A Cold And Broken Hallelujah
by CobaltPhosphene

Summary

The Psychic Family AU where the Seeds are all psychic, and so is that one Junior Deputy Joshua Rook who bears more than a passing resemblance to the Father. Fast forward to the beginning times of the Reaping and the end times of the world, and we have psychics on both sides that have foreseen the Collapse—but Joshua is the one who knows what happens to herald theCollapse, and he wants none of it. But will it matter in the end? Joshua doesn't know the answer to that, he only knows that he must try. It is not only the struggle between the Resistance and the Cult that Joshua must deal with though, as he must also grapple with his own internal conflicts and as it turns out, forces far beyond even the scope of Hope County's troubles.
Take Me To Church

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning Content for this chapter: Joseph's canonical dark backstory content, specifically infanticide.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Joshua

“Hey Pratt can you swing a little to the left, I wanna take a selfie with the fuck-off grandiose statue of egotism.”

“Rookie, ” Hudson snapped, her exasperation and nerves showing as she shot Pratt a dirty look while Pratt laughed, going so far as to give him a gentle backhanded smack on the forearm. “Don't encourage him Pratt, and keep the chopper on course.”

Whitehorse didn't say anything, just glancing over his shoulder at the two young deputies in the cockpit before looking back to Joshua, poker-faced but for a slight glint of amusement in the older man's eyes.

Joshua for his part just looked positively innocent. Both he and the sheriff knew what Joshua was about—Hudson's shoulders were a little less tense, and Pratt was smirking still, just a bit.

The only snare in that plan was sitting directly across from Joshua, looking on with eyebrows drawn low in open disapproval. Said snare also chose to drop a damn anvil on the lightened mood like he was from the Acme corporation. “Jesus, people, is your hiring pool that shallow that you take in green kids right off the street? You're cops for chrissakes, act like it.” The Marshal scowled.

That put everyone right back into a foul mood, and Whitehorse just shook his head minutely, both at Joshua, but also at the Marshal's lack of grace.
Joshua for his part ducked his head, annoyed and a bit embarrassed, but only a bit. It had been childish, yes, but it'd been to help ease the damn tension that was wrapping them up all so tightly he expected it to snap at any moment. But he knew what Whitehorse was saying without saying anything aloud—Joshua should've known better than to say anything like that in front of the Marshal. US Marshals were in general badass dudes one and all...but Burke was definitely also an ass. They'd all keyed in pretty quickly that Burke was wound up pretty tight the moment the Marshal had walked into the station—he wasn’t even the good kind of asshole like Pratt was. Also not their asshole, as Pratt also was.

But the Sheriff was right, shouldn't have done that, and Joshua sent Earl a contrite look to acknowledge that, though he knew the Sheriff would still give Joshua a check-in talk about it later. Begrudgingly, that also meant Burke was right, not that Joshua would want to actually say so, though he might have to if somehow a miracle occurred amidst all this.

But they needed to all calm down. Everyone was tense, and that wasn't going to make what was going to happen any better. If he could've gotten the Marshal to calm down, that would've been ideal, but Burke was coiled tighter than a newly pressed bed box spring, and Joshua couldn't quite hone in on why. The three deputies had all agreed though in their brief moment of privacy as a gossip circle that it felt like there was something on the line for the Marshal to be that gung-ho about the entire affair. All speculation, but despite Whitehorse's efforts to get Burke to turn back...Burke wouldn't turn back.

Joshua already knew that. Knew that Burke wasn't going to listen to the three, clear, simple rules that the Sheriff had laid out: stay close, keep your guns in your holsters, and let Whitehorse do all the talking.

“How much longer?” Burke asked, now that the air was diffused into just the white noise roar of the helicopter's blades and engine. Tense as a coiled spring, why was the Marshal so tense? It felt wrong.

“Just long enough for you to change your mind, so we can turn this bird around,” The Sheriff said, directing his gaze pointedly towards the Marshal. Pleading almost, but too sharp, too knowing from so many years of watching people, knowing people, to expect it to work. But also knowing just how dangerous a situation they were headed into.

A danger Burke failed to appreciate, would fail to appreciate, even to the end.

Times like this made Joshua wish he could forcibly change people's minds to do what was easier, to do what was best. Just reach into their brains and give them a little push towards the better, easier path. But down that way lay madness and immorality. He would inevitably abuse that power if he had it he was sure, even with the best of intentions at heart, so it was for the best he didn't. So
Joshua quietly sulked instead, trying not to let his nerves get to him.

They'd do their best, it'd all go to shit anyway, but maybe they could all escape the impending crash. Maybe they could get out and away.

“You want me to ignore a federal warrant, Sheriff?”

No we just want you to stop ignoring the voice of reason, Joshua could practically hear Staci saying that from the cockpit, despite the other being perfectly silent. It made Joshua have to rub his face with a knuckle to hide the beginnings of a smile at the thought. Pratt was doing an admirable job keeping his lips shut, better than Joshua was, but the tilt of his head to look back over his shoulder told Joshua enough, and he'd also known the man long enough to know what the other was likely going to say in this kind of instance. Joey too, with how she shot a look to Pratt as a silent reminder to stay on his best behavior.

Whitehorse of course knew exactly what Staci had been about to say too, going by the little inflection on the first two words of his response to the Marshal. “No, sir,” Earl said, sounding perfectly polite but echoing the slight upward lilt that Pratt would've used to sass Burke if he'd had the chance. Then Whitehorse got serious, grounding them all in the weight of the situation. “I want you to understand the reality of this situation: Joseph Seed, he's not a man to be fucked with. We've had run-ins with him before and they haven't always gone our way. Just sometimes...sometimes, it's best to leave well enough alone.”

Watching the way Burke tapped the warrant against one gloved hand was giving Joshua anxiety, knowing what could—would—happen. It was tempting to just grab that damn paper, rip it up, and toss it out the helicopter door. But Joshua was a cop, despite everything.

“Yeah well, we have laws for a reason, Sheriff.” Burke was not backing down, and Earl knew it, given how the older man's eyes flitted away for a second as he hummed, unsurprised, but disappointed.

It was a sound that would send both Staci and Joshua into fully-apologetic mode when directed at either, or more typically both of them. Burke didn't even notice it. Joey looked back, mouth thinned into a line as Whitehorse met her eyes, before they both looked away.

Burke continued on, unaware of how hollow his words would be. “And Joseph Seed is going to learn that.”
Earl looked off into the distance behind them, withholding a sigh on the tip of his tongue, and girding himself for the incoming shit show this was clearly going to be. “Pratt. Open a call with dispatch.”

“Ten-four.” Acknowledged. Pratt didn't like this either. None of them did, not even Burke, but for different reasons.

Joshua couldn't stop fidgeting, needing to fidget with something, anything to try to quell the mounting anxiety as they flew closer and closer to the church. Nancy sounded worried, he could feel her worry, and something else? Joshua barely listened to what she and the Sheriff were saying, thrown off by the odd emotion he was picking up over the line, gnawing at his brain. It was something to wonder about at least, but it didn't help with the situation.

“Roger, Sheriff. Still planning to go through with this? Over.” Her voice was still so familiar, worried about them all, it sounded like. He wondered if she had any regrets about sending them all to their potential deaths, here and now, and making sure no one else came for them after.

“We are—unfortunately, still trying to talk some sense into our friend the Marshal, over.”

Ooo, Whitehorse was definitely unhappy with how he emphasized his words there. It made Joshua briefly consider maybe jumping ship out of the chopper right then and there—or better yet tossing the Marshal out, with how the other man was sporting a slight condescending smile as he shook his head at the exchange.

Marshal Burke had clearly seen some shit in his time, but...

Joshua saw—no he remembered, this isn't real it's all in his head—green smoke, carved sins, angry eyes, impending fire.

Every slight. Every injustice. Every choice reveals our SIN!

John was wrong. Your sin is not Wrath.

You would rather watch the world suffer and burn than swallow your Pride.
Joshua kept stock still, but he knew his gaze was glassy and vacant, so he turned his head to look out to the side, the conversation in his headset slipping over and around his consciousness like water over a stone.

“Alright, he's lucky I'm not there,” Nancy laughed full of nerves, “If you get into any trouble you just let me know. Over.”

“Ten-four, over and out.”

It's Pratt's voice that brought him back online, back into the present, with a surprise bit of humor. “Maybe we should've brought Nancy along with us instead of the Probie. These Peggies wouldn't fuck with her,” he said, jabbing a thumb back over one shoulder at Joshua.

Joshua promptly flipped Pratt off with a singular, expressive digit of his own, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

Pratt laughed, even as Hudson scolded him, though her heart wasn't in it, they all knew.

The Marshall remained unimpressed with Joshua's behavior. “Why do you keep calling them Peggies?”

Aaaand that was Joshua's cue to stop paying attention to the Marshal again. The man just didn't want to let them all relax with a joke—yes, it was a serious situation, but they weren't at the boots on the ground stage yet. But people all responded to stress differently, Joshua had to remind himself, looking back out the window again at the landscape sweeping out underneath them—thick woods, easy to get lost in, and that bridge—he remembered the windshield being filled with fire before it filled with water, remembered the panic-filled fear of drowning before he could get to the surface. Cold and clammy and shiver-inducing, that's how the water felt, that's how his hands felt now. His pulse was racing a mile a minute now at the memory-that-wasn't-a-memory.

Joshua breathed deep, trying to exhale some of the fear pent up in his chest through his nose, but it didn't work. Not really. He'd swear his heart was going to explode from all this stress.

“Are you scared, Sheriff?” That tone the Marshal used actually managed to turn the fear and stress in the entire interior of the chopper into a blank moment of suppressed rage. Joshua knew he himself was angry, knew that comment rankled Joey, pissed off Staci, even if Earl simply blinked in world-weary acceptance that the Marshal still didn't appreciate the absolute danger of it all.
Maybe Joshua really would toss Burke out of the chopper and claim a bear got him in a freak accident out in the woods.

“'We're here. Compound's just below.'” Pratt's words were clipped, bottling up the irritation and unrest with curtness as they all turned to look out the windows to see smoke and fire and a church steeple looming over a series of buildings and fenced-in enclosures.

There was something distinctly unsettling about the whole layout—not just from the memories-which-were-not-memories, or the way the fog and the smoke and the flames blurred together to give it all an otherworldly film of grim grime and soot. There was just...something about the place, the way things were laid out, the entire location that set Joshua's hair standing on end.

They were all apparently in agreement on that—Whitehorse sighed heavily as Pratt simply summed both the Sheriff and Pratt’s own feelings up on the matter: “Oh my Jesus.”

“This is a bad idea.” Hudson stated, to no one in particular.

It was clearly a Supremely Bad Idea when Pratt and Joshua agreed with Hudson and Whitehorse on something without debating it first.

“Last chance, Marshal...” Whitehorse said, the words dragging out slowly the way shadows slithered away to hide as the minutes crawled towards a showdown at high noon. It felt like an old western, but not one of the ones where the heroes got to ride away into the sunset.

Perhaps Burke was finally starting to feel a bit of the emotional dread as all four of them looked at him then. The sigh before he answered was the only concession he gave, or would give. “We're going in.”

“Set her down, Pratt.”

“Roger that.”

It sounded like nails in the coffin, felt like they should be scrabbling through the wood to get out, nails bleeding and biting into splinters to reach open air again.
“Dispatch, you still there?” Whitehorse called out as the helicopter touched down.

“Yes, go ahead Sheriff.”

Too many guns visible not even including the bloody flamethrower, Joshua thought as he scanned their surroundings outside the window, barely listening to the last safety precautions Whitehorse was trying to set down in case of the worst. But that wasn't the worst, the worst ran so much deeper than any of them could imagine. And Nancy wouldn't help them, in the end.

What a fucking joke of the century this was, that anyone would think four cops and a Marshal armed with only pistols and a shotgun would be able to waltz right out of here through a sea of hostiles.

It was a wonder the cultists didn't just shoot them all to begin with...but the Father had to offer them the choice, Joshua supposed. He adjusted his baseball cap nervously, pulling the brim of it low over his face and glasses, one finger reaching up to trace the embroidered badge of the police department on the front pensively. It would hide his face enough for this, but it didn't hide him from the terror he felt deep inside. Another memory that was and wasn't a memory flitted through his mind unbidden, one he shouldn't have been able to remember but had been slotted into his mind just the same—

No air no air can't breathe can't breathe please let me breathe—

He took a deep breath, just to remind himself he could breathe.

There's air. He's fine. They're all fine.

But they won't be.

But maybe they will be, if they're lucky this time. Maybe knowing will be enough of a head start.

“Now listen up,” the Sheriff said, drawing everyone's attention back again. “Three rules: stick close. Keep your guns in your holsters and let me do the talking. Got it?”
“Got it.” Burke said.

You do not, a part of Joshua wanted to hiss at the man across from him, but he was being vengeful and petty now before the man had even done anything, he knew. Even if Joshua knew what was going to happen was close to inevitable.

He scooted out to the far side of the helicopter, waiting inside for Hudson, Burke and Whitehorse to pile out before he leaned forward to grasp Pratt's shoulder and murmur in a low voice to get his attention, “Pratt, it's gonna be a 10-15 and then a 10-34 real fast, we're gonna end up subject to the receiving end of a 10-31 by 10-96s, we're gonna get hit with a 10-81 for the chopper, and then we're all gonna be 10-78. Copy that?”


Pratt didn't move as he listened, before murmuring low, “10-4, watch your back, Josh.”

Joshua gave Staci's shoulder a squeeze, just in case it still all went to shit, in case this wasn't enough, before he said, “Watch out for the 10-81, it's going to be a big one, soon, and it's gonna suck, Stace.”

“Get a move on Rookie!” Whitehorse called over from where the others stood outside.

Staci nodded once, and Joshua let go as he slithered out of the helicopter and shut the door behind him, pulling at his pony tail nervously to make sure for the umpteenth time that it was pulled through the opening on the back of his cap neatly. A needless gesture, but it gave him something to fidget with for a brief moment, and that was all he could ask for.

He trailed behind on the group's six o'clock, trying to breathe steadily.

Too many weapons, too many bodies—his vision blurred slightly into red around the edges as it became too much blood —no, just a memory, nothing there. Not yet.

“Jesus christ, you're wearing badges, aren't you?” The Marshal snapped, turning to face the Sheriff
and Joey—Rook had missed most of what they'd been saying.

He had half a mind to strangle the Marshal then and there, with how the red tinted his world was with rage on the inside. But Rook stayed quiet.

“Yeah, they don't respect badges much out here...” Hudson muttered, shifting her shotgun, trying to settle her own nerves.

“They'll respect a nine millimeter.” Burke shot back as he continued towards the church towards the End and Joshua gritted his teeth, hands squeezing tight as he ghosted up behind Whitehorse and laid a light hand on his shoulder, holding him back a moment.

The Sheriff turned to look at him, the retort to the Marshal he'd been about to say put on pause, and Joshua murmured for Earl's ears alone, “Can you bring Hudson in to watch your back and have me guard the door when we get there?”

Earl looked at Joshua then, at the young man's too blue eyes behind carefully-chosen specifically-selected-to-be-different rectangular glasses, at his neatly trimmed beard that framed his youthful face, his long brown hair pulled back in a ponytail tucked under his cap. All the ways he did and did not look so strikingly similar to the face of the man they'd been sent to arrest this day. So strikingly similar to the statue's features that the Junior Deputy had cracked a joke about taking a selfie with, on the way over.

If the Marshal hadn't been there on the helicopter ride over, Pratt would've cracked a joke in response to help continue easing the tension, they both knew. Something to the tune of, well now we all know what your statue would look like if you were the maniacal leader of a doomsday cult, Joshua.

Jokes like that to ease the tension whenever the topic of the Seeds came up, whenever any of them looked at the files that had Joseph Seed's profile and mug shots in them—the ones that looked too much like Joshua.

Joshua had never told them anything specific, but they could all read between the lines about it enough. And he'd stated his stance on it clear enough to Whitehorse when Earl had pulled him aside to ask about it, concerned.

“I don't want to meet face to face with him at all if I can help it, or anyone relating to the Project,
but I will if duty demands it, Sheriff.”

And duty did demand it, here and now. But Whitehorse nodded, then and now, allowing his Deputy some breathing room away from the epicenter of the mess. There was no escaping the close quarters of the helicopter ride, but they could deal with that when they got there. If they got there.

“He’s not going to listen,” Joshua said, reaching out to pull Joey in to hear this as well—they all cottoned on as to which “he” Joshua meant with a glance at Burke's turned back up ahead, “shit's gonna go down after we get back to the chopper, ready yourself for a 10-81 shortly after. Gotta run real fast then, we're all gonna be 10-78, no one'll answer.”

Joey had that pinched look of skepticism clearly written upon her face, but she didn't say anything. This wasn't the time for them to hash that old argument over again, they both knew.

Whitehorse didn't say anything other than nod once more, leading them all on to catch up with Burke. Joshua didn’t know if Whitehorse believed him, but a warning was better than saying nothing. Or so he hoped.

Burke had one hand reaching out to open the church door already, impatient to get it all over with.

“Whoa, Marshal,” the Sheriff said, gently but firmly pressing the door to the church's interior shut, “now we do this, we do it my way: Quietly. Calmly. You got it?”

Burke clearly did not get that, having his hand on his holstered gun, unstrapped and ready.

While Joshua couldn't fault the man having it unstrapped to draw quickly in their given situation, knowing that Burke would aggravate the crowds didn't make him inclined to feeling sympathetic to the man.

Even less so with the faint note of exasperation like it was one big, huge concession when the Marshal spread his hands and said, “Fine.”

Joey looked out across the people, eyes on their guns, her own finger loose and away from the trigger of her shotgun.
It wouldn't be enough.

Whitehorse tipped his stetson towards the two deputies then as he continued, “Rook on the door. Watch our backs, don't let anyone in behind us. Hudson, on me.”

Joshua let out a small breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding then.

“And you,” there was a faint note of dislike, and resigned acceptance in Whitehorse's tone then as he turned to face Burke once more, “just try not to do anything stupid.”

Burke actually tried to comfort Whitehorse then, it seemed, reaching a hand out to clasp the older officer's shoulder. “Relax, Sheriff. You're about to get your name in the paper.”

*What an appeal to vanity to say someone's name is in the papers when it's bound for the obituary section,* Joshua thought sourly as he tugged his hat brim down low again and took up position at the door.

Joey gave Joshua's shoulder a squeeze in passing, the same reassurance in the face of adversity as always, solid as a rock, handing him the shotgun for now before she followed the Sheriff and Burke through. She'd need both her hands for this, in his stead.

Joshua shut his ears to the voice wafting out from within, shutting the door to block it out. It was painful to listen, knowing how it would go down...he hoped switching out with Hudson wouldn't bring down anything too terrible on them all.

But Joshua didn't want to face him, the tattooed, scar-etched man he'd seen too many times to count in the memories-that-were-not-memories in his head. Didn't want to stand face to face with the man who had held Joshua in his arms, and quietly, gently, pinched the oxygen-tube shut, to slowly smother Joshua in his first hours of life, before memory, before wakefulness, before he was truly Joshua.

It wasn't something he should have remembered, in theory couldn't, and technically didn't. But remember it he did. He remembered it from an angle elsewhere in the hospital's nursery room, watching his father hold a small blue-shrouded bundle for several long minutes, staring down at it, at the tubes protruding out from it, that helped his infant son breathe. Joshua remembered it as if it hadn't been his life snuffed out, soft and easy like a candle, the smoking ember pinched until only
dark, lifeless black remained to mark that there had been a fire there at all.

His father had gently put him back down into the hospital crib, as if he were laying down an infant that was only sleeping, and left. He hadn't looked back. It was after a long moment, after the door had swung softly shut and the room had become deathly still, that there was a soft breath, and then a sad cry as a tiny hand reached up from the crib. Crying, crying, crying softly out for someone, something that wasn't there.

Joshua had died. He knew that for a fact, with a stone-cold certainty that settled into his bones. He didn't know how it was he lived again, after that, without obvious assistance like CPR.

Obvious wonderings had included the thought that perhaps it had been a tiny miracle or act of mercy by God. He didn't know, though. Didn't know why he had been spared—or why he had suffered so.

A nurse had come in shortly afterwards and picked him up, holding him and rocking him gently for several long minutes to soothe the unhappy infant back into calm slumber, soothing away the fear of what had just transpired.

The memory-that-was-not-a-memory had ended there, fading into black with a soft swiftness like one did when drifting off to sleep.

There was a crowd gathering out by the fenced arches, Joshua could see. He knew they would be there, knew they wouldn't—probably—do anything, just yet.

The doors opened beside him, and Joshua tilted his head down a little bit further to obscure his face as members of the Eden's Gate congregation streamed out sullenly, one of them making a beeline immediately heading away and elsewhere—the same man, Joshua knew without having seen it with his own eyes, that had given a minuscule nod to Jacob Seed before leaving Joseph's side inside the church. No doubt to stir up trouble, to rouse the rabble for what the Heralds knew were coming, for what the Father knew was coming.

Too many witnesses to get rid of the messenger boy quietly. The thought made Joshua's mouth go dry, once the initial sullen resentment had passed as he watched the man leg it away quickly. He'd been thinking too many violent thoughts today, it was out of character for him. He hadn't noticed it before since they'd all been directed towards Burke, and knowing what he knew, they had seemed just like stress and fear turned into anger, lashing about inside his head. So long as he didn't let the feelings out in a way that hurt people, he hadn't thought them a problem. Just an expression of emotion.
He'd chalked it up to bleed-in empathy of how people around Hope County had been much more on edge lately, understandably so—everyone had been just that bit more violent, more aggressive. Joshua wondered then if maybe there was something else afoot, but the thought spun out into nowhere, into empty space. He had no idea what else it might be...all he had was a feeling he couldn't name. A feeling that said something was there.

He shut the doors again, to keep prying eyes out, to give the others a bit more time before it all came crashing down. And so he didn't hear what was said again, put on repeat in his mind's ear from memories-that-were-not-memories.

He hated calling them visions.

The doors opened again, and Joshua barely turned to acknowledge the Sheriff and the Marshal walking out before he fell in step with them, keeping his back to the man he knew Hudson was leading out behind them in cuffs.

Would God save the Father if I turned and shot him right now, point blank in the head? The almost absentmindedly murderous sense of curiosity sat wrong in Joshua's head, now that he knew to look for it. Would I or the others die if I tried? Or would we be spared?

He was very back and forth on whether he believed in God or not. Sometimes he did...other times he wondered how an all powerful, cognizant being that was said to love everyone and everything could allow so much horror to exist in the world. He wondered how such a being could create the concept of Hell...or if that was something humans had made up along the way, looking inside themselves for all the dark pieces and corners full of terrors, hidden away in the primordial basements of their minds.

Joshua didn't know. He didn't know if there was a god. But he knew when the crowd would start turning ugly, when the rocks would be thrown, when the guns would be drawn, when the shots would be fired.

He dove for the front seat and buckled himself in as his fellow officers tore themselves and the Father away from the angry mob. Grabbing onto Staci's arm Joshua hissed, “It's coming, be ready,” as Whitehorse and Hudson rushed the Father into one of the seats, Burke shooting down some of the more aggressive members of the mob who tried to cram themselves through the open chopper door.
Joshua now had a front row seat to watch the death of the one cultist that clung to the windshield before him and Staci as the chopper rose up into the air, sticking like a frog to a windowpane in the rain. He stared at the man, observing with a curious sort of detachment how young the cultist's face looked. The young man looked afraid, clutching the flare he'd grabbed in one hand like a lifeline, a prayer. Amidst the fear though was also a steel core of determination, or perhaps a bright hint of mania.

Joshua would never know. Their eyes met briefly, for the first and only time, before the man leapt up into the rotor blades and was summarily crushed by the whirling machinery amidst the ominous and familiar groans of metal breaking and screaming, warning blares coming to life as systems failed all around them in a spectacular splatter of blood.

It was disturbingly pretty as a form of chaos, set to the backdrop of the Father's singing cutting sweet and mellow through the fear and destruction. It added a layer of heartbreak to it all that was old and new and a beautiful kind of terrible to actually hear it with his own ears in the here and now, knowing this was all actually happening. He'd known it was coming though, and he didn't have time to slog through a slurry of mixed emotions right now—he had other things to deal with that were more important than that. The others were shouting and screaming, but Joshua couldn't hear most of it, choosing instead to grip Staci tight against the other's seat, hoping it'd be enough as the helicopter spiraled out of control. He felt Staci grab him tightly upon the arm, just before the impact, just as his friend let go of the controls and accepted the impending crash, as their entire world got turned upside down in a shroud of violence.

It took Joshua a few moments to come to, flames coming into focus as he looked around—*get up hurry get moving there's no time to waste, get them all OUT*—and then his fingers were moving before he could even think straight, unbuckling himself with a struggle before dropping painfully onto the roof of the helicopter. He could hear Nancy calling in over the headset dimly, but that wasn't his priority. His priority was Staci, Joey, Earl, he had to get them out.

Or else they would suffer.

Or else they would die.

His fingers frantically found their way to the seatbelt looping Staci into his seat, hanging him by the waist upside down. Shoving his shoulder up into the other's stomach, Joshua lifted Staci just enough to ease the weight straining the seat belt and heard the clasp unlock, before dragging Staci outside to the forested side of the crash, away from the flames.

The other man started to come to, mumbling a bit. Joshua promptly slapped him awake. Gently. “Wake up wake up wake up Staci come on, I need you to help me get Earl and Joey out, now.”
Not the best thing to do, in case Staci had a concussion, but that was a thought and a regret for later when Joshua had brains to spare that weren't scrambled like an egg. He shoved the feeling of urgency and the echoed *need* to get their people out of the chopper into Staci's head and nearly froze when he felt a soft roll of power in the air accompanying a voice behind him, still singing. Joshua turned to see Joseph holding the dangling headset as he lay upon the chopper ceiling, staring Hudson down from where the other officer had been trying to reach for the headset to call Nancy for help.

“Dispatch.” Joshua could feel tangible hooks in the air whirling and circling in that single word as Joseph spoke.

“Oh my god.” Joshua knew rather than heard Nancy say that, the conversation burned into his brain from too many nights where it was a nightmare instead of a memory or vision instead.

It made cold fear run down his spine, for a very different reason other than hearing Nancy out her true colors.

“Everything is just fine here. No need to call anyone.” That power again, smooth and deep and unrelenting as it went rolling like floodwaters across flat plains after a vicious spring melt, all consuming, all dangerous.

“Yes Father. Praise be unto you.” Suddenly Joshua recalled how stilted and odd Nancy's voice had sounded then, in his memories. It clicked then. The Father was tipping the scales. Placing a thumb on one side to weigh it in his favor, to push Nancy to ensure she would obey.

If Nancy had any lingering reservations about sending Whitehorse and the deputies into peril, torture and death, they meant nothing now.

Joshua could do something like that, if someone was already inclined to do something, or shove enough fear or feeling into them to hit their primal instinct buttons if he tried really, really hard. He couldn't force someone to do something against their will...but he could nudge them. This however felt like a lot more of a push than anything Joshua had ever done, or perhaps ever could. It was far more powerful, and because of that, far more frightening. It made the blood in his veins run cold, to have the confirmation that the Father had something more in common with him beyond a face, beyond blood.

He knows for sure now what side of the family he probably got it from, then.
The Father let go of the headset and in a voice that had no right to carry to all of their ears outside of a memory said, “No one is coming to save you.”

There was a blanket of dread that dulled the mind for a moment, following those words, before Joshua carefully scrabbled it off of both his and the other officers' minds, trying desperately to do so as discreetly as he could as to not draw the Father's attention. He prayed that the Father wouldn't turn to look at him.

The powers that be answered that prayer, as Joseph didn't so much as spare a glance back as he clambered out of the burning helicopter to his followers.

They were running out of time. Staci's brain was online at that point, and he and Joshua both scrambled to drag Joey out of the helicopter, putting the wreckage between them and the gathering crowd of cultists. Burke was coming around and working his way out of his seat belt too at that point.

_We might make it we might make it hurry hurry hurry get out get out GET OUT._

They pulled a semi-conscious Earl from the next seat over, head bleeding from where some errant piece of equipment had hit it, when Joshua heard it.

“BEGIN THE REAPING.” Power flowed once more like floodwaters unleashed, waters full of promises, and full of fear.

FUCK.

“Run run run!” he shouted, as Hudson drew her weapon to provide covering fire as he and Staci started to run as fast as they could while supporting Whitehorse's still-groggy steps forward.

“Hudson come on!” Staci yelled over his shoulder.

Joshua looked back and felt like his heart stopped as reality overlaid itself with possibilities yet to be—too many possibilities ended with Hudson dragged kicking and screaming back into the mob, ended up with bullets in her side, bleeding out, _no no NO._
“STOP.” He made it a command, tried to mimic what he'd felt Joseph had done, to bend the cultists swarming towards Joey to his will—but the concept slipped through his fingers like water, and instead he fell back to his default instinct, shoving as much blinding fear and panic into their heads as he could manage, trying to tie it to the swell of flames coming from the crash site. He smelled blood and his head felt light. It worked for enough of them, making them quail as they reared back and away, for a moment. He didn't check to see if the Father noticed. He didn't dare.

“HUDSON!” Staci bellowed out as they continued running. Earl managed to gain his feet under him more soundly with a few precious seconds spent orienting himself and setting his understanding of the world to rights once more.

Joey thankfully turned tail and ran, bolting after them with long ground-eating strides—putting all the daily runs she dragged her fellow deputies on to good use.

He couldn't see further ahead in time right now. He could see well enough in the present though to keep running with the others without the future overlaying his steps at the very least. His head hurt, but that didn't matter though—this was a better situation than what he'd seen before, and if there was luck or something looking out for them, they'd book it into the woods and lose their pursuers.

“Where's Burke?” Whitehorse hissed, keeping his voice down as they ran.

“Gone,” Joshua managed to get out with a grunt as they leaped down over a slope that was a bit steeper than he'd thought. And it was true—Burke was already long gone, haring off in some other direction while the four of them disappeared into the blue-gray shadows of the woods.

A familiar dilapidated watch tower came into view, causing Joshua to balk mentally—no no, this was a bad way to go, it was the way that'd bring them closer to where Burke would end up in that blasted trailer house.

“No, this way!” Joshua said peeling off to one side. It was away from where the trailer was, away from the bridge. He didn't want to go down that road if they could help it. “Turn off your radios, we gotta hide or they'll hear us.”

He didn't want them caught...but he also didn't want them turning around for Burke. He had tried much too hard to keep the others out of the clutches of the Seeds and the cult to lose them to Burke's doomed gun-blazingly brazen attempt to escape. And Burke would not be led, the disregard for Whitehorse's rules and authority had proven that more than enough for Joshua.
There was a faint twinge in his conscience at the thought of leaving the man behind—enough that he tried to look ahead to see if there was a way Burke might be saved. He couldn't see very many possibilities right now, and it made his head ache worse, causing his steps to falter and stumble in a moment of pain. He couldn't see very many possibilities, but the easiest ones to see were always the most likely ones, and all he could see ended with capture or death if they went back for the Marshal.

“But the Marshal!” Hudson said, glancing over to the others—but they continued to follow Joshua's lead, for the time being. In his opinion, the Marshal should be the best off one to handle things alone just based on sheer skill and physical prowess by virtue of being a US Marshal, even in extremely unusual circumstances like this one. Burke would probably be okay. Probably.

Burke might even avoid the future where he ended up controlled by Faith this way, maybe being on his own would inspire him to take a bit more care than to break out into the open with guns blazing.

Staci spoke up then as he swung around a tree, “He got away, I saw him tear off into the woods. He should be fine if he stays out of sight and sneaks out. We far enough yet to hide and sneak? Can't hear any pursuit.”

“Silence isn't a reason to stop running, keep going.” Whitehorse said, huffing to keep up with the younger deputies. The old man was still pretty damn spry, holding his own despite the blood running dark down his temple.

It was with an odd mix of relief, fear, and guilt that Joshua breathed out then, putting what was left of his attention into running.

They came across a dirt road where a white truck emblazoned with the cult's cross-and-star-burst sat parked, but Whitehorse waved them on. “Stay off the roads, they won't think we came this way if we just leave a truck like this sitting unattended. Mind your footprints.”

A cursory sweep to scuff away any clear indications of their passage, and they moved on, slowing to a jog to breathe, but still pressing onward. They’d left the cries of the search parties far behind, trading instead for the quiet way the night held its breath in the wake of violence.

As it turned out, they actually had gone in the direction of the bridge, Joshua discovered as they came out upon the banks of the Henbane river—he could see the crossbeams of the structure out in
the distance. Nothing was on fire, yet...so Burke was either captured, dead, or still working his way towards the bridge.

Another faint pang of guilt, but the others were alive and still free, for now at least.

The guilt grew a bit stronger when he recalled the panic in Burke's voice as they'd tried to cross the bridge, only to be met with a swath of fire from above.

It dissipated a bit when he recalled Burke swimming out of the truck without looking back.

“We swimming or walking across, or following the bank on this side?” Pratt asked, breathing hard as he raised his hands to rest atop his head, trying to preempt any potential stitches. “Fuck. Tell me we're not swimming.”

One look from Whitehorse had Pratt sighing at that point, already knowing the answer as he lowered his arms and rolled his shoulders. “This is definitely not my night.”

“No but let's go, before I lose my nerve,” Joshua croaked out. He couldn't feel his feet particularly well aside from cold at the thought of walking into water deep enough to get lost in. He hated swimming. He could swim, but it definitely got his heart rate up way higher than he liked, for all the wrong reasons.

Hudson nodded knowingly, and looked to Earl then. “Sheriff? You good for a little swim?”

“I'm fine. Nothing that'll last. Let's get this show on the road—sooner we cross, the sooner we can try to dry off.” Earl said.

They waded into the water, Pratt and Rook both gritting their teeth—Pratt from the cold, Rook because of the water—before taking the plunge. Staci was a good enough swimmer to get wherever he needed to go, but Rook rarely did more than a doggy paddle, hating the sensation of his head being underwater. He could manage a butterfly stroke on better days, but today was definitely not a good day.
They made it across without a hitch, Whitehorse even managing to keep his hat on despite the occasional splash of water attempting to steal it right off of his head. They wrung what they could out of their clothes and pressed on, putting distance between them and the water’s edge, with Hudson adjusting their route to follow the river downstream once it was out of sight. The wilderness was all well and good to hide in, but they were without a map, and needed landmarks.

“Now that we're all sopping wet and shivering in the dark, you think we're far enough to light a fire and dry out, or are we just gonna get royally fucked over with trench foot while squelching about in wet shoes and socks all night?” Pratt grumped quietly, as the adrenaline worked its way out of his system.

Hudson swatted his shoulder and turned to the Sheriff, pulling out her flashlight and risking a bit of light to check Earl's injury over. After a brief examination she concluded, “Looks like you got lucky, Sheriff. Not too deep, thankfully. Follow my finger with your eyes?”

A few tests cleared Earl of any major brain injury that they could suss out on their own, though Hudson was still of the opinion Whitehorse needed to rest up and take care of his head, just in case.

Joshua in the meanwhile had wandered off slightly to one side, away from the group and towards the edge of a clearing. He needed a bit of space, just to quiet his mind, and ease up on the fraying edges of the headache still throbbing in the depths of his skull. If not for all the blood and threats of impending death, it would've been a pretty night, with how the starlight made the white flowers in the clearing glow amidst the gathering low mists clinging to the ground. Cold out, too.

...wait. There was something about the flowers, something important. His brain was fogged from the attempt to influence too many people at once back at the helicopter—that had been a stupid, stupid thing to do, even if it had worked...but Joey was okay, at least.

But the flowers. What was it about the flowers he was trying to remember? He stood there, squinting at them suspiciously in the dark, backing up a pace or two, racking his brain. They smelled nice, even from here. Soft and sweet, and...like what dreams are made of. With a faint undercurrent of plant-green-sap and...some kind of herbal-chemical smell like in those little off-beat apothecary shops in the neo-hipster parts of the big cities outside of Hope County. It was actually really nice.

“Joshua, don't wander off far,” Hudson called out softly, keeping her voice low, but the frown was evident in her voice that Joshua was doing Something Questionably Stupid Again.
It registers that he's crept a few steps back towards the flowers, just a bit, curious about the smell and look of them. He's weirdly tempted to go to the flower field and pick one of the blossoms. Joshua points to the clearing instead. “Hudson, do you know what kind of flowers those are?”

He can feel her squinting at him like he's lost his mind. Which, he probably has right now, with how wiped out he's feeling. There's something refreshing about the floral smell in the air though, making him relax a bit.

“What flowers?”

He has a moment where he feels like he's waiting for the penny to drop...but he's too out of it right now for there to be a penny. He's missing something, he knows it. It's nagging at the back of his mind, but he can't place his finger on it...every time he gets close, it feels like the thought slips away, fluttering out of reach like a pretty butterfly.

…butterflies. Also important. But why? He was too tired, right now.

“There's a field full of pretty white lily-like flowers, out in the clearing there...or, or don't you see them?” Something was wrong, he knew something was wrong, because maybe there weren't flowers present. That meant...that meant...

“Joshua,” suddenly Hudson's voice was a lot closer, and he turned, mildly surprised to see that she was now beside him instead. When had that happened? She sounded concerned though, looked concerned too as she reached out to tilt his chin up. “shit, you're bleeding, Rookie. When did that happen?”

“Iunno,” he said with a somewhat sloppy shrug. It was a lie, really. He'd over-extended himself mentally—or psychically, really. Sometimes that made his nose bleed. It was kind of funny as an old comic standby thing...but actually he probably shouldn't be laughing right now. In fact he was laughing a bit right now, in a stupid slow as molasses snickering way with what felt like a real dopey-feeling grin on his face. Yeah, he should stop, Hudson was looking concerned now.

“Shit, Rook, I didn't see you hit your head, and you looked alright back before we started running. Should be checking you for concussions then too.”

“S real nice of you to do that, you know? Worrying about,” Joshua waved his hand, off in the direction that he...was reasonably sure, mostly positive, that Pratt and Whitehorse were in. “About
all of us. You know? Jus' wanna say thanks, you're a...you're a good person, Joey. We love you, yanno?"

Yeah, even he could tell in his addled brain that he's not acting alright at this point. Distantly, but still.

“Yeah, okay, we're gonna have to walk you back to the others real nice and slow, Rookie. Can you do that for me...?” She squinted over his shoulder then, one hand resting on Rook's wrist as the other came up to rub at her eyes. “...are those fireflies?”

Joshua hummed, still not quite grasping what was wrong, but knowing *something* was, turning Hudson by the shoulders and gently, urgently pushing her back towards the others at the pace of a slightly brisk walk.

He remembered guiding another by the shoulder, skin left exposed for carved sins, inked symbols, old scars to be on display.

But Hudson had done the walking, in reality. Not Joshua. Not this time.

The memory made him pick up the pace just a little bit faster however, and he knows they should be moving faster still.

“Rook?”

“Time to go,” Joshua said with a little hummed tune under his breath, almost singing as he speaks.

“Rook you're being weird again,” Hudson said, a note of complaint and worry in her voice though she didn't stop him from ushering her away.

The air seemed to be oddly a lot more sparkly, now, a bit mistier, with a faint green hue like soft sunlight through dappled leaves, if leaves were made of smoke and water.

“We gotta go away from here, it's not safe,” Joshua said, voice soft and not at all concerned as much as that distant little alarm bell in his head said he should be.
Whitehorse and Pratt looked at the two of them, the slight shifts in their stances already telling how they were gearing up for an imminent threat.

“Rook, what's wrong?” Hudson again, sounding a bit more exasperated, approaching her limit of how much of this she’d take before she stopped and demanded an explanation of some sort.

“Something...something I can't put my finger on, but we should leave...somewhere else.” Joshua said, tapping a finger to his lower lip as he really genuinely tried to wrap his brain around just what it was that was putting him off. His thoughts were too fuzzy to really figure out where they should go, just not here.

“Don't tell me we've gotta swim back across the river again,” Pratt said sourly, eyes scanning the treeline, one hand hovering loosely near his gun holster.

“We're gonna need a bit more than that Rook, can you talk about what's got you wanting to turn tail back the other way?” Whitehorse gently inquired, also a bit on edge, but his eyes remained on Joshua's face, trusting Hudson and Pratt to keep an eye on their perimeter.

“It's...” Joshua flapped his hand uselessly, trying to indicate the green and the flowers and the soft white crawl of sleepy fog filling the air. “It's all the green, the flowers, Hudson's fireflies, it's not...not right.”

That clicked enough understanding into place for the sense of wrongness to come more to the fore.

Earl raised his eyebrows then. “Green?”

“We're in a forest, isn't it supposed to be all green and shit?” Pratt muttered. He was tired they all knew, and grumpy as a result of it.

“...no wait, I see it too, it's not supposed to be this green at night, there isn't enough light to see actual green.” Hudson said, looking back over her shoulder past Joshua in the direction of the clearing. “...those flowers weren't there before, were they?”

“I dunno,” Joshua said, unhelpfully. “They were always there for me. We should leave though.”
“Flowers?” Pratt asked, looking at the two of them like they were having it on with some dumb ass joke right now, of all times.

Whitehorse had heard enough to know something definitely screwy was going on, and started herding the lot of them back towards the river, to Joshua's relief. “I don't know if we have to go that far Pratt, but let's get a move on, maybe working our way along the bank will be far enough.”

Joshua heard a soft laugh then, the stifled sound of amusement before you drop a surprise on an unsuspecting person, like a birthday party. He had mixed feelings about that, the sound feeding into the sense of distant alarm, but also slowing his footsteps down with an odd sense of reluctance to move away from...from what? “Did you guys hear that?”

Hudson went stock still, listening then, eyes narrowing. The others also went still, ears pricked for any sound beyond the quiet stillness of the nighttime forest. The moments dragged by, and it looked like the green mistiness was getting thicker around the edges of the world to Joshua at the very least if not the others, and it was starting to feel like a better and better idea to just lie down and rest—

“Run,” Hudson said abruptly, suddenly grabbing Joshua's hand and breaking into a run, heading away from the flowers that they both could see now. Pratt and Whitehorse broke into a run as well, with Pratt cursing under his breath about having just caught his breath.

Things got fuzzy after that, fading into white instead of black for a change of pace, and Joshua couldn't find it in himself to mind as his consciousness faded out.

Chapter End Notes

First chapter done, how exciting!! Just to clarify in this AU, Joseph had a son instead of a daughter primarily because I prefer writing male characters, but also because of blatantly easy "wow you look just like this one Cult Leader I know" connections, and future potential shenanigans—tell me you wouldn't want to see Joshua trying to trick some Blissed Out Cultists into thinking he's the Father come to talk to them personally. This fic will also be swapping between various character POVs because that's what I'm here for: to dig into the brains of our favorite villains and various other characters to see what makes them tick, and to provide more Seed Family Interactions. And drama. And comedy. And angst. This will probably end well!
The title of this chapter comes from the song "Take Me To Church" by Hozier. This song was picked for obvious titular reasons given the scene's location, but I also felt it suited Eden's Gate in general quite well in some of the lyrics. The first part I interpret as fitting Joseph and his wife, while the chorus fits the other family members more—the followers, John, Faith, and Jacob. And so on and so forth, didn't think too deeply on the rest since it was fitting enough music to work with.
Faith watched, listening silently as the angry mutterings turned into the beginning growls and warning roars of a gathering mob that stood before the three intruders invading their church. She watched Joseph, the Father standing serenely as the light streamed down from behind him, circling him with the backlit halo of divine purpose, looking so above and beyond the ordinary, flawed mortals angrily swarming before him. He looked so much more above and beyond the rest of them, even though she knew he was as flawed as the rest of them. She knew about his flaws, his shortcomings, his sins. Not as deeply as John and Jacob knew them, no, but she knew enough, and she buried those sins like secrets taken to the grave where she'd buried the old her a long time ago.

Secrets never did like to stay quietly laid to rest though, much like doubt. That was why she was Faith, she knew. It was her appointed task, her duty, to soothe those doubts and fears and ugly, dirty, dark secrets back to sleep, and bury them once more whenever they tried to crawl back out of the grave. To lay burial shrouds of sparkling white cloth like blankets to sleep soundly and securely beneath, blankets of Bliss to soothe the disquieted minds of their flock.

It made her fingers curl into a fist at the sides of her dress to watch their people be riled so, even when she knew it was necessary, all a part of Joseph's plan. One hand still found its way up to reach out, wanting to soothe, to quiet, to prove she could. To prove she was still, still useful.

But that wasn't what Joseph would want.

She tucked that fear of being useless, of being discarded and all that such a fate would entail, back into the earth's embrace, putting her hand down, willing the feeling to return to blissful sleep. It wouldn't help her do what she needed to do here, which was to stand, and watch.
She watched the Sheriff's face, lined with stress and care, pulled faintly tight to emphasize the creases about his eyes—he didn't want to be here, she can tell. She wished he wasn't here either. He's not a bad man, and not one to pick a fight, not like the Marshal.

Faith's eyes slid over to the brash man, lips pursing slightly as she considered him. So much anger, he threw his weight around expecting everyone to be cowed by his aggression and his handgun, even in the face of far more heavily armed and far more dangerous people.

Jacob wasn't carrying a gun and he was far and away the most dangerous one in the room, as far as physical violence went. And that was saying something, wasn't it. They were all of them dangerous, including her. She knew this, and buried it quietly in its own shallow grave.

The Marshal was making up for something, she was sure. Making up and putting out a hardened shell of an exterior to cover a hollow interior, like so many were in this world. Tried to fill the void and the silence with noise and anger and fire, to light up the darkness inside.

But it wouldn't be enough. He'd always keep looking for more to burn, offerings to make upon the altar of his starving soul. The Marshal would never know peace going the way he was now, she was certain. As Faith, she'd gotten good at discerning the hollow ones who needed the peace of the Bliss the most, first from Joseph, all soft words before the Father had ended the wretched souls' suffering, helping her to see the signs of a wayward soul like a miasma emanating from a person's eyes, their skin, their air. But it was from John she learned it best, all sharp eyes and invisible knives, flaying and filleting people open in vivisection with insight and words and recognition of life's little tells. John had seen so much, too much, of the darkness inside people, and too often turned the knife points of his own making back on himself, but not as often as he turned them on the people outside the family, on the world, in vindictive hate of all it had been, instead of what it should have been, could have been.

Joseph had said to her as an aside that the root of John's rage and hate, was the full and total disappointment and despair of someone who had once been an optimist. John had been good once, been full of love, full of joy, full of good. Full of grace. Then the world had crushed it out of him, smeared it red and sticky and full of blood across the floor, and filled his rib cage up with hurt and sharp and broken and pain instead of where his heart should have stayed.

Joseph and Jacob had helped to give John's heart back to him...but a soft heart inside a rib cage full of broken glass and twisted metal was going to be shredded and bleeding from too much sharp and not enough soft.

And John still refused Faith's help, refused the softening of all those sharp edges that the Bliss could offer.
Jacob was much the same in his own way, really.

She wished they'd accept, so that she could help,

_and so that she could help make sure they wouldn't get rid of her like they had the last Faiths_, a treacherous voice from beyond the grave whispered, rising up from where her fears and ambitions lay buried within her heart of hearts. She tamped it back down, breathing slow and even consciously as she denied it. She was Faith, she was a member of the family, they loved her, they wanted her here, she had a place here, at Eden's Gate. She was a Herald, she was important, she was needed.

_They were important too, once, those other girls Joseph called Faith, and you're just one more in line, what makes you so special that can't be replaced_? the voice from beyond the grave whispered still, through the dark and from the deep, shadowed places inside her soul that never saw the light of day anymore—the deep, dark places she left Rachel to stumble in, alone. She wasn't Rachel anymore, she was Faith. No one could hurt her like that anymore, the way the world had hurt Rachel. She had been cleansed, she had become Faith, born anew from Joseph's faith in her, and her faith in him as the Father. Rachel should have been no more.

At times like these though, Faith thought it was Rachel's voice that sounded out these thoughts, coming back to haunt her with all her doubts and fears, hating that Faith was divinely lifted to fly, was loved, wanted—hating that Faith had left her alone and forgotten, just like Rachel had always feared she would be.

All of these thoughts made her yearn to confide in Jacob once again, after this confrontation was over. He was solid like a rock, and he wouldn't tell Joseph. John wouldn't either...but Jacob? Jacob knew what it was to gather one's strength and to shed and shred one's fears. Or, Jacob at least knew how to fight those fears and win most days. Winning at night was another matter entirely though. Because those fears never really did die, did they? Coming back like demons and devils to haunt and torment them as they tried to build the path to Eden, trying to distract them from their god-given duty.

That was another thing she knew, that helped her feel a little bit safer, a little more connected—Jacob didn't believe Joseph talked to God. But he believed in _Joseph_, and that, she could understand better. Most of the time.

This, right here, right now, was not one of those times. Her own faith was wavering. _Faith_ was wavering. Looking at the Father staring down the officers of the law, the representatives of the system that had scorned them, _abandoned_ them,—_like she had abandoned Rachel too_, whispered
something spiteful inside her—made her doubt. They made her fear.

Because what if Joseph wasn't right?

But what if he was?

She didn't know what she feared more.

They'd all read enough of the Book of Revelations to know what would happen when the Lamb broke the seals. Joseph had told them—her, John, and Jacob, all gathered around the table like a family as Joseph laid out what the Lamb would do. The destruction the Lamb of God would wreck upon the county, judging the worthy and the unclean as the Lion of Judah. Both would fall before the wrath of the Lamb, but the righteous and the good would be laid before the altar of God as martyrs, and brought up once more in the second resurrection for the final Judgment. The living who were spared would be marked with God's mark upon their foreheads, and they would retreat to the heralds' gates to wait out the divine, righteous fury that would follow the trumpeting of the angels, and after the world had been cleansed, they would reemerge. And then they would open the gates, and the world would be born anew as their own paradise, their own Eden, and all would be good and well.

She wanted to believe. She really did. But it always felt like a rat race, always something more to achieve before they could be happy and okay. It made that voice hidden in the dark places in her heart wonder if they would ever be finished, ever be able to just be. Faith told herself that it was better now, and that was true.

Better, but not good, now is it, whispered Rachel from her dark and lonely grave.

She buried that voice again with a vengeance, with the knowledge that it was good enough—it had to be good enough, because this was the best she was going to get. It had to get better after the Collapse. It was going to be.

Right?

She stepped a little further towards the middle of the dais, towards where John and Jacob were gathering behind the Father, watching as Joseph calmed the rising tides of anger with his usual soft spoken manner and far reaching words.
“We knew this moment would come. We have prepared for it.” the Father said, gently urging his people towards the door, out into the night, to the end of the world. “Go. Go...”

The crowd began to file out around the officers then, reluctantly, like a slow moving current passing and splitting around river stones—stones that would be swept up in the ensuing flood that would come barreling down the river bed once the Reaping had begun.

Faith looked at the three officers then, recognizing the Sheriff, and one of the deputies. The Marshal she dismissed largely because she knew his type—he would be given to either her or Jacob most likely, as John didn't have as much use for rebellious personalities as the two of them did. The Sheriff...perhaps was too old for Jacob or John, and would likely be given to her care. The young Deputy however...she looked strong. Either John or Jacob, then. Jacob could do with another strong, fiery soul to add to the ranks of his hunters—John was better suited to help those lost souls actively seeking direction or leadership, Jacob was better for reforming the misguided or misdirected with a firm hand. As for Faith herself, well...she was the best choice for those who were either beyond salvaging, or needed inner peace first and foremost.

She took a really good look at the youngest officer then, looking at the other woman with her mind’s eye, through the Bliss. The Deputy...was an ordinary person. Mundane. No outstanding glow to her aura at all, like the Family had, like the Father and John and Jacob had. Like Faith herself knew she had.

It was strangely disappointing and surprising to see that the Deputy wasn't one of them—wasn't God-touched, or Divinely Blessed as Joseph called it. Fucking psychic, Jacob had described it as when pressed, though their eldest brother preferred not to call it anything at all most of the time. She liked Joseph's interpretation better, but Jacob had a much more blunt way with words that simplified things nicely and made it easily understood.

Still, it felt like a bit of a let down. She had been so sure the Lamb would not be merely one of the ordinary flock—Faith bit her lip at that thought, chastising herself mentally. Their followers deserved more consideration, she knew that, Joseph had reminded her of that gently not two weeks ago, when he had come on his monthly review to visit her and look over her operations.

\textit{But it's true, isn't it, you're part of the Family, not just the family, all held above the rest of them, apart, different. That's why Joseph picked you, because you were different too,} Rachel whispered once more, almost seeming supportive, until—\textit{but not different enough to be irreplaceable. That's another reason he comes to check how you're running things, to make sure you're still useful enough for their purposes.}

That wasn't true—Joseph checked on John and Jacob too, she told herself, told \textit{Rachel}. But the fear that Rachel was right lay uneasily beneath a too-thin veneer of grave-dirt, because dangerous truths
never did rest easily.

“God will not let them take me.” Joseph's words drew Faith's attention back to the situation at hand momentarily, watching as the faithful members of the flock filed out, leaving only the Family and the officers behind. She could see the green clad shoulder of another officer standing to one side of the doors outside, and she wondered how many total had come. It seemed too few, almost like it was only a token effort and nothing more than that. She looked at the Sheriff and the Marshal then with her mind's eye, observing that they had nothing noteworthy about their auras either, and glanced at the officer outside.

That made her stop, and smile for a brief moment. That was the one. She could see a faint glow to their aura, even from here. Not a strong one, but it was there. She let her astral self step forward, drifting over to phase through the doors to look the third officer over, even as she remained dimly aware of Joseph speaking to the other officers within.

The blurry quality to the one outside officer's appearance on this plane made her frown a bit. Everyone should have a significant enough degree of Bliss in their system in the county now for her to latch hold of, aside from visitors like the Marshal. Faith was certain this one had been in the county for a while now, John or one of the faithful would have told her about a recent addition to the police department if there had been one. He had a baseball hat tipped low over his face as he scanned the surroundings, but even ducking down to peer underneath it she couldn't quite make out his features yet. Despite the lack of Bliss in his system she could still examine his aura more closely—or so she thought. She frowned at how the glow seemed to withdraw from her sight, hiding its nature from her. Did he know about the Family? Surely not...but he could hide himself to a degree it seemed, just not entirely from Faith's eyes. She was too well-practiced and too well-honed by the Bliss to miss it, though other, less skilled persons surely would have overlooked him.

She felt another smile creep upon her astral form's face then. This was far more promising—it was early to say yet she knew, but there was no denying the excitement seeping through her veins. This one felt like a personal test just for her, one she was sure she could pass. The Marshal wouldn't be an interesting case to work on, but this one...this one might be amenable, might make a good lieutenant for one of them. Not one of hers, more the pity really, but she only liked to have women for her priestesses. But, she could be the one to turn this one to their cause, and then turn him over to John, or maybe Jacob—or maybe even one of the Father's own personal guard.

She slid back into her own skin, just in time to watch the Father being led down the aisle in handcuffs, with a final word of wisdom for the deafened ears of the unbelievers.

“Sometimes the best thing to do, is to walk away.” The Father's words were meant for the officers, she knew...but there was an odd ominous feeling in the air that lingered for her, now that she was back in her own mortal senses. Something didn't feel quite...right.
It should be the Lamb that tried to take the Father away...but the Deputy in the church had not been the *special* one, the chosen one, her gut told her.

“I think there was something wrong, there,” She said to her brothers once the doors were closed.

Jacob turned his head to give her a considering sidelong look, inquiring without words for her to continue.

“How so Faith?” John was far less patient, as usual, turning on one heel to look at her full on. “All has happened as Joseph predicted.”

“I don't think that was the right *one*, John.” She explained, tucking her hands behind her back as she batted her eyes at him, all doe-like in a show of innocence. “I think it should have been the other one outside—the officer who handcuffed Joseph wasn't anything special. The one outside is.”

“Appearance and abilities?” Jacob asked, because of course he'd want to profile the one of interest, to know the extent of precaution to take when handling a new threat.

Faith shook her head then, making a little humming noise of frustration and disappointment. “I couldn't see him well at all—it was like he had next to no Bliss in his system. He was wearing a hat too, all I could tell was he was wearing glasses and had a beard. Light skin, dark brown hair pulled back in a ponytail. It was too dark to see his eye color as it was.”

That made Jacob raise an eyebrow, and John raise two.

“What do you mean he had no Bliss in his system? We've soaked the whole county in it at this point with the water treatment plant,” John said, scowling all the while. He didn't like it when plans didn't go as they should. “There wasn't any new blood, he's been here for at least a year now if that was the Junior Deputy of the department. All the others have had years more of exposure at this point.”

Faith spread her hands and shrugged, lips pushed into a pout to one side. “That's all I can tell you, John. He doesn't look like he's been exposed to Bliss.”
“We'll just have to fix that then,” John said coolly, looking back towards the door Joseph and the officers had disappeared through, “assuming they survive what's coming.”

There was no doubt the Lamb would survive. The others were not integral in the grand scheme of things however. But Faith knew John didn't believe her words—his faith in Joseph was akin to adamantine, and little would sway him from that belief. Jacob didn't care one way or another, he only needed information and marching orders to strategize, to plan, and to execute. So Faith was left alone in the shroud of her own uncertainty and doubt, waiting with her brothers for news of what happened next. They would wait here in the church for the Father to return, as Joseph had instructed.

They heard the crash from outside, and she saw John's jaw tighten minutely from the corner of her eye, a hint of teeth bared as his hands tightening behind his back until the fabric of his coat sleeves creaked in his grip. If it was needed that John take to the skies in Affirmation, one of the faithful would come for them.

Jacob stood rock still, eyes focused almost unblinkingly upon the door, waiting patiently, attentively.

Minutes passed, slowly, agonizingly. Then, the doors swung open once more to reveal the Father, striding back to them all, the crowd of faithful respectfully stopping beyond the threshold to allow him the time to speak with his Family alone, shutting the door behind him. John relaxed minutely, and Jacob finally shifted his weight back, once again at rest. Faith smiled then, for the most part glad to see Joseph returned none the worse for wear—but oh, he'd have to replace his glasses, she could see the cracks from here with how they caught the light, glittering with the promise of sharp edges fitted into a whole, the way the Family did in all their broken glory.

“My brothers, my sister, the first seal has been opened, as we knew it would be,” Joseph said, spreading his arms wide for them as he drew near once more. He reached for John first, knowing he would be the antsiest one of them all waiting for Joseph to return, one hand wrapped close around the back of his youngest brother's neck to pull him forward, pressing their foreheads together. He released John and turned to her, repeating the gesture with a light touch to the back of her shoulders as their foreheads met, and then finally to Jacob, clasping his older brother's forearms firmly with fondness and determination as he completed the circle, touching his forehead to Jacob's.

“The Reaping has begun, but we will need your hunters, brother. The officers have slipped from our grasp, save for one.” Joseph said, turning from Jacob to regard Faith for a moment. “The Marshal shall be yours to shepherd, Faith. We put our trust and his fate in your hands.”

Faith inclined her head, putting on a little girlish smile as she did so. “Thy will be done, Father.”
Always Father, never brother. She would never dare.

Joseph gave her a single nod, before focusing on Jacob once more. “Be wary of the deputies, Jacob. One of them is divinely touched, I am sure.”

Jacob grunted in affirmation, crossing his arms again with that surly expression he got when he was contemplating a situation that wasn't as well-informed as he liked. “Faith mentioned that earlier about him. Did you get a feel for what he can do? He's not got enough Bliss in his system for her to read him yet.”

John's gaze turned to watch Joseph's expression a little bit more closely at that—he always wanted first look at the new toys as far as Faith had seen. She couldn't begrudge him that, he was picky about who he had serving as his lieutenants, and bemoaned the lack of actually effective individuals who weren't sent off to Jacob to staff the project's militia.

“He tried to command the faithful, but not successfully, until he put the fear of God into them for a time.” Joseph tilted his head as he looked slightly off to one side, his lips pressed into a contemplative line. “He would be a good addition to our flock, even with his youth and inexperience in handling such power. His grasp was shaky, and weak, like handling broken glass with bare hands. He has been alone in his struggles with his gift, I am sure. But with guidance and a firm hand, with love, we can help him prosper.”

There was a note of pity in the Father's voice, Faith was sure. Pity for the young man's struggles with trying to grapple with a monumental gift like theirs— and pity for what the Deputy will have to go through in his initiation into the family too, isn't it, Rachel whispered in Faith's ear. It won't be kind, and if he fights, he'll go through all three of the Heralds' tender mercies.

Rachel was right in that, at least. But given how the Father had called him weak...she rather suspected he would die in Jacob's trials. More was the pity, they didn't find many who could share the burden of guiding the flock too often, and many of those were too weak to be of much use, or driven mad by the revelations that came with the burden God had placed upon them.

Jacob hummed dismissively, undoubtedly coming to the same conclusion Faith had. “If he's weak, send him to John or Faith, they'll break him more gently than I will.”

“Weak from inexperience, my brother,” Joseph said in soothing assurance. “I could sense potential in his attempt, clumsy though it was. The fear he invoked...there was power in that. A primal fear, rooted deep in the darkest heart of one's soul. It reminded me of you.”
That got Jacob's attention then, eyes flicking back to watch Joseph, assessing his brother's words. “Really.”

John bristled a bit at that. “But Jacob got the last one we came across, and broke him,” he complained.

That just made Jacob snort in amusement. “You wouldn't have had any use for one that weak anyway, John.”

“No all measures of skill are to be held against the yardstick of killing ability, Jacob,” John replied testily before quieting at Joseph's upraised hand.

“Calm yourselves, brothers. Whatever the case may be, the faithful will need to lay hands upon the harbingers of doom before we seriously contemplate who shall convert them to our cause.” Joseph said. Always the peacekeeper, until he wasn't.

“My hunters are already out in the woods. They know what to do.” Jacob continued, dropping the topic of contention like it no longer interested him at all.

“They know what to do in pursuit of regular quarry,” Faith said, rocking to and fro from her heels to her toes, all so innocently, finally breaking her silence. “We don't know what the newest lost lambs have up their sleeves, and we know one of them must have some tricks at the very least. If they're going to herald the Collapse, surely they wouldn't be weak, would they?” She tilted her head to look up at Jacob inquiringly.

That got her another sidelong look of consideration. “The weak can be problematic on their own without strength, like an infestation of rats.”

“And it would be rather fitting for the end of this world to be ushered to its demise by harbingers that epitomized all that was wrong with the old order,” John chimed in, earning an amused look that almost felt like approval from Jacob. It felt a bit like the two were ganging up on her, but Faith had to tell herself that this was not what they were doing, even if Rachel was whispering otherwise. “But Faith has a point, and like I said before, not all skills are measured by how well they can be turned to murder, Jacob.”

Now Jacob was back to looking surly again—a sign he was busy considering possible scenarios
and planning accordingly. “Doubt the scrub has foresight,” he grunted after a moment's consideration, “otherwise he should've seen all this shit coming, turned tail and run before he ever set foot here.”

Foresight was a rare gift, more often than not turning those who had been blessed with it into raving lunatics. Joseph was one of the few exceptions, and used his God-given gifts with a deft hand and a will forged into steel amidst the fires of hardship.

“We shall see,” Joseph cut in serenely, resting one hand on Jacob's shoulder and giving it a squeeze. “God moves in mysterious and inevitable ways. Perhaps he could not deny his purpose in coming here, to escort the Lamb to us, and to join our family.”

Faith pouted then, looking at her toes. “I still don't think she's the Lamb. It didn't feel quite right.” She was treading dangerous ground and had to be careful, tiptoeing the line between honesty and fealty.

It almost wasn't worth it, with how Joseph turned that all too piercing gaze upon her, considering her words, considering her. After a long, long moment, he hummed in thought. “If you're right, Faith, then matters may be more complicated than we give them credit for. I suspect Jacob is right about the lost soul not having foresight however. If he had foreseen the Collapse, what reason would he have to deny himself joining with us?”

“Denial.” Jacob said, blunt as ever, dry and unimpressed with the world and its weaknesses in the face of cold, hard truths.

Faith nodded in agreement to that as well. They all knew, even Joseph, but the Father always hoped for the best...even while enacting plans for the worst — worst outcome, or worst method? Rachel sniped, but Faith ignored it, even while the words stung and brought back bad memories in their wake like disturbed leaves swirling on the surface of a river's current.

“Then we will simply have to make them see,” Joseph stated simply, as if that was all there was to it.

And in a way, that's all it was, to the bloody end.

They dispersed after that, retiring to Joseph's living quarters and the guest rooms set aside permanently for them there, settling back into their usual evening routine with such ease it was as
if nothing out of the ordinary had occurred prior.

Faith sat alone upon one of the soft, plush armchairs in the small library, legs swinging idly to and fro as she watched the distant figures of the faithful moving about to close up for the night. Mentally however, she was miles and miles away, checking in with her priestesses to ensure they were watching the border of the Henbane river, in case the officers had slipped through Jacob's clutches as she had a sneaking suspicion they might. She loved Jacob, she really did—if you call that feeling of having strings-attached conditions for their acceptance of you and your continued existence love, Rachel interjected—but he liked to approach things with an almost single-minded focus at times, as did the others of their Family to varying degrees. John less so, and his people would be patrolling the edges of his territory and lending in the effort to track the officers down in the woods as well.

If the one marked officer did indeed have some gift that helped them evade pursuit, then it would be better to lay a trap, Faith knew. Thankfully she had instructed her priestesses to dust the banks of the river and surrounding areas with Bliss via plane earlier as a part of routine maintenance, and now time would tell if that investment would pay off. If the wayward souls had headed to John or Jacob's territory, then that was all there was to the matter unfortunately. It'd be to their advantage if they ended up in her territory over her brothers', in particular Jacob's—he always did like wounding his prey when bringing it in, to better ensure that escaping was all the more difficult. Even John regarded the use of Bliss arrows to be a bit...Jacob-y. Not that John thought it was too far, she knew, but the youngest Seed brother did prefer to bring his converts in without added injuries via the use of the Bliss-filled darts Faith's chemists and engineers made. Injuries could be troublesome if they hit somewhere delicate or life-threatening, after all. Not enough finesse for John’s tastes but John was fussy like that, and while Jacob had his own deft touch when it was called for, it was the gamble of life-or-death that Jacob liked when his hunters used more brutal methods. She hummed to herself, passing the time by idly flipping through a book without really looking at the pages—she was miles away, ghosting along the riverbanks in her astral form, looking for any sign that their lost little lambs had strayed into her region, tracing the invisible lines that criss-crossed her region like unseen spider silk.

Then, she felt it. That faint, familiar tug, like a tripwire going off. She turned her attention to that point, flitting over as quickly as she could. There were figures in the distance, and could it be? Yes! Fortune favored her this day, the chosen Deputy was the one entangled in her web, the strings circling and clinging to his form as the Bliss called to him with its soothing song. Only, he wasn't phasing through from the waking, physical world into the astral plane, into the Bliss. He was resisting, how quaint. A smile curved upon her lips as she drew closer to him, watching as his features slowly began to sharpen—and oh, he was bleeding. The poor dear, they'd have to patch and clean him up once they'd brought him in. She ran unseen fingers up his arms, framing his face with her palms, humming a soft song to help him slowly sink further into the Bliss's hold, into her embrace. She could tell it was working, but it was slower than usual—he was a hardy mind, which would serve her brothers and the Project well once he had been broken and remolded in the Project's image.

Faith dipped her head closer towards his, trying to get a glimpse of his thoughts and his state of
mind. It was hard for her, such things being moreso John's forte when it came to detail, but she could get emotional impressions accurately enough.

Oh, the poor boy, his mind was all roughed up, pain-riddled from overuse of his power. He really was not in peak shape, was he? Well, nothing practice and training couldn't fix. Perhaps he would end up going to Jacob after all, Jacob would whip him into shape soon enough. Assuming the Deputy survived the trials, of course.

Then another Deputy stepped forward from the woods, drawing Faith's attention to her—this was the one the others thought would play the part of the Lamb, the one who had led the Father out of the church in handcuffs.

She turned to look at the blessed Deputy whose face she still held cupped in her palms, smiling at him, even though neither Deputy could see it. “But you and I know you're the chosen one, aren't you? And I'll be the one who brings you into the fold.” She said with something almost akin to fondness as she patted his cheek.

Faith stepped back then, letting her hands drift to one side to gather more of her spiderweb silken lines of Bliss to try to wrap it around the second Deputy. It would be more difficult, since the second one hadn't walked into the trap itself, but it could be done if given enough time.

But oh, the first Deputy was gently pushing the other one away. Faith frowned—he shouldn't be in any state to do much of anything. Others would have been down and on their back by now. She had assumed it was simply a measure of his willpower that he was still standing, but this was even more unusual. The lack of Bliss in his system must be making it easier for him to resist outright.

Sending out a call to her nearest priestesses to hone in on the location, she threw more threads at the two officers, twisting the strands around the blessed one into a leash—or a noose. The other one she cared less to capture, but an effort had to be made so Faith drew the threads around the woman's head to emphasize the Bliss's disorientating effects. With any luck the visual hallucinations would be enough to make the female Deputy easy to catch, but she wasn't going to let the blessed one slip through her fingers, she needed to prove to Joseph she was right, that she was useful and worthy enough to be kept around.

The two deputies led her to the other pair of wayward souls the faithful were searching for, and Faith cast her net of spider-silk snares wide to try to entrap them all, even as the one chosen Deputy still managed to get them all running away from her region, beyond her reach. Her frown deepened in irritation, but she pulled on the threads, tightening her grip to let the Bliss cut a bit more readily into their minds, seeping in like water through cracks.
The three other officers would get away, she could tell already as they splashed back into the Henbane to cross over into John's territory, out of her web. But she had the one that mattered, watching as his steps finally slowed to a stumble, and with another yank of the intangible rope she had wrapped around him so tightly he finally faltered and fell. His colleagues didn't notice, too addled by her threads, by the Bliss. John could pick them up though. Humming to herself and basking in her little victory, Faith settled down to sit upon her knees, gently tipping the Junior Deputy to one side to encourage him to roll onto his back. “You'll help me ensure that I remain the Father's trusted Faith, won't you Deputy?” She said, brushing the hair out of his face with one ghostly hand and an ethereal laugh.

She paused mid-laughter then, the sound dying away into silence as she studied his face, his features clearer now that he was firmly ensconced in the Bliss. Her hands slipped away from his face, cold and nerveless despite her flesh and blood body being so very far away.

He looked just like the Father.

Leaning in, she focused on his face all the more intently, scrutinizing him. He was so young, he didn't have the lines of care and age that Joseph had earned over the decades of his life. The glasses were different, and the hat helped obscure his face's familiarity at a casual glance from passersby —this one likely hid behind the uniform and people's own blissful obliviousness to have avoided detection for so long. They should have heard about this, did John know—? Did the Family know, and had deemed it too private, too personal for her to know? Fear and bitter jealousy stabbed at her heart as Rachel laughed at her in the back of her head.

If they did know, they wouldn't entrust him to you, they would've tried harder to catch him on their own, because at the end of the day, you're not a Seed by blood, and he is, isn't he?

It could just be coincidence. It could be.

What better herald for the Collapse than the Father's own flesh and blood though? The Seeds are a chosen family...and you, you're just an interloper, a temporary hired hand along for the ride.

Her hands balled into fists in her lap, nails biting into her palms as she sat and stared at the unconscious young man, resisting the urge to order the nearest Angel to simply drown the wayward soul in the river, and then for the Angel to kill itself shortly after. No one would ever know otherwise then. She took a deep breath, inhaling and then exhaling slowly.

But John might find out, and through him, Joseph. They saw too much, and if they saw the Deputy's face...would they be willing to think it was an accident? They might still think the lady Deputy was the Lamb, but Faith felt a deep, dark certainty born of fear that filtered all the way down into her marrow and bones that this one was the one who would decide it all. Her intuition was on point more often than not, even if the Father, Jacob, and John didn't believe her this time.
They doubt you often enough, why would they believe you this time when it's something as important as the coming of the End Times? Rachel jeered. You are not the leader of the flock. You're just the choir conductor for the Angels, the mindless laborers who've had their brains drugged right out of their skull—you don't lead the faithful the way they do. You push them, right over the edge, right over the brink, into oblivion.

Stop. Faith had to tell herself—tell Rachel—that as she breathed in on a count of ten. She had to think. Rachel was right, if the Family had known about this, they would have sent out a more concerted effort. So that meant either this Deputy wasn't a member of the Family, or that they didn't know.

They didn't know.

Joseph didn't know. This child must have been born during his days before Eden's Gate then, or the Father would have known. They all would have known. So, what would they do if she handed the Father's son over to them?

They'll replace you.

That thought made her stiffen up and freeze.

They'll replace you, and he'll take your place, because why would they keep you around, when they have another true Seed to take up the role?

That wasn't true, he might not have the skills for it, he was weak.

Weak from lack of practice, but for how long? Jacob will make him Strong. Joseph will ensure it. He resisted the Bliss for so long...even without Bliss in his bloodstream and his mind, that's unusual. He will be Strong, one day, and then where will you be? Sinking into the boiling muck of the Angel's Grave, just like the other Faiths, and you'll get your wish—you'll be the last Faith there is.

No, no, Joseph wouldn't throw her away, he needed Faith, the faithful needed her because she was soft, approachable, loving where the Family of brothers were sharp, unyielding, and demanding. She was a counterbalance to them all, that was why they always needed a Faith. That was why the mantle of Faith had always been taken up by a woman. She'd be safe, proven loyal beyond a doubt.
by turning him over to the Father's embrace.

_Are you sure?_

The long silence in her head was telling enough, even for her through all her denial. No. No, she was not sure at all. She wasn't sure of Joseph, either. In some things, yes...in his valuing of her, no. Never. Never ever ever.

What to do, though? It felt like there was no obvious way out, running a maze with no exit as the walls closed in on her. Breathe. Breathe. Perhaps...perhaps she could use him, as a shield, an investment.

That idea had Faith scrutinizing the Deputy in a new light.

If she could bring him into the fold, perhaps she could also help ensure he supported her, either through operative need, or through a need for faith. She'd need to walk that line carefully, make sure he didn't get too far into the Bliss...but she could walk that line. She was always walking lines, delicately balancing between too much and too little in all aspects of her life now. Yes, this plan might work, might help to ensure her continued place in the family...maybe. It was fraught with uncertainty, but she stood a better chance with a plan than without, she was sure.

That meant she needed time to work on him, to win him over to her side and her way of thinking, to dispose him to her will. Her priestesses were closing in, and she instructed them to take him to the nearest of their facilities equipped with a hospital wing, and to keep the matter hushed up until she had given them further instruction.

In the meantime, she had a role to play, as always. Slipping back into her own skin, she stood up on her tiptoes and stretched, arms reaching up over her head before she tucked the book she hadn't been bothering to read back onto the shelf. She trotted out from the library with a little skip to her step, putting a smile on her face as she knocked on John's room door.

John answered swiftly, impatient as always, looking at her with his eyebrows raised to express an unspoken sentiment of _yes what is it?_

“`The deputies and the sheriff seem to have tried to cross the Henbane into my region, but they doubled back into Holland Valley territory, brother John,”_ Faith said sweetly, tilting her head in a coquettish manner as she brushed an imaginary speck of dirt off of her lace and skirts. “A few
miles downstream from the bridge, do you have a map? I can point out where for you that way.”

Her information earned Faith a toothsome grin from John as he got out his phone. “I'm pleased to hear that you found them so quickly Faith—any idea why they turned back? The more we know, the easier the hunt will be.” He said, pulling up a map on the screen before tilting his phone towards her.

Faith hummed noncommittally, scrolling down the map just a bit before tapping and zooming into a particular section of the river. “Right there, not ten minutes ago. And who knows? I suspect they're allergic to pollen, it can get thick in that area this time of year.” She gave him a playful pout, knowing he'd understand what she meant—she'd tried to ensnare them, but they'd moved away from the Bliss fields and clouds too soon for her to latch onto them properly.

And that was true enough, for the ones she was talking about.

Truth was always a knife's edge when talking to John of not too much but not too little, and lies were the gouged out wounds that he could smell like blood in the water from miles away.

Even now, he looked at her with those deep-water shark eyes of his that saw everything, and that smile he was wearing seemed like he knew every little secret she hid beneath the too-thin layer of topsoil they lay buried under.

And he did know just about every last one of her secrets—but not this one, the new one, the one that was laid out unconscious in the hospital wing in the Henbane with a face that looked too much like the Father's.

She let the put out feeling that still lingered over the fact that she hadn't managed to catch the officers color her face first and foremost, making sure her breath was even and calm so he wouldn't have reason to look past the lace-thin curtain of omission that hid the truth's entirety from the parts out in the open. The tension in her mind made the moment where he looked at her seem all the longer, like he did suspect her. Like he knew, and was simply waiting for her to confess—and waiting to confess always made the confession hurt more, metaphorically and otherwise.

“It's a shame we can't expand your reach permanently,” John said in an almost clinical kind of disappointment like it was actually such a shame they couldn't, but they both knew there were other feelings and opinions running deep beneath that veneer. “It would make catching runaways like these wayward souls so much easier.”
He did sort of mean it...but they both knew he would be fifty shades of green with envy and red with blood-stained rage if she stepped over the line into his territory. His, his, his, no one else's, John needed his own space, his own authority, his own power. And she could understand that—she wished she had as much freedom as he had, even if it was given by Joseph.

*Because at the end of the day, all you have is a Bliss-fueled dream of freedom.*

For once, Faith couldn't find it in herself to object to Rachel's observations, and the two of them went quiet, as if partaking in an unspoken, temporary ceasefire. She moved on though, because there was nothing to do about the skeletons in her closet other than bury them, and sometimes she got tired of it, and just let the bones lie there, grinning in the open like silent ghosts that judged and laughed at her.

“Well, look on the bright side John, if I did that, you and Jacob would gripe about all the fun being taken out of hunting them down,” She heard herself say with a teasing lilt to her voice.

He smirked at that. “Too right. Now if you'll excuse me,” with nothing further that needed to be said, he went about calling the patrols nearest to that section of the Henbane.

She tilted her head and waved him goodbye in response to his wave before he shut the door, and then Faith stood there for a brief moment, just breathing out a tiny moment of relief as her rolled her shoulders back to ease a phantom tension—she knew her tells well enough to resist the instinctive reaction of her muscles stiffening up with the fear of even trying to *lie* to John, of all people. This little lie would have to be put to rest soon and made into a truth of sorts, or he might catch on.

Spinning on the ball and toes of one foot, she went off to her own room, shutting herself in before lying down and wrapping herself up warmly in the quilted blankets. She didn't feel cold all that much anymore, but she had little doubt her skin was cool from the evening air even indoors—autumn was coming in, a fitting season for the Collapse that would end it all. It was like nature was sending them off with a final salute of beauty and glory...if one believed in the Collapse being imminent.

There was no way Faith could go to her people in her region tonight, that would rouse suspicion among her Family members. But, she didn't have to be there physically to do what she wanted there. Closing her eyes, she opened them again on the astral plane—in the Bliss—and flitted off into the night, seeking out the dreamscape of the Deputy she had ensnared. Time to see what information she could glean and could use from his dreamscape in the Bliss, then.
It was a surprise to actually see the Deputy's astral self sitting upon the edge of his bed in the medical ward, the edges of reality fuzzy and non-distinct on his half of the room from the Bliss and from the softening touch of shadows and the night, while the walls and floors faded to an open, dreamy field of bliss flowers in the sunlight where she touched down to stand. Faith could tell he was all there and fully cognizant with how he looked at her with clear eyes. That made her wary, but she tried not to show it.

“Hello Faith.” The soft, unaggressive tone of his voice made Faith smile—that was good, the Bliss actually was affecting him properly then, it seemed. It was almost disconcerting to hear his voice sound both similar and different from the Father's, in just those two little words. Joseph's voice was all soft, mellow edges of fresh, sun-warmed linen fabrics and the fire of an evening's shot of whiskey on the porch, wrapping you up and warming you from the inside and out. The Deputy's sounded similar...but clearer, the way sunlight shone through the leaping waters of a busy brook, glittering, glittering, glittering, catching attention with the smooth shifting of water and light. Where the Father's voice sounded like it was made for giving sermons within the hallowed halls of a church to enrapture the souls within, the Deputy's put to mind the sound of distant church bells, calling out the time.

Is this what the Father looked and sounded like when he was this age? It was hard to imagine the Father as anything but the intimidating leader of the Project that he was. Thinking of him as a young man stumbling his way through life in the early steps into adulthood had always been an abstract notion even though she had heard the tales before, from Joseph and from other sources. Looking at the man before her now though breathed more life into those stories than she'd ever really had imagined before. It made her that much more suspicious that he was perhaps the Father's son...it seemed unlikely it was a coincidence.

“Hello, Deputy. Rook, is it?” She asked, eyeing the stitched name on his uniform as she folded her arms behind her back, rocking to and fro from her heels to her toes as she regarded him. Presumably, he knew her name from a police file he'd read on the Project, or perhaps gossip. She'd have to fish and find out what preconceptions he might be coming in with about her. Ultimately though, this might be easier than having to try to poke his dreams in the directions she wanted to go, if she could question him like this and he was compliant.

He hummed an affirmation, eyes taking in the medical wing around them. That made her pout a tiny bit unconsciously—men usually couldn't take their eyes off of her when she was center stage, which made them all the easier to wrap around her finger. He hadn't even looked her over once, aside from acknowledging her presence and greeting her.

“Is this the Bliss, then? I don't usually dream like this.” He asked, tilting his head as he still stared off into the middle ground.

...she didn't like that question. She hadn't been prepared for that. It would have been far more
understandable if he'd asked where he was, or not said anything at all. How much did he and the other officers know? They shouldn't know about the Bliss plane—the drug perhaps, but not this. “It is. Welcome,” she said, plastering on a friendly smile as she looped her fingers around his hand and gave it a gentle pull. “Follow me, let me show you how wonderful it is now that you're here.”

It was admittedly a little odd that his portion of the dreamscape reflected his actual surroundings in the physical world, rather than some favored dreamscape backdrop or a metaphorical representation of their own selves. That usually said something about a person that Faith could glean impressions from...perhaps this Deputy was simply a very literal person. That wouldn't be terribly fun at all, definitely one better suited for John or Jacob if so. One had to make do with what God gave you, though.

It did enter her mind that, perhaps, just perhaps, he was lying, in a sense. The mind could do extraordinary things to protect itself, both in life and here in the Bliss. That thought made Faith rather certain he was hiding something, then. Hiding what though? Behind a veneer of normality, behind the illusion of what people would expect to see? Enshrouding him more thoroughly in the plane of the Bliss with more of the drug running in his veins would reveal everything in due time though. That was what the Bliss did after all—it helped people achieve a tranquility and happiness that was all too vanishingly rare amid the rampant sufferings in the world. She made sure of that.

But the Deputy resisted her urging to make him stand, remaining seated instead. “Ah...can we stay here, if that's alright? I'm...not real fond of hospital spaces, or more specifically of leaving my body behind in one.” Rook said, looking down at his sleeping form in the physical world.

Faith could hear the note of uncertainty in his voice, and the undercurrent of discomfort. Was that fear of the Bliss he was feeling, or of hospitals? Possibly a fear of dying. “Your body will be alright,” She assured him with another smile, patting the hand she was still holding. “It'll still be here when we get back, promise.”

He looked up at her then, before his eyes flickered down and to one side, looking like he was trying to find the words to phrase what was on his mind. He was oddly lucid still, it was still making her slightly uncomfortable. Unplanned for variables were dangerous when one had very little wiggle room between success and failure.

“It's not just that, though that is part of it,” he said, “I don't usually get to sleep without dreams very often, so this is...kind of a nice break. Feels like a weird kind of pressure though, like being in deep water.”

“Huh.” No harm in letting her curiosity show here, it helped play up the harmless innocence and keep things moving the way Faith wanted...and she didn't like how he was still so...him even in the Bliss. People usually lost themselves so easily here, unless they were strong enough and used to the
Bliss plane. She let go of his hand and moved to sit beside him, folding her skirts neatly so her frock didn't get messed up. “Okay. Will you tell me about your dreams then?” Faith asked, rubbing her knuckles against his forearm in encouragement.

She could see him hesitating there, for a long moment. It sharpened her curiosity all the more, but she waited patiently.

“A lot of things,” he said at long last, “mostly things that have been, things that are, and things that might be. Sometimes from my life, other times from other people's lives. Memories. Possible futures.”

Rook turned his head then, looking at her out of the corner of his eye. It was strangely unnerving, how the intensity was so similar to the gaze of the Father...but the Father always looked at people face to face. The dissonance of familiar but not didn't settle well with her.

“He's right you know. About the Collapse. But I got the impression...you all didn't realize what the breaking of the seals entailed, do you.” he said.

Faith's heart stopped. Metaphorically of course, as she hadn't expected an outsider, son of the Father or not, to speak of the holy prophecies, let alone believe them. Was he an outsider? He never had come to join the congregation before now...or was it all part of letting the prophecies unfold as they had been foreseen?

The smile had completely vanished from her features then. “What do you mean?”

He turned to look at her a little more fully then, still not quite the way the Father would, still just off enough to be eerie and strange. “I've watched so many people die in the possible futures that are yet to come, regardless whether they were part of the Project or not. I've watched John die, Jacob die, and you die more times than I can count.”

Her blood ran cold at that, and she cast her eyes downward, lips parted in search of something to say. The Father had asked long ago if she would be willing to die for him, and she had known that would be a very real possibility, but...she had thought her death would have been a result of not measuring up to the Father's standards, not...not this.

Rook wasn't finished speaking though. His soft voice continued ever onward like water running downhill. “I've watched the Father grieve over every one of you until his heartbreak ran raw and
red with blood and tears, I've watched as he was stripped of the entirety of his flock and work until he was left alone with only the instrument of his family's destruction as the only remaining remnant of everything you all had, but lost. *That* is what happens to herald the Collapse—if you continue on the path you are on."

Now Rook was looking at her fully, too-blue eyes looking at hers through unfamiliar glasses, the frames dark, thick, and rectangular, lending a weighty sharpness to his face like a glimpse into an alternate future that could have been.

She couldn't look away, not from him, not from the idea that he was presenting—representing—and what it meant for her, for all of them.

Faith had thought that if she had been enough—good enough, strong enough, obedient enough—that she would be spared. That she would march with the faithful to Eden's Gate. That she would live.

She had hoped—she'd had faith—that she would be happy. That she would be free. That the Family would truly be a family for her, in the end.

*But you never really had faith in what the Father offered, in what the Project promised to you, because you always knew better,* Rachel said, the ghost of her words almost tangible here in the Bliss, but only to Faith. *You always doubted, because you knew it was always going to end this way.*

*Good things never really happen to people like us.*

*Like me.*

“No.” Faith heard herself say. “No, you're wrong. The Father wouldn't sacrifice us—sacrifice his Family just to herald the Collapse.”

The Deputy's face went blank and empty at her words, and behind him she saw fragments of a memory pushing through, teased out by the Bliss for her to see—and she saw the medical wing shift and blur into a different kind of hospital room, a nursery. She could see the Father, looking down at a small blue-shrouded bundle with tubes and a tiny soft hat protruding just over the top edge of the swaddling.
He looked so much younger, and as her eyes snapped back to the Deputy's face she couldn't help thinking once more he looks just like him.

“Don’t.” The quiet tone of the Deputy’s voice and the expression upon his face was all at once a command, a warning, and a plea. Don’t look, that’s private. Don’t look, you don’t want to see. Don’t look, it still hurts, please.

It was discomfiting that he knew what the Bliss was doing behind him without looking...but if he dreamed as much as he said he did, then that might explain why the Bliss dreams were not affecting him quite the same in the introductory dosages.

She hesitated, wanting to know. Watched, as the Father-to-be raised a hand to rest it gently atop the newborn’s head, tilting his own head in low as the soft strains of Amazing Grace in a voice she knew so well filled the air.

Faith had never heard Joseph sound so sad when he sang that song in church as he did now, voice breaking into pieces like glass scattered across the asphalt from a broken and bloodied windshield.

“Please stop.” There actually was a faint push of a command in his words this time, a shred of power to try to persuade a listener to heed. Faith looked back to him again, almost startled by the application—but judging by how hollow and distant his eyes were, it was more a reflex than a conscious thought. She wasn’t sure if those words were for her, or the Father in the memory before her. Whomever it was intended for, his use of power certainly did not pull a listener in with anywhere near the power Joseph wielded when he chose to apply it.

If anything, to call it a shred was all too accurate—the texture and sensation she got from the Deputy's power felt like he was worn ragged to bloody shreds. But it did what it was intended to do —where others would have pushed with power to seize and take hold, this push had been to draw her attention to his request. Faith could resist it easily enough, it was not a compulsion, something the Family could do with little thought. But his wording and the haunted look in his eyes hit a little too close to home, so she dismissed the rest of the memory, nudging the dreamscape back to the medical wing of her own facilities in the Henbane.

That was the point of the Bliss after all, she had to remind herself. To help people distance themselves from the pain and suffering of the real world, and the demons in their heads.

“Thank you.” He said. The Deputy’s little exhale of relief as the tension started to bleed out of him bit by bit made Faith smile—she didn’t really like her work in its entirety, but she did take pride in it and how it helped people. The smile was short-lived though. The question was on the tip of her
tongue to ask what happened, why that memory troubled him. Was it because the Father gave him up? Joseph had never spoken to Faith of his late wife much, aside from explaining that was who the beautiful woman was that he had memorialized in ink upon his forearm.

It was a surprising thought, that the Father would give up his own child to the foster system that had done so wrong by him and his brothers. Was it a vision of his past that the Deputy—Rook—had? He was far too young to remember that scene in his own living memory, obviously. Was it somebody else's memory? It seemed unlikely, the Father had acted like there was no one else in the room...but that didn't necessarily rule that possibility out.

The moments slipped by, and she found herself waiting to see if the Deputy would say something to press his case, to make her believe, the way Joseph would. To say something to change her mind, to insist that what he had seen would indeed come to pass.

She didn't want him to say anything of the sort, a part of her vindictively suggesting the idea of silencing him with a higher dose of Bliss so he couldn't talk about such things at all. Faith knew better than to listen to that part of her though...most of the time. Joseph had taught her better—and worse.

But Rook didn't say anything at all. He didn't even look at her, having gone back to staring into the distance with unfocused eyes. It felt like he was waiting too, the air around him tinged with a faint sense of melancholy.

Joseph and John both did that too, when they thought no one else was watching.

Perhaps it came with the territory of waiting for the world to end.

“For what it's worth,” Rook said at long last, still not looking at her, still looking off into the distance at something only he could see, “I don't think he ever meant to sacrifice you all. From what I can gather...he really did mean for you all to march with him to Eden's Gate. It just didn't work out that way.”

It startled them both when Faith laughed, a bitter sound tinged with an edge of despair and mania. “I'm sorry, but you'll have to forgive me if I don't find the irony of my supposed future death being accidental rather than purposeful on his part to be all that comforting.”

“No, I suppose not,” Rook said with a slow blink, his face as calm and impassive as still lake water
on a windless day, “but it's more than the other Faiths before you could say.”

Faith doesn't acknowledge the truth of his statement. She doesn't need to. “It was always going to end this way,” was all she quietly said.

“Are you sure?” He asked Faith, turning to look at her again at long last. “What if there's another way?”

There was something sharp and intense in how he held her gaze with his own...something she recognized in the faces of those who really, truly believed. But she didn't recognize what he believed in—she rejected it. “That's what you believe, isn't it.”

“I do. I hope so.”

“Why?” That single question was laced with razors and suspicion. If this was truly what was to happen, then there was no escaping it. Faith was backed into a corner, but by god she had teeth, and she wouldn't go down without a fight. Despair had pushed her through hopelessness and come back full circle to tranquil fury.

Even if her desire to live still cast too many dark shadows over the shallow-made graves of too many bleak truths that threatened her existence down to the very foundations of her being because that was what was necessary, because that was what was ordained, she couldn’t truly ever give her will to live up as a sacrifice for the Project.

She wasn’t sure if Jacob would call that weak or strong...probably Weak, because it was against the interests of the Project. The thought made her feel discreetly ashamed at having disappointed her older brother. But that shame only served as fuel for her ire—because how dare the Deputy give her reason to feel ashamed?

She rose to her feet, looking down at him with the growing rage of an avenging angel, a goddess incarnate—who was he to speak to her this way? He wasn't one of the Family, no matter his blood. He had never worked for this the way she had. He didn't stand to lose the promise of everything after having less than nothing for so long. “Why would you have any reason to care? You're one of the ones who brought the coming of the Collapse down upon us. If you knew, why wouldn't you stay away?” Her voice pitched upwards almost to a shriek as she shoved him, sending him sprawling across the floor several feet away as the Bliss magnified the force of her fury into added power behind her actions.
The Deputy grunted as he hit the floor and she felt a small sense of satisfaction at the idea that maybe, *maybe* he was beginning to feel a sliver of all the pain she felt. “But you're right, it doesn't have to be this way,” she said coolly as a smile crept up her face, the thought coming to her as she spoke it. “You'll walk the Path, become one of the faithful, and accept the Father's teachings into your heart. You, and all of your fellow officers, and the rest of the non-believers here in Hope County. Through that, we can avert so much needless death. And you'll all be saved.”

Rook barked out a laugh that turned into a cough as he pushed himself back to his feet, stumbling a little to one side. “No. No, I don't think so, Faith. I've no place in your flock, that much is clear. But listen to me, listen—”

She cut him off then, her voice, posture and expression once again serene, verging on joyful, as an innocent of Eden should be. With a small laugh she said, “Oh I'll listen, but I think we should talk about something more important right now—like what's holding you back from heeding the word of the Father. *That* is something we need to rectify right away, starting with whatever illusions you're hiding your true self behind.”

His eyes widened at that, confirming her suspicions as neat and tidy as you please, all gift-wrapped and done up with a bow. Faith smiled at him sweetly, genuinely pleased now as she bent the Bliss to her will, pulling it towards them both and hurtling a glowing orb of concentrated energy at him.

The Deputy apparently wasn't quite as out of it as he appeared, dodging out of the way of the first projectile and barely avoiding a full hit by the second and third. Small shreds of his half of the world started to peel away just from those grazing hits she had scored upon him, little cracked pieces of tiling and wall plaster chipping off like the aftermath of a firefight around them. For all that her projectiles did not have the finality of actual bullets in the real world, here she was the goddess of life and of death, and her will served as a weapon of destruction and a tool of salvation however she saw fit.

“Stop! You don't want to see it!” He called out, panicking as he made a dash out into the open flower fields away from Faith, putting distance between them to better allow more time to dodge. That effort didn't get him far though, as he was suddenly yanked back by a white noose-like collar and leash, staggering to one side as he reached up to his neck with an audible choking sound.

“Oh but I do,” Faith said, the epitome of grace and acceptance as she ran a hand lightly over the glowing rope strands that tethered the Deputy's soul to his body. This was not truly an extension of the leash and collar she had ensnared him with earlier, so much as the bond between his body and soul manifesting, mirroring that earlier creation of hers because she willed it so. She wrapped her fingers delicately around the cord, and gave it a sharp pull, taking the Deputy's teetering balance from him and knocking him to the ground once more. “We here at the Project accept all people, from all walks of life, no matter their background, no matter their state of mind, so long as they come with an open heart. And if they don't have an open heart, well...”
Faith waved her hand, sending a silent telepathic message to one of her nearby priestesses. “We can help with that.”

The door to the ward room opened, and the blurry real-world figure of the medical staff on duty walked in, carrying a tray.

The Deputy's dream self propped himself up on an elbow and craned his head around to look, eyes darting back and forth between Faith and the staff member. “What are you doing?”

“Helping you see. Don't worry, it will all be clear soon,” Faith said soothingly as she drifted forward and knelt beside the Deputy in the field, rubbing a hand soothingly.

The nurse wiped down the inside of the unconscious Deputy's elbow, tying a bit of rubber tubing around the bicep as he sought out a vein. At the faint flash of light off of the blurry suggestion of a syringe, the Deputy's self in the Bliss started to panic. “No wait, don't—!”

Faith hushed him soothingly, stroking her hand down his arm almost gently, but for the other hand holding his wrist almost tight enough to hurt. “The Bliss will help you see. That's its purpose. Just embrace it.”

He couldn't stand against her will here in the Bliss, especially since he had her full attention to contend with. Few others could, outside of the Family. There was nothing he could do other than watch as the nurse administered another dose of Bliss to his sleeping form.

It was always a joyful kind of moment filled with a touch of pride, to see the moment of enlightenment the Bliss always brought, especially the first time. The way the fear and sin and misery just fell from their shoulders, their expressions softening into one of peace...it never failed to bring a smile to her face. She brought a hand up to his cheek, turning him to face her gently so she could see the very moment the Bliss began to have an effect on him.

There it was—the dilation of his pupils, the slackening of his frame as the fear was bled from him, his expression changing to one of wonderment.

Then she smelled the smoke.
Faith turned to look behind her, at the Deputy's half of the dreamscape that the Bliss had pulled from him, back at the blurry depiction of the medical ward where the Deputy still slept. That image was crumbling away now, blackening and burning with a soft but growing, rumbling roar of fire. The flames rippled up in plumes, causing the dreamscape view of the room to waver like a mirage as it crumbled and collapsed in upon itself like burning newspaper kindling. The dreamscape shifted further then, becoming a burning hellscape before her eyes, the fire starting to spread to the white of the flowers on her side, turning the once verdant green and white petals and leaves into haunting mockeries of their former selves, leaving orange and red tongues of flame to take the shape of the blossoms, while the greenery was recolored into black and gray ash.

It reminded her of Jacob's domain within the Bliss, in a calm, nightmarish kind of way.

“I told you,” the Deputy said calmly, drawing her attention to him—even with the Bliss in effect to keep him placid, there was a faint echo of tension in his voice. “You don't want to see what I see at night.”

“You have to face what troubles you before you let it go, Deputy.” Faith insisted, a slight frown gracing her lips. “Then you will know peace.”

“Peace is transient. Everything is, Faith. You know that.” He whispered in response, eyes fixed on the burning edge of flame that drew closer to them like a grass fire across a plane. “You're not going to run, are you.”

“There's nowhere to run to.” Faith said, and the last thing she heard before the flames swallowed them whole was the Deputy saying,

“I didn't think so.”

The light of the fire bloomed into white, and then everything faded to black for a time...before the familiar, normal landscape of the Bliss took over—the soft faded fog, the flowers, trees, and dancing fireflies.

But those weren't her legs—dark cargo pants, boots, and gloved hands came into view as she found herself simply watching like a spectator as the person’s viewpoint change as they rolled up and over to stand.

*You're doing better than I ever did in these dreams,* the Deputy's disembodied voice drifted
through her consciousness as the focus shifted towards a familiar gate bearing the cross of the Project at Eden's Gate. *I never remember I'm me in them.*

*Who are you then when you dream?* She asked back, attention faltering as she heard a familiar voice—her voice—speaking from all around them.

“Now you see what we can do. Come to me and I'll show you a world you never dreamed possible.”

*I am whoever the dream makes me be. It's not something I could control or think about, until the dream was done, and I awake again,* the Deputy responded. *I don't know if this is me or not, in dreams like this.*

*How can you not know even after the dream has ended?* Faith asked, watching and listening as she saw her own self stroll into view singing Amazing Grace, the melody echoing hauntingly through the world of the Bliss. Guided by her other dream self's arm, was the Sheriff.

*Because I never feel anything in these dreams. All the others, I can feel and think as that person does.* The Deputy's voice held a detached note of curiosity to it, as they watched dream-Rook reach out to try to stop the Sheriff, only for dream-Faith to catch his arm and stop him, speaking to them face to face. *How is it you can recall yourself right now, Faith? Is it your influence that I can still remember myself, right now in this dream?*

*This is the Bliss,* Faith responded promptly and authoritatively. *All that happens here, I can control, for this is given to me as my realm by the Father, and here I lead the faithful to greener pastures, away from the shadows of doubt and suffering.*

That sounded more like a recited answer than she would have liked—it made Faith suspect that this telepathy she and the Deputy were sharing now was more immediate and less censored than speech in life and what passed for normal in the Bliss.

There was a faint hum of doubt in response to her words that made her bristle just a little bit before the Deputy said, *Do we have to watch this though? I hate seeing you and others die in my dreams.*

*We have to pass through it in its entirety, before the Bliss can take it off your shoulders.* Faith said. They would cleanse the Deputy of his fears and doubts, and he would walk the Path, just like all the rest of the pilgrims. He would see, and he would have faith in the Father, in her, and in the
The Deputy gave a resigned sigh. *I was enjoying the break from all those dreams, for once, despite you hurling projectiles at me.*

*We'll see what we can do to shield you from such blood-drenched dreams,* Faith said soothingly, with absolute surety. *That's what we do here in the Bliss. Soon you'll only dream of peaceful things.*

*I don't think being chemically lobotomized is a good trade-off,* the Deputy responded. *Honestly, I'd take nightmares and strange dreams over being an Angel any day if that's what you're talking about—and I've dreamed of John saying you never did treat your Angels well...why is that?*

*You don't know what you're talking about,* Faith shot back, angry and defensive as they watched her dream-self appear and disappear, talking to them as dream-Rook. It bothered her more to think *John* said that of all people, considering his methods. *Her* ways were far kinder.

*“Your Sheriff was a wall...a wall between you and the Father. A wall that kept you from seeing his truth.”* Faith saw her dream self appear hovering in midair, hurling the very same concentrations of energy she had thrown at the Deputy earlier—ah, so that's how he managed to dodge with so little notice. *“So I will knock down that wall.”*

*You've never thought about what it's like, have you.* There was bitterness apparent in the Deputy's voice now as they watched the fight unfold, the dream-Deputy shooting at dream-Faith and dodging her projectiles and the shambling Angels that joined the fight. *It feels like you're drowning in your own skin despite having air to breathe, when someone becomes an Angel. It's like being buried alive while someone pours cement over you, but you don't cease to exist. They're still in there, Faith. They don't think, but they still feel, the way people do when they're in shock and dissociating. They feel everything you and your scientists do to them, Faith. And you know exactly what it's like to feel that way, to feel but not think, while everything happens around you.*

*Stop.* Faith’s order brooked no argument, brittle and chill like the crack of ice in the silence of empty winter air. She didn't like that he knew so much about her, about her past, her memories... He had no right.

*I will stop.* The Deputy said, dropping that particular topic without further fuss—there was a more important topic to discuss now. *But will you?*
“Your Sheriff is so close to accepting the word of the Father into his heart...and when he does...there’s no coming back from that.” Dream-Faith said with a laugh in the background. That was true—there was no coming back from that, for anyone. Not for Rachel. Not for Faith. There was no way she could stop anymore, except for death.

*You’re worse than Rachel.* She hated the Deputy, just a bit, right then.

“Liar,” taunted dream-Faith as she summoned more Angels to attack dream-Rook, the two of them watching like spectators to a coliseum fight. That word in her own voice sounded just like all the times she’d heard it said by others about her—and it didn't hurt any less this time.

*I know. And I know you said the Project accepted everyone, no matter their background or their state of mind...but why do you reject Rachel then? She deserves better than to be buried and forgotten like she’s someone to be guilty and ashamed of, Faith. She didn’t do anything wrong.*

*She was weak and full of sin and doubt,* Faith shot back. *I am better than her in every way, I have everything, she had nothing, she was nothing.*

“Traitor,” Dream-Faith called out, and if Faith hadn't known better, her paranoia would have led her to believe the Deputy was manipulating the Bliss to make this happen, to make it sound like Rachel was speaking through dream-Faith to Faith herself once more.

*Rather cruel to call yourself nothing, Faith.* The Deputy remarked as his dream-self mowed down yet another batch of Angels before returning to firing at dream-Faith. *No one deserves that kind of treatment. Why do you hate her so? Why do you hate yourself so?*

“You’ve lost the Path.” Dream-Faith said, disappearing into thin air, and the fact that the taunt was meant for an adversary rather than for her was lost on Faith.

*BECAUSE THERE WAS NOTHING TO LOVE!* She screamed in rage and above all, hurt. Hurt that had lasted for years upon years upon years, born long before the Project had found her and simply buried the hurt with paper-thin promises in a shallow grave. She’d known that. She’d known that the Project wasn't there to fix anyone's personal problems or their lives. They were there to serve the Project, to help save humanity...but did it really have to hurt this much?

Dream-Faith reappeared across the watery clearing then, hurling more bliss bolts at dream-Rook. *“Feeling confused? Don't worry...it'll all be over soon.”*
The Deputy's voice cut in then, soft but sincere. *That's not true, Faith. It never was, and never will be. You are worthy of love, without having to do anything to earn it, just as you are.*

Faith laughed, her laughter filled with anger and despair. *And they call me a manipulator.*

“Why do you keep fighting us? You know what's coming. The Father showed you...the world is crashing to an end! It is diseased and corrupt. The Father is offering you a chance to let go...to stop worrying...to be free...”

Faith hated that all of a sudden, all she could think about was how Rook looked so much like the Father, and how those words her dream-self was spouting felt like they were meant for her. It felt like everything was a lie, twisted and ugly—she knew not *everything* was a lie here at the Project, in the Bliss. But it felt like all her ghosts had crawled out from their graves now to stare her down with the same pair of haunting, too-blue eyes.

*All forms of social interaction could be called manipulation to some degree or other, Faith. The difference is intention and applied skill.* The Deputy said. *I'm asking you to stop harming yourself and others—is that such a bad thing to ask?*

“You betray,” dream-Faith said with a laugh. Those words stung deep, dragging shame in its wake into the open, jagged wounds of Faith's heart. Betrayal of the Project and of her belief in the Father was one of the gravest sins a person could commit, here at Eden's Gate.

The sharp, mechanical sound of repeating gunfire was the final punctuation mark to the end of her patience. Faith lashed outwards, turning the invisible threads of the Bliss around them into razor wire to slice them apart from one another. The force threw them both away from dream-Rook's position, stumbling into an imperfect mirror of their dueling counterparts, with Faith standing by the middle boulder, and Rook regaining his footing with an assault rifle in hand.

“You don't know what He'll do!” Faith shouted in almost perfect unison with her doppelganger, the words echoing eerily one after the other.

“Don't I?” Rook asked, lowering the rifle to point the muzzle at the ground, at rest. His duplicate phased through him, eyes focused and disturbingly vacant all at once, fixed on the dream-version of Faith, tracking, aiming, shooting. *He killed me in that memory in the hospital room, Faith. I don't know how I'm alive now, but I know that I did die that day, and not in a figurative way. I have seen what the family has done and will do many, many times. I know what he did to the other*
Faiths, I've seen their deaths, in response to their so-called betrayals. It was never their fault for wanting to back out, or for doubting the message or the methods the Project used, as I know you do. Faith without the test of time and doubt isn't faith—it's blind obedience.”

“No! I believe! I believe in Him, I believe in the Project!” Faith screamed, hurling more projectiles of her own at Rook.

Rook darted away to one side, avoiding most of the damage, grimacing at the splash damage that caught one of his legs. “Because you believe, or because you have to, in order to be accepted? Because you have to, in order to live? That's not faith, that's coercion!” The pain was evident in the tightness of his voice as he shouted, but he still managed to move freely, circling to put the central boulder between the two of them, even as their echoes did the same.

“It's not my fault...none of this was my fault!” Faith cried out, desperate to convince him, but above all to convince herself. “You think I wanted this? He plied me with drugs! He threatened me! I was seventeen, I was just a child!”

“You always said that in my dreams, you know.” His words made her heart wrench painfully open over old wounds that never closed properly, because no one ever believed her, or if they did, they never cared. But Rook continued on, “And I always chose to assume you were telling the truth, even knowing what others said about you.”

She hadn't been expecting that.

It drew her up short, the glowing sphere of energy fizzing away to nothing in her hands as she looked at him, uncomprehending.

The familiar mechanical rattling of gunfire tore through the air, and they heard her counterpart cry out one last, sorrowful “No!” Before dream-Faith dissolved in a bloom of blood red smoke and petals.

“Then why do I always have to die?” Her voice betrayed her, sounding lonely, mournful, and forsaken. Selfish. It was selfish of Faith to think only of herself, she knew, instead of being willing to lay down her life for the Project the way Jacob was without question, without thought.

Rook looked down at the rifle in his hands, and put it to rest upon the rock beside him prior to trudging over towards her with a slow, careful gait.
The world faded to white around them before he reached her, but she found him standing a respectful few feet away as the world shifted itself into a new scene in the dream that was not a dream. “I don’t understand why I only see visions of me killing you, Faith. I don’t understand why I would. But I don’t want to. If I have any free will in the matter...I won’t. That's why I tried to change it at the helicopter crash site, and here. It's why I'm trying to ask you to just...stop. Please.” He held out a hand, fingers spread in entreaty, a peace offering.

It reminded her of how the Father had offered her his hand as well, when she first joined the Project. She had taken it with only a moment's hesitation, because back then she'd had nothing to lose. Now...she hesitated because she couldn't bear to face the thought that perhaps she had already lost everything all because she doubted. Because she feared. But perhaps she had never had anything at all. Just a Bliss-fueled dream of something she had never had—and maybe never could have.

She looked away for a moment, taking in their surroundings like it would be her last view of life. They were by a river now, the air still sparkling languidly with the touch of the Bliss all around them, and their doppelgangers stood, with dream-Faith at the water's edge, facing dream-Rook.

“You still don't understand. You don't know what it is you're doing, do you?” Dream-Faith asked, taking an unsteady step towards dream-Rook.

Faith watched, as dream-Rook took a step back, maintaining the distance between them without a word. “Your dream-self didn't ever speak in the dream.”

“I never do. I don't understand why.” Rook responded. He sounded uncertain, unhappy, and...afraid? “Sometimes I'm not certain it's really me...but then I see it from your perspective, or someone else's, and I see my own face.”

They watched together, as dream-Faith continued, face bleeding, the white lace of her dress slowly staining red from the bullet wounds riddling her person, like the corruption of innocence once held, now lost.

“Joseph believes he's our savior. But you'll be the one who decides what happens.” Her dream-counterpart said.

“...I was right, wasn't I,” Faith murmured sadly. “I knew you were the special one, from when I first saw you at the church, when you came to take the Father away.”
Rook turned to look at her, surprise mixing with regret. “But I didn't enter the church...did I?”

Faith gave a small shake of her head, still not moving her eyes away from the scene of her death unfolding before her. “I came outside to see you like this, through the Bliss.”

“You were the start. You'll be the end...” Dream-Faith reached out one wavering hand to dream-Rook, only for the other to step back again, putting more distance than before between them.

“I always hated this part.” Rook commented somberly, his own hand lowering as dream-Faith's did. “Even if I were to hold all that you had done against you...it still felt cruel.”

Faith said nothing for a moment, watching as her dream-self gave a small nod of acknowledgment...and turned towards the river. “Do you hold it against me?”

“Perhaps I should, as an officer of the law...but I don't.” Rook said. “Maybe that makes me a bad person...I don't know. But this outcome didn't seem right, either.”

“You'll walk the path.” Dream-Faith's voice wavered much like the ripples of the water did as she stepped with too much care into the river's depths. Her laughter wavered even more, threatening to break, to show all the hurt and pain and grief she had always buried—but never buried deep enough. “You'll rescue your Sheriff. You'll be the Hero...and then...you'll choose.”

Dream-Faith turned then, to regard them all upon the bank, and for a moment, it felt like she was looking at Faith herself, in this other time and place.

It was both peaceful and anti-climactic looking, to see herself fall into the water in what Faith knew were the last moments of her death. She felt cold inside.

“And if you don't listen to him...he'll be right.” With those last words, Faith saw her counterpart vanish into a trail of Bliss-smoke, curling past dream-Rook to circle around a Bliss blossom at his feet.

They watched, as dream-Rook knelt to pick the flower, before the dream faded away entirely. Then there was just the two of them, standing side by side.
“...was the significance of the flower something to do with walking the Path?” Rook asked.

“It's symbolic,” Faith said distantly. “It is meant to represent the person accepting the word of the Father, of accepting peace into their heart. Accepting the Bliss.”

“I see.” Was all Rook said.

The silence filtered down around them, with only the faint sound of wind and water in the background, amidst the soft rustling of grass and leaves.

“I can't leave the Project now, even if I might want to,” Faith said at long last, her voice soft. “The Bliss...it's more than a state of being, a drug, or a plane of existence. I am tied here. There can be only one Faith, one caretaker of this realm, and the souls who dwell here alongside me. That's why they all died...the other Faiths. That's why I can't leave.”

Rook was silent for a long moment. “I didn't know that you couldn't leave because of that,” he said, voice equally soft. “I thought it was because you felt you had nowhere else to go.”

That got a sad laugh from Faith. “That too...but it's the Bliss most of all. Do you know what it is? What it really is?”

“No.”

Faith tilted her head down, letting her hair fall around her face like a mourning veil. “It's a collective place, where all the faithful can come together and where sinners can't go. The flock, the Judges, the Angels...they all are here, to some degree or other. The Family...Joseph, Jacob and John, they have the strongest presence here, aside from me. It's like...like a hive mind, almost. Most can't use it the way we do, the way the Family does. Most of them, they aren't like us, like you. There has to be someone to tend it, always here, while still being there, in the real world. It takes a strong mind, to be everywhere and also only here. That's why we were chosen to be Faith. Why I was chosen. That's the sacrifice I made, to be here, to be part of the Project. He gave me the keys to the Bliss...and they will find me through it, if I leave. They'll kill me, like they did with the others, if I try to abandon the garden.”

She fell quiet for a moment there, her face contorting as long-suppressed grief welled at last to the surface. Her voice wavered and broke as she continued, trying to maintain her composure. “That's
why I hate the Angels so. They at least aren't aware...but I have to be. I can't be unaware anymore. They can die, and go peacefully. If I die...if I die and there isn't another Faith to take my place...I'll have to linger in the Bliss until they do find a replacement. They won't let me leave, just like the last one, until I was strong enough to take her place. She told me.” A sob broke from her chest, quiet and shuddering.

Rook stayed silent, listening, head bowed low in sympathy.

“I never told John that,” Faith said with a watery laugh, wiping at her eyes as she turned away to hide her tears. “It was long after my confession, and I didn't...I'm sure he'd say—he'd say I have the sin of Envy and need to purge it from my soul...on top of Sloth, Wrath. And Pride. But...I'm sure he knew, on some level, if he knew about...about...” About how she treated her Angels.

About how, on her worse days, she ordered them to work long and hard hours, until their hands blistered and cracked, to help soothe her fears of not being enough. To soothe her anger and her despair, putting off the inevitable time when she was cast aside in favor of another, because she knew she would be, one day. It was always going to be that way.

“...would a hug help right about now? Or, would you prefer not to be touched?” Rook asked tentatively, sounding like he wasn't sure quite what to do here.

Faith turned her face slightly to peer at him through the curtain of her hair, sniffling just a touch. She hated people seeing her when she was weak and crying...but Rook had seen her as she'd died, in her final moments. This seemed smaller, in comparison. “...I'd like that.”

He shuffled forward and carefully wrapped his arms around her shoulders in a firm embrace, and she wrapped hers around his middle.

...it was a bit more like hugging John than Joseph, on account of Rook being a bit shorter in height than the Father. Not as lean as the Father was...a little bit softer around the middle, like his body was holding on to the last remnants of puppy fat as it grew into them.

Faith wondered if he was older or younger than she was—she'd look up whatever information John might have on Rook later. She didn't want to ask or pry...Rook would undoubtedly answer but it felt too much like creating a connection, to exchange and talk about personal details like that. Maybe one day she wouldn't mind, but right now, she wanted distance. Distance was safe.
She ignored the hypocrisy that desire brought with it as she stood there, being hugged in his arms.

After a time, she sighed and let him go, backing up to wipe away any last traces of tears and setting her hair and appearance to rights. “So if you don't want to join our flock, what exactly do you want then?” Faith asked, words steady and determined as she built herself back up, as if her moment of emotion hadn't happened.

*But it did,* Rachel whispered.

“You know what the Father is trying to do, so why do you resist?” Faith pressed on, ignoring Rachel's comment.

“I don't object to your goal per se, so much as some of the methods,” Rook said, settling his weight to one side, crossing his arms. “So...can I ask you to change your methodology? For your own sake, as well as your followers and others affected.”

Faith looked at him flatly, before sighing and settling down into the flowers to sit. “You realize the Collapse is upon us, we need to make this last ditch effort to collect resources and people before everything is purged with fire.”

Rook sat down cross legged at an angle from her, partially facing her, partially sitting beside her at a respectful distance. “I do...but, does it have to involve forcing people to join the cult? Torture and murder are a good shade more serious than kidnapping and theft in my opinion, Faith. Not accusing you, mind,” He said, raising a hand in placation at her look, “but it is what it is. Isn't it? Or do you disagree?”

Now she was just glaring at him. “Yes, it is what it is.” She said. There was nothing else to say—Rachel would call her out if she did, she knew, and Faith didn't have the energy right now to deal with Rachel being snippy on top of talking to someone. “But we need the numbers, and we're out of time, Rook.”

“How many do you have and need? I won't use that information against you, promise,” Rook said, adding the last bit as she opened her mouth to object for that very reason.

“...We're shy of two thousand followers still,” Faith admitted reluctantly, working her way to accepting the choice of action she was committing to, even if she was still feeling a bit sullen about it. She couldn't ensure her survival with things the way they were without changing the situation,
and pressing forward on this particular path looked like it might lead to other possibilities. “We need a full three thousand at least, according to Joseph. That means absorbing at least half of the rest of Hope County's population.”

Rook gave a low whistle, shaking his head. “Yeah, you guys have your work cut out for you on that front. There's a lot of bad sentiment to begin with towards the cult—sorry, Project,” he corrected at her frown, “I hear it referred to as a cult too often by those outside of the Project in my dreams...and if I can broach the topic, you guys technically do fit the definition of one.”

“Cults usually don't have actual prophets leading them to try to save humanity from extinction,” Faith scowled, crossing her arms in disapproval.

That made Rook pull his lips into his mouth, looking like he didn't entirely agree with her words, and wasn't looking forward to what he was going to say next. “Would it be okay for us to discuss this topic and define what a cult is, Faith, using technically defined criteria? I, uh, may have done some research on this beforehand. If you say no, I'll drop it, but...I do think it would be beneficial to you.”

Faith narrowed her eyes, giving Rook a long, considering look. She didn't like this direction, and it felt extremely unpleasant...but Rachel wanted to hear it, and Faith was morbidly curious too. “Go on, then.”

Rook appeared simultaneously relieved and mildly anxious, like how one felt when suddenly self-conscious of one's own stage fright in front of an audience. “Okay, uh, cliff-notes abridged version of it all, there's three main things that make a cult a cult: First is an absolute authoritarian leader, which in theory would be the Father,” Rook said, unfolding his thumb as the first finger to keep a tally as he spoke.

“That, uh, boils down to basically the leader being the defining element that the people in the cult worship, and he's got no other actual overseeing power to answer to, like the government as opposed to God. Ignoring the fact that the government is royally fucked in reality, I mean like a real world checks and balances system, you guys don't really have that for him, and...you all kind of have like, mini-cults within the cult based on the different Herald's way of doing things.”

Faith had expected that on some level, so she wasn't too surprised to hear him point it out. People usually looked at Joseph and immediately assumed he was leading a cult, not a congregation, since he was preaching a more active vision to spur their followers to take action, rather than focusing on the moral guidance work of pastors in mainstream religions.
“Number two,” Rook unfolded his pointer finger to waggle both it and his thumb, “would be a process of indoctrination and influence—basically brainwashing, in blunt terms. Stuff that's done to mess with people and make them less likely to think independently and critically in ways that doesn't support the group policy, and to encourage submission and dependency on the cult group itself.”

Faith frowned and looked down, rubbing her upper arms in discomfort.

The sight made Rook pause. “Do you want me to stop?”

Faith considered it, then sighed and waved a hand to usher him onward. “No, keep going.”

“Okay. So third and finally,” Rook straightened out his middle finger to hold up all three in demonstration, “would be that, if it's a destructive cult,—and some cults can be benign I will add—is that they're going to be hurting people. Either as a direct result of their actions, or as a byproduct of what they're doing, but people are going to be harmed in some fashion, or exploited. And anyone can be in a cult, from all walks of life, all education levels, family backgrounds—it's actually scary-easy for people to fall in with one. Usually, they end up attracting or targeting people who are going through a difficult time in their life, when they're vulnerable.”

She knew he was saying that in particular for her to hear, because she had been vulnerable and alone, when the Project had found her. She didn't resent him for it, as she might have earlier...but the thought still hurt. It still hurt because it felt like it was true, and Rachel agreed.

In a way, perhaps all of Rachel's doubting and sniping at the Project had been her way of trying to express that sentiment with words she'd needed but hadn't had, concepts she'd lacked and had sorely needed.

“Do you want me to give you a run down of what the indoctrination process criteria would be? It's important too, I think,” Rook asked gently.

Faith held her breath for a count of seven, before letting it go slowly, rubbing her forehead as she looked away. “No. Not right now. Later. I need to process and think about this.”

“Okay.” And Rook left it at that. “Do you want to just sit quietly together instead, or would you prefer alone time?”
“Stay,” she said without looking at him.

“Alright then.”

Part of her wanted to cry again. Another part was disgusted by the threat of more tears—hadn't she cried enough?

_Not if the pain hasn't stopped,_ Rachel said. _And it never really stopped, ever, did it. Not when we took to the needle, not when we joined the Project, and not now. Maybe it never will._

That made Faith angry again. She had spent so long fighting, trying to find someway, somehow to be happy. She'd thought she'd found it, one time after another. But each time, one time after another, it turned out it wasn't happiness at all. Happiness felt like it was a lie, ashen and charcoal-black upon her tongue and in her hands, an afterthought of what could have been but now lay in ruins.

The faint smell of smoke made her look up, to where tiny flickers of flame and sparks caught and perched upon the edges of flower petals in the Bliss-field dreams around them. The white petals crinkled and curled, graying and blackening slowly like a good dream fading into harsh reality—the story of her life, really.

“You do bring destruction and hell in your wake wherever you go, don't you,” Faith murmured, watching the slow death of the flowers before her. The fire was creeping back into Rook’s side of the dreamscape, the Bliss teasing it out of him once more as an imprint upon the malleable plane around him.

“...you accused me of that many times in my dreams.” Rook said. “I'm trying not to do that.”

“I'm not sure you can help it, can you.” Faith said.

Rook looked to where her gaze rested, to the flowers dying as the fires fed and blossomed upon their graves. “I'm not sure I can change anything,” he said quietly, some emotion Faith couldn't quite place coloring his voice like the lingering scent of smoke clinging to their clothes and skin, “but I'm still trying.”

“Why? Why try, if all it will lead to is ruin? Why not just let go?” Faith asked. He, at least, could
let go. She wouldn't begrudge him that freedom even if in her heart it hurt to feel like she was left behind each time someone did choose to embrace the Bliss, and all she could do was watch from the outside.

“Because I'm scared that if I don't do anything at all, it will be as bad as if I'd pulled the trigger myself, since I know what will happen.”

Ah. Faith could identify that ephemeral layer of emotion in his voice now—dread, soft and creeping like the dim twilight preceding the early orange fingers of dawn, when shadow and light lay confused and entangled with one another indefinitely, forever becoming one and the other.

“I don't know what happens, what changes, if I do nothing.” Rook continued, “So far, despite my not being the one in the church to arrest the Father...not much has changed, in terms of the big picture. The others, Whitehorse and Hudson and Pratt...they're free, but I don't know if that will last. But, I don't know if I could really have expected anything to change in that regard—the Reaping would happen no matter who tried to arrest the Father, wouldn't it? And I couldn't think of a way to stop the Marshal from pushing the matter no matter what I did in the church.”

“You speak as if you were supposed to be there, instead of the other Deputy,” Faith noted. “Why weren't you in the church?”

“I didn't want to face him.”

“Ah.” Faith could understand that. She didn't want to face down Joseph's wrath either. “Do you know how he would have reacted to you being the one to arrest him?”

Rook didn't answer for a long, long moment, long enough for Faith to think he wasn't going to, before he said, “I don't know if he would have reacted at all. Maybe it was pointless of me to do all this avoidance...in the dreams, he never acknowledges the fact that I'm his son...or, I think am. I think he only ever calls me his child in the sense that members of the flock are his children in the dreams. But in a way, that's just a different kind of worse than him acknowledging it. I didn't want to deal with either outcome, if I could help it. So...that's why I wasn't in the church.”

Faith hummed in acknowledgment. “I can understand that.” She really could all too well, in a mixture of personal experience, sympathy, and another little touch of envy that he could choose to try to run when she could not.
Not that it mattered in the end, now does it, Rachel said, sounding bitter and sad, like she had hoped he'd at least get away—for at least the vain hope that there was a place to get away to.

But that was just fantasies and fairy tales—Neverland wasn't real. Not here, not anywhere.

The feeling of tears and disgust threatened to well up again, and she hated how much easier it felt to cry right now, like the first tears had broken something inside of her. But as quickly as they came the feelings left, now she just felt tired and sad.

The conversation lapsed into silence briefly then, before Rook spoke again. “Hey...Faith? Can I ask a question?”

She looked at him in tacit affirmation, and he continued, “How does the Father know when a seal breaks, or is he just—pardon the term—bullshitting it as he goes? The prophecy I believe, but just...how does he know? About the seals breaking in real time, I mean.”

She scowled at him a tiny bit, lips pursed together in a pout—there was something a tiny bit refreshing that she could just emote at him in this time and place freely without having to wonder what he thought or what he would do.

What Faith did not expect was Rook making a funny face in response.

“I'm not laughing at you, just to be clear, you're just very cute when you pout like that,” he said, sounding like he was trying to tamp down on a strain of good humor that colored his whole countenance—now he looked his age. Young.

It made Faith laugh, the sound little more than a puff of air, but she did feel better. “Saying I'm cute then, are you Deputy?” She said, a little sly, a little teasingly.

Rook got that look on his face that a person got when asked a trick question where answering either yes or no was clearly a trap—a trap in normal circumstances, where there weren't consequences of death or suffering to worry about, just teasing between friends. A could-have-been moment in a snapshot dream, here in the Bliss.

“I do think you're cute,” Rook said carefully, holding up a finger to emphasize his point, “and I mean that in a general sense, and I promise I'm not trying to hit on you or anything, which I'm sure
you get a lot of. Plus you're like my aunt or something technically. And I'm just gay as dickens.”

Now Faith actually laughed out loud, causing Rook to sputter out a laugh while trying, and failing, to maintain an earnest expression. The big, slightly crooked grin on his face was a bit of a giveaway.

“Why are you like this?” Faith asked, wiping at her eyes—tears from laughing now, not from crying, though the former came easier because of the latter.

Rook spread his hands in a shrug, mouth pulling to one side comically. “I don't know, that's just me.”

It really was—she had never seen the Father act quite so...silly. It made her smile...and that made her realize.

Oh no, she was actually starting to like him just a little bit as a person.

She knew that he was trying pretty hard to convince her of...something, that the cult was bad, but he knew she couldn't leave...Rook was a very confusing person. That train of thought made her smile fade a bit and she sighed. She was doing that a lot around him and Faith had a sneaking suspicion that was a common reaction to Rook.

“What are you even trying to do at this point, Rook?” She asked.

Again, Rook made that face as he shrugged, infusing it all with a youthful “I don't know what I'm doing don't ask me hard questions” kind of silly energy. “I don't know, just talking? I mean, I asked because I was just wondering how he knew or if he was just bullshitting and interpreting stuff as he went?”

“I honestly don't know,” Faith said, and she was telling the truth then and there. Joseph could be just interpreting things to his liking as they went...or maybe he really did know somehow. She didn't know, and didn't want to know since the breaking of the other seals involved her and the Family's deaths. The first seal was broken yes, but...was that just Joseph interpreting it? Or did he really know...?

“Huh. Well, damn. I wanted to ask if there were other things to avoid so we didn't accidentally
break the seals, and all of you seem to know an awful lot about all this stuff in my dreams, stuff
that no one tells me about.” Now it was Rook’s turn to pout, waving a hand to indicate that not
knowing said stuff was very annoying to him.

Faith laughed. “Stop that, silly.”

“But it's important!” Rook complained, going the extra mile to whine in a purposefully bratty
manner as he scrunched up his face in an even more exaggerated pout.

“How,” Faith said between laughs, “are you the one who's supposed to rain down death and
judgment and destruction on the entire county?”

“That's what I want to know!” Rook said, waving his hands over his head. “I wanted to look into
being like a mother fucking baker or a chef or something as a kid, not this.”

“Why didn't you then?” Faith asked, calming down and curious now.

“Ugh. The dreams.” Rook made a face now, no longer trying to be funny. “I tried to move further
away from Hope county once I learned that's where all of this was going to go down, a couple
years ago. The dreams got worse though—I started waking up in strange places, like not in my bed
where I'd gone to sleep, it was innocuous enough at first, I'd wake up elsewhere in the house, like
in the living room and such—that wasn't so bad, my roommates didn't mind, thankfully. But it got
worse when I started waking up with my coat and shoes on out in the street. I gave up and gave in
after the time I woke up in the bus station, and then the time after that on a greyhound bus headed
to Miles City, Montana. The sleepwalking stopped once I did that, I don't know if it was just me
stressing out or if it was...something else. I don't know.”

Faith hummed, feeling a touch of sympathy for his unease in those last words—it looked like he
didn't really have much of a choice either. “It seems you were meant to be here then.”

Rook snorted, the sound coming out bitter and unhappy. “Apparently. Kinda wish my opinion
mattered more in the direction my life is going, but hell if I know if I do or don't have a say in all
this. Maybe I should've just tried harder to stay away, but I guess on some level I kind of didn't
want to. I'm worried that's just something I say to myself to rationalize all this so I can think I can
have a say in what happens and not end up just recreating my dreams.”

Faith looked away at that.
Rook sighed through his nose, tilting his head down to look at the flowers nearest to them. “We're in a bit of a pickle, aren't we.”

“Are we?” Faith asked, sounding detached even to her own ears. If this was meant to be, then there wasn't much they could do, was there.

*Are you sure?* Rachel asked.

No, she really wasn't. But Faith was tired of fighting.

“Well look,” Rook said, shifting to turn towards her more fully, hands gesticulating as he spoke. “You want to be happy and okay and maybe do Eden's Gate things, right? I want everyone to be alive and okay and relatively happy, with preferably minimal to no torture, brainwashing, murder and all that on either side. That sounds like there should be a reasonable middle ground between those two wants where everyone more or less gets what they want, don't you think?”

Faith gave him a measured look, unsure just where he was going with this. “Which we could do if you joined Eden's Gate, but you don't seem willing to do that.”

“I'm disinclined, yeah, mostly because of the whole torture, brainwashing, murder stuff, awkward family reunion tension, and because of my own weird personal emotional hang ups that I haven't thought through yet,” Rook said. “Not sure it's a hard no, but definitely not appealing with the aforementioned bits. But listen, we'd still need to convince the other Heralds and the Father to ease up on the bad bits, and that'd make it easier for you to stop too without having to worry about what they might think of it if they eased up on the bloodshed, right?”

“Possibly,” Faith said. She was hedging her bets, not really willing to commit, but not wanting to skip out on hearing a potential way out of this tangled mess of a situation.

“Well what about if I talk to them?” Rook asked. “I was always gonna try to do that, but, uh, I figured I'd try to do that from a distance, while on the run. So John and Jacob wouldn't try to put a screwdriver or a bullet in me. Or something.”

“You want me to let you go.” Faith stated, sounding absolutely unimpressed and flat as a board.
“If you think it'd work, yeah,” Rook tilted his head to one side. “In all honesty I was figuring on trying to scoot people out of the line of fire and maybe just slow down the murder and torture rates enough to maybe convince 'em to stop. If not, well...we're back where we started, I guess.”

“So let me get this straight,” Faith said mildly as she laced her hands together in her lap, “you want me to let you go, in an act that would constitute as treason to Eden's Gate and would result in death or worse if I was found out, all so you can talk to my brothers. The brothers you could talk to freely, if you were a member of Eden's Gate, and I didn't have to worry about dying horribly?”

Are you sure you would survive if he joined? Rachel whispered snidely. Maybe Joseph would consider your death here during the Reaping to be foretold if he showed up like this.

“Hey, we don't know that your brothers would listen to me if I was just a lowly peon in the rank and file who's already converted, what's the point then? I'd already be a Project member. But as a very annoying sinner they need to convert, I'd be much better at getting and holding their attention. And it's not treason if you don't let me go so much as I escape, right? Also not treason on my part if I'm waylaying the prisoner transportation trucks as a sinner on the loose. Also-also, I have what I would term a very rational fear that the Father might want to just straight up murder me again if I was just prancing about as a congregation member. Or, you know, any manner of brain-fuckery that ends with me not really being the me I want to be anymore.”

“We also don't know that they'd listen to you as a sinner, Rook,” Faith pointed out. “And how would you escape even? Few people can extricate themselves from the Bliss by themselves.”

“I do know from the dreams that they'd hear me out and I'd be slightly out of strangulation range—and if few people can get out of the Bliss on their own, that means there's a way out, and that means I can find it!” Rook said, looking all too enthusiastic about it.

He didn't have the Father's kind of charisma, but he sounded so sure in a hopeful kind of way that Faith wanted to believe, wanted to give him a chance to prove himself right. It was a sweeter kind of hope he offered than the Father did—that things could work out to be okay, both big and small...but that was what the Father had said, that his message was frightening and that people would turn from it because they were scared, not daring to face the truth. But Rook wasn't offering a hope that ran contrary to Eden's Gate, was he?

“Why, Rook? Why all this?” She found herself asking, trying to encompass so much in so few words—why did he bother if he believed in the prophecy? Why did the method matter if enough people survived in the end? Why did he care?
Rook got what she meant apparently, with how he spread his hands in a wide shrug. “Because Eden's Gate could be better? Because humanity can be better? Because we can be better? Seriously, torture and mistreatment and murder are all really bad stuff, do we actually need to resort to that? On both sides, I would like to point out. Like I can even understand kidnapping...sort of...I guess? In this particular situation, at least, end of the world and all that. But all the rest of the stuff just seems extreme, Faith. Some folks are straight up murdered without so much as a how-do, what's up with that? That's not recruitment that's just slaughter, and not even in a “Jacob is putting them through a trial” kind of slaughter. Are some of the followers just gleefully going on a murder-rampage with or without permission from you and the other Heralds? I know some of them are fucked up in a bad way, but I also know some of them are reasonable too.”

She wasn't entirely sold that the faithful were doing these things without the Heralds' say so...but on the other hand, it wouldn't surprise her to know people were taking advantage of the situation—even here at the Project, humans were still humans.

“I'll think about it.” She said, moving to stand up and brush her dress off, giving him a meaningful look as she carefully stated, “Obviously, you know the answer will be no, but I will at least consider your words. I'll come talk to you again later, okay?”

“Okay. And hey? Faith?” He called after her as she turned to leave, “Is there any chance you can maybe help Rae Rae at the pumpkin farm in Holland Valley? I know that's John's region, but they were always all dead in my dreams—I think they're some of the ones that were killed offhand. They don't deserve that, and Boomer doesn't deserve to have to watch his family all die in front of him.”

Faith paused, thinking. The Bliss rippled behind Rook as she turned her attention to the thread of a dream that flickered beneath the surface, sharpening into discernable shapes as she encouraged it forward to see what he had seen. She saw Rae Rae lying prone and unbreathing upon the ground, hand outstretched towards the too-still body of her young son, Ryan.

Sitting beside them in the dream was the dark-speckled fur-covered form of Boomer, head bowed low in a posture that, even across species, read unmistakably as grieving.

She let the dream fade away, standing quietly for a moment. “No,” she said. “I cannot.”

Rook looked away, lips parted like the moment of soft exhalation as a body registered a grave injury, before the pain of fresh grief set in.

Faith walked back over to where Rook still sat, folding her legs beneath her once more. “But I will
tell you a little bit more about how the Bliss works.”

He looked to her then, brows furrowed as he tried to comprehend what she was implying.

“There are different effects that can be curated with the flowers and the different parts of the plant,” She said, folding her hands in her lap. “Different mixtures and distillation methods help bring out the various desired results. Some are milder, causing only calmness and a sense of serenity, many of the flock use this from time to time, particularly if they need help with relaxing or to sleep. The more common, simpler distillation process causes hallucinations as well, and helps one enter the Bliss as we are here now, but with a weaker connection. The variation that's currently being used on you, can be used to create a chemically-induced state of unconsciousness for a time—you'd be due for another dose soon in the real world. It creates a relatively strong connection to the Bliss, hallucinations are more prevalent, and it allows the chosen few to connect through the Bliss in dreams with one another, or with me. The strongest concoctions however, can create a far longer-lasting connection to the Bliss, and allows the potential for more lucid control of oneself even when exposed to other forms of Bliss...if one can master it. That is what my Chosen, what all of the Project's Chosen, are exposed to, as are members of the Family.”

Faith could tell that Rook had cottoned on that she was telling him something, but not quite what yet.

“Is that how they keep you connected to the Bliss?” Rook asked.

“It is part of it,” Faith said. “It affects blessed individuals, ones like us, differently than normal people or animals. That’s why you have that strong, tangible connection to yourself here, as you felt when you tried to run away earlier. Most people, when they enter the Bliss, don't have that. They aren't fully lucid, the way you and I are. It's rare you're awake, but perhaps that's a side effect of your prophetic dreams. It takes a great deal of time and exposure for someone to train to the point of being able to navigate the Bliss, even for short distances or along known paths. If one is not prepared to become a Chosen one, if a person isn't strong enough...they will become lost to the Bliss. That's how Angels are created. They go into the depths of the Bliss...and they don't come back.”

Faith's eyes flicked down as she paused, then she looked off to one side. “When a blessed one such as us takes the concentrated dose...we can still get lost. Not as easily, because what we are makes it easier for us to navigate and use the Bliss in ways others could only dream of. But...it changes you, physically. It becomes a part of you, and you become a part of it. A normal person, a regular person, they can phase the Bliss out of their bloodstream and out of their mind if given enough time to come down off of it slowly. They can eventually become clean. Even those of the Chosen who were not one of the blessed beforehand can walk away from the Bliss if they truly wanted to...though some small part will always remain with them in their dreams. But we never will, once we cross a certain threshold. There is no leaving the Bliss, and it will never leave you, if you take
the highest dosage—the sacrament. The blessing. None of the Family can ever truly leave the
family, now. Death will take us in the end, but the final departure will be delayed here, for a time.”

“...is that how he knew that you all died, so soon?” Rook asked, barely breathing.

“I would think so.” Faith said. “Last words, before the departure...but even in death, I don't think
he would have let me go without a replacement. I might have lingered longer in the Bliss in that
final moment of death, until either someone else took up the mantle of Faith...or the Bliss itself
finally dissolved, when no other living members remained to maintain it. I am the Bliss, and the
Bliss is me, in a manner of speaking. I cannot truly die as long as the Bliss remains me—when a
Faith dies, the flock remains in her garden, in the Bliss that was hers, until a new Faith can create a
new pasture for them to reside in within the Bliss. Then, and only then, when her world here is
empty, can she finally die. Eventually, that is what will happen to me too.”

Matter of fact, she had always known it. Faith had simply hoped that it would be a long time in
coming, and short in its duration when her time finally came. She wondered if she was looking at
her replacement, even now, seated beside her.

She hoped not, for her own sake...but also for his.

Rook tilted his head down, biting his lip. Meeting Faith's eyes, he said, “I'll do my best to try to
make sure that doesn't happen to you. Not a drawn-out death, and not any time soon. I don't know
if I can, but I'll try.”

Faith smiled a humorless smile at him then, little more than a decoration upon her face the way her
dress was adorned with lace. “Still trying to play the hero, Deputy?”

But Rook shook his head. “No,” he said, rueful honesty lined with regret upon his face. “I know
I'm not a hero. I just want people to be okay. I want to be okay. I don't know if I'd even be here, if I
really could have walked away without consequence. So I know I'm a coward in that respect. But I
am here, so I might as well try to make the best of it for everyone involved, you know? To protect
and serve. I'm undoubtedly not a terribly good cop, but I'm trying.”

“We'll just have to see if trying is enough then, won't we Rook,” Faith said, her smile now soft and
bittersweet with a gentle melancholy. “The world is ending, after all. Perhaps, at the very least, you
can help make it a better ending than it would have been otherwise.”
“Maybe.” The hope in Rook's voice was bright as candlelight, a votive offering of a church devotion before the statue of a saint.

“Best light a candle and say a prayer to Saint Judas Thaddaeus then, Rook.” She said simply. “He's the patron saint of the desperate and lost causes.”

“Aw, it's probably not that bad...but yeah, okay, Saint Jude might smile on us for this.”

“Ever the optimist, aren't you.” Faith said, but her smile was a touch warmer than it had been before.

“Maybe a little bit. Nothing else to do but hope and aim for the best, you know?”

Faith hummed noncommittally, rising to her feet with an absent minded brush of her skirts. She held out her hand to Rook then, waiting for him to take it. “Come along then, Rook.”

The look Rook gave her was just short of comical with how mystified he looked, taking her hand to rise to his feet. “Where can we go? I thought I couldn't go far from my body...or is that something you can do to change that?”

“A little bit of both. Distance is not always the same thing in the Bliss as it is in the physical world, Rook. Let me show you.”

Everyone outside of the Family tended to underestimate the Bliss—underestimate her— and everything she could do with it. Pulling his hand, she led him what felt like only a few steps, but the scenery around them blurred like the sudden rush-by view of a train in motion without the lurching of pressure as gravity and speed pressed one back into the seat. They were standing in what looked like a medical lab, built with sterile white linoleum and tiles amidst matching cabinets decorated with nothing more than rounded steel for handles and trimmings. Rows of shelves stood in the center, lined with many, many tiny bottles wrapped in mechanically neat labels.

A slender figure dressed in simple, rough fabrics and familiar straps bound about a shorn head stood with her back to them. An Angel stood there, languidly picking tiny bottles and boxes onto a wheeled cart, pausing between each selection to stare at the clipboard for a long, long moment before picking the next one. Faith let go of Rook's hand, stepping forward to gently rest her hands upon the Angel's shoulders, causing the woman to slow, and still, hand raised mid-reach for another little bottle.
“This is the moment of truth, Rook,” Faith said, her voice soft and reverberating through the Bliss all around them, like a soft, rippling current curling and flowing through water as it bent and played with the light and perception of everything around it and in it. “Everyone has to take a leap of faith at some point in their lives, and you stand upon the brink of the precipice of choice. Not everyone survives the leap, as I'm sure you know,” she said, turning her head just so to look up at Rook, her gaze serious.

“Always struck me as more of a statistical gamble rather than a leap of faith myself, regarding things like leaping off of the Father's statue onto rock-hard ground littered with corpses many yards below,” Rook observed, a shade of skepticism creeping into his tone. “But please go on?”

“Having faith in the greater scheme of things does not mean believing you will come out alive, Rook, but that things will be as they are supposed to be, whether that means you live or die.” Faith said, another of those tiny ghost-smiles that held nothing happy gracing her features. “It means having faith in something more than any one individual, even the Father.”

Rook squinted at that. “If we're talking about God, I would say it's a sign of bad parenting if He doesn't value his children's own lives individually as well as collectively—love and peace shouldn't mean death and war.”

“But it does mean death and war happen, Rook. There's no denying that.”

“But we can try to make it better,” Rook insisted.

Faith breathed a sigh. “Sometimes you just have to accept things as they are, Rook. But I admire your optimism, even if I envy it a little.”

“I'm pretty sure this is one of the things we can change, Faith, or at least I hope so.”

“Some things are too big for any one person to change, Rook.”

“But that's why we're here, aren't we Faith? We're more than just one now, and that can grow and change too.”
“So optimistic.” Faith shook her head, an almost-smile curving her lips upwards. “But your own test you will have to face alone, as all people do in their lives. Would you take a chance at courting death, or becoming lost here in the Bliss, to have a chance at preventing the death of another?”

She was talking about Rae Rae and Ryan, and she could see the exact moment Rook connected the dots by the look on his face. He nodded. “Yeah. Yeah, I would.”

He denied that he was a hero, but he was still trying to be one. Faith couldn't say she believed in heroes, at the end of the day—she knew they existed, but they always only ever existed somewhere else. She tilted her head down, letting her gaze fall to the ground for a moment. This was going to end in tears—but life often did. At the very least, this way was a little bit safer and allowed her to hedge her bets both ways—not that she was sure Joseph would forgive her if his son became an Angel in the case of failure. But setting him on the path to becoming a Chosen of the Project was undoubtedly the right thing to do for the Project and the future, whatever came of it. Joseph would find no fault in that effort...and no one would ever know her hand in this little plot, provided she did not actually take an action that could be conceivably defined as technically helping him so much as trying to guide him to walk the Path. That was what she was supposed to do after all, because she was Faith. If he did become an Angel...she could always blame his lack of previous exposure making him susceptible to being overwhelmed by the low dosages.

That happened sometimes, both for blessed and normal folk alike, usually the ones with great, deep, hidden pain. Poor souls.

“Then you must take a leap of faith, Rook.” Faith gently guided the Angel's outstretched hand towards a different bottle one shelf up than the one the woman had been reaching for, pausing once more to hover over it to look at him one last time. “Last chance to turn back.”

He understood now, why she had been telling him about the Bliss mixtures, about the Chosen, about the Angels, about faith. He hesitated only briefly, before nodding. “Let's do it then.”

The Angel plucked the bottle of concentrated Bliss and put it in the cart, wheeling it over placidly to where a label printer stood beside a computer. With Faith's gentle guidance, the woman slowly typed in the necessary identifying components and printed out a new little low-dosage label for a fresh bottle, pouring the concentrated distillation into it and sealing it up properly. The newly switched bottle was added to the cart, and the Angel pocketed the empty bottle at Faith's prompting for later disposal before wheeling the cart out of the room once Faith let go of her, slowly drifting out of their sight.

Faith took up Rook's hand once more, and in another blur of the landscape shooting past them like rain on a sharp gale wind, the scenery shifted back to the half-Bliss-meadow, half-hospital-room scene of before, with hints and curls of embers charring the edges here and there.
“You'll have a few minutes to yourself, before the next dose,” Faith said, turning to examine his palm idly, holding Rook’s hand in both of hers. “You may want to spend your time reflecting and gathering yourself for the trials ahead.”

“Hey Faith?” His words made Faith look up to meet his eyes, and he held her gaze for a searching moment that did remind her so very much of his father and her other brothers. “Thank you.”

She smiled at his sincerity, just a little bit, her appreciation of his gratitude a little bit too dusty and faded like old lace for her truly enjoy or feel good about. “I have done nothing more than point the way out to you, Rook. You must be the one who walks it, as everyone does.”

“I appreciate it nonetheless.” Rook said, an earnest seriousness coloring his countenance. His gaze wavered down and to one side for a moment, before he looked to her again. “And hey...I feel I should tell you, my name's Joshua.”

She averted her gaze once more, smile dimming away to nothing. She hadn't wanted to know his name, incase any of a number of outcomes came about, whether he ended up killing her, or she tried and succeeded at killing him, or he became an Angel, or if Joseph killed and replaced her with him, or God knew what else. “Do you know my name? My birth name?” She asked quietly, not looking at him, hands slipping from his.

“I do. I didn't know if you felt comfortable with me calling you that though—do you want me to? Or...do you still prefer Faith?”

“Either's fine,” Faith said distantly. She didn't say anything more than that, because there was too much to say in too many conflicting directions, full of wanting and not wanting, and they didn't have the time. She wanted to be honest in this at least, and that was the closest she could get to the truth in only a few words.

“Faith. Rachel. Thank you. For letting me try.”

The way he said Faith and the way he said her name made it sound more personal, more *her*, not just a title. She wished he wouldn't but at the same time was glad he did. It made her happy in a way that hurt, coiled and piled on top with more pain of an unseen injury, stretching and tearing like a rubber band pulled to breaking.
“Don't thank me, Joshua. I haven't done anything.” She said. It was a denial of sorts, but also the truth. If Joshua managed to make his own way out, well...that was that. If not, then that was all she wrote. Faith looked at him then, wearing her public persona smile once more, tone switching to playful and light, like it was all a game once more. “You have a few minutes until the nurse arrives and the Bliss kicks in with full force. I'd suggest you use it to center yourself—that makes it easier to manage the infusion of Bliss. I have to go now though, so good night, sleep tight, and don't let the bedbugs bite.”

Letting her form dissolve into the Bliss, Faith withdrew to a safe distance that she could safely observe him from without being detected.

The Deputy looked startled at her sudden disappearance, searching the distance for a few moments before calling out a “Good night!” He settled back to sit beside the watery vision of his prone physical form in the waking world then. The first few minutes passed quietly, until a few soft strains of a sung melody reached Faith's hearing—it took her a moment to realize Joshua was singing.

Our lives are stories, waiting to be told

In search of silver linings, we discovered gold

And judgment taught us that our hearts were wrong

But they're the ones that we'll look down upon

Somehow, the fact that Joshua was singing in times of duress didn't surprise her at all—all of the Family was musical, it stood to reason the next generation would be as well. He did have a pleasant singing voice, one that would have fitted in quite nicely with the congregation's choir if he joined. Faith didn't recognize the song itself that he was singing, but it reminded her of the more melancholy reinterpretations on some of the Project's songs that her own followers had composed. As lovely as the originals and choir versions were, sad songs always had a certain place of fondness in her heart.

The rules say our emotions don't comply

But we'll defy the rules until we die

The nurse came in at that moment as if on cue, and Joshua's singing faltered as both he and Faith watched the faint telltale silver flash of the needle flicker in the watery reality that felt so much less real than the Bliss they resided in. It wouldn't be long now, Faith thought as the nurse exited once more as little more than a phantom shadow that served as a mere cog in the great machinations of fate.
Not long before he turns out like me? Rachel said, hope and bitterness and too many twisted feelings rooted deep in good and bad to make it all too Complicated to feel.

Maybe.

Joshua waited until the nurse had closed the door and the sound of footsteps had receded down the hallway into silence, before picking his song back up again.

So let's be sinners to be saints
And let's be winners by mistake
The world may disapprove
But my world is only you

Some of those lines felt rather apropos to their current situation, and to Eden's Gate. It made Faith wonder fleetingly if Joshua knew she was still observing how his trial was proceeding or not, but dismissed it—he might suspect, but he didn't really know how the Bliss worked, even with her explanation.

And if we're sinners then it feels like heaven to me

He would learn, though, soon enough.

Our hearts are too ruthless to break
Let's start fires for heaven's sake

Faith could see the fiery charring of the Bliss-scape surrounding Joshua grow more definite as the Bliss took hold in his heart and veins—the air was tinged a fiery orange and gold, the sunlight flaring into violent, molten shafts that glowed as if they would burn to the touch where they cut through the smoky haze.

So much like Jacob, though the eldest Seed brother's influence upon the Bliss was the red of blood and death, not fire and smoke. The air did have a reddish tinge that leaned towards Jacob's colors
though, Faith observed offhandedly.

It took her a few moments to realize the red was continuing to seep into their surroundings while Joshua continued to sing—she felt the effects far farther out than he could, and the recognition made her freeze in a faint sense of dread.

So let's be sinners to be saints

There was the faint scent of blood wafting into the air on the growing breeze.

And let's be winners by mistake

Then came the sun baked, scorched-earth smell of rock and sand beneath a merciless sun.

The world may disapprove

The rolling heat wave that just engulfed everything in its path like a tidal wave.

But my world is only you

Faith began to carefully slip away, silently, slowly, so as not to draw attention to her presence. She couldn't warn Joshua—it was too late now, as the faint strains of another song slowly began to rise up from the distance, catching up with the other tells of the coming presence as it drew near. The last thing Faith could make out as she slipped farther away was Joshua's shoulders jerking up in a startled moment of recognition as he abruptly stopped singing, and the slow, distorted notes of the new song could be heard rising in the distance in response to the Deputy's singing.

Only you...
Extra long chapter this time! Wasn't expecting it to be this long, but Faith had a lot of setup to do for all of this, imo. She's a busy bee, and has a lot of plates to balance all at once. And we get to see a little bit of the Seed Family's dynamics! A nice little beginning to the matter, I think. Title of this chapter is from “Afraid” by The Neighbourhood. Felt like a fitting song for both Faith and Joshua in different ways, but primarily Faith in this particular chapter since this one is hers. Disclaimer, maybe don't go digging into people's emotional wounds the way Joshua is and probably will be as it's a murky-morality area, though he means well, mostly.

I wasn't quite sure I had all the details of Faith's backstory and personality aside from what I could glean from what she tells us and some in-game notes, NPC commentary, etc. The pickings seemed pretty slim, even then. Some folks online speculated she had implications of sexual abuse if I recall correctly? I'm hoping this doesn't come across as erasure, but I will state that for the purposes of this fic, I'm interpreting Faith as not having experienced sexual abuse prior to joining the Project. I don't feel I have the skill to handle the topic well, and I've not been able to verify if it is indeed a part of her backstory or not. Definitely neglect and other forms of abuse though.

And did anyone else enjoy that ending to the chapter because I sure enjoyed writing it. Back to writing chapter three now, though that also is coming along slower than I intended due to health problems cropping up a bit. If all continues to be on the mend, writing will continue, but if things take a downturn, that'll necessitate more rest time—that's life for you.
Joseph

Joseph waited. He was used to waiting and had learned patience out of necessity and, undeniably, helplessness. Helplessness in the face of their father, in the face of the realization that being foisted from one home to another was to be his lot in life, and then finally in the face of the all powerful God.

The Lord taketh, and the Lord giveth.

So Joseph had waited. Waited, until finally the day came to a close, and he could retire to his own quarters in peace, knowing his family were just down the hall. Safe. Close. Connected. Found, not lost. Together.

For now though, Joseph needed a little time to be alone. Shutting his bedroom door behind him, he leaned his head against it and breathed out slow and silent. He let his eyes slide shut, and opened himself up to the wash of long-denied panic as his heart plummeted into his stomach.


It had all turned out alright. The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh. God did not let them take him, not from his flock, not from his home, not from his family.

He would pray for the young man’s soul, Aaron was his name. One of Jacob’s newer recruits, so
young, so bright, too eager to prove himself for the Project’s sake. Too ready to sacrifice himself, when this could have been avoided. He would pray for Felicity and Euphemia, for George and Sebastian’s sake as well, God rest their souls. They had all given their lives in the attempt to wrest Joseph from the grasp of the law enforcement officers, and they would be remembered. He wished they hadn’t died for him, all the same. The charges wouldn’t have stuck, John had said. And Joseph believed his brother. John would have made sure of that.

But the Lord moved in mysterious ways. It came as no surprise that the flock did not want to see their holy shepherd parted from them. Of course they would want to try to rescue him from perceived peril, and he appreciated their devotion. Their devotion was perhaps a bit too fervent at times, even as it sat poorly with him to speak ill of the dead.

A small part of him wondered if Jacob had planned for this, with his own people set waiting in the crowd. He wondered if Jacob had chosen for Aaron specifically to be there that day.

*Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. John 15:13.*

Aaron had come to them starving for love, made rabid through the suffering of abuse and hate, poor child. Joseph remembered the too-thin young boy that had been ushered before him, eyes so wide and hungry as to devour the world and never have enough.

Most runaway children didn’t survive a whole year, alone upon the streets. At six months a vagrant, Aaron had his heart in his eyes, empty and wanting for love and safety, and were instead full of fear.

There had been hope there too, in the young boy’s eyes, Joseph remembered. Hope, and suspicion because abuse never laid easy without scars being raised across one’s soul, invisible to the careless eye but all too glaring to those who knew where to look. It had shown in the child’s face, his expressions, mannerisms, the way he hunched over his food, watched people oh so carefully, was at once both on the defense and defenseless. It had taken years for young Aaron’s soul to finally achieve some semblance of peace, of ease—and the young lad turned young man had been drawn to Jacob’s tenets. To serve. To *protect*.

To sacrifice.

With that fire in his eye, of wanting to spare others from having to suffer the way he had suffered, Aaron had gone gladly to prove himself worthy of serving the eldest Seed brother. He had struggled at first, as all young ones did, needing time to build the muscle and endurance to keep up with the older, time-tested veterans that filled the ranks. But he had persevered, and in time
Jacob had mentioned considering promoting Aaron to becoming one of his Chosen, given time and temperance to balance out the young man’s zeal. Enthusiasm was a boon in and of itself, but Jacob favored cool-heads among his selected elite, just as he prized it in himself as a quality to cultivate over the years.

They would never know if Aaron would have earned that promotion, now.

Joseph pained himself with the bittersweet thought that Aaron would have, he would have earned his place among Jacob’s Chosen, would have grown to fill the role, would finally see that he was worthy of being proud of being just as he was and would have been. Would have finally understood what the Project had been trying to tell him all along—that he was worthy of love, simply for being who he was, as he had been, regardless of what others of the outside world had said.

Joseph could feel his brows drawing together, his expression mirroring the pain he felt at the loss, that there would be no more todays or tomorrows for Aaron. For the others. And there would be more, more who would lay their lives down for the Project and the faithful, to keep the rest of them safe.

It hurt, even as it gratified just a little bit.

It was an ugly and clean feeling, like the speckling of dust across the sparkling gleam of a polished blade. But Joseph knew of his faults and sins, and accepted them as well he could, as he tried to do with everyone else.

It’d been a similar ugly and clean feeling when he’d had a giddy moment of triumph, of being right in the most dramatic way possible, when he’d imparted a truth to the deputy in the helicopter. The truth that no one was coming to save them—a truth that was all too often the only reality elsewhere in life.

She was likely a reasonably good person, Joseph knew. But in that moment, she and her fellow officers had stood for everything broken and wrong and corrupt in the system, and had been cast down from the sky like birds with their wings struck out from under them.

It’d been glorious to be right.
The thought of her sobered Joseph a tiny bit from his emotional high, however. Deputy Hudson, if he recalled correctly.

She reminded him of his wife, just a little, with the fire in her eye and some of the finer details that shaped her face. It made him wonder if their child would have taken after Clementine, reminding him of her in little ways that Deputy Hudson did for that brief moment. If both of them had lived...but God had other plans, both then and now.

“Would you have approved of all of this if you had lived to see it, Clementine?” He whispered to the empty air, opening his eyes to stare at the floor, one hand coming up to rest his fingertips against the ink of his forearm that served as a lasting memorial to his dearly departed love.

It hurt, still. Hurt that she wasn’t here, even though it was well over twenty years that she had been gone. The pain had changed, softened, the edges filed off like a riverstone turned over by the current of time.

But he missed her still, in quiet moments like this.

He’d tried to find a connection like that with others in the years after, but in the end, there had been only Clementine. Now, he only saw ghostly reminders in other’s faces, and he accepted the pain and echoes of grief as a measure of their love that had been. It was a love that still lived on, in him.

Joseph sighed, and closed his eyes again, straightening up as he turned to walk to his bed, sitting down upon the edge with his hands folded together across his knees.

It hurt to wonder if Clementine would approve—in many of his daydreams, she stood steadfast by his side, by the Project, hand in hand. In others, though…

In others, she disapproved and fought him on some of the things the Project did.

Always idealistic, always believing—she’d always had faith in the good of humanity, in the hearts of people. Joseph had wondered if time would’ve changed that, crushed it out of her the way it had been crushed out of so many into a wariness that waited and watched to discern if someone was threatening or harmless.
She’d been through her own trials though. It had been part of why he’d loved her—that she had given him hope that things could be better than everything he’d known, up to that point.

Tears pricked at the corner of his eyes, but he let them be.

He’d stopped believing that everything could be better in this world the moment she had died.

Of all the futures he had seen at that point...he hadn’t seen her dying in a car crash. Some of the distant futures had been of him alone, but he’d thought—

He’d thought it would be something to deal with and plan for in a future time, far, far away from the then and now of their young love.

Joseph drew in a breath, the air barely shaking with the tremors of familiar sorrow and all the could-have-beens that he still remembered, still cherished. He let the breath go, singing quietly for his own sake, his voice low and soft, remembering.

You were a phonograph, I was a kid

I sat with an ear close, just listening

I was there when the rain tapped her way down your face

You were a miracle I was just holding your space

It was a fitting song, for Clementine. For how the sunlight had delighted in the very presence of her, the way it had glowed golden upon the twirl of her skirt as she had danced and laughed across the empty space of their tiny apartment. It had been small, and a bit rundown with its creaky old floors and peeling paint, not situated in the better part of town...but it had a small view of the park and backlot where the neighborhood kids played ball. It had been a safe haven. It had been theirs.

She’d taught him love, a different kind of love than he’d ever known or thought to exist, and to love the little things in life. The tiny plants and flowers she’d dug up from forsaken gardens and lots where others would call them weeds, situated in thrown-away pots and containers. Their own little garden, perched in mismatched and splendid glory upon the windowsill.

Well time has a way of throwing it all in your face
The past, she is haunted, the future is laced

She would’ve loved the flowers the Project had now.

Heartbreak, you know, drives a big black car

He wished he’d had the money to afford a proper funeral for her. Clementine...sweet Clementine had deserved every last respect and accolade this world could afford. He’d had to scrawl a barely legible signature for the coroner’s office to take care of the funeral rites, before he’d left. There should have been a burial, should have been a headstone, should have been flowers because she’d loved flowers. Clementine of all people, dear and soft and gentle, deserved to be remembered.

But she had burned, like flowers before a grassfire. Cremation was the only option for those who died poor—and he hadn’t had the thousands of dollars needed just for a burial plot alone, to say nothing of the cost of a fitting and proper casket.

Swear I was in the back seat, just minding my own

It was a final indignity of the world, that good people would be forgotten like dust on the breeze just because they were poor.

This could be all that we know,

Of love and all

Without her, there had been nothing left. Without her, he had lost everything. She had been his everything. Alone, he couldn’t afford to keep up with the rent, ramshackled though the place had been, while also having enough for food. Couldn’t keep up with the bills, the cost of transport to and from their—then his, and only his—workplaces. Alone they hadn’t been much, a two legged stool that couldn’t stand on its own, but together...they had been stronger. They’d managed. They’d fitted the pieces of their broken lives together and had made something. Something worth living for, something to enjoy. To delight in. To love.

Well you were a dancer and I was a rag

The song in my head, well was all that I had

Hope was a letter I never could send
He remembered the good days, in particular the days they’d had just to themselves, where she’d danced and laughed as he had sung and strummed self-taught melodies he’d picked out string by plucked string from memory after listening to the radio. The harmony of them singing together had been one of the purest forms of joy he had ever felt, that he would ever know. She’d loved his singing—even though his voice was in his opinion nothing remarkable with the twangy timbre and limited range. But Clementine had said that was part of the appeal, a pretty and warm kind of ordinary, that he sang with a kind of emotion that felt relatable to the average person. She’d later also added that she loved his voice because it was his. That reasoning had meant more to Joseph than any other compliment he might have received.

It’d been a moment of wonder to see her that first time, he recalled. A smile that could light up a room more readily than summer sunshine, and a laugh that had made his heart dance and skip a beat that first time, and then every time he’d heard it since.

She had been beauty and light both inside and out, and he would never know what grace of God had turned her head to look his way. She could’ve had everything from anyone with how she smiled, because it was in a smile like hers that you saw a reason why God was gracious in the face of all the trespasses and horrors that humanity wrought against each other and the world He had gifted them all.

Clementine had given him hope even when by all rights he shouldn’t have any—the hope he could try to be a good husband, a good father, a provider. Even in the face of his struggles and failures, she still believed—believed in it all, believed in him. That everything would turn out okay.

It had been so beautiful and bright, that faith, that belief, in the darkness of his life it was like a sudden rising of the sun when all he had known was night.

Then the sun had set, and with her departure she had taken all the light. Then the darkness had become all the more oppressive because Joseph had for once in his life known the light, and his eyes could see so much less now in the dark of the world than he could before she had stepped into his life. She had lifted him up on her own two wings, brought him closer to the love and the grace
of Heaven than he ever and never would have dreamed of...

...but then she had gone on without him, to a place he could not follow.

And the fall from grace had been so far, farther still because now he knew. Now he knew just what that absence entailed, and it hurt in a way that it never had before, crushing down with the weight of understanding compounding all that time that had come before alongside the time of both now and to be.

Joseph could never be as good as she had been, the way she had inspired people, including him, to be better, to be good, in an inherent way he could only marvel at.

John had been that way, once.

Joseph wanted to believe that it was still there, deep down, buried beneath all the hurt and suffering the world had piled upon his youngest brother’s shoulders. He’d looked for it, long and hard, in those early days when they had first reunited as a family, as brothers.

Despite the tears during their reunion, despite what Joseph would call fraternal bonds of love...he wasn’t sure that kind of goodness was still alive and well in John’s heart anymore. He didn’t know if John was capable of that, as he was now.

Joseph hoped he was. Hoped they all were, on some level.

But hope and belief were two very different beasts.

Perhaps one day, if given enough time, enough love, John would rediscover love in his own heart more readily than he did now.

Ah, but Joseph had spent enough time on sentimentality for now. He had to be strong for them all, here at the end of everything. He had to be, or no one else would. He had to be the backbone that his brothers could rely on, that the flock could look up to unwaveringly...even if he was nothing more than a flawed, mortal man. And not even a good man, by his own admission.
Joseph let the song trail off into silence instead, hands clenching tightly against one another.

He wouldn’t waver. He would persevere. He didn’t have unwavering faith...but he could have determination instead, and that would have to be enough.

That was why they had Faith, after all. To cover for his own failings and shortcomings, to help provide for the congregation when they doubted and Joseph’s word wasn’t enough to soothe. The comfort of the Bliss was something they all needed to partake in from time to time...even if there was a fair portion of their followers that didn’t care to use it for spiritual matters so much as a tool. He couldn’t begrudge either Jacob or his eldest brother’s followers the methods they employed...but the price was high all the same, a world of red and blood, so that the rest of the family could be all the safer. Jacob’s peace of mind, for his family’s safety. Hopefully, that would not be forever, and Jacob would learn one day he did not have to be measured by what he could offer—by what he could sacrifice.

The thought of the Bliss had Joseph reaching for the dreamscape with his mind just a little bit, to help calm his heart before turning in for bed. But then he heard it, a faint song...in the Bliss? The sound made him lift his head curiously, even if his flesh and blood ears couldn’t ear the song.

It seemed strangely sad by the tone, but he couldn’t quite make out the words.

*Are you lost, child?* Joseph called out into the Bliss silently. It was one of the family, undoubtedly, but the song itself was so...faint. One of the younger, more recently inducted members of the congregation then, likely feeling uncertain and afraid to be wandering the Bliss alone in their dreams. The Chosen would be familiar enough with it to not be afraid...but then, perhaps it was one of Faith’s Chosen, singing to pass the time and guide the Angels.

He listened for a moment, calling out once more with his mind, but there was no response.

Certainly not one of Faith’s priestesses then—they were the more sensitive listeners of all the Chosen within the realm of the Bliss.

With that in mind, Joseph stood up, stepping out into the hallway to go knock on Faith’s door and nearly running into Jacob.

Jacob’s hand shot out in reflex, at first to block, to distance, but in the fraction of a second it took for recognition to overtake surprise, he turned his hand to steady instead, holding onto Joseph’s
elbow as the younger brother swayed back. “Everything alright Joseph?”

“Yes, yes, I was just going to go visit Faith about one of the faithful in the Bliss. Are you headed to the kitchen for tea again?”

“Oh.” Jacob’s answer came as no surprise to Joseph there. Jacob often preferred to sip on something hot to help pass the time when nightmares chased away sleep—which was why they stocked an entire cabinet of herbal teas here, in no small part thanks to John once their youngest brother had found out about Jacob’s preferences.

“Another sleepless night?”

Little wonder, really, Jacob rarely slept well for the nights following the loss of any initiated member of his ranks. It could be due to nightmares and trauma...but there was also the suspicion on Joseph’s part that there was also a degree of penance and respect to be paid in the action on Jacob’s part. He honored the sacrifices of his people, of the Project in its entirety, without waver.

“Yeah. What’s happening in the Bliss?” Jacob asked, more in passing than out of any significant interest. But then, Jacob always wanted to know who was doing what.

“One of our congregation seems to be in need of guidance,” Joseph said as he mentally reached for the Bliss to check for the singing once more, surprised into stillness when the distant melody came through just clear enough to make out a few words—

... only you,

The pause wasn’t long, but it still got Jacob’s attention easily enough coupled with the look of consternation on Joseph’s face. “Joseph?”

Joseph frowned, trying to concentrate on the song, but it still faded in and out of audibility enough to make discerning it clearly difficult. “The melody isn’t one I recognize,” Joseph said, pursing his lips. It wasn’t strictly against the Project’s tenants to sing or listen to music from outside, but it was generally discouraged to perform such outside influences within certain areas, including the Bliss. The few words he had heard though...Joseph’s gaze flicked over to meet his older brother’s, who stood there waiting patiently, attentively, now curious. Perhaps that was a sign.
Intuition leaned forward to tap lightly upon Joseph’s shoulder then—suspicion arose that this wasn’t one of theirs...but that didn’t add up, the song indicated that they were in the Bliss, the consecrated realm that only their family and congregation could come together in.

“I think...we have a lost lamb wandering within our pastures, Jacob,” Joseph said carefully, watching the flicker in Jacob’s eyes like a visible shift in gears making way for a rising intensity as his eldest brother went on full alert, ready and waiting to run—to hunt. Where Joseph and the other Heralds shepherded the faithful flock, Jacob was the one who shepherded the wolves. He reached out, and Jacob tilted his head forward in acquiescence to this little ritual of familiarity, of contact, that Joseph had slowly warmed Jacob up to. Bumping their foreheads together, Joseph held his brother’s face between his hands, trying still even so many years into their lives to reach out to his brother, despite the hesitation, despite the fighting, despite the thorns that Jacob inflicted upon his own self—and it was also because of those reasons that Joseph reached out to him. Forever apart, forever distant, forever ready to do what must be done in acts of self sacrifice that never were enough in Jacob’s reckoning of his own self and flaws.

They had made some progress in convincing Jacob that wasn’t true...but progress was still slow, and now, with the Collapse upon them...this was a difficult time for Jacob, and Joseph could see him sliding back into his old ways all too easily going forward. They’d have to be careful to ease Jacob away from being forever set on this path of blood and sacrifice, to put the sword down and be at peace in life instead of seeking said peace only in death. “Bring them home, brother.”

Maybe turning Jacob loose to gentler shepherding would also help bring him home from those ghost-filled, distant places the eldest Seed brother got lost in within the confines of his own head.

Jacob nodded once, and Joseph let him go, feeling like they stood upon the precipice of something big. Joseph paid the feeling no mind however as he turned to return to his quarters—it was the Collapse after all, the whole world was on the brink, and that included all of them as well.

Jacob

Jacob turned on his heel and headed to the kitchen with brisk, long strides, his pace quicker now that he had something more pressing to do than just pass the time. A cup of steaming hot water from the kettle Joseph always left warming upon the stove for Jacob’s use, a chamomile tea bag, some lemon and honey stirred in, and then Jacob was striding back to his room, shutting the door with a sharp and quiet click. Setting his tea down to steep for a moment, he pulled his travel pack to him and flipped open one of the pockets, one corner of his mouth slanting to the side in distaste as he removed one of the plastic vials within. He gave the milky green liquid a brisk swirl before uncorking the vial and downing it in one go, chasing it with a sip of hot tea. He never liked the
taste of Bliss—it tasted like soap to him. John liked the taste better, but then there was no accounting for taste. The memory of that particular bickering session before Joseph had intervened made Jacob’s lips quirk up in a fleeting smile before he dismissed the thought and feeling—he had matters to attend to.

Settling down in a seated posture upon his bed with his back against the headboard, he took another sip of his tea to settle the brief wash of distaste and unease that chased him whenever he made to enter the Bliss. He always braced for it, didn’t entirely like it, felt too vulnerable when the Bliss made him relax—it made him soft, sloppy, less attentive if he didn’t put in the extra effort to balance it out with willpower. It was useful for soothing fears, but not so useful for Jacob’s purposes—this had led to Faith’s people going through the trouble of developing special strains for Jacob’s followers in particular to use in the trials and for the Judge program, but the classic strains still needed to be used to commune with the family and congregation in the Bliss. This little errand shouldn’t take long though—Joseph had good intuition, and this was likely just throwing Jacob a bone as something to do so as to burn away an hour or so of time. He’d be in and out shortly, whether it was indeed an interloper in the Bliss or one of the faithful loitering about to wait out an accidental high from Bliss fumes.

Jacob closed his eyes, inhaling to a count of four, holding it for seven, and then exhaling to a slow count of eight. He repeated it once more, and opened his eyes to the red tinged, blood-splashed world of green within the Bliss.

Flowers withered to dust and rock and sand beneath his feet as he quickly strode forward, heading up the slope of a familiar hill as the sands shifted and slid down beneath his steps. The heat of the sun beat down from overhead, a conglomerate memory from different times and different places, pricking at his skin with the beginnings of sweat as he toiled his way to the top. It was always this way, always uphill, always fighting. His rifle thumped lightly against his back to keep time, the strap a well-worn weight across his chest, familiar and comforting even as it dug in slightly with the expectation of violence here and now, be it close and personal or upon the distant horizon.

And it was never truly a world without danger, now was it? The bloodstained boulder he passed by agreed with his sentiment, dripping a silent testimony of another memory of another body that wasn’t here today in the Bliss. His Judge was too far away to hear him in the Bliss tonight, so he would have to do without.

The wind plucked at his coat almost playfully as he reached the summit, ruffling his hair with the touch of a familiar hand and he half expected to see a smile following it—but there was no one there.

Same as always, these days.
He put the half-remembered memory out of his mind and unslung his rifle from about his shoulder, using the scope to scan the distance. There was the faint tug of intuition that pointed him to a particular direction, and at first it just looked like more of Faith’s influenced areas of the Bliss, as usual. That was expected—the faithful rarely had influence on the Bliss itself, even the Chosen. What influence the more powerful Chosen did have was far more limited and localized to the areas immediately surrounding them, unless they were connected to their Herald’s beacon network. But then, they usually took on more of the Herald’s influence to spread through the Bliss out of reflexive imprinting. Fitting, given their duty.

But in the distance, Jacob could see flickers of flame. Tiny orange tongues and snaps of light. Nothing big, but the most dangerous fires could hide their roots deep once they’d had time to get going and incubate, like the trees of old growth forests. Now that he was looking for it, he could see how the green haze of the Bliss was a bit greyer there, smudgier than the usual air of drugged Bliss.

This was Faith’s realm, and very possibly this was in her portion of the network in particular rather than John’s, but this hunt was Jacob’s.

He settled down upon the ground to set up, keeping his eye trained through the scope on the flame-touched tree-filled meadow he could see out in the distance. His network wouldn’t be of help to him here, but Jacob was not without his own tricks even then. And his intuition told him to wait.

When his patience was rewarded, he smiled.

There through the trees, he caught the flash of the olive drab green uniform of the county police. Definitely one of their missing interlopers then, and definitely his mark to bring in. Faith would have been a good choice to try to ensnare them too here in the Bliss...but her methods were more gentle than Jacob preferred. It was necessary to have a hand that rewarded as much as one that disciplined of course, but in his opinion it was high time to bring down some corrections on these little lost sheep.

And that was his job. To correct, and to cull.

He slid the safety off, and flicked the laser sight on, a stark bright red against the green of the Bliss. Searching, searching, he tracked the flicker of laser red with his sight, looking for an intersection of that particular shade of damning olive green and his personal shade of red.

The mark was being shy at this point, staying under cover and out of sight. Jacob waited, patiently breathing in and out, controlling the micro movements and tremors that came with being a living
body, keeping his rifle sights steady.

The fires in the distance were slowly climbing higher now, inch by inch, growing and feeding on the underbrush and foliage around them. But other than that, nothing moved, save for the trees in the false-breeze of the Bliss.

Long enough passed that Jacob started to wonder if the mark had spotted his laser sight, or Jacob himself. But that seemed unlikely, given the direction the figure had been headed—they hadn’t been looking behind them, to where Jacob waited to strike. They certainly hadn’t moved out from the cover of the clump of trees they were hiding behind, he was certain.

A waiting game, then, to wait out the pull of the Bliss.

*Oh, but we can’t have that, little sheep.* This would mean Jacob would need to move in and change positions, giving up his current vantage point. That was fine as far as Jacob was concerned, and he drew himself up into a crouch, standing to move forward with his rifle at the ready if an opportunity presented itself.

While it was unlikely that the deputy would have a materialized weapon or such, today had been full of enough surprises that Jacob took a few more precautions than he might have otherwise on a hunt through the Bliss. He went from cover to cover, circling around to come in from the side discreetly rather than straight up sprinting across the open ground. From what Jacob could see, the most obvious path of escape for the deputy to take from that patch of cover was towards two o’clock, down the slope and along the trees, into the dense thicket fifteen yards off. As such, he shifted to get a clear line of sight for an open shot behind the thicket—but saw no one there.

There was a faint twitch of irritation and displeasure at the corner of his mouth, but it looked like the deputy had stayed put behind the first piece of cover. Out of panic perhaps—that wasn’t unusual for newcomers to the Bliss, particularly if they stumbled in alone. Jacob continued tracking to the next piece of cover, rotating around the area to get a good look at the initial area of underbrush through his scope—and came up again with nothing.

Growling softly in rising annoyance, Jacob scanned the area carefully, eyes narrowed as he tamped down the agitated spark of impatience. He liked a good hunt, but he didn’t like when his mark disappeared into thin air—and the deputy might have, if the Bliss had worked its way out of their system by now. He had no idea what the dose was, nor how long it’d been in the deputy’s system, among other things. The fires were still here, though. While influences upon the Bliss could linger for awhile after a person left, it was usually far shorter when the person was new. Unwilling to call it quits just yet, he lowered his rifle and stalked forward, less cautiously and more openly now to the first piece of cover he’d seen the deputy dash behind.
There was surprisingly little in the way of broken grass and leaves. But there was enough for Jacob to see that the deputy had taken a different route entirely than what he’d predicted—if anything, it looked like his mark had seen him coming and had moved along a route that took advantage of Jacob’s pathing and had circled away, keeping visual obstruction between the two of them.

His irritation vanished, and Jacob grinned. This was so much better—he did so enjoy chasing down smart prey.

Hm, but he’d have to step more lightly than before then, if the deputy had kept their wits about them enough to notice him and adjust accordingly.

He followed the trail, he had to—the marks were too faint to follow from a distance. Seemed like this deputy had some woodcraft experience under their belt if they knew better than to simply stomp through the undergrowth. Was there the possibility of the deputy leading their trail through an improvised trap, like a deadfall? Not likely, but he’d keep an eye out for such instances, just in case.

The trail wound on and on, picking through the woods with an eye towards concealment and speed.

Good. Very good. A little green still, but this one would make a fine addition to his hunters with a little more training, if they survived of course.

It was actually a little bit concerning that he wasn’t catching any immediate signs of the deputy’s location—normally, in the waking world, Jacob would have been all too happy to hunt his mark down until they were run ragged if need be. Tenacity was a fun game, if one had time. But with the Collapse upon them and the Reaping underway, he didn’t have time for games—and the clock was ticking all the faster since he didn’t know what the time limit was for catching the deputy while they remained in the Bliss.

Almost as if sensing Jacob’s rising tension, a voice crackled to life across the radio—the radio that usually hung on his belt as ornamentation and little more when outside of his Bliss domain, so far from his network of beacons in the Whitetails.

“So..ooo, brother mine, how goes this little hunt of yours?”
John. Jacob could feel his eyebrows flattening into a straight line across his brow. He loved his little brother, he really did, but John just had that skill of being insufferably smug enough to get under anyone’s skin down to an art form, and neither of John’s brothers were not exempt from that, not even Joseph.

Jacob sighed, and unclipped the radio from his belt. “John. It’s going fine, I’ve got the trail.”

It honestly wasn’t that hard, given the smoke and fires that were popping up behind the deputy’s trail. The problem with the fires however was that they were spreading. But close enough was close enough...so long as the fires didn’t cover up the actual trail. The mark in question didn’t seem to have enough control over their effects on the Bliss to take advantage of that...yet.

“Do you really now. Because from where I can see it, it seems you’re awfully far behind our little mischief maker here in the Bliss.”

Opening his mouth, Jacob had been about to humor John and ask how he knew that, when he heard the faint telltale drone of an airplane flying out in the distance. Of all the things for John to have fine control over in the Bliss alongside his mental materialization skills, manipulation of perception was the most annoying skill Jacob could think of for John to exercise on him strictly for the sake of dramatics. Specifically, keeping the cues of John’s presence and in particular his airplane on the downlow until that very precise moment of his choosing. It wasn’t surprising that John would use his skills to heighten his theatrics, really...but Jacob couldn’t point that out without it being the pot calling the kettle black. That never stopped him usually, a little bicker now and again was good for the soul, and for brotherly bonding.

This time however, they didn’t really have the time for it while hunting, even if he was definitely on the receiving end of the needling, rather than the other way around.

“I see,” Jacob said dryly, soothing over the desire to needle John back. “You gonna tell me where our little lost sheep is at relative to my location then or do I need to be nice and say please?”

John clicked his tongue in mock-disapproval, the sound coming through clearer in the dreams of the Bliss than it would in real life—the radio still served as a communication line, but it was more the idea of it that served that function, rather than the reality. “Now now, big brother, is that how you ask for help that’s been so kindly offered?” John was in a teasing mood. Joy. But that was inevitable whenever John had the upper hand, really. “But since you’re my big, gruff, grumpy older brother I’ll let it slide, because I know you say it without saying it in that charming woodsy mountain man way of yours.”
“John.” A less than subtle and very flat reminder that time was ticking.

“Always so impatient on the hunt, aren’t we, Jacob,” John said, the drone of his airplane growing louder and louder as the airborne sibling flew directly overhead.

That was rich coming from John, but Jacob held his tongue on that remark—it’d waste time to bicker on that as much as anything else, and that topic was an old bone they worried and played with many a time. There’d be other opportunities.

His patience was rewarded then.

“Very well, very well,” John said, satisfied to have had his little bit of fun poking at his brother. “Come along and follow my lead, they’re headed towards your ten o’clock. I’ll just go and cut them off, shall I?”

The glee in John’s voice almost made Jacob feel a little bit sorry for the deputy. Almost. For the most part, it just made the corner of his lips twitch upwards in a smirk at the sound of the distant explosions as John dropped a long line of bombs up ahead.

Leave it to John to bring out the overkill option on the first pass.

“Did you take out the cover without murdering our little runaway?” Jacob asked wryly as he started jogging forward at a faster pace, since he no longer had to try to follow the winding trail left by their quarry.

“Pffft, I gave them plenty of warning. If they didn’t get out of the way, they don’t deserve to live.”

“And which one of us was the one complaining about breaking our toys?” The eldest Seed pointed out, amused. A harmless enough topic to tease John about, John wouldn’t delve in deep into complaints while having fun on an aerial bombing run.

“They aren’t one of ours yet.” John said by way of defense...though they both knew that John was all too happy to seize an opportunity to utilize his plane as an airborne terror of the skies at any given moment. Sometimes to excess, in Joseph’s quietly worded opinion, but Jacob could always appreciate the sheer zeal that John came at it with. Their little brother deserved it, after all was said and done—after all that John had been through, all the lies and falsehoods and masks he’d had to
juggle, instead of just being himself. “There’s nothing wrong with putting the fear of God into
them and giving them a good show of power now is there.”

This was why Jacob appreciated John, and fuck the Duncans straight to Hell with their religious
claptrap influence for trying to smother it out of him. If they hadn’t been dead by the time Jacob
had learned of them and what they’d done to John, Jacob would’ve put them down into a shallow
grave that nobody would’ve found.

But, God spared Jacob and Joseph from having to find out how good a defense John would’ve had
to muster against murder charges laid against his eldest brother, however bitter the lack of revenge
tasted on Jacob’s tongue. But dead was dead, and that was that.

Jacob’s musings were interrupted at that moment by another crackle over the radio.

“I don’t believe it.”

The acute disbelief in John’s voice got Jacob’s attention the way an unexpected gunshot turned
one’s head sharply towards the source. “What is it?”

“They’re running through the fire.”

Well. That certainly was unexpected. And suicidal, even in the Bliss. “Guess neither of us have to
worry about breaking a shiny new toy then,” Jacob grunted, a little annoyed by this turn of events,
but people did stupid things when they were desperate. He of all people would know, given that his
usual day to day affairs involved pushing people farther than even that point of desperation. His
pace slowed a bit, but he continued on—might as well, he might at least find out where the
deputy’s body was in the waking world, for what little good it would do them. Joseph would want
it for symbolic reasons, certainly.

“They’re still going.” John said, sounding almost pissed with affronted anger that someone might
dare surprise him in such a manner—but also intrigued. John liked outliers in particular, Jacob
knew. They were “interesting.” This was definitely an outlier though—if the flames were from the
expected incendiary bombs Jacob reckoned John had loaded his plane with, then the fires
should’ve been too hot and widespread to cross.

“What do you mean they’re still going?” Jacob demanded. Now he was intrigued.
“The *deputy* is still fucking running, across the flaming fields, and they aren’t even on *fire*.” John said, definitely sounding angry and interested. “...I’m shooting them.”

He probably should stop John. “Aim for the legs,” is what Jacob said instead. Because what kind of brother would he be to spoil John’s fun? It served their purposes well enough—an element John made sure to always incorporate with his antics...even if Joseph didn’t always agree. But Joseph was a bit more insistent on their younger brother toeing the line for what passed as good behavior here at the Project than Jacob thought was necessary at times.

The sound of John rolling his eyes was definitely a part of Jacob’s imagination, but it still felt almost like he did indeed hear it with his own two ears with how John’s exasperation showed. “I *know* that, you great big lummox.”

No point in going slow now then, John might get impatient enough to actually shoot the deputy in more vital points. Jacob sped up from a jog into a run, cutting a direct line to the orange-glowing break in the trees he could see ahead of him.

The sound of automated gunfire filled the air as John made a pass, followed by a frustrated growl over the radio.

Jacob huffed a laugh, but he didn’t care to spare breath to talk while running just yet. He stopped to take a look across the open area before him from a vantage point that was good enough—but not *ideal*, a part of him grumbled internally—to scan the burning fields before him. Peering through his scope he could see the figure out in the distance now, still running. How had they managed to get so far away?

“Having problems over there, Johnny boy?” Now it was Jacob’s turn to gloat, just a little bit. All in good family-friendly fun, after all.

“Shut up, they were just lucky not to get hit.” Yep, John was definitely gritting his teeth now in concentration, Jacob could just picture it.

Jacob took a few moments to setup the shot, trying to steady his rifle sights as much as possible by holding his breath—he was still breathing a bit too hard for his liking, but he didn’t need a bullseye just now. He could hit close enough, and that would suffice. And he was more than good enough to pull that off.
John in the meantime was making another pass, coming in down low with another spray of gunfire.

Jacob could hear John whoop over the radio and saw the figure stumble as some of the bullets made impact—but then the deputy just kept running. As if they hadn’t just taken however many bullets in whatever places they’d been shot in.

“They’re still running, John.” Jacob said. John was circling around and thus didn’t have eyes on the deputy to see this, and what kind of brother would Jacob be if he didn’t inform his little brother of this fact?

“What.” The celebratory high of moments before was replaced with flat disbelief and another spark of irritation in John’s voice.

“Don’t worry though,” Jacob said, knowing John could hear the smirk in his voice, before he held his breath, steadied his hands as best he could, preparing to take the shot. “I fixed it for you.”

The crack of his rifle rang out and Jacob watched with satisfaction as the figure fell forward onto the burning earth before them.

That satisfaction immediately disappeared when the deputy got up and just started running again.

“Wow, what an amazing job you did there Jacob, you shot down the one deputy and their identical twin just popped right on out of hiding to run away. What breathtaking effectiveness I have stood witness to.” Sarcasm did not become John, and it certainly annoyed the hell out of Jacob.

“Shut up John.”

“Oh no no no, Jacob, here—let me fix this little problem of ours.”

Jacob knew what was coming. He also knew he really should stop John, again, but…

...he didn’t care that much for doing so right at this moment, Jacob just wanted to win. He would’ve preferred to be the one bringing down the deputy, but if John got it done, it was still as good as finished. Even if John was going to be strutting about like a peacock over it later in private.
But, credit where credit was due, if John managed to cinch the win. Another louder drone of the airplane engines from overhead signaled a third pass from John, and when he opened fire, Jacob was reasonably certain that John was simply aiming for the deputy in their entirety now, no longer trying to carefully snipe their legs out from under them anymore.

He watched as the figure rag-dolled and jerked under the repeated impact, and went down again.

Jacob waited, keeping his gun sights trained on where the figure had fallen.

He waited.

But at long last, their quarry did not get up.

“And that’s how it’s done,” John said with an air of satisfaction.

“By killing them, you mean.” Jacob said dryly as he lowered his gun and stood, marching out towards the area where the deputy’s body had fallen. He had to skirt the flames still present, eyeing them warily—they certainly were behaving like normal fire in the real world, felt like it too when he got a little too close. They’d have to ask Faith to block off this quadrant with rivers and bodies of water to make sure the flames didn’t spread throughout the entirety of the Bliss. Maybe she could summon rain? Or a flood? It wasn’t something he’d ever thought to ask her about before now. Whatever put them out, really, if they didn’t go out once the deputy exited the Bliss.

“Hey, it worked.” John argued. “So don’t complain.”

“Oh I’m not complaining, you’re the one who was complaining after all.”

“Tsk. They’re probably not even dead in real life, if they have this much of a presence in the Bliss already. Just unconscious.”

“Mmhm. Assuming the shock doesn’t kill ‘em.” Jacob responded. Death in the Bliss was a tricky business—plenty of folks died from it, but there was a fair number that didn’t. Yet another weird fairyland rule bending element, but one he put to good use for training.
“Weren’t you on about not wanting someone who was too weak to use their abilities and survive and all that?” John said snippily. “If they’re Strong,”—god John was such a pissy bastard sometimes—“then they’ll survive. And I still call dibs.”

“What do you mean you call dibs,” Jacob shot back, voice almost low enough to count as a growl—John had definitely successfully gotten under his skin again, in this particular instance. He’d let John have this little victory between the two of them, seeing as Jacob won often enough in their little bickering bouts anyway. But he wasn’t giving up this particular mark—it was a little too interesting a situation if they’d survived a “death” in the Bliss, on top of everything else. That was why John wanted them too however. “I’m the one who got the orders down from Joseph to bring them in, John.”

“Mhm, and I’m the one who shot them down.”

“Assuming you didn’t kill them,” Jacob argued, trailing off with a frown as he drew up to where the deputy’s body should have been.

“Well then we’ll just have to find out if they’re dead or alive then, won’t we, Jake old boy.” John said, snideness lacing his tone as smoothly as sugar in a tall, cold glass of good old fashioned sweet tea.

“The body’s gone,” Jacob said, interrupting their little family feud.

“What?” John was quick to drop the fun and games as well, attention back on this unexpected development. There should have been a body, whether the deputy had died or lived.

“The body’s gone, all we’ve got is a pool of blood.” Jacob reported. It was thanks to Jacob’s presence that there was any blood left at all, really. Blood and wounds always lingered in his presence, here in the Bliss.

“Let me take a pass over the field, maybe they crawled off in the fire and smoke without us seeing them.” John said, all seriousness once again as his plane curved around to scout the area.

But both John and Jacob knew that if John couldn’t see them from John’s current vantage point, then the deputy was probably gone. Where, though?
That question had Jacob musing over it as he stooped down on one knee, drawing out a clean handkerchief and pressing it into the pool of blood. He made sure to sop up as much of the blood as the cloth would take without being a dripping mess—how interesting though, that the deputy had managed to leave the Bliss at the last moment. It made Jacob smile, despite the relative failure of this hunt. This little sheep had more potential to be molded into a wolf, it would seem. If they learned under pressure as well as they seemed to, they would make a fine addition as one of his hunters. He’d have to see if the deputy had what it took to kill properly, be it through duty and loyalty, or through bloodlust and rage.

And Jacob could arrange for that—he’d find out, sooner or later.

“I don’t see any sign of them,” John said, his tone almost sullen but too attentive and too interested for him to truly be in a sulk.

“Doesn’t surprise me, there’s no trail of blood leading away from this puddle here.” Jacob said, standing up with the bloodied handkerchief in hand. “Come down here, I need you to take this handkerchief and keep ahold of it to give to my Judge.”

“Bliss kicking you out already? I keep telling you to take bigger doses if you want to stay longer, Jacob.”

“Not yet, but it’s gonna sooner rather than later, I reckon.” Jacob said. “Think you can get Faith’s attention?”

“Naturally,” John said, all too pleased to be of assistance—and to preen a bit about being able to do something his brothers couldn’t do half so well as he could. He jumped from his plane, the aircraft continuing along its projected path for a ways before dissolving into thin air and the sound of its engines faded away to the quiet ambience of the wind and crackling fires.

John rolled over midair, aiming upwards, and firing off a flare gun that arced up high and bright over their location before rolling back over to pull his parachute release cord, drifting down gently and oh-so-smugly to land a few yards away from Jacob, neat as a button.

Show off. But, so were they all.

John unbuckled himself from the parachute straps, dropping the whole bundle and dismissing it to dissolve into thin air with a thought just as he had with his plane, before he held out his hand with
an expectant flourish.

Jacob withheld a sigh, but couldn’t resist rolling his eyes as he handed the bloodied cloth over to John.

Taking it delicately between his fingertips, John looked at it with a slightly unimpressed look, sniffing in a show of disdain at the sight of it. “So messy, this rookie deputy. But all the better for us to hunt them down with. Looks like Joseph was right though, hm?”

John’s eyes were suddenly back on Jacob’s face now, watching intently, as the younger Seed absent-mindedly rubbed the blood-soaked fabric between his fingers.

Jacob refused to show any sign of being phased by John’s scrutiny, keeping his face still as stone for the most part. He was however curious enough to lift an eyebrow in inquiry as to which part of Joseph’s commentary his youngest brother was referring to.

“You’re not going to do anything stupid, are you.” John’s question came out as more of a gentle, threatening statement than an inquiry, really.

That stood to reason—John’s love was like a single-edged knife, the pressing of the blade’s dull spine against the soft, vulnerable parts of the neck where the arteries and veins beat just below the surface. Not inherently threatening to cut…but you could never forget that there was a razor’s edge attached to the other side of it. It was sweet, but also bitter like the metallic taste of iron in blood. A sad reminder of who they could have been,—even though they loved one another as family members should, just as they were, there was always that what-if thought that drifted by on occasion—the what-if imagining of a life without the horror and hardship that had made them who they were now.

John could have been happy, if life had been kinder. Their youngest brother was happy now, in fleeting moments, was even alright on most days.

Joseph could have been happy, too. Jacob was less sure that Joseph was happy these days so much as driven, always driven, always focused on his purpose, on their shared purpose. Running from the pain and from the memories and the bleak truths of the world both inside and out by focusing on the Project—the way Jacob had buried himself in the day to day misery of drifting from one interchangeable homeless shelter to the next, the way John had buried himself in the meaningless luxuries and surface-deep glitter of the ritz and glamour of expensive, hollow living. The way Rachel had tried and still tried to bury it all under a haze of forgetfulness, both before and after the Project had found her.
No, none of them were truly happy people. John came the closest out of all of them, in ways, but in the end, they were still sitting here in the dimly lit dusk of the world’s end, cracked up this way and that through their cores with all the different ways the world had mistreated and discarded them all. It was true of many in the Project too, if not all of their followers as well—the lost leading the lost.

He’d never say that to any of the congregation though—as far as just about anyone else knew, Jacob supported Joseph’s claims of speaking with God one hundred fucking percent. Jacob had never said anything else to the contrary, since the beginning of the Project at Eden’s Gate. Some skepticism in the early days when it had just been the three of them was understandable, of course, but he had supported Joseph’s dogma ever since.

John and Faith both knew better though. Perhaps Joseph too.

He never really talked to any of them about his wavering belief, if it could even be called belief, in God as most spoke of Him—as a loving God.

Was there a God? Probably. He didn’t doubt that. Did Jacob have faith in that kind of God having a plan for them all?

...no.

No, he could not say he did believe in a plan that would leave people, kids in particular, to suffer needlessly.

But Joseph said their suffering wasn’t pointless. That it was the crucible that made them who they were.

Jacob could not believe that any divine power that espoused unconditional love and redemption would allow, let alone plan, to permit abuse and harm to come to a child. Like what had been done to John. Like what had been done to Joseph. Like what had been done to Faith.

But he could believe in a divine power that espoused conditional love and patronage. He could believe in a God that demanded sacrifice—that made sense of all the suffering and evil in the world that happened to the undeserving souls, the innocent and clean. Like John had been. Like Joseph had been. Like Faith had been.
Such beliefs were blasphemy, he knew—but that was how he made sense of the world, of how a God could lay down wrath upon innocents, of allowing evil to be enacted against a child.

And he could also believe in the Devil doing such things to both innocent and damned souls alike, could believe and understand why an all knowing, all powerful God would create a being just to have them fall from grace.

Sacrifice. That was the name of the game.

Every garden needed its snake—what was the point of Heaven, after all, if there wasn’t also the fear of Hell? It was by the depths of Hell that Heaven’s glory was raised all the higher. It was the fear of the fall that made ascension truly worthwhile. It was the chance that one would fail that made victory so much the sweeter.

And who better to bring forth a Hell that would serve Joseph’s plan, than the soldier who had been to war?

War was hell, after all, and brought out the worst in people so that they knew just what it was to be human—just what it was to sin, and sin so deep the blood would never wash off clean from their hands again.

It fit neatly, that way—the whole story of God having a plan, having the Devil fall, and the whole concept of Hell. To know love, hope, and joy, one had to have hatred and fear and pain all on the other side of the scales. And Jacob offered it up freely, with directed purpose—hellhounds upon a leash and muzzle. He would be the hellsent horror for all who would threaten the peace of the Project, in their garden.

The garden wasn’t meant for him and his kind, the men and women who followed him. And that was okay. Sacrifices had to be made, and Hell had to have someone to watch over the damned, that the blessed might live in peace. And who better than Jacob himself then, war-soaked sinner that he was?

One more, ten more, a hundred or a thousand more sins would never matter when weighed upon his soul—his were too many to count now, and he was beyond saving. The others of his family could be saved though, if he kept them from having to do the things he did, from having to bring forth the Hell that he had leashed.
But there were the new kids on the block now. A new threat. Joseph had so named the officers the harbingers of doom—*and Hell followed with them.*

Well.

They’d just have to see who was the better Hellraiser then, wouldn’t they. Jacob had many years of practice under his belt at this point, and he knew the extent of his own abilities. They’d test the deputies, and see what the measure of their worth was, all in due time.

He’d ruminated on much of this for a while now—Joseph had not hidden what he had known of his visions from them.

And while Jacob had never said much of this out loud in so many words…

...John knew. John knew in that all too sharp, blades-facing-out way that he used to cut the world into tiny bite-sized pieces, examining the fragments and fitting them back together like a jigsaw puzzle re-shaped to his liking. He knew the truth. And he knew how Jacob would lie—by not lying overtly, so much as through diverting.

“Are you going to do something stupid, John?” Jacob asked pointedly after a long moment of staring each other in the eye, waiting to see who blinked first.

John narrowed his eyes, lips pursing off to one side. Unsurprised, and undoubtedly reading that response as *yes John, I’m going to be doing Stupid shit, and so are you, so shut it*—acknowledging without openly acknowledging how it was for the both of them, and how it frustrated them to be so alike in this of all ways.

Rather hard to be your brother’s keeper when your brother was a stubborn git about doing things his way, but that was true for all of them.

Faith thankfully arrived at that moment, her appearance preceded by a soft laugh. “My but you two have been busy playing rough today haven’t you? So much fire and vigor!” She twirled into view with a cascade of sparkling white and lace, looking so very much like a good dream that was so out of place amidst the small fires spreading across the fields.
“That wasn’t us, it was one of the deputies,” John said, crossing his arms, keeping the bloodied
kerchief far enough away from his sleeves to avoid staining—ever fastidious, even in dreams.

“It was mostly the deputy,” Jacob corrected with a look at John.

“Stop ratting me out! That was a controlled series of detonations! Not this wildfire mess!” John
said, turning his head away with a huff.

Faith just laughed, covering her mouth with one hand daintily all the while. Her expression grew a
bit more serious as her eyes flicked over the scene then, to blood pool nearby—and the absence of
a body, Jacob knew. “Did you get them?” She asked, tilting her head to one side.

“No.” Jacob knew his disgruntlement showed a bit then, but couldn’t be bothered to hide it. Faith
was going to tease him either way—but he might be able to redirect it to focus primarily on John, if
things went in his favor.

“Awwww, I’m sorry to hear that.” Faith said, actually looking a bit put out by their loss.

Huh. Sounded like Faith was in a more sympathetic mood today. Must have been a long day for her
too, then—she was usually more energetic in the Bliss.

John sighed then in a long-suffering sort of way, waving his empty hand in Faith’s general
direction while still looking off into the distance, dramatically. “Well go on then, have your
moment of victory, you were right, we underestimated the deputy, assuming it was the same one
you and Joseph mentioned.”

“Oh I wouldn’t do such a thing as that,” Faith said all too innocently with a coy tilt of her head,
smiling as she rocked to and fro from heels to toes, hands neatly folded behind her back.

That actually got John to roll his head to the side and give her such a Look from beneath brows
drawn together in a flat line that matched the set of his mouth. All theatrics, once again. Rachel had
integrated very well with that aspect of the family, in Jacob’s opinion. John’s too, he was sure.

“I wouldn’t! You look so put out already, poor John,” Faith insisted in a genuine sentiment, though
the light of her amusement still fluttered all too gayly in her eyes.
Leave it to John to still deliver a bit of fun for Faith’s little victory as the youngest Seed brother gave a disgusted sigh and rolled his eyes skyward. John was getting better at being a sporting loser in these little inter-family quarrels of theirs—it had taken a long few years for their little brother to grow comfortable with the vulnerability of losing, even to trusted family members. Such little efforts to engage rather than sulk were a sign of progress, and trust. They also amused Jacob, and he could tell it amused Faith too, by the little deepening of her smile.

“But back on topic, can you do anything about all of this,” John said, waving a hand almost with a sense of disdain towards the brush fires around them.

“Of course, brother mine.” Faith raised her hands up, up, and up, reaching towards the cloudy haze overhead that served as the sky in the Bliss, now smogged up with the smoke rising from the fires.

The skies darkened, and the soft pitter-patter of a light rain overlaid the crackle of fire and rustling foliage, increasing to the louder more insistent drumming of fat raindrops coming down rapidly.

John made the most disgusted face, looking down at the dirt that was quickly turning into a field of slurry instead, raising one boot in disdain. “Ugh. Mud.”

Jacob snorted. “What were you expecting to happen in a rainstorm?”

“This is the Bliss, we’re practically able to pick and choose how we want reality to bend here, and that should include no mud when it’s raining,” John complained, holding a hand out to one side for a sleek black umbrella to materialize in his palm. He opened it with a brisk snap, resting it against his shoulder to deter the rain from ruining his hair and clothes. And to preserve the bloody handkerchief, of course. That, John tucked into a newly-materialized plastic ziplock bag, folded and held securely inside his vest pocket.

Faith laughed. “But if the dirt didn’t get wet, then the flowers wouldn’t grow.”

John flicked his eyes skyward in an impatient shorthand implication of an eyeroll. “Fire’s not so good for flowers either, last I checked. Speaking of—we’re in your region of the Bliss, aren’t we Faith?”

“We are, yes. You want me to have my priestesses try to find the deputy?” Faith raised one hand to the side, faint glimmering threads coming into being from her fingertips out into the distance—her
statement had been a question, but they all knew she was already mid-process for updating her people with the latest orders.

At least, that was what they would normally expect, until Faith frowned, turning her hand over to scrutinize the threads. She pulled them towards her, and some of them went slack, drifting through the air like spider silk on the wind, trailing broken ends trailing tiny embers in their wake.

“...oh dear.” Faith said. As collected as she was, Jacob was dead certain she was panicking a bit, because that wasn’t how things were supposed to be.

Jacob was certainly concerned, and back on high alert. “The fire broke the connection?” An obvious question, but he wanted clear confirmation.

Fire and other “natural” phenomenon didn’t normally affect the more “abstract” parts of the Bliss. The more magic hocus-pocus stuff, as Jacob would term it—outside of Joseph’s hearing range.

John caught one of the broken threads and pulled it closer to his face, examining the glowing, ember-touched end with acute curiosity. “That’s new.”

“Very.” Jacob grunted, crouching down near another patch of flames to observe them, brushing away some of the rainwater dripping down his face while paying no heed to how his hair and clothes were steadily growing more and more soaked. The rain was coming down far heavier now, and the flames were slowly starting to diminish. Jacob wasn’t sure how effective rain in general was on wildfires, but he did wonder if this fire was taking longer than it should to be smothered out by the downpour.

Faith was unaffected by the rain, as usual—hair and dress and even her bare feet were pristine. The only thing out of place was her troubled expression as she stepped closer to John to examine the burnt thread. “It’s not destroyed entirely—I can rebuild it. But I need to put the fires out first before I can repair the lines. For now though…”

“Radio silence,” Jacob grunted, picking up a stick to poke at the flames, seeing if the fires would take to the wood even despite the damp conditions. “Like jamming the frequencies, but in the Bliss.”

The fire took, crawling slow and sure like a brightly colored caterpillar with too many legs up the twig. Seemed like the rain wasn’t really putting it out just yet, just slowing it down and lessoning
Faith watched Jacob’s little experiment, eyebrows drawn with concern. “Long distance yes, but I can still contact the nearby ones without having to be there. Hopefully they’ll be able to relay the message to the more distant ones.”

“Was this on purpose you think?” John asked, toeing a clod of dirt to roll over and onto a patch of fire. That seemed to snuff the fire out for a brief moment...until tiny tongues of flame started licking out along the edge of the clod.

“Infiltration?” Jacob mulled the idea over for a split second before shaking his head, dropping the stick. He wasn’t interested in seeing what would happen if the fire caught onto flesh—well, not his flesh, anyway. “Unlikely. Knowledge of the Bliss is too tightly contained. Odds of someone learning about it who wouldn’t dismiss the idea outright and who actually has some kind of ability that could influence it is zero to none, if not close to it.”

“We learned about it once upon a time, Jacob,” John insisted, turning his head just enough to give Jacob a Look over his shoulder. “And nothing is foolproof. Perhaps a leak happened. People defect from all kinds of groups for all manner of reasons sound or not, ours would be no different.”

What went unsaid was the Project’s unspoken policy of taking care of deserters—that was part of Jacob’s job. There was too much at stake to risk interference or the wrong kind of attention.

Faith pursed her lips then as she focused on a small group of flames nearby in particular, and the rain falling on that patch of ground suddenly turned into a veritable waterfall of rain.

John squawked angrily and hopped away from the sudden wave of muddy water that rushed outwards from Faith’s test area. “A little warning next time, Faith!”

“Sorry John,” Faith said, looking a little bit contrite. “I just wanted to see if the fires would go out at all. They’re taking too long even with the rain coming down as hard as it is.”

“It’s fucking close to drowning us all and the fires STILL aren’t out yet,” Jacob said, standing up and giving his hair and coat a shake to get rid of some of the excess water that was pouring off of him in rivulets now. That didn’t actually help at all, as the rain coming down simply replaced all the water he’d shaken off with even more.
“They’re contained, but...no, they don’t seem to be going out as they should be,” Faith said, waving her hand to cease the waterfall—the water upon the ground drained away slowly into more of a swamp with thin layers of dirt floating atop it, compared to the field of grass and earth with some puddles that it had been a short while prior.

They waited, and watched.

The dirt shifted with the lazy spinning of the water trickling off—and faint orange embers glowed from beneath the water’s surface in the pool they were all staring at.

“Well.” John said. “Seems we have a bit of a pyromaniac on our hands. More so than the usual sorts around Hope County, hm?”

Jacob ignored the rather pointed look John gave him at that, stooping instead to grab another stick and poke the submerged embers with it, holding the twig against the orange part of the glowing lump for a good long minute before withdrawing it for inspection.

The fire didn’t take. That was something, at least.

“Not even blackening on the stick,” He reported.

“Oh how nice, the fire doesn’t spread when it’s underwater. At this rate we’re going to have to flood this entire damn field and keep it that way.” John said, sarcasm more than easily evident in his voice— “That was sarcasm, by the way, Jacob, just in case you didn’t know.”

It was now Jacob’s turn to roll his eyes—it really was an unfortunate habit at this point, one he’d tried to train out of himself in his early adult years, but John had reintroduced him to in abundance. John had also helpfully given rise to many situations that certainly made Jacob want to roll his eyes, which didn’t help the matter.

“We’re going to need your researchers on this, Faith—let us know if you want some of ours to collaborate on it with them. This shit’s screwy.” Jacob did not like screwball matters like this. Clever tactics in reality, yes, but the Bliss was fucking weird at the best of times. This was not the best of times. It was a realm of ideas—of “make believe” as Faith had termed it to some of the little ones—and ideas were mutable.
Using the stick again, Jacob rolled one of the embers out of the pool of water and onto what passed as a relatively drier, more viscous portion of mud. The ember sat there, simply glowing faintly for a good long few minutes as the water trickled down its fire-filled facets.

“...is it actually out?” John asked, intrigued.

As if in answer to John’s question, a tiny tongue of flame sparked up from the brightest portion of the ember, licking upwards greedily for air even in the rain-dense atmosphere they were currently in.

“Flood the field, Faith,” Jacob said, tossing the stick away as he stood up. “We don’t want this shit spreading to the entirety of the Bliss. Make sure to spread the word for anyone spending time in the Bliss to avoid the field. Yours too, John.”

There was that impatient flick of the eyes upwards in place of an eye roll again. “Naturally,” John said, his tone a little bit scathing in the implied sentiment that of course John would know to do that, he wasn’t dense.

“I’ll get my people right on it,” Faith said, looking and sounding troubled. “I’ll cut off this area with some wide and shallow rivers, that should keep it contained enough to prevent trouble—I’ll cut down on the air currents in this area too, so we don’t chance sparks being carried over the rivers on the wind.”

Jacob gave a curt nod in acknowledgement, then turned his attention to John. “I need you to get that handkerchief to my Judge on the double more than ever now, John.”

That was more an order than a statement but given the situation, he figured John would let it slide.

John did, simply raising both his hands defensively, while also lifting the umbrella up higher as a result. “Fine, fine, going right now, don’t go getting your underwear in a knot.”

John turned on his heel and stalked off, muttering in disgust about having to dodge not only mud and rain but also fire that refused to be put out now. He materialized a truck at the edge of the field far enough away from the embers to avoid potentially stirring them up and spreading them further, got in his car, and drove in the general direction that lead to the Whitetail Mountains in the Bliss.
John would be there within the hour—travel distance was malleable in the Bliss, as were many things.

Jacob turned then to Faith again once their brother had begun driving off to fulfill his task.

“Faith, kick me out of here? I don’t want to linger right now. I’ll come back some other time with a few of mine to get a look at these fires.” Jacob asked. It probably wouldn’t be long until the Bliss started fading from his bloodstream, but he was cold and wet here in the Bliss, and it was putting a damper on his mood on top of the usual disinclination he harbored towards lingering here in fairy-dust land.

Faith nodded, reaching forward to lightly rest a hand upon his forehead, “Good night, Jacob,”

—and then suddenly there was Jacob, sitting in his room upon his bed, as dry and comfortable and warm as one could wish, with only the memory of the cold and wet soaking into his muscles and bones. It was still enough to make his body ache a bit, on top of a phantom headache at the sudden “shift” in temperature. Real life hindrances didn't annoy him half so much—even the weather in the real world rarely changed so swiftly without some kind of warning and transition. The Bliss could change on a dime—that was one of the many reasons he disliked the Bliss, it really didn’t make a great deal of sense to have a sinus headache from a sudden temperature shift since his body had been here all along, not in the suddenly rain-flooded field over in drug-and-dreamland. He sat forward, rubbing a hand over his face and head with a disgruntled grumble. If he’d had any inclination to sleep before after the day they’d had, the people they’d lost, and just looking at his life in general, it was gone now.

Fuck the Bliss and its goddamn nonsensical rules.

Chapter End Notes

Title of this chapter is from the song "Big Black Car" by Gregory Alan Isakov. I picked that one specifically for Joseph, but some of the lines do fit Jacob too. It's a whole lot of heartbreak this family's toting. Joseph in a romantic sense for Clementine, Jacob more so in a sense of how he views love and how the world works. Pretty deep sense of loss for both of them, and in many ways a betrayal of hopes, dreams, and expectations. More Joseph than Jacob when it came to their views of their own lives back in the day, with Jacob still feeling the disappointment among other things pretty keenly that his brothers and other people of importance to him didn't get a better deal in life.
A lot of things happened recently in real life with family and loved ones that required attention, but here we are. Glad to have this chapter out, it was a lot of fun to get to write the siblings all interacting more, and to start showing off a bit of what they can do in the Bliss. They all have different skill sets with some overlap, on top of differing opinions with regards to the Project's magic dreamland. Always fun to have the family bickering a bit more when the responsible peacekeeping sibling isn't looking, isn't it?

And hey, we learned what the name of Joseph's wife in this AU was! Just to clarify, it's not canonical, we're rolling with thematic artistic choices here. Fun surprise: We got another writer hopping on the Psychic AU bandwagon doing their own take on it in the other-works-inspired-by-this-one link over yonder, maybe go check em out and see if it's your cup of tea. That's about everything for the moment, so back to the draft board then. Have a good one, all you fine sorts!
Staci woke up. He was lying face down in the mud, he was cold, his clothes were most definitely wet, and he was covered with the stench of river water.

What in the fuck just happened?

His brain was in a confusing, hazy whirl, and despite all evidence to the contrary, he wondered for a good few moments what had happened last night, how much he’d drunk, and if these were his pants.

“Fuckin...Boshaw,” Staci grumbled to himself as he made the monumental effort to push himself up from the mud. He gave up for a split second as his chilled muscles complained. Maybe he’d just stay down for a little bit longer, despite the mud. He was still feeling pretty out of it—Sharky must’ve spiked the Goddamn drinks again. *They just don’t have enough kick to them man, how are you supposed to kick back with a drink that’s got no kick?* Sharky had said after the second time this had happened and Staci had accused him of such.

Granted, Staci *agreed*, but he liked to know ahead of time when he was going to get absolutely plastered so he didn’t accidentally run into Joey or Whitehorse when he was skulking about the grocery store’s frozen dinner isle for easy-to-make hangover-day foods. It was embarrassing to get an all too knowing eyeballing from either of them, even if it was on his day off and he was conducting himself as a reasonably respectable member of the public. With aviator sunglasses on indoors, yes, but sometimes a guy just had really sensitive eyes and was a bit of a douchebag that way.
It was a wonder he bothered trying to hide when he’d been out drinking to those two—they were like living lie detectors for stuff like this at times. They were pretty forgiving about it all compared to his previous department—Hope County got real quiet sometimes. Boringly so. Not always, but sometimes.

And given that these little occasional regretful-morning-afters never impacted how he or Joshua performed at work—hell would freeze over before he even dreamed of showing up to work with so much as a whisper of a hangover, he had at least *that* much respect for himself and the department—Whitehorse and Hudson were willing to be somewhat lenient.

Emphasis on somewhat.

He still got a good ribbing from them if they caught him out in his “close enough to be civilized” attire, namely a hoodie, sweatpants and sneakers with the aforementioned sunglasses.

Joey usually swung by later in the day with food to make sure he was hydrating properly, and yes he had aspirin in the medical closet, or called if she couldn’t make a face to face visit. How she never got the urge to just get blindingly drunk was beyond Staci—Hope County was so damn... *something*. Middle of nowhere.

It was a pretty place, yeah, but it was all still so...small rural town.

God’s country, people called it, for the pristine and rustic nature of it all.

A nice vacation spot, in Staci’s opinion. But he wasn’t out here on vacation, to be fair—he lived here now.

Staci had known he was likely to get stuck out here if he transferred, not for any reason or politicking among the ranks, just...inertia. He was like that—he got comfortable, and then he got bored. Staci being bored led to Staci making questionable life decisions that he regretted about two hours later, if not sooner. Sometimes the regret got put off for a whole day even.

His thought process at the time had been along the lines of *ugh, I’m sick of city life, all the constant noise, and the smell of burnt burger grease mixing with back alley trash. Hey look, the Hope County Sheriff’s department has put out a call for transfers on the board! Looks like a nice place out in the wilds of nature, let’s go give it a whirl!*

He had not taken into consideration that he much preferred being a city boy up until he had already
put in his request to transfer. He hated camping with a passion, because bugs sucked. Literally, in the case of the worst ones like mosquitoes, ticks and fleas and God knew what else was crawling around in the grass. Bless the inventor of bug spray, otherwise Staci would have taken one look around him upon arrival in Hope County and put out an officer in distress radio call. At that point, he’d given himself two months before he snapped.

_This was a terrible idea_, he’d thought to himself back then. He’d been low key pissed at himself for doing it, especially upon finding out that he could count the number of bars in Fall’s End on one hand, and that all the clientele were all so...country. Not his usual crowd to go fishing in for a nice one-night stand, honestly. That’d been kind of a nose-dive for him, but he’d made due. There were _some_ fish in this pond, just not as much as he was used to. Nor as necessarily discreet—the town was a fucking rumor mill, like damn. It’d felt like it’d been one step down after another, honestly, and had him rethinking that it might just be one month before he snapped and went stir crazy from too much fresh air and charming rustic goodness.

But then he’d met Joey. And then Danny and hell he’d started warming up to Whitehorse too at some point. Then Joshua came along, bringing along a number of other oddballs like Sharky and Hurk to add to the merry little band of rustics that Staci had one day looked up at and had then subsequently realized he actually considered them as friends.

How fucking picturesque and Disney-ified his life had become out here in the boondocks. He’d had friends before, but not _honest-to-God friends_ he actually cared about or wanted to hang out with specifically. More like the friends you hang out with because you’re bored and you all get along well enough to spend time in each other’s general location together as a group. Maybe exchange Christmas cards even. Not _friends_ friends. Not people he’d actually _miss_ if they weren’t around.

He hadn’t ever really noticed the difference before Hope County—or the absence of the latter group in his life, more specifically. Hadn’t cared enough to look. Hadn’t known, either. Fuck, all that self-realization was probably the others rubbing off on him and making him have personal growth and shit.

Fuck his life, he wasn’t even all that mad and sullen about it anymore these days. If anything he’d been starting to like his day to day.

Okay maybe that was lying a bit. He _did_ like his day to day life here. The bad days sucked, yes, but...well, it was worth it, he guessed.

...nah, it was worth it.
There was probably mud in his fucking hair, but worth it. Assuming he had time for a hot shower.

Aw fuck, he needed to check the fucking time and did he have work today—Staci groaned a bit more angrily this time, actually putting his back into levering himself up and off the ground, wobbling enough on his knees that he reached out instinctively to try to grab something...not that there was anything to grab in empty air. His balance stabilized, and he leaned down for a moment, hands on the ground, gathering himself to give a push and roll himself up onto his heels.

Well. At least he had his pants and shoes this time...even if his socks did squish in a nasty as fuck wet way. It was river water at least judging by the smell and not piss, thank God. He was never going to let Sharky live that down, not ever.

Stumbling forward, he rubbed at his face with the back of his wrist, grumbling. It was still so damn dark, so it was a reasonable bet he wasn’t late for work, he had day shifts all this month.

It was the moment when he spotted Joey sprawled out in the mud unconscious that his brain slowly made the oh shit wait connection that it wasn’t just another slightly shitty Monday morning.

“Oh fuck. Shit, Joey, come on,” He said, muttering more out of reflexive worry than actually thinking she’d respond, rolling her onto her side to check that she was breathing. His brain was coming back online now, and he could remember that something shitty had gone down.

He remembered the crash then, and oh shit HIS FUCKING HELICOPTER WAS TOTALED—did that actually happen?

Fuck, it probably did. Yeah, that wasn’t just a shitty dream.

Joey definitely being here helped cement that, she and Danny were too responsible to pull any drunken antics that landed her drunk-sleeping and soaked in river water out in the middle of the woods.

Oh shit Staci hadn’t even thought about Danny during all this mess, shit.

She was breathing, which was good, but what in the name of Jesus, Mary and Joseph had just happened? Staci’s brain was still scattered, and he needed to focus on the here and now.
What he wouldn’t do for a hot cup of coffee right now, even the crappy instant stuff they kept just in case of emergencies at the station when the good stuff ran out. Just to focus.

But this wasn’t the station, and Joey was unconscious and he was alone in the middle of the woods and everything was going to shit—and oh no, they were probably still in real deep shit with the Goddamn cult, weren’t they, Heaven help them.

They were going to be absolutely drowning in the nutters, and there was all that talk of a Reaping and oh God he didn’t want to know what that was about. Then Staci’s brain helpfully made the connection for him from the thought of the batshit cultists to Joshua’s warning about them.

Fuck. Where was Joshua? God damn it. And Whitehorse! They were two men down—technically three if you counted Burke—and fuck, would the cultists go for Danny and Nancy at the station?

EVERYTHING SUCKED GRANDLY RIGHT THEN.

“God give me strength,” Staci said to himself with a grunt as he hauled Joey up over one shoulder—he hadn’t found any injuries to speak of on her person, and it didn’t feel like she had any spinal injuries or other broken bones, so he could at least get her out of the wet muddy ground and maybe onto something a bit drier nearby. That wouldn’t need to be far, the mud was really just from all the water that had come along for a ride all soaked up in their uniforms.

GOD, he just wanted to go home, strip out of his clothes, toss them in the wash, and get himself a hot shower and warm food. No such luck here and now though, for obvious reasons.

Should he make a fire? Not much point to hide from cultists if he and Joey froze their bits off Staci reckoned, but Staci knew he was a man of creature comforts, preferring the easier options where possible.

Was it the safer option though? Was it the best option?

“Fuck.” He swore to himself, again, because Joey definitely couldn’t hear him cussing up a storm right now in her state as he gently set her under a tree, on a relatively-drier patch of pine needles. Definitely not warmer though, fuck the cold night air and fuck nature and fuck the cult, not necessarily in that order. “Okay. I’ll be back, I just need to sweep for Earl and Joshua, so stay here under this crooked tree by the small boulder, Joey, and don’t go anywhere just yet.”
Joey had no response, being still unconscious. The talking was really more for Staci’s benefit, to sort out his still-fucking-scrambled brain and talk himself through what he was going to do, landmarks to notice and remember so he didn’t get lost, and what to focus on.

What had even happened at the river? Shit, he was more fucked up by that than the crash.

He worked out from where Hudson was located, spiraling out slowly while muttering to himself quietly about specific tree formations that stuck out, because if he didn’t they’d all look the same and shit he did not need to get lost right now. The minutes ticking by as he searched were agonizing in how they stretched out the paranoia of not knowing what was going on, the sensation of not knowing if it was safe or dangerous pulling his nerves taut like piano wires.

He was so focused on not getting lost that he nearly tripped over Earl in the dark, sprawled out in a muddy puddle just like Staci and Joey had been. It was almost enough to make him laugh hysterically in relief, but that urge was quashed by good common sense and by hearing the small grunt of pain that followed Staci’s boot accidentally making contact with Earl’s ribs. Staci hissed in surprise, reaching down quickly to check Earl for further injuries. “Shit, sorry Earl, didn’t see you in the dark. You with me Sheriff?”

Earl groaned as he was rolled over, trying to get his hands under him with the overly-careful slowness of the injured, the drunk, and the hungover. “Pratt? Ugh—I feel like I got run over by a backhoe. How are you doing?” He had a bit of a wheeze as he spoke, rubbing at his head as he struggled to stand on his own two feet.

Time to put on his metaphorical, professional cop hat and be Officer Pratt now, then. For about two and a half minutes, as much as he could manage. He could do more than that, naturally, but he was tired, hungry, cold, wet, and definitely fucked up on something if not “oregano” and beer. Definitely not the latter two, but what?

“Feeling a little fucked up sir, and feeling like this entire situation is really fucked up sir.” Did he sound a little bit impudent? Probably, yeah. Now was not a good time for sass, but never let Pratt be called entirely sensible when in a not-tense-but-definitely-tense situation. He had enough sense, but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t complain while doing it if he could get away with it. If you couldn’t snark about a shitty situation, then it was a REALLY shitty situation and then it was probably time to bend over, pray, and kiss your bum goodbye.

And it was not that bad.
It was not that bad.

Absolutely, positively, not that bad. Staci was very, very carefully not thinking about just how bad it could be, other than the acknowledgement that it was a definite and serious kind of bad, and that he needed to take extra care. Because if he thought about the enormity of the entire situation and how bad it very well could and might be, he’d have a meltdown and would be utterly useless instead of just panicked while working to fix the Goddamn situation.

So it wasn’t that bad. Absolutely, positively wasn’t.

“Not too fucked up then are you Pratt,” Whitehorse’s tone was dry, if a bit forced. His patience was understandably running thin here.

Pratt probably should know better than to sass right then, but stress does funny things to people, and sass was how Pratt coped.

“Trying not to be, sir. We should head back to Joey, I left her under a tree over yonder.” Stay focused and on task, Pratt. Don’t look at the monstrously looming fear of danger on all sides.

It’s going to be fine. It’s going to be fine. It’s going to be fine.

“Shit, how’s she holding up? And have you seen Rook around?” Whitehorse finally had his feet under him without swaying and was waving for Pratt to lead the way.

It was honestly impressive the old coot could manage to walk as well as he was—Staci certainly felt like he’d been run over by a stampede of cows, which had been a near thing that one time thanks to Zip Kupka’s occasional need to let his bovine “babies” run free through the streets on the fourth of July, of all days.

That never failed to rile the farmers whose cows actually got pulled into that entire mess on the occasions where Zip managed to pull it off—naturally it also pissed off the whole police department too.

But son of a gun if Zip didn’t always manage to somehow always evade actually having charges stick to him for the matter.
Guess being a paranoid conspiracy theorist gave him an edge in avoiding getting caught up in the system, somehow. Still a fucker though.

It was kind of gloomy for Staci in that moment, realizing he would’ve rather been wrangling two dozen startled cattle, however much a pain in the ass it was, than being in this situation in the here and now.

Fuck.

“Was out like a light, whatever hit us, hit us hard. I don’t even know what. And no, no sign of him so far. I’ll keep looking after we rendezvous with Joey at the tree and you keep watch on her?” He only really remembered to turn that into a question at the very end of his statement, because he hated doing nothing when there was something that needed doing, and he would rather be out there looking for Joshua than sitting playing guard duty. Plus, he was the less injured one of the two of them...though he knew that was just coincidental justification for his preference. Patience was ever a trial for him, at times.

“We’ll see. Any sign of the Peggies hereabouts?” Whitehorse asked, stepping carefully over a particularly gnarly tree root.

Oh shit. Pratt hadn’t even been looking, honestly, other than for anything in general that screamed danger Will Robinson, danger in big bold letters.

It hadn’t occurred to him to even notice the odd lack of immediate Peggie search parties, of all things. They should be around, looking for the deputies, shouldn’t they?

Staci and the others could not be so lucky that the cultists had given up the search. Surely not.

“No. No, I—I haven’t seen or heard any signs of Peggies.”

Whitehorse hummed, clicking his tongue as he wound his way through the underbrush along the easier trails that wouldn’t drag at his clothes with grasping twigs and branches. “That doesn’t sound right.”
Yeah. Fuck.

“But everything’s gone pear-shaped at this point, so it’ll be messy to figure exactly what the Seeds are doing on the ground for their jolly little end of days jamboree.” Whitehorse continued. “If they’re not hunting us all that hard, then they probably have other priorities. We couldn’t have gotten all that far on foot.”

“That Reaping they mentioned when we crashed?” Staci ventured, tapping at Whitehorse’s arm to direct his attention to a safer portion of the slippery-steep slope covered in leaves they were trying to quietly slither down.

Whitehorse made a noise that was somewhere between a sigh and a long-suffering groan. “Certainly chose an ominous enough name for it, whatever it is. Suspect it has something to do with seizing supplies for their prophesied apocalypse, given it’s all farm country around here. That’d be a conflict and a half with Hope’s people—they’re not going to take too kindly to that...but I reckon Joseph knows that, and that he and his lot are prepared. Too many damn guns not to be, the crazy fucks.”

That last little explicative made Staci wince just a bit. It was hard not to acknowledge how bad things were if Whitehorse was swearing about it now. Fuck. He had to keep an eye out for that one crooked tree by the small boulder now—a-ha! There it was, and lo there was Joey. She looked like she was starting to come around, with how she’d rolled onto her side.

“There she is—Joey you up? It’s us, Pratt and Whitehorse.” Staci was most definitely taking precautions not to accidentally spook Joey, because she was a scary lady if you spooked her wrong. Tough as hell and more than capable of taking down a crew of peggies all on her own without a doubt, a fact he greatly respected from a safe distance.

“I’m getting up, and when I do, the fucking Seeds are all going down,” Joey growled, rolling onto her hands and knees with a slightly disoriented sway, before getting to her feet and staying stable through sheer force of will.

Joey in the morning, or upon being woken up, was a force to be reckoned with and one that would make any grown person with sense piss their pants.

Unfortunately a lot of Hope County came up lacking in common sense.
“Keep ahold of that fire for the meantime, Hudson, we’ve got to take stock of the situation and figure out what’s going down and how much of a threat the Project’s going to be to the public,” Whitehorse said, but there was a trace of humor in his tired tone. How the Sheriff managed to find Hudson’s wrath at all humorous rather than pissingly-scary was a marvel unto itself in Staci’s opinion. Whitehorse turned his attention to Staci then, continuing, “Pratt, can you do a quick sweep and see if you can find any trace of Rook? I think I speak for all of us when I say I’d hate for us to leave a man behind.”

Nobody mentioned Burke.

It went without saying that everyone was thinking about him, though technically Burke wasn’t a member of their department team. Burke had been technically a member of their group as a fellow member of law enforcement, but that’d been a real uncomfortable ride with the Marshall and Sheriff not seeing eye to eye on this whole matter regarding Eden’s Gate.

Fuck. Did that mean they were going to leave Burke to his fate?

Staci really hoped the Marshall had gotten away, because he really did not want to go back into the thick of things if it could be helped.

But, if that meant leaving someone behind…

Shit.

“Yeah, be back in twenty.” Staci said, peeling off to go search the rest of the woods surrounding them, starting in the direction he and Whitehorse had come from. With any luck, Joshua was just out of whack from whatever had happened and somewhere near the rest of them. It was going to be okay, it was going to be okay, he’d find Joshua probably rattled out of his gourd under a bush somewhere, they’d make some wisecrack jokes about being soaked while on duty not being anywhere near as fun as actually cracking open another six pack with Sharky and Hurk after they’d all definitely had a few. They’d rib each other and eventually get into a shove-and-slap war while walking back to join Joey and Whitehorse and the other two would give him and Joshua That Look that said Staci and Joshua were being dumbasses again and now was not the time. And everything would be fine.

Twenty minutes later, everything was not fine.
He could not find Joshua.

WHERE THE FUCK WAS HE. Staci traced all three—only fucking three there should have been FOUR—sets of tracks all the way back to the river side, which actually took more than the twenty minutes he’d told the others he’d take.

This was probably worrying Whitehorse and Joey, shit.

BUT WHERE WAS JOSHUA?

THAT FUCKER OWED STACI A THOROUGH EXPLANATION FOR ALL THIS SHIT GOING DOWN. It had destroyed Staci’s helicopter for God’s sake. He hadn’t owned it but being the department’s resident pilot made it as good as his. Had Joshua not known this was all going down until the last minute or—?

Fuck. Wait. Was Joshua missing because this was all part of some cockamamie scheme of his to go fix this?

Shit, Staci did NOT want to entertain that thought because down that way madness lay. Because if Joshua wasn’t actually in danger, then they were wasting time. But if this wasn’t all part of some grand plan of Joshua’s, then Joshua was probably in really deep shit.

Staci didn’t know how to react or act on these possibilities.

Panic, or act like everything’s fine?

...in theory he should panic and act like there wasn’t the possibility that this was a plan of Joshua’s, because if he did act like there might be some reason to this madness, Joey would pick it up faster than a quickdraw sharp shooter could pull out a pistol.

And if Joey sussed out that, what the fuck was Staci supposed to tell her?

Oh yeah, our buddy is actually psychic and can see the future sometimes and does other weird mind-fuckery psychic-magic bullshit and it’s all legit and real. Funny old world, innit?
Fuck no he was NOT going to be the one who broke that particular bit of news to Joey and Whitehorse. Hell would freeze over first, because frankly, calling Joey a skeptic was putting it lightly.

She scoffed so hard at scandal rags and the like, and while she would say the possibility of aliens was not impossible, she definitely did not agree with Larry Parker on many things regarding space and extraterrestrials. Particularly with regards to Mars, evil AIs, or invasions of space crabs or other such fiddle faddle and rot.

Even if Larry had built some really fucking weird tech shit that did not make sense. But science wasn’t exactly any of their strong suits, to be fair. Certainly not the kind of science in Larry’s league, but Larry was also part of that brand of weird that flourished in Hope County. So fuck it, drink a beer, and forget it.

Panicking was definitely the plan then, because he was not gonna drop that truth bomb on Whitehorse and Joey. No.

Actually panicking was not a hard thing to do all in all, considering he really wasn’t genuinely certain Joshua was alright, and he also really genuinely didn’t want Joey to suss Staci’s insider knowledge out. She was in a bad mood and he did not want to be the focus of her scrutiny in a bad cop, good-cop’s-out-on-lunch-break routine with Whitehorse—Whitehorse would just fucking sit back and watch with that little amused twinkle in his eye as Joey grilled Staci like a Sunday barbecue rack of baby back ribs.

“I can’t find him,” Staci said just a tad bit breathless as he ran back to join Whitehorse and Joey where they had thankfully remained waiting for him under the crooked tree. And yep, Staci definitely sounded stressed because he was, and that was in his favor right now.

Joey’s mouth tightened at the news, and she glanced over immediately to the Sheriff. “Sheriff, we can’t leave him behind. We don’t know what those Peggies will do to him if they catch him on his own.”

Ahhhh Joey, always fired up to do the right thing when her temper was running hot.

Less so when pacified with food or drink as Danny had found out—it was almost funny how much more easygoing Joey would get about letting little things slide when she was well fed. Almost funny in a “never say that to her face unless she’s at least halfway done with her current meal” kind
of way.

Shit. That probably meant Joey was hangry now. A little bit like dealing with a grumpy bear just coming out of hibernation ready to eat the first meaty main course meal it came across—followed by just about anything else deemed edible.

Whitehorse knew that though. He knew all of his deputies real well, as he should, given that he was the Sheriff. It was a bit of a blessing that Whitehorse was the leader, he was the calmest one of the lot of them alongside Danny. It was that quality among others that had Staci pretty sure that Danny was going to be the successor to Whitehorse when Whitehorse retired—assuming retirement actually happened for any of them at this point.

Shit, they might die dealing with all this B.S.—nope. Do not think about that, just focus. Focus on Whitehorse, and what he’s saying.

“We also can’t spend too much time looking for him,” Whitehorse said, pulling out his cellphone, grimacing as he looked at the screen. “No signal here, and we’ve lost more time than I’d like already. The cult’s got the advantage on us in manpower, preparation, and mobility right now. We need intel on what they’re doing, when and how, and to call for backup. The six of us against the whole lot of them is not odds anyone should bet on.”

“Five,” Joey corrected, with a face as impassive as stone—her voice was more than bitter enough to make up for it however. “Nancy sold us out. I heard her talking to Joseph Seed over our own comms right after the crash. No one’s coming for us out here, or for Hope County until we get the call out ourselves, Sheriff.”

“Ah shit.” Was Whitehorse’s response to that welcome bit of news.

Staci agreed, to the fifth power of exponential exclamation points.

“Danny,” Staci said looking directly at Joey, and knowing from her expression she had thought of her partner too.

Danny was back at the station alone, manning it until they returned, with Nancy, a now known traitor at his back to them, but not known to Danny. Shit. What would Nancy tell Danny? What might she do?
SHIT. FUCK. Joshua was missing, but Danny was in clear danger, assuming the cult hadn’t already snatched him up.

This entire situation sucked balls, more so than it already had to begin with.

“Did you see any trace of Rook at all, Pratt?” Whitehorse asked, in that tone of voice that said *Pratt this is really important and crucial for making a decision*, and if that didn’t make Pratt’s stomach drop down to his toes then what would?

Fuck, this was going to decide if they went for Danny or looked for Joshua, wouldn’t it.

Shit. Shit shit shit.

Lie, or tell the truth?

...lying might get them to look for Joshua, *maybe* find him, if he was around here. God, Staci had no clue if Joshua was even nearby. If Joshua wasn’t, they’d screw over Danny for nothing. If he was though...shit.

Mental coin toss reasoning hour: Who was better at surviving on their own between Danny and Joshua, in Staci’s opinion?

Danny had his head on straight, was a crackshot, could run just about all of them into the ground, and was good at reasoning under pressure. Joshua was a super sneaky bastard who could out-quiet a motherfucking cat in a soundproof room, and he had that whole psychic wall-hack sight skill of his.

That had been one hell of a weird afternoon, and ultimately what had convinced Staci that Joshua wasn’t kidding around and hadn’t gone around the bend on him with all this psychic nonsense: they’d gone to locations of Staci’s choosing, and Staci had moved out of sight of Joshua and held up a number of fingers, behind various obstructions like walls, rocks, trees and the like.

Son of a gun if Joshua couldn’t call out exactly how many each time, on the dot, and could track Staci’s movements even when Staci was out of sight. That shit had been scary, if Staci was honest. Cool, but Goddamn scary. So, crazy weird skills to deal with crazy weird situations seemed a better fit...but on the other hand, Danny was a bit of a prepper in his own right, so, he was also crazy-
prepared, if not to the same extent as the more hardcore survivalists like Dutch or Eli.

Joshua also knew something about what was going on, even if the little shit hadn’t told Staci what was what until JUST before the Goddamn crash. HOW WAS HE SUPPOSED TO INTERROGATE HIS BEST FRIEND IF SAID FRIEND WASN’T HERE?

*Joshua you fuck, you better not have disappeared just to avoid answering questions or so help me I’m going to smack you upside the head when next I see you,* Staci thought silently to wherever his friend and colleague had gone off to.

Shit, Staci was probably hangry too now that he thought about it, swimming and being fucking freezing cold would do that to you.

Oh God damn it, they weren’t going to dry off before they headed back to town were they.

Fuck his life right now.

Well, truth was integrity and all that, so another plus in that column for choice of action. Joshua... hopefully would be okay. Joshua would be okay. He’d come back and join the rest of them, and he’d be okay.

“No, I went all the way back to the river bank and didn’t find any other tracks other than ours—I tried to cover them up somewhat but it was a slapdash job.”* Fuck all this, Staci hated this decision in its entirety. He hated the thought of leaving his friend behind, the feeling twisting and churning in an ugly way inside his gut in a sickening kind of anger and an already forming regret alongside the desire to dig his heels in and insist they look. He knew Joey and Whitehorse wouldn’t make this decision lightly, and that there was more at stake, but he hated it all the same. An additional little petty thing to hate: the thought that hiding the tracks might also hide it from Joshua if he stumbled across this area at some point after they’d gone. But, needs must, and the Peggies were a bona fide threat, so hiding the tracks had been the way to go. The tracks wouldn’t be TOO obvious hopefully, but a close look would probably tip off any competent tracker that something was afoot.

...shit he had no idea if Joshua was a competent tracker or not. Another thing he had to ask the other man when next they met. Right after he shook Joshua for being lost in the first place.

Whitehorse breathed out a sigh, lifting up his hat to run his hand over his still-wet hair—how the hat had managed to stick with him through all this madness was kind of a mystery in Staci’s
opinion. “Alright. We don’t know where Joshua is, or if he’s even on this side of the river. Either we split up to both search for Joshua and also go alert Danny along with the rest of Fall’s End, or the three of us all hightail it out of the woods back to town. I don’t think it’s safe for any of us to stick around here, or to split up, and I don’t think we can find Rook quickly enough to prevent possible trouble back in town.”

Shit, Staci knew how this was going to go, but he still wished it wouldn’t go this way, even if it was sensible. He knew Joey would want to object to it, and he did too pretty fucking obviously, but that was the thing about leadership—sometimes the choices just fucking sucked when you had to take the long view of it all.

“Let’s head back on the double, grab Danny, change clothes, get a discreet search party armed and out to look for Rook while the others work on establishing communication with reinforcements from outside the county.” Whitehorse continued, looking specifically at Joey to forestall any incoming disagreements. “That way we’re not chancing anyone else being caught alone in all this mess. We all clear on this?”

Joey held Whitehorse’s gaze for a long moment, clearly conflicted, and Staci just for that moment wished so hard that she would disagree, even though he knew better, and so did she. She dropped her eyes then and nodded, lips thinned.

“We should get going then,” Joey said, her reluctance as evident as day with how she wanted to dig her heels in on the matter.

Whitehorse inclined his head, not liking the decision anymore than the rest of them, but being Sheriff meant he did what had to be done. “Pratt, take point, keep it quiet and discreet.”

“Roger that, much as one can with wet shoes,” Staci said in as professional and not-quite-sullen a tone as he could manage, moving to head deeper into the woods before he stopped short and looked back at the other two. “...this is the right way back to Fall’s End, right?”

Joey tsked, which made Staci spread his hands and raise his shoulders in a defensive shrug. “What! I usually have a map or landmarks to go by! I’m not even sure exactly where along the Henbane we are!”

“Did you see the Holland Valley bridge?” Joey asked patiently.
“Yeah, it was about six clicks or so off in the distance, I think.” Staci said.

“More to your eleven o’clock then, Pratt.” Joey said.

Whitehorse just looked on patiently, knowing the two would sort themselves out quickest just by letting things flow naturally. It was a wonder Whitehorse was as composed as he was, despite the palpable tension running through all three of them. One could practically cut the tension through with a knife, like a slice off of a yule log cake at Christmas time.

“Alright, thanks Hudson.” Professional tersity time, last names all around, no more panicking or the like. Pratt took point, correcting his course, making time as quick as he could, as safely as he could, given the circumstances. Fuck he hoped this was the right decision. His conscience was going to eat him alive if he learned that Joshua died or some shit because of this.

Joshua you better be okay at the end of this, Staci said in silent reprimand to his missing friend.

There was no answer.

He hadn’t expected one. Would’ve been nice, but telepathy wasn’t on the list of crazy psychic skills Joshua had told him about.

Balls.

Joshua

Joshua sat up with a deep and ragged gasp, clutching at his chest with one hand as he struggled for breath. He leaned over, feeling sick and nauseous with his heart beating wildly inside his ribcage to the tune of get up get out you’re in danger you’re DYING as his hands skittered back and forth over his body, checking for injuries.

He knew he was fine. The shots hadn’t been real. But it had felt fucking real.
Why the fuck had there been a sniper—*Jacob*, his brain screamed because who else could it have been with that song haunting Joshua’s head, only Jacob, *only you*, growing louder and louder until Joshua fled almost blindly, running away from the *red-red-red-RED* ghostly outline he could spy through rock and tree and god damn FIRE at the end.

He hadn’t expected Jacob. His hands were shaking and cold, and he felt like he couldn’t breathe, despite the deep breaths he was dragging into his lungs.

And the fucking *plane* —AFFIRMATION. Like he wouldn’t fucking recognize John’s own personal aircraft.

**WHY THE F**CK WAS THE ENTIRE FAMILY OUT TO GET HIM IN THE BLISS? THE ONLY FUCKING ONE MISSING HAD BEEN JOSEPH FUCKING SEED HIMSELF, FUCKING SMALL MERCY THAT WAS.

**F**UCK FAITH AND THE GODDAMN BLISS, **F**UCK ALL OF THEM.

Had she known? Had she set him up? Had she siced her brothers on him? He wouldn’t put it past her. This entire fucking situation had been an absolute wreck from start to finish, and he still couldn’t entirely believe that she was letting him go.

With caveats, of course, and he had no doubt she was holding a knife over his head that he wasn’t aware of. Faith was too smart not to, and had far too much to lose if she didn’t have a back up plan to make sure she could swing the game whichever way favored her goals best.

He didn’t trust her, and Joshua had no doubt she didn’t trust him—it was an alliance of convenience and necessity...and honestly he was still not convinced she wouldn’t murder him if she felt it was the best course of action.

He had to figure out insurance against that, and to see if he could suss out what possible threat or kill switch or God knew what she might have over him. Almost definitely relating to the Bliss both as a drug and place, he was sure.

Speaking of the Bliss, everything was fucking sparkly. His head still hurt a bit from the effort he’d made to sway the cultists at the crash site, but less so for having slept...how many hours? He glanced around. The medical wing he was in was empty, thankfully, and also dark. No windows here, he’d have to move elsewhere to try to find a way out. The Bliss didn’t seem to make him high
right now like it had when Faith had ordered the nurse to give him another dose of the stuff, or whatever that state had been. A little too willing to talk, certainly. So it was a very welcome return to reality to not be feeling like he was just shambling about all peaceful-like without a care in the world...even if the Blissed out feeling had been kind of restful, in a sinking-into-a-soft-bed kind of way, like really deep, fresh snow without the bone-chilling cold. He could kind of see why the Peggies would enjoy it, but that was a troublesome line of thinking and he did not want to explore the idea of self medicating his problems with a brainwashing cult's mind melting drug. So, Bliss-sobriety was welcome, but he did wish the sparkles were less prevalent. It was like someone had thrown giant glitter chunks all over reality or something. Shit this sparkly stuff wasn't going to be permanent was it? Would it run out eventually over the short term?

He did not have time to be sitting thinking about this—but he did need a moment to collect himself. Focus, Joshua, focus, what do you need to do?

Get out of the facility undetected, as his primary goal. Did he have subgoals? Resources. What did he have, what could he steal, what would he need? Information. What could he find about the Project, his present location relative to the rest of Hope County, the going ons here at this facility, and what could he find out about his fellow officers?

It was a little strange that his outfit was completely dry, as was the rest of him—while that was nice, he was not going to think about the fact that this probably meant someone had undressed him, dried him off, and chucked his clothes and shoes into a dryer before clothing him again.

...oh GOD they probably knew about his tattoos then. That made him feel weird and way too exposed. They'd put his gloves back on at least, so that'd make hiding his hand tattoo a little bit easier, but shit, they'd know what to look for then, if they hadn't already.

The whole idea of someone undressing him while he was out cold, and that someone definitely being a member of the cult really didn't sit well with him. Granted, leaving someone to lie about in wet clothes while in a chemically induced coma was really not going to be a good idea unless the captors in question were trying to induce skin lesions and all those other terrible sorts of problems. They were a cult with a penchant for torture, so...it could happen. That wasn't really Faith's thing though as far as he knew—more Jacob's —so at least he didn't have to worry about trench foot or something like that. Still...he patted his chest, feeling just a tad uncomfortable that they knew that little bit more about him. Fuck they knew about his underwear preferences too then. That was just invasive, man. It was necessary and a normal hospital procedure he rationalized, so taking care of their patients—or prisoners—wasn't necessarily unusual...but admittedly it was a “captured and now being held at a cult clinic” situation, which had him wondering why there weren't restraints or cuffs. But then again, the Bliss was a pretty potent—and fucking weird, on top of bizarrely versatile—drug.

...Did they dress him back up in his own uniform for symbolic reasons, or something to that tune?
Easier to identify, certainly, if they needed more help with that.

He sniffed his clothes and his hair for a moment.

Huh. They’d washed him and his stuff up with soap. How nice. Weird, but nice to not smell of river water. Okay he at least had to give Faith credit for being a good captor-warden in that regard.

He had very mixed feelings about that. There was a tiny part of him that did actually hope that she did trust him to a reasonable extent—okay maybe not tiny, but he wasn’t going to admit that to anyone else other than his own self. It was easier not to be quite as worked up about everything, now that he wasn’t swamped with the immediate panic-rage of running for his life from a fucking .50 caliber sniper rifle and an aerial bombardment of bombs. INCENDIARY bombs.

What the fuck, John? Actually no, not what the fuck, Joshua knew exactly what the fuck was up with John—John was just as fucking extra as all the rest of the Seed family, and he had the money to afford the luxury of going overboard on his arsenal, alongside supplying Jacob’s people with all the weaponry their shriveled little black hearts could want.

At least Faith was more strictly theatrical-visuals with the Bliss most of the time—until the end where it escalates, do you remember all the dead bodies at the base of the Father’s statue?

...he appreciated her relative restraint, faint damning praise that might be. Or more specifically, the lack thereof when it came to restraining him in, say, a cage, or with rope and duct tape. Granted, she used a mind-obliterating drug, but she at least hadn’t obliterated his mind yet.

As far as Joshua knew, at least.

*She never was really very kind to her Angels, was she.*

Joshua rubbed his head, resting his elbows on his knees, mindful of the IV stuck in his arm, still trying to just focus on collecting himself a bit more. Shit, why did he like any of them?

*Because you’re fucking insane just like the rest of them, that’s why.*
No, he tried very hard to be a safe, sane, productive member of society, albeit with occasional illicit activities. Though as Sharky had put it, if you don’t get caught, it ain’t illegal.

In all fairness though, perhaps it was a bit much to expect that he wouldn’t have mixed feelings, given all the good and all the bad he’d seen of the Seeds in the years upon years he’d had full of dreams of their lives, their futures, and their deaths. Their deaths at his hands, specifically.

He’d deny such mixed feelings to any other so-called “sane” party, but he did have respect for just how ruthless and skilled Faith was, even if he didn’t agree with a lot of shit the cult was doing, including her own faction.

His breathing was a little more manageable and controlled now, and Joshua didn’t sound like he’d just run a marathon across burning fucking BLISS FIELDS, so that would help with sneaking out.

Before any sneaking could happen however, he was going to have to pull that damn catheter out of his arm—the IV drip bag was probably just a saline solution since the nurse had been dosing him directly with Bliss through the catheter port rather than just sticking it in the IV bag to drip into his veins. Was there something to stop the bleeding once he did pull it out though? Ah, a box of tissues by the bedside. Not a band-aid, but a wad of tissue paper would stop the bleeding well enough. He wadded up a clump of tissues, gritted his teeth, carefully pulled the catheter out and immediately pressed his pad of tissues onto the site firmly. It didn't hurt to pull catheters out, but having something stuck under his skin gave him the willies big time.

...they wouldn't have taken blood samples, would they? No, that was paranoid talk. What would they do with his blood anyway? Joshua peeked under the bloodied tissue wad to check if the bleeding had stopped yet—nope, just slowed. He pressed the wad back onto his elbow, trying to quash the sense of anxiety and impatience. It usually took a minute or two to stem the bleeding, and his inner elbow would be tender for another day or so after this—yet another reason he hated needles.

...now was it done bleeding? Another peek, and a few seconds' worth of staring, and Joshua concluded that yep, he could be about his merry way then. He rolled the now-bloody patch of tissue paper up into another bunch of protective layers of clean tissue and stuck it in his pocket.

He really didn't feel good about leaving anymore of his blood around than he needed to...even if Faith's staff had pretty much full access to his bodily supply.

Resource check though: Had they found all his squirreled away shit? His pockets were empty, as expected. No gun in the holster. They’d nicked his leg knife and sheath. His pouches and cases on
his belt were empty. He had his glasses at least, but they'd not deemed it worth the time to return his hat, the fuckers—no wait, it was on the bedside table. Thank God, it was a good hat that actually sat nicely and it would’ve sucked to lose it, tiny thing as that consideration was in all this mess of an apocalypse. His hair was down, but his hair tie was beside his hat—it was actually a bit soothing to pull his hair back into its usual ponytail, just a little bit of normalcy in what was definitely not a normal situation anymore, even for him. He put his hat back on after that and pulled his ponytail through the gap, feeling a bit more like himself after that.

Ah! Aha! They had missed his discreet little secret compartment on the inside of his belt—that was where he kept his lockpicks and the tiny flat vials of “homeopathic remedies” Tweak and Bo had taught him the recipes for. Just in case of emergencies like this one, really.

Joshua popped the cap off of the Ultimate Hunter mix Bo had shown him—Bo had sworn that had been the name of the recipe he'd been taught, and that he hadn't named it that himself—and swigged the contents of the one tiny vial down, wishing for a bit of water to wash down the taste. It had something like that weird spirulina and kale smoothie flavor that Xander insisted meant it was extra good for you. Joshua was thankfully accustomed to that range of flavor, but he really did prefer not to have his breath taste like... greenery in general at the moment, right after that Bliss adventure. Even if there wasn't any Bliss oil in this particular recipe.

It took a moment for the effects to kick in, but then everything lit up—specifically, the silhouettes of all the living things nearby. Huh. Surprisingly, not a whole lot of people on site, which was good for him since that meant less work. And...that was new. A weird little glowing point drew his eye, and Joshua stared at it in consternation. Was that a broken sparkle of the Bliss, or something? Perhaps it had missed the memo on how to...well, sparkle like a sparkle. It was stationary too, unlike all the rest of the visual mess that seemingly came with being Blissed.

Well. He was going to scout out the facility's resources anyway, so, might as well see if that was a sparkle that had an actual point in space, or if it was just a Bliss-equivalent of one of those eye-floaters in his vision.

...It felt like it had a tangible point in space, and was quite close, if feelings could give distance-estimates.

Yeah, Bliss effects were fucking weird.

He got up and tested his balance, taking a moment to center himself carefully since he was still a bit woozy from all of the excitement and exertion—and hungry, goddamn. He hoped there was food in this facility, surely there must be, right? He ran his tongue over the edge of his lips and grimaced a bit. His lips were dry—he'd have to go find a bottle of water and swig it all down, seemed like.
...shit wait, this was Faith's region, did he have to worry about there being Bliss in all the food and water? He'd avoided consuming food and water sourced from within the County in general for that very reason up til now—even though that wasn't terribly supportive of the local farmers, minor guilt as that was for the safety of avoiding cult-entanglement—but now that Faith and her lot had basically all up and fucked his system up on Bliss...did it matter?

And just what exactly had she done to him with that last dosage? It had sounded pretty ominous to hear her talk about it, but he only knew bits and pieces about the Bliss plane itself from his dreams and what Faith had said told him before. It'd been a fucked up choice either way—damned if you do, damned if you don't. But staying and remaining a helpless prisoner had definitely not been a viable option, at least not under Faith. With Jacob and John and their more traditional methods of containment, there might be chances for escape if things aligned as he foresaw and hoped they would. With the Bliss however? Ha, no. He couldn't do anything about being drugged out of his Goddamn mind. Faith was in her own way the most dangerous of the lot of them, which he had to give her props for. Being dangerous was something to be proud of in Hope County, considering not being dangerous was generally, well, dangerous—for one's own health, more so than others'.

He definitely didn't want to find out just how dangerous it might be for him to meet any of the other Seeds face to face. He did not want to think about what that might entail if they recognized him, and that scenario was just going to stay under his very clearly labeled “Do Not Do These Things Under Any Circumstances” list.

Skulking about the facility showed it to be a fairly ordinary and unremarkable cookie-cutter-office-interior style of building, and peeking into some of the nearby rooms showed a few doctor's offices, another wing full of cots, and some of the locked rooms were simply full of expensive-looking medical supplies and equipment that Joshua definitely had no business messing with without years of medical training. He did make a note of them though, studying them to try to be able to describe them later in case such things were something that might be needed. Such equipment could be high priority resource salvaging or sabotaging, if things came down to it...but the Resistance wouldn't have any doctors, aside from the one veterinarian Dr. Lindsey and the clinic's midwife.

How in the living hell were the disparate elements of the Resistance even thinking about winning, disorganized as they had been in what Joshua remembered of them in the possibilities that might be coming to fruition in the very near future.

*With a shit ton of murder, obviously. How else do people win wars when nobody's talking?*

Yeah, there was no way in hell the two sides would reconcile—Eden's Gate was busy “reaping” for the coming end times, and everyone outside the cult was a motley lot that wanted to go about
business as usual, whatever that business entailed. Pretty sure there wasn't much to reconcile there, given the two very clashing goals. Prophecies of the end times was no new thing, after all, and those who did believe in them either were on the train to crazyville, or were already a member of the population in crazyville, with the rest all understandably writing off the doomsday expectants as nuts.

So, actual possibly-real-prophecies of the end times were definitely not going to be a selling point to the skeptics and such outside of Eden's Gate, and...ha, no, no way was he going to be able to convince the cult to just...stop.

Joshua had thought about all this well before now many a time, and he still was not sure he could really do anything worthwhile that would help anyone...there was no way in hell he was pitching in with Eden's Gate, that was suicide and absolutely batshit. But helping the Resistance by doing what they wanted just brought about the end times, and ended with Joshua being the biggest serial killer in the entire county...except for maybe Jacob.

He wasn't sure what Jacob's actual kill count was...but going down the Resistance route would definitely put Joshua up there in competition with Jacob's tally, Joshua was sure. That much death definitely wouldn't do his brain any favors, he had enough PTSD from the dreams of other people's lives and the future possibilities of mass murder already.

It made him feel out of sorts just thinking about it, so he stopped that line of thinking, and chose to focus on his surroundings instead, counting the weave in the unremarkable, generic-looking carpeting that just seemed to fill offices everywhere in varying shades of bluish-gray, motley-gray, and other such related colors. He couldn't do that for very long, but counting up to fifty was enough to get his brain a little less out of focus and off the road to disassociation from the thought of—nope, don't think about it. He had shit to do, and spacing out was not on the itinerary right now. Focus.

Focus on that odd sparkle from before. That stationary sparkle had stayed right where it was in space, and as Joshua padded down the blandly-two-tone-painted hallways under the fluorescent lighting, he found himself growing more curious as he drew closer. It was a welcome distraction, and the few staff and Angels on site were far from this part of the clinic, thankfully, so he had free run of the halls. For now, at least. How long until another nurse checked in on him only to find Joshua gone? Time was ticking, he had to be far and away from here as soon as possible.

He peeked through another doorway and was cheered to find a recreational room with a small fridge in the room along with plenty of cupboards. That might mean food!

Hm, to eat Bliss-laced food or not? He hadn't decided on his answer to that question.
...it probably didn't matter anymore, and his stomach felt like it was trying to devour itself. Sneaking was quite a bit harder if one's stomach growled at the wrong moment, so might as well in this case. There was even a backpack left on the sofa here, maybe it'd have something useful in there! If not, the pack itself would be handy to have. And a first aid kit on the wall! Definitely taking that. Snooping about, the cupboards turned up dried prepackaged foods including ramen, rice, cereal, and granola bars along with some bags of candy, nuts and—pop tarts?? Hm. So much for living simply here at Eden's Gate. Guess they went shopping at the convenience and grocery stores same as everyone else when Joseph wasn't looking...or was Joseph alright with that? Junk food was definitely not what Joshua pictured as the breakfast of cultists, at least as far as the apparent public persona of the cult went. There were some small pots, utensils, and a little portable gas stove in one of the cupboards too. Nice. He'd want to grab some of those and take them with him, provided he could fit them into his new pack. The portable stove looked like it was just small enough to squeeze in so that the zipper wouldn't catch.

A look in the fridge showed a plastic-wrapped sandwich, a couple of sealed water bottles and sodas, a half-eaten container of potato salad, a vegetable wrap, and a slice of chocolate cake in a plastic clamshell container with a post-it note that read “REGGIE'S CAKE!!! DO NOT EAT!!!”—now normally, Joshua was not a fridge-raider in shared work spaces. That was a grievous offense that he would under normal circumstances never, ever commit against his fellow employees. But this was not his work space, and he was in a somewhat more dire situation. So he cleaned the fridge out, except for the sodas. They could have those, he needed hydration, not extra sugar...but he was still taking Reggie's cake. Because chocolate.

A check of the backpack showed it to be a change of definitely-cult-brand clothes, extra socks, a wallet with ID and cash in it, a bottle of sunscreen, a tiny bottle of what appeared to be Bliss oil, some chapstick, and a trashy romance novel judging by the picture of a pair of hands ripping open the laced up back of a corset on the cover and the title, “Jack the Bodice Ripper”. Joshua wasn't entirely sure if he was surprised by the title or not, given the cult's penchant for murder with a side of crazy. What editor let that title slip through? Granted, plenty of the Peggies were perfectly normal people who simply had been down on their luck and were now definitely mixed up with being part of a murderous cult, but there were definitely some loonies mixed in...not that the rest of Hope County could talk all that much. Pot, kettle, black.

He was just going to leave the chapstick, wallet, and the trashy romance novel on the sofa. No idea whose lips the chapstick had been on, the person might want the wallet and he had no use for it, and the trashy romance...yeah. No. Not touching that one. Everything else he was taking, along with the backpack. Joshua glanced up to check the movements of the staff and Angels, and satisfied that none of them were apparently headed towards discovering his escape-in-progress, proceeded to stuff his new backpack with dried foods, a pot, some utensils, the now-dismantled-for-safety's-sake portable gas stove, fitting it tetris-style alongside the first aid kit. The water bottles he stuffed into the sides and front pouches, taking care with how he squashed the pack just enough to zip it all shut without messing up any of his newly acquired food.

...he might have over packed a bit, but he was hungry. And hunger did tend to make him grabbier.
He hefted the pack, shoving a granola bar into his mouth to chew vigorously as he checked if his backpack made too much noise when shifted around a bit.

...Nope, quiet enough for government work. He swigged down the contents of one of the water bottles and tossed the granola wrapper and empty bottle into the recycling bin before skulking back out into the hall, shutting the door behind him.

Not much else to look at other than surveying what was at the clinic then, unless someone was keeping weapons about, which would be handy, given the level of enthusiasm that the local wildlife had for a good tussle. Could he find his own stuff or did they pitch it, Joshua wondered. Not that a handgun was going to be real handy here without a silencer, but better than nothing.

More medical equipment, looking more like science labs off of the crime serials on TV now, and hey, there was that pharmaceutical-storage room Faith had manipulated that one Angel in! Creepy. Yeah he was going to give this room a hard pass as one he didn't want to be looking at too closely right now. Information was good, but...he needed to stay not-creeped-out more right now. Maybe next time. Could steal some of the Bliss mixtures, but...yeah no, he could come back for that if he really felt the need for them in some circumstance or other.

That permanent sparkle was in the room at the end of the hall—said room was locked, curiously enough. Not for long, though! Aligning the pins and turning the lock without a catch on the first go was always a satisfying sensation, like watching a well-oiled machine at work—Joshua's thoughts came to a pause as he silently made an “ooo” face as the door swung open. It was definitely a lab, and it was also definitely a lab with guns in it. If those little racks of green-filled glass darts were what he thought they were, he just hit the jackpot.

Shit, he might have to give up some ramen real estate in his pack for this.

Drifting forward, he took one of the guns off the wall mounts to examine it more closely. It was an air rifle with a nice mounted scope on top. Just holding it put a grin on Joshua's face—he could already taste the sweet, sweet thrill of petty revenge for all the times he had been shot with a dart or arrow in his dreams. Admittedly that petty revenge was for things people hadn't done to him yet and if he had his way they wouldn't ever, but, you know. Sometimes you just needed to get in on the pre-vengeance game when you're plagued with visions of the future and one hundred thousand ways to suffer or die horribly. So Joshua was going to Bliss-dart as many cultists as he possibly could—where necessary, anyway.

He was going to have to make room in his pack for a lot of ammunition. No, wait, he should just
take what he could reasonably carry right now, because he could steal more of these from other cultists later. No need to be greedy right now.

Or at least that's what he said to himself as he went for another round of backpack tetris to fit as many of the cases of Bliss-filled darts as he could, along with a cleaning and general maintenance kit for his shiny new toy. He would need to get ahold of actual guns sooner rather than later though, Bliss-darts wouldn't do him much good against, say, an angry moose or bear he reckoned. Slinging his new air rifle over his shoulder, Joshua continued looking about the lab, but snooping about didn't turn up any useful information, such as dosage size for the darts. The ones he had were already filled, so he could just continue with replenishing them with the same amounts as they had presently, or test things out the old fashioned way by darting a bunch of cultists with increasing dosage sizes to see what was and was not effective for a given size and weight range.

...hm, maybe Tweak could offer insight to guessing that.

Ghosting about the rest of the facility, he didn't find much else of interest, though he did steal off with a roll of toilet paper from the bathroom. Because you could never go wrong with having some toilet paper on hand. Also tissues, paper towels, and a bottle of antibacterial soap and hand sanitizer wipes. Because fuck roughing it, civilization had its perks. The dry paper items he stuffed between his various implements to better muffle the sound of any rustling or clanking—the backpack was turning into a jungle in its own right full of odds and ends.

If it wasn't for the fact that Faith had more or less agreed to let him go, Joshua would've unscrewed the bathroom light bulbs and stuck them in a can under the rec room sink, along with squirreling away all the supply closet's extra bulbs. But she did, and this was her facility, so Joshua was going to behave...this time. He made no promises about future encounters since Faith's people had certainly done their fair share of screwing him over in the future-that-hadn't-happened-yet, and he was quite sure they were still going to be shooting at him regardless of his agreement with Faith.

...that was another thing he'd have to think over and unpack later, that whole Bliss conversation and agreement with her. How had he even managed to get her to agree to this? Damn. Squatting down behind a corner in the hall, he squinted at the seated silhouette of what he presumed was the nurse on duty. Or maybe they were the front desk secretary, he didn't know—just that they were seated in scrubs, apparently working on some paperwork. Peering down the corridor, it looked like it was the lobby they were in, not that Joshua could actually “see” the person in question in a direct line of sight presently. There were windows there at least, and he could see it was night outside still. Or, well, dark out—hopefully it was still the same night and he hadn't lost too much time in the Bliss with Faith.

...the Bliss sparkles sure did look pretty against the backdrop of the dark night outside.
FOCUS JOSHUA.

So. He either had to figure out how to sneak out the front way, or look around for a back way...aside from the fire escape door. That door was rigged to a fire alarm understandably, and he did not have his kit for dealing with circuitry and wiring on him right now. Or at least he assumed it was active—this was a somewhat old building, so it was possible the alarm was out...but Joshua didn't feel like testing that possibility. Not like this anyway.

There'd been a disturbing lack of windows in the facility all told, and that little absence, particularly of windows that were movable and big enough to get out through, was giving Joshua the heebie jeebies. He hated being trapped in enclosed spaces. Bigger was somewhat better, but he'd forever prefer having the option of the open air and sky overhead.

That wasn't at all brought about by visions of the end of the world and being stuck in a bunker ALONE with Joseph Seed for seven years, among other things. Nope.

So. Either test his new air rifle darts on the desk jockey, distract them, or wait for them to move.

...honestly he was tempted to wait for them to move and to eat his cake in the meantime, along with his other perishable foods.

...food won. It was likely warmer inside here anyway, rather than outside, so he probably should enjoy the comfort while he was here. Shit, he'd have to look and see if that person in the lobby had a coat hanging on something nearby when he swooeced on past.

In a fit of rebellion, Joshua chose to eat Reggie's cake first—he needed the pick me up of the chocolate after the stressful day he'd had. He moved father back to a quiet room with plenty of hiding space options, and closed the door before he dug out the plastic clamshell container with the cake little worse for wear after the tetris-ing it'd endured. Good enough to eat, certainly.

The first bite cheered him considerably to find out that it was good chocolate cake too, not the cheap sugar-with-brown-food-coloring sweetness level of the average grocery store cake sold by the slice. This was a proper bakery-made chocolate cake slice, with actual chocolate flavor in it, rather than being composed entirely of cane sugar in cake form!

He actually felt slightly bad about eating it now, poor Reggie. But not bad enough to not eat the
cake. The guilt would be soothed by the knowledge and justification that he needed the cake more than Reggie probably did.

Probably.

...he couldn't recycle the plastic clamshell container without going all the way back to the rec room. Was it worth it to trundle on all the way back there, and possibly miss an opportunity for an escape? No.

He still felt like he was letting the planet down by not recycling though.

*Don't do it Joshua, there's no tactical advantage to it.* He consoled himself by unwrapping the sandwich and biting into it. Ah, ham and cheese! With a nice coating of mayo and mustard too. The tomatoes were a bit on the mushy and tasteless side, so he pulled them out and left them in the wrapper. The lettuce and onions were alright though, adding a nice bit of crunch to the sandwich. The seed-speckled bread tasted like one of those healthy-alternative breads with fancy logos. It was alright, but it just seemed so conspicuously *healthy* despite the abundance of cheese. He half considered pulling a bit of the cheese out, but alas, no crackers or extra mustard to eat it with. So he left it in. It was really more of a cheese-with-ham sandwich, but beggars couldn't be choosers.

The figure at the desk still hadn't moved. That just gave Joshua time to debate whether he should eat the potato salad or not. Someone else had already started eating it, so...what if they were sick? Or had left it out longer than the suggested two hour time limit? Was he hungry enough to chance this?

...No. Upon consideration, and now that he had eaten enough to not be famished, he did not want to try eating the half-eaten potato salad. He'd probably regret that later, but that was what the rest of the food was for.

Then came the moment of temptation—return to the rec room to refrigerate the potato salad so some other poor soul could finish off that bit of food at least? It'd prevent food waste, and Joshua would then have the chance to recycle the now cake-less plastic container.

*Joshua, this is not a tactically difficult decision. Just leave the potato salad and the empty clam shell container in a drawer somewhere and wait for your chance.*

He was resisting he was resisting he was resisting—
...he could not resist the siren call of preventing food waste and recycling, damn if the world was ending or not. Was everyone still more or less in the same spot? Yep, the Angels were still cleaning that one room in the other wing, rather repetitively. The nurse at the desk was still pushing papers and filling out forms with the best of desk jockeys.

So Joshua hustled on back as quickly and quietly as he could manage to the rec room, depositing the empty cake container into the recycling bin and returning the potato salad back to its rightful place, exactly where he had found it in the fridge.

All this newly freed space in his pack now needed to be filled though. But the question was: Food, or ammunition? Joshua cringed at the question. Both important, both making his fingers itch to just grab them all up.

He'd have to compromise. This meant replacing the empty water bottle—the empty one of course went straight into the recycling bin—and grabbing a second unopened bottle, plus another two bricks of ramen, and then another three or maybe even four containers of Bliss darts.

So it was of course while Joshua was busy in the last stages of riveting backpack-tetris gameplay with the end goal of carefully fitting in his four newly acquired containers of Bliss darts without crushing his ramen packs, that the nurse manning the front desk finally decide to get up and stretch.

Shit.

That was Joshua's cue to zip his backpack up in a slight and definitely well-controlled frenzy as the nurse stood and reached up overhead to stretch out. Joshua was going to make it, he just had to shut the door really quietly—precious seconds spent making sure it was a quiet click, not a slam, but he had to cover his tracks—and zoom down the hallways as quick as he could without alerting anyone to his presence. Which meant a really fast scuttling tiptoe.

The nurse was walking now. That was good. The question was, to where? Possibly the bathroom—if that was so, Joshua was in the clear, provided he got out before the nurse did. Yes! The nurse was indeed headed to the nearest bathroom—unfortunately, that particular set of bathrooms was very close to the lobby, just a short ways down the hall from it.

*Please God let the nurse need to take a dump, and not just a quick piss.*
...nope, God was in a fickle mood today, the nurse was just in there to pee, judging by the standing-at-a-urinal pose the nurse was in.

*PLEASE GOD LET THE NURSE BE HYGIENIC AND WASH THEIR HANDS.*

For multiple reasons, not just time for sneaking out. It would be mildly disturbing if the nurse didn't, given that they were, you know, a nurse. He was pretty sure they would though.

Joshua was almost to the lobby! Almost!

The nurse was washing their hands now, thank you God, but also: shit shit shit. Joshua was tiptoe-running past the bathroom doors as quickly as he could, and it felt like his spine was ready to grow wings and simply fly up into the great unknown with how the hairs on the back of his neck were standing up.

He glanced over his shoulder as he rounded the desk—was there a coat? Yes there was, but it was in plain view behind the desk, take it? Leave it? Leave it, too obvious if it was missing, would cost too much time to grab it, just go—the nurse was just finishing up washing their hands, good, not good enough for time but it'd have to do.

Was the front door locked?

Oh thank God it wasn't. Joshua slipped right out on the door and shut it as quickly and quietly as the door would allow, before sprinting out of sight of the windows. The nurse was only a scant few seconds behind, exiting the bathroom as they dried their hands to return to the lobby. Joshua just...took a few seconds to breathe in the night air. It was definitely cold and he wished for that coat again rather fervently, but cold and free was better than warm and pursued.

Plus, he might be able to make off with a car, and that meant a heater, given the size of the parking lot. There was surprisingly more than just the one or two trucks scattered about he had expected. Obviously the ones near the door were a no-go due to being in direct line of sight of the nurse still inside the lobby. All of them were the standard cult-white truck with the black Eden's Gate cross logo emblazoned on the doors.

Shit they weren't the newer more high tech cars with the electronic locks and ignition were they? He hadn't actually paid that much attention to that particular detail in his dreams. Skirting along
the exterior of the building to the outer edge of the parking lot, Joshua squinted at the darkened interior of one of the trucks parked farthest from the clinic.

No, the truck did not look like it was a more modern model with higher grade tech, thank goodness. A quick peek into some of the other nearby trucks showed that they were pretty much all of the same or similar make. That meant their locks were easier to pick, and their ignitions easier to hot wire! Excellent.

Now the question was: Did he sabotage the other trucks and slash their tires?

...probably not, it was a clinic, they might have a medical emergency for someone that required transport, tempting as it was to wreck the cult's shit at any given opportunity. Plus he didn't have a knife on him at present, though one could always improvise. Such as just letting the air out of the tires. Not as effectively destructive as a proper puncture, but it was at least a bit of a hassle and would take longer to redress compared to the relatively low cost in investment time. Joshua seriously considered that option for a moment, but then circled right back to his original reasoning of not sabotaging the cars: it was a clinic and there might be medical emergencies that needed transportation. He'd just take the one car and call it done.

Less than a minute's work had him in, crouching down to gently pry off the section cover in order to expose the wires under the steering wheel. He peeked up at the clinic's front door, checking out the location of all the staff and Angels. Nothing out of the ordinary yet, good. The truck he was working on was farther away...but looking at the slight incline in front of it that led to the main road...he could make it farther maybe, before he started the engine. That might be far enough to make very sure that the nurse wasn't going to come out and check what he was up to. Time to do dumb-yet-smart things then.

Tossing his backpack into the passenger side seat, Joshua pulled the parking brake lever and braced himself against the interior frame of the truck cab, trying to get the vehicle moving just that little bit along to take to the incline. The pavement had a bit of a slope too, so thankfully the truck didn't need too much convincing to start coasting down slowly. He hopped into the cab and pulled the door shut soft enough that the lock didn't even catch. He'd fix that later. For now, he had to steer down and make sure the truck didn't get stuck in a ditch or something.

It mostly worked...he ended up rolling to a gentle stop a yard or so from the road, foot on the brakes to avoid rolling back and settling in the little dip in the grass. This was a good few yards farther, and lower...so here was hoping the nurse didn't notice.

A pull on the parking brake to set it back in place, and he slithered back out of the cab to crouch down to manhandle the wires. A quick rip and then a careful loop-de-loop while making sure not to electrocute himself, and the engine rumbled to life. After making sure the wires were tucked out
of accidental-zappy range he hopped in, closed the door properly, released the brake again and put the truck into gear to drive off, watching the clinic in the rear view mirror as he quickly tried to break line of sight with the trees lining the next part of the road. He couldn't see the silhouettes as well now, but he was reasonably certain the nurse hadn't moved. Or so he hoped.

Now where the fuck was he. The Henbane region obviously, but where??

Was he near the river still, or in a more southerly direction, or perhaps Faith had him brought more to the east? Navigating by the stars was not really his forte aside from orientation...but that would at least tell him if he was headed west, which would be good. Slowing the truck to a standstill, Joshua rolled down the window and leaned out to try to pick out the constellations. It was early fall, so Andromeda should be somewhere up there...yep, there she was, midway past the highpoint of the sky, alongside Cassiopeia. Damn, it must be late, or early. And there from Cassiopeia he found Polaris, the northern pole star and the tail end of the Little Bear constellation.

...okay it was late, and he was heading in a western direction then. Good.

Joshua leaned back in and closed the window, turning on the heat and the radio. Ah. Cult music. That was honestly one of the better aspects of Eden's Gate as far as marketing went, John definitely had done well to commission the songs. That had unsurprisingly been followed by John thereby recruiting the song-writer into the cult as town news went, of course. The road continued to bend this way and that, and Joshua continued to drive slowly— he considered stopping to swap his uniform for the long-sleeved cult shirt, but he honestly found that shirt to be pretty distasteful. If there was an immediate situational need for it, he'd slam it on real fast, but wearing it long term? No. Off-white was not his color.

...and now his brain was dredging up all the things he'd said to Faith, starting from the beginning. Joshua winced. He'd much rather go back to thinking about the horrible fashion choices of the average Peggie but shit, he actually did need to think about what he'd said to Faith and how much damage control he'd have to deal with. The idea that he might have to kill her after all flickered across his mind like a minnow in a sunlit stream, but he pushed it away to arms' length. He didn't want to kill her despite everything, and he didn't much care for that road at all, slippery slope that it was. One step would lead to two, and then three, and then everything would end bloody and red.

So nope. Not going down that way.

...shhhhhhhhhhhhhiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii, she'd seen that memory of him and the Father in the hospital when Joshua was a baby. Not the whole thing, but more than Joshua would've wanted to share in any case. Joshua was feeling nine kinds of fucked over at having that particular memory exposed unwillingly, along with having possibly laid bare what it meant to him and how much it hurt still, despite all the years between then and now, despite the fact that he didn't remember it from his
own too-young perspective in that time and place...he was also feeling a bit “she can do that?” at the realization that she had seen. Fuck. He hadn't foreseen that bit of information about the Bliss.

What did that mean for other things he didn't know about the Bliss?

Probably far too much for Joshua's comfort. That was a big old blind spot for him, and he didn't know how to inoculate against the Bliss either as a drug or the plane other than exposure, and that was definitely not a good idea. Faith and who knows who else was wandering about in the Bliss, like, say, the entire rest of the Seed family. And Burke.

Shit. Burke.

Joshua groaned a bit to himself. That was going to eat at him, leaving Burke to his fate.

...which probably meant he should go help the man.

But Burke was likely a hazard to his plans. And Burke would be relatively safe with Faith...shit he'd have to ask her about maybe not drowning the other man in Bliss too much...

...though having now actually experienced the Bliss first hand, he could see why the cult called it that, and why Burke wouldn't want to leave. It was actually pretty damn nice in the Bliss...which made Joshua feel that was all the more reason to avoid it—to him it felt like it was all too easy to get hooked on overusing the Bliss as a drug, and Joshua had more than enough problems as it was without a possible Bliss-dependency.

Then there was a soft, familiar laugh. “Aww, it's not that bad, now is it?” Faith asked, as if she was sitting right beside him.

Joshua glanced wide-eyed at the pack beside him, just to make sure it wasn't Faith...and even still right then and there he wasn't sure it wasn't, even if it didn't look it. Turning down the cult music radio he tentatively called out, “Faith?”

“Mmhm. Just checking in on how you're doing. Good job, getting out of the Bliss as readily as you did. I'm surprised you managed it with Jacob and John on your tail. Very impressive, and very dramatic timing.”
Well this was frankly very uncomfortable. He still wasn't sure how he'd exited the Bliss other than it felt like he'd died in a dream, which had felt far too real as far as the pain and blood had insisted, but maybe that was something he wouldn't tell Faith. At least, not right away. He wasn't sure where the line between caution and needing information on an area of her expertise was. “Uh. Thanks? I'm doing alright. Kind of lost on the road, but out of the clinic, with your staff none the wiser. Left them all as they were...though I cleaned out the fridge a bit. And snagged some other supplies I didn't think anyone would miss much.”

Joshua was very carefully trying not to think in words, but he definitely had an un-worded feeling along the lines of: COULD FAITH READ HIS MIND? That was a fucking scary thought which had him feeling like a spooked cat because there were things he did not want to let others know and Faith was all too capable of using that kind of information to her own ends, whatever her goals would ultimately end up being. Perhaps it was just hearing the worded thoughts he was thinking, like a radio broadcast through the Bliss? Shit he didn’t know enough to guess how it worked for Faith in this. Could Faith see what he saw, or what was around him? He didn't want to have to explain his other acquired goods, though she probably wouldn’t begrudge him the air rifle and ammunition given his intended goal. He didn’t want to explain the food either really but hell, maybe a bit of honesty might be enough for her not to ask, and if she didn’t ask, he wouldn't have to consider whether if it was better to tell the truth or lie.

“Poor Reggie, he always does complain about the other staff members or sometimes even the Angels eating his food, even if he leaves notes on his meals.” Faith's tone was sympathetic, but also faintly amused. “He'll blame it on them again, I imagine, even if he and the others notice that truck you're driving has gone missing. But, details. I'll see what I can do to divert their attention elsewhere—there's always more that needs to be done, especially now in the End Times. Speaking of...if you want to head to Holland Valley, you're going to want to take the right hand turn when you get to the fork in the road up ahead, just so you know.”

Yeah okay that was creepy as hell. He wasn't sure if she could see him or not, and if she could, was Faith simply overlooking his little theft of the air rifle and ammunition? She wasn’t talking about it, so he didn’t feel like bringing it up either...maybe it was plausible deniability or something for her. Either way, not knowing for sure what she did or did not know was really discomfiting.

Also well played in his opinion. He had to give her props for the power move and showing off her skills, because it was definitely unsettling. “Ah. Thank you, I uh, appreciate it. Also, do you mind me asking if you dropping in any old time is going to be something to keep an ear out for? Not to be ungrateful for the help and check in, just...that was a little bit spooky to hear your voice come out of thin air like that, not going to lie.”

That got him another little laugh from Faith. “Only when you're feeling the Bliss, Joshua. Right now, you have quite a lot running in your veins...so, keep an eye and ear out for me whenever you happen to cross paths with some of my flowers, or ingest some of the Bliss itself. You probably
won't hear much from me in John or Jacob's region...but you might see more of them over there, so be careful about that.”

The whole nice and helpful shtick was definitely unsettling after their fight in the Bliss. It was frankly giving Joshua emotional whiplash with how different Faith could choose to act, with how she could turn on a dime. Yeah they were...allies...sort of, but still. She really was a scary and capable lady, but that was no new revelation to Joshua. This was just driving home that particular point. It was also kind of weird to hear her calling him by his first name...was she angling for a familiarity tactic? Or, just calling him by his name because she knew it now? He wasn't sure. Could be either option.

And ooo, he remembers needling her a bit with questions about how she treated her Angels. That had been an ugly little part of the discussion right there. Honestly he was surprised she hadn't just lobotomized him right then and there to serve as an Angel. Thank Heaven for small mercies...maybe? He wasn't sure what this would all lead to, other than the hope for something better.

Oh. He just remembered another part of his dream-conversation with Faith.

UGH he'd sounded like Joseph in how he'd talked to her about loving herself back in the Bliss-dream. Fuck his life. There was a distinct need to scrub his brain clean with brain bleach—specifically alcohol—now. Joshua withheld a sigh. There was no time to get drunk in the near future it looked like, which really sucked.

Speaking of alcohol...shit, Sharky. Hurk. Staci. Joey. Earl. Danny. SHIT. He had to go figure out how to wrangle everyone to safety while hopefully not torching a whole slew of Angels. That never sat right with Joshua, even if they were lobotomized at this point...that dream of Sharky setting the Angels alight reminded him too much of the Cook in the Whitetails—and he knew death by fire was one of the worse ways to go.

He didn't manage to suppress his instinctive shiver at the thought.

“Ah. Okay then, good to know. Does that mean the sparkles will fade out eventually too? They're a little distracting to drive with, I have to say.”

“They will, until next time certainly. I'd say based on your height, weight, and dosage, you'll be seeing them for the rest of the night at the very least, if you choose to stay up instead of getting some shut eye between then and now.”
It was another little creepy sensation to know that Faith knew little inane details about him like his height—but hell, she probably guessed that much from seeing him in the Bliss, or maybe when she’d spied on him outside the church—still via Bliss—if constants like relative height were weird and inconsistent in the Bliss itself. Knowing his weight was still weird though. Regardless, he wouldn't be sleeping anytime soon, Joshua was certain. There was a little too much going on in general that did not really make room for sleeping in his immediate schedule, plus he felt okay, or he did right now at least.

Plus he had to go wake up and alert Boomer's family to get a move on and get out. Shit, he almost forgot in all the excitement. Shit shit shit. He hoped they were all still alive. Maybe John and Jacob wouldn't start their murder-reaping raids and all that until the morning?

It'd be so lucky if that were true. Joshua hoped so, at any rate.

...oh dear GOD he'd told her about Joseph killing him.

FUCK.

He was in a world of trouble. How would she use this information? Had he tipped the scales against his favor? Would she consider him more likely to be expendable?

THIS PROCESS OF HIS MEMORY COMING BACK FROM HIS FADE-TRIPPING IN BITS AND PIECES WAS HORRIBLY PAINFUL IN HIS REALIZATIONS OF THE MAGNITUDES OF HIS CARELESSNESS. Granted, being high on Bliss was being drugged, and thus one was in less control of themselves...but shit. He was in so much potential hot water with this, and he didn't know Faith as well as he would've liked in order to guess how she might take and use that information against him. He knew some things about her, but less so than the other Seeds, for better or worse.

“Ah, I'll be sure to drive extra-safe then. Thank you.” Joshua said. There was a slight pause, just long enough to be awkward, or maybe that was just him because this was a really uncomfortable situation for him to be in now. “So...how are you doing? Everything okay, despite John and Jacob showing up?”

He almost admitted to her that he hadn't known Jacob and John could do that. Almost. But that would've been yet one more slip he really shouldn't make. Or maybe she already figured as such. She did not need to know the limits of his capabilities or knowledge though, if he could help it. If
Faith knew those, she'd outgame him easily—she very well might still out do him, as is. Joshua was feeling pretty out of his depth right now.

Then the next bit of memory cropped up. Oh no he'd gone all mushy on her with telling her he believed that she was telling the truth. Fuck his life. But then maybe that would be to his advantage, if she trusted him a tiny bit more for that. Or maybe Faith would use that to pull the wool over his eyes all the more readily, who knew. Who knew, really.

“Mm, I'm alright, it all went as smoothly as I'd hoped. John was upset that you got away, Jacob too. But they suspect you aren't dead, and that alone has them interested, to say nothing about other little details regarding your performance in the Bliss. They'll be coming for you, you realize.”

Joshua winced at that. “Do they know it's me then? As in, one of the deputies, I presume they didn't get that close of a look at my face or there'd be problems.”

“They definitely know it's the gifted deputy that's eluded them, yes. As for your face, no, they haven't seen it yet. John will likely be the one to find you out first, through your records or something to that extent. He always has had a sharp nose for digging up secrets.” Her tone was amiable, like they were simply sitting down for a glass of sweet tea on the porch together in the middle of the day, conversing about the neighbors' going ons.

It was a little surreal, which was even more weird since they were definitely not in the Bliss right then. Faith being terribly helpful and informative certainly wasn't what Joshua had expected...it had him a little suspicious but at the same time, he kind of enjoyed hearing her talk. It was nice, in a “temporary ceasefire from trying to either convert or murder each other” kind of way. Or was it? He didn't know.

“Hm. Concerning, but I took precautions regarding the possibility of the cult digging up my files before now. Hopefully that'll be enough.”

“Mmhm. And Joshua? Just so you know in the future...singing in the Bliss might be a tell for your location, if I'm not there to limit the range. Some things, like certain actions, can ripple outwards over far greater distances than one might expect, particularly songs or words of importance.”

“Shit. Jacob heard me?” Joshua guessed, since Jacob was the one who'd arrived first...he couldn't imagine John calling in Jacob to hunt him down instead of just doing it himself with Affirmation already at hand.
“No, Joseph was the one who heard you earlier.”

That comment made Joshua's gut plummet like a stone, and he felt cold despite the heat radiating from the truck's heater system.

“Oh.”

“He has an ear for those laden with sorrow and doubt, as do I and my priestesses.”

“I see.” He’s not going to comment on the implications of that statement at all. Consider it denial, of a sort.

“You’re still concerned about what he might think of you?” Faith inquired.

Well. She already knew what Joseph had done, so... “More concerned what he might do, honestly. I don't know what he'd think of me.”

The words were out of his mouth before he'd thought about it thoroughly. Why the fuck was he being honest with her? Had he lost his mind? Or was it still an effect of the Bliss? Maybe he was just being an idiot again right in that moment. This was going to get him killed, he was sure of it.

Joshua also didn't know whether he was hoping for assurance or agreement from Faith here and now.

All she did then was hum, the tone somewhat sad, but acknowledging that she knew how he felt. That was an uncomfortable thing they had in common, not knowing what the Father thought of them. She had far more on the line than he did though what with her state of being well-entrenched in the cult's clutches...but then again, he wasn't sure how free of all this he was either, in the final reckoning of all things.

But Hell had followed the White Horse. The one that could not walk away.
He remembers those words in Joseph’s voice. That memory, and all the other memories tied to it through context and understanding, filled him with fear, and doubt. Maybe he was using those memories as an excuse to be here, to play hero and take advantage of the situation, even if he thought otherwise. Maybe if he’d tried harder to really get away, to not give in to the nonsensical, maddening need to go to Hope County...maybe that would've been the best choice.

But maybe that just meant he was weak.

*Or maybe you do have a role to play here in the end of all things after all.*

He did not like that thought. He disliked the memory of the fact that he had been openly sympathetic to Faith's—Rachel's?—predicament of being psychically bound to the Bliss even moreso. It showed too much, it showed weakness, and opportunity for Faith to exploit his behavior. He was monumentally sure it was a bad move on his part, drugged or not, and even if he did have that foolish little voice in the back of his head that said maybe it’d be okay to just try to trust her first, at least a little bit.

Oh God they'd hugged.

She must think him such an absolute sucker, which was just the sort of dumb ass she helped reel into the cult hook, line, and sinker on a day to day basis.

*What if she'd made that whole spiel up beforehand as a sob story to tell?*

No. No, he was not going to choose to doubt her, even if he was full of doubts and paranoia. Or technically well-founded fears, as paranoia was unreasonably-founded fears.

Oh GOD he'd given her a Dad-talk about murder and kidnapping and brainwashing. And lectured her on what made a cult a cult versus a mainstream religion.

OH GOD he'd come out to her in the most awkward way possible.

Maybe he should just drive into the Henbane and end it all now out of embarrassment. He wouldn't actually do that of course, but the thought had a certain allure to it.
...oh NO she'd laughed in the Bliss, and he'd laughed with her, and he remembered it now. Was that why she was being nice? Were they...were they friends? Frenemies? What was even going on in his life now. Was this a conversion effort on her part? It felt like it'd be in line with her usual modus operandi...but was there a possibility she wasn't doing that? Or maybe it was just a convenient path that could be any of those options depending on what suited her. That felt about right, it could be all of the above because this was Faith they were talking about.

His thoughts were momentarily put on pause when Faith spoke again.

“Do you have a plan for the immediate future as to what you're going to do?”

“Uh. Go get Boomer's family up and moving so they don't die. That's step one. Step two...think of something brilliant.” God he felt like Hurk right now. “Step three probably involves being a pain in John's keister while trying to get people out of cult snatching range? Maybe? Something to do with Fall's End, I imagine.”

“Hmm. Are you really sure interfering with bringing people in is wise, Joshua?” Oh dear Lord she could do the Mom-Disapproval voice.

“Well I mean, it's just to buy time to try to convince John to not torture people upon collection? Maybe? I don't know, we're negotiating the grey morality of kidnapping with intent to try to save people against their will here Faith, this is weird territory we're headed into.” Probably not actually weird, just not at all moral, but he didn't think outright condemnation would get anything other than a very angry Herald...and if he was honest he didn't entirely object to the “kidnap to save them from the oncoming apocalypse” plan that much. It was the murder, torture, and brainwashing that were the hangups, really. Along with maybe a couple of other points like obedience to the Father but what the hell, that was hardly a new thing compared to some other organizations in the world at large.

Oh no, he remembered going full on “hope for Hope County” on her like a character straight out of a Disney movie. He'd really run his mouth off in the Bliss, hadn't he.

“Hm. Well, so long as you're not actually trying to harm or kill Eden's Gate members...do try not to slow down the collection process too much, won't you? We still need to finish before the Collapse happens. We can't help people once it actually comes about, and we'll be out of time then.”

“I know, I know. But, well, do you think we'll have more time since we're trying not to break the seals?”
“I don’t know. One can hope, but I suspect that’s only a delay, Joshua, and I don’t think one can delay the end of the world for long. That’s beyond any one person.”

“Jacob and Joseph seem to think otherwise.” Joshua retorted. “Jacob seems to think I’m possibly the only one who can stop it.”

He wasn’t sure he believed that, honestly...but that did lead to a rather thoughtful pause from Faith right then. That had to be worth something, Joshua reckoned, he knew she and Jacob had more of a friendly relationship out of all of her ties to the various Seeds.

“...well I hope he’s right about you then, Joshua.”

“I hope so too.” Joshua was honest about that, even if the thought of actually having that much power was acutely terrifying in its own right. But hey, he’d wished for the power to determine his own life...guess this sort of counted. Sort of.

“You’ll be coming up in view of the river shortly, along with the check point on the far side of the bridge. You might want to consider alternative routes to cross, if you’re determined to go to Holland Valley Joshua. That police uniform is a bit of a give away that you’re not a member of Eden's Gate.” Faith's tone was wry as she said that last bit.

“Would wearing a cult shirt get me through the point without being too closely looked at?” Joshua inquired. He did still have that shirt in his pack that he’d swiped from the clinic earlier.

“Perhaps. They might still stop you to ask what business you have crossing the bridge at so late an hour.”

“Any suggestions for excuses that would fly well? ...actually what time is it,” Joshua said glancing at the clock. Three forty seven AM. “Do they have people guarding the bridge round the clock? That's devotion.”

“The faithful have practiced quite a long time for this day. Maintaining surveillance over the roads is a key point in maintaining control over an area. John and Jacob are quite particular with how they go about that.”
It went without saying that Faith was also quite particular what with her Bliss fields, the Angels, and the occasional speaker-laden truck that went zooming by playing cult music to attract Angels in its wake.

After a moment of thought, Faith added, “You might be able to get past the checkpoint by saying you're returning the truck while working the graveyard shift, and you're hoping to catch a ride on the early personnel shipment from Black Horse Mountain back to the Observatory. That would be a far enough drive to explain your early arrival, since the shipment should be starting down the road at seven AM.”

Hm. That sounded vaguely important, like maybe a prisoner caravan headed to the Henbane? Faith was being really helpful right now, he probably should check if that came with the expectation of not interfering with that particular shipment. Pulling off to the side of the road, he put the truck into park and went about digging into his pack for the shirt. “Alright. Uh, mind if I ask if that personnel shipment is a bunch of new converts or to-be-converted sorts?”

“Oh, I wouldn't ever dream of telling you to go interfere with John's operations, Joshua, that would be treasonous of me,” Faith said all too sweetly. “It'd make him look bad in Joseph's eyes, and they'd both be so terribly upset. It's quite a big shipment too, and lightly guarded, since John's relying on any resistance being too scattered and disorganized to do much about it so early on. It would surely get his attention if anything were to happen to it.”

Well if that wasn't a big old target painted in red on an objective, Joshua didn't know what was. “I see, I'll bear that in mind, Faith. Thank you.” He said, wriggling out of both his uniform and hat and into the cult off-brand white shirt. Thankfully, he did have a beard, so that would make it easier to blend in. “Hair down, glasses on?”

“Glasses off, they'd be memorable and distinctly out of place—they're not made in the style of eyewear the cult prefers for its members. And yes, hair down. Your profile's too recognizable with it up. Keep the gloves on too, it's cold enough to justify them.” Did that mean she knew about his tattoo? Probably. He also almost asked if that meant the cultists knew him on sight already. Almost. Then he remembered that he was practically the spitting image of Joseph, only younger and with some of those blending-together touches of influence from his mother's side. Derp. Admittedly having his hair down wouldn't help that much, but it was something.
“Okay, but just so you know, I am a bit more farsighted than really works well for casual conversation in my opinion.” His eyesight was honestly okay without glasses, but he really did prefer wearing them to keep things sharp and in focus when up close and personal. He particularly preferred to have his glasses on when it was fine details like subtle facial expressions or sudden and fast-moving surprises he had to focus on, like wild life running across the road—blobs of blurry color when you were driving along were not exactly the easiest thing to discern and understand, particularly brown blobs against brown-colored backgrounds, like, say, the woods. There were a LOT of trees and woodsy areas in Hope County.

“Make sure to drive safely then, Joshua.” Faith said, sounding amused. “It’d be a shame if you destroyed a piece of Eden's Gate property by accidentally driving into a pothole.”

“Ignoring all the destruction I've foreseen in various dreams including vehicular decimation, I'd like to state for the record I'm actually a really good driver.” Ignoring Faith's laughter, Joshua did take a really long look down what he could see of the road up ahead just to make sure he had an idea where the ditches were after he took his glasses off. Removing his hair tie, he fluffed out the now-freed hair, hoping it'd serve to curtain his face enough to hide his resemblance to you-know-who a bit better in the dark.

Faith chimed in then, as he put his foot back on the gas pedal and shifted gears out of park. “Are you ready to go? I won't be able to help you much once you cross the river, Joshua, so this will be goodbye for now.”

Oh. Well. He had...slightly mixed feelings about that? Relieved in that he wouldn't have a disembodied voice talking to him, but...he did admittedly enjoy having a bit of company right now, frenemies or otherwise. To be fair, she'd been good company once they were out of the Bliss so far, what with not trying to murder or lobotomize him anymore. At least for now.

This is when you realize you have set really low standards for social interactions with your cult-involved adoptive aunt, Joshua.

He knew, but, you know, dealing with a cult. Sometimes you had to adjust your standards a bit...or maybe he just never really had much in the way of standards to begin with. That was an uncomfortable train of thought and he really didn't feel like looking at that too closely right now.

“Yeah, ready as I'll ever be. Thanks for all the help, and I hope you have a good night Rachel.”
It was a little odd to use two names for her, but she'd said she was comfortable with both, so...maybe using both her names more would be a good thing? He wasn't sure. It felt like a bit of trust though, so maybe it helped her, or led her to feel less like a cult chess piece.

The little pause just before Faith answered seemed rather telling—he almost thought she'd “gone” already before she responded.

“I will. Good night, and good luck Joshua. Try to stay out of trouble now, and be good.”

“I will. Good night!” He waited a few seconds more, just letting the silence stretch out as he listened—as if there would be any audible tell to say if Faith was actually gone or not. That was the thing with disembodied—telepathic?—voices, you couldn't tell if they were actually gone or just being real quiet.

Joshua sighed then and started driving again, turning the radio back on for more cult music. He was getting too chummy with Faith without really addressing her various, well, crimes against humanity. Really though, he had to try to finagle the situation so she had the option to be less...uh, murder-y and immoral before they could address any of that, in his reckoning. Then they'd have to see if she would change. It seemed like she would, but you never really knew with people until they actually did change, and then you had to see if it actually stuck.

The bridge came into view, as did the large signs hanging from the cross beams overhead on it reading, “THE POWER OF YES.” Just in case he wasn't sure which Herald's region he was headed into, of course. The posters and the billboards scattered across the Holland Valley area also were...well, driving home the point of just how far out John was willing to go to put himself out there as the head of the cult's public relations department.

There was another sign that read “EDEN'S GATE TERRITORY” propped up against the front of a parked cult truck at the end of the bridge, along with a Peggie seated in the driver's seat. The other man got out as Joshua drove towards him, signaling for Joshua to stop. That AK-47 the man had resting in one hand certainly was reason enough to listen, if nothing else.

“Morning brother, what brings you down this old way to Holland Valley?” The man said as Joshua rolled down the passenger-side window. He was honestly a rather fuzzy blob that Joshua could tell was smiling, had long brown shaggy hair, and a beard. That was about it. He wouldn't be able to pick this one out of a lineup in the future with his glasses on or off if his life depended on it—particularly if that lineup was made entirely up from Peggies. So many of them had long hair and beards, it made one wonder if that was a cultivated group look they were going for or if the Project had simply failed to recruit a hair stylist after all this time.
...well, John probably—definitely—still got his hair styled, Joshua was sure. Maybe Jacob too, that wasn't a hairstyle you just grew out and forgot about like most of the rest of the Peggies' hairdos. But that was a thought for a different time and place.

“Good morning.” Joshua said, slapping on a friendly but not too-friendly grin. And this was not fucking morning, at least not until the sun was up, but he wasn't going to say that out loud. “I'm headed on up to Black Horse Mountain to drop off this here truck, morning treating you alright so far? Awful cold out.”

“Aye, that it is, but I got a nice thick sweater from my dear lady to keep me warm with,“ The man said with a hint of pride as he thumped his chest, indicating the thick brown knitted sweater he was sporting. “What about you though friend? It's awful early to be driving around just to deliver a truck.”

“Glad to hear her love's keeping you warm, brother. I'm working a graveyard shift, but you won't hear me disagreeing that it's too early.” Joshua said, and he really meant it. If he hadn't had that Bliss-induced sleep earlier he would've been hellishly cranky right about now with how much sleep he was missing out on. “I'm heading on up there at this hour to try to catch that personnel shipment from up yonder and ride it back down here. It ships out at seven am sharp, I'm told.”

Hopefully the guard would let him go at this point, since that was all Faith had told him at this point. Joshua probably could figure his way through any further conversation based on little day to day details of life in the Project that he'd seen in dreams, but if given a choice he'd really rather not.

“Ah I see.” the guard said, nodding his head understandingly. “And yeah, you'll make good time then to be going to meet up with them now, our brothers and sisters have got a watchful eye on the rest of the way on up there with all the roadblocks we've set up, so you should be alright. Drive safe now you hear?”

“Aye. Thank you brother, and keep warm out here!” Joshua waved the man farewell as the other waved back. Rolling back up the passenger-side window, Joshua drove on, watching in his rear view mirror as the the guard piled back into the other truck to ward off the night's chill air.

He breathed a sigh of relief then, before pulling out his glasses with one hand and sticking them back on. Fuck he missed them, even if he'd only been missing them for all of ten minutes. Being able to see clearly what was right in front of one's nose was an under-appreciated joy that he did not like to be without, having accidentally broken his glasses more than once throughout his childhood and having to either deal without them, or having to muddle along with what repairs he had been able to manage. There’d been one time when it’d been taped-up broken frames and some pretty big cracks through both lenses, that’d been an absolute shit show to deal with, during an absolutely shit time in his life. But that was then, not now.
Once he was well out of the view of the bridge and the friendly guard, he paused to switch shirts and tie his hair back up, settling his hat back into place once more. That felt better—the cult shirt was actually alright as far as the feel of the thread count and texture went, but he still found the whole “cultist mountain man” look rather off-putting on himself.

The rest of the drive to the pumpkin farm was rather uneventful, if mildly tense because he wasn’t sure where the roadblocks were. In retrospect he probably should’ve left the cult shirt on and just stuck his glasses back on to drive properly.

But he really didn’t like the look of that shirt. As far as he could see though, there weren’t any roadblocks or other cult trucks out on the span of road he was on, and Joshua was reasonably certain he was headed in the right direction to arrive at Rae Rae’s. He really hoped he was on the right road, because he was trying not to drive at a noticeably fast speed in case he was spotted by a Peggie or chanced upon a roadblock. At the unremarkable speed he was traveling at, it’d take the better part of half an hour or thereabouts to get from the bridge to Rae Rae’s farm, so there was that little bit of time pressure, even assuming he was headed in the right direction. Fuck, he’d have to intercept that delivery Faith had mentioned along the way, assuming he found it in time and could manage to actually rescue those folks successfully. Where would Rae Rae and her family go though? The list of places that were Peggie-free was remarkably thin if not nonexistent.

That was also assuming Faith and John weren't playing him with some sort of bait and switch by having Peggies disguising themselves as unwilling converts to infiltrate and root out the Resistance in that prisoner convoy.

...was that paranoid of him to think that? Joshua wasn't sure. It might be too much effort for Faith or John to undertake, really.

Plus it was also really more of a Jacob-style tactic...albeit with perhaps less murderous conditioning and more just general cult conditioning—for what the difference was worth, which might not be a lot in some cases, but in others...? Might be worth splitting that hair for some of the Peggies, at least.

Hm. Faith and John might actually do that then, they DID hang out with Jacob...and Faith had done that in a manner of speaking with Burke, in Joshua’s possible-future-dreams. That had been more Faith taking advantage of a moment of opportunity though, Joshua reckoned. John though?

Would John do that? ...hm, John might, he was clever and ruthless enough to do that. Or would that way of doing things not fit John’s personal sense of style? John was the more...ah, honest of the Seed Family Heralds. Perhaps a little too enthusiastically so. Or maybe forthright was the more
fitting term for John, ironic though that was given his past.

*Or maybe not so ironic.*

Terrifying definitely, but that was true of all the Seeds. They were all of them efficient too, for a descriptive word, in their own ways.

Speaking of efficiency, hopefully John wasn’t starting his raiding too early there, but it was getting real close to dawn hours, which would seem a more likely time frame to start at if John’s folks were early risers. It’d also make sense if most of the cultists in Holland Valley did keep farm rising hours, given how many of the local farms they owned or ran.

Jacob’s people of course probably just never slept. Or if they did, they did it with one eye open and in shifts.

It felt almost too good to be true to arrive at Rae Rae’s without a hitch, without another cultist encounter, and to see the farm looking quiet and peaceful without cult-graffiti all over it screaming SINNERS and REPENT in messy black ink alongside whatever sin of the day they felt like spelling out. Definitely no blood stains as far as he could see in the dim lighting of the night, and that absence along with the sudden perking up of a familiar canine head made Joshua smile.

Boomer barked, rising to his feet immediately as Joshua stopped a respectful distance up the driveway, piling out of the truck and making his way to the front door with a soft call to Boomer to try to calm the dog down. “Shhh, boy, just here to try to let your folks know they got to split before trouble hits.”

Boomer grumbled questioningly at him, watching him intently with another bark, ear pricked forward. In this lifetime, in this time, Boomer didn’t know him…and shit he still had Bo’s mix running in his veins—that Ultimate Hunter stuff *did* make predatory animals flee, so…Boomer might be smelling that on him. Brave dog wouldn’t flee from a grizzly though, and he wasn’t going to run from a strange smelling human either. All the more reason Boomer deserved a dog treat, if only Joshua had one. But alas, he did not. Some other time perhaps, if he could find dog treats conveniently during the Reaping of all times.

Joshua could hear people—and technically see them despite the walls in the way, since Bo’s mixture lasted a pretty long time—moving about in the house probably on account of hearing Boomer, and he knocked on the door before backing away from the steps, because it was a pretty horrible hour to be waking people up and they likely were expecting trouble if he recalled correctly.
Now if only the Bliss sparkles would wear off already—he could swear he saw a few Bliss flowers drifting through the air with them, but they vanished when he turned to look at them properly.

The door opened then, and Rae Rae stood there in a thin cotton t-shirt and pajama pants, squinting suspiciously with a rifle in hand trained on Joshua.

Joshua carefully put his hands up where they could be seen. He had expected about as much, not because of foresight but because this was Hope County, and everyone and their mothers—including Rae Rae—were armed to the teeth, especially with guns. He was really glad it was dark and he had his hat and glasses on, the odds of him being mistaken for Joseph Seed right now seemed unfortunately very high, be it right now or in the coming days especially. That might be more reason to keep wearing his uniform, in all honesty. “Morning Ms. Weaver, I'm deputy Rook from the Hope County Sheriff's Department, I'm unarmed, and I want to offer apologies for waking you up but it's urgent that you, Ryan and Boomer pack up and leave right now. Eden's Gate is coming down like a hammer and they're taking whatever they can get their mitts on, including people. And they're not being nice about it either, there's going to be bloodshed and a whole lot of it, I reckon.”

Rae Rae looked him over a few seconds as he spoke before lowering the muzzle of her gun, listening carefully. Boomer was quiet too, head tilted as he watched the two humans interact. “I appreciate the warning Deputy, but you'll pardon me for taking a moment to ask what are you doing driving a cult truck at this hour?” Rae Rae asked. Her gun was lowered, yes, but not entirely turned away just yet.

Might as well give her the rundown of what had happened, especially if she and Ryan managed to get connected with others in the Resistance then they could help spread the word as to what was going on. “We tried to carry out an arrest warrant for Joseph Seed with a U.S. Marshal on charges of kidnapping with intent to harm. It went badly, the Peggies took down our helicopter and tried to grab us. I think my fellow officers got away, but I'm not sure about the Marshal, he ran off early on in the chaos. I confiscated the truck to try to sneak past the Peggies guarding the roads, it's worked once so far, but they're out in force for something they're calling the “Reaping”, and from what I gather they're trying to grab as much in the way of supplies, people and whatever else they can get for their expected doomsday event.”

“Christ.” That was admittedly a bit much to hit anyone with at five o'clock in the morning, but Rae Rae looked like she was handling it relatively well, all things considered. He wasn't sure if she was a stay-and-fight sort though, he only knew of her, and precious little at that. Aside from her farm growing some real marvelous pumpkins and having a regional star like Boomer as part of her family, of course.
“I really feel I should insist on you and Ryan and Boomer packing up and leaving, ma'am.” Joshua said. “The Peggies are coming in heavily armed I'm sure, they had more than enough firepower to equip a small army with just what we saw around Joseph's church, and sure as shooting that wasn't all of it. Hell, they probably DO have a small army. Please tell me you're not going to try to fight it out on your own.”

Rae Rae clenched her teeth, looking down at the rifle in her hands, before she shook her head. “No. No, I know I'm not enough of an ornery sort to take on a pack of Peggies if they're gunning for blood. I've got Ryan to think about, and Boomer too. I don't know what they'd do to them if I...”

She didn't finish that sentence.

And Joshua refrained from any comment on speculation of what might happen, even if he knew what probably would happen if they stayed. Instead he said, “How soon can you three leave? Do you need help with anything? I don't know how much time we have, but the sooner we all leave the better, Ms. Weaver.”

Rae Rae took a deep breath and nodded, turning back into the house. “Just Rae Rae will do, if you please. I'd already had things packed for both Ryan and me, let me just pack up some of what's left in the fridge to take to go. Can you help with the bags?”

“As you like, and yeah, should I take it to the garage?” Joshua said, taking the steps two at a time to follow Rae Rae along, with Boomer ghosting along closely behind.

Rae Rae shook her head, blonde hair fanning out from the motion. “No, our truck's in the shop, can you give us a ride?”

“Of course. I don't know how safe Fall's End is going to be, I expect the Peggies to hit the town hard and fast.” Joshua grimaced at the thought. God he hoped Danny would be alright...he was real tempted to head there right away just to quell the anxiety of not knowing if the other officer was alright. But was that safe for Rae Rae, Ryan, and Boomer? Where was a safe place for Rae Rae and her family to go? Dutch's? ...he wasn't sure if he was “supposed” to know about Dutch's bunker, honestly, since the Peggies certainly didn't. So...probably shouldn't suggest that. Could he mention Dutch though? That might just lead Rae Rae to go hide out at Dutch's house, which wouldn't be any the safer than anywhere else in Holland Valley.

“Mom? What's going on?” Ryan stood in the doorway, wide eyed and awake, wearing a long sleeved shirt with a little cartoon tiger-astronaut piloting a rocket ship on the front along with matching pajama pants. “I heard Boomer barking.”
“Hey sweetie, this is Deputy Rook from the Sheriff's department.” Rae Rae said, kneeling down to gently stroke her son's hair, gun definitely safely pointed far away from him, resting upon the floor now as she gave the young boy's arm a reassuring squeeze. “He's here to help us pack up and move for a little while to somewhere safer. So go get dressed in something warm for now and get the bags that I told you to pack, okay?”

Ryan looked at the two of them and nodded wide-eyed, motioning to Boomer to follow him back into his room. Boomer complied, bumping close against Ryan's leg in reassurance as the two disappeared down the hallway.

“Brave lad.” Joshua said, feeling a pang of sympathy for the poor kid. His mom had prepared him for danger and emergency enough that the boy hadn't stopped to ask questions. He really had to get them somewhere safe, but where?

“He is, my poor boy. Come on then, the bags are over here, it's mostly just clothes and essentials and travel-food, I'll sort out the perishables and water that we can bring.” Rae Rae said, pointing to the closet across the way from them. “And thank you Deputy, I really do appreciate this. We all do.”

“Anytime ma'am,” Joshua said, putting on his most professional-public-servant demeanor as best he could. He started ferrying the bags outside, slinging them over the side to lay neatly in the bed of the truck.

Where to take them though?

...honestly, there was little to nowhere in Hope County that conflict didn't touch that he could think of, aside from right in the middle of the woods. And when you were in the middle of the woods, you still had to worry about the occasional random Peggies, wolverines, mountain lions, and all manner of other wild life just springing forth from the woodwork.

Shit. He hadn't thought this far, and that was definitely a flaw in his planning—honestly Joshua was flying by the seat of his pants at this point. He'd had a *general* idea of what he'd try to do, and it was going more or less according to plan so far, but...yeah he hadn't thought out the particulars of where he could find a good hiding place to serve as a safe house for refugees to stay at during all of this.

Granted, they could go stay in his hideout-slash-base, it was certainly safe enough, but... it'd be a
long drive, and he wouldn't be able to make the “personnel shipment” John was sending down. Shit. He couldn't send Rae Rae and her family alone out that way because it was a hideout for a reason—it was hidden, and not obvious to the naked eye.

…They'd also then would have to potentially deal with Larry and the various potential environmental hazards contained within the base. Wait, could he take Rae Rae and the others to Larry's old place? Oh wait no, the cultists would hit there too. Shit. He didn't like the idea of sending them to his base, since he was pretty sure that wouldn't go well if Joshua didn't give Larry a heads up ahead of time, which he hadn't really thought this plan out beyond building up said base. Even if they somehow managed to find his hideout with directions, and Larry somehow could be convinced to let them in sans Joshua being there to vouch for them and explain shit to Larry, Joshua was sure Larry probably would not think to point out all the dangerous equipment, experiments, and was more likely to weird out Rae Rae and Ryan with talk of aliens. Which wouldn't help anything, but that'd be the least of their problems. And then there were also the, uh, other illicit things that little kids should not be exposed to, like alcohol and weed. And various homeopathic remedies, ie drugs. Not hard drugs, but they still counted as drugs. He had not child-proofed that place...he probably should as soon as possible. Or at least parts of it. That brought to mind another place to rule out—the abandoned town of Prosperity. Tweak was alright company, but not someone you took home to meet the family, as it were. Well, normal family sorts. The Jones-family stereotypical kind of normal, not Hope County normal. Plus going there would definitely involve exposure to hard drugs if he sent the Weavers went to Prosperity. 100% NOT child friendly, at all. Plus there were the mannequins...yeah those were fucking creepy and one did not need to hear Tweak’s explanations regarding them. Said explanations just made it all...creepier. Nope, not a place for a child, at all. Or really anyone who wasn’t...uh...inclined to such activities already.

It probably did not speak well of Joshua that many of his friends were morally and lawfully questionable sorts.

Okay honesty hour: The majority of his friends in Hope County were comprised of the sort of folks who did not necessarily count as law abiding citizens. There were some normal ones in there...like Joey, Danny, Staci, and Earl. Xander was normal...but, uh, not a place to stash Rae Rae and her family—the Marina would be hit hard too, at least at first. There was also Larry. Larry was...Larry. Roommate, friend, and all around...well, mad scientist. It certainly made life interesting, but then life was never not interesting in these times. Though to be honest, Joshua wasn't sure which if any of Larry's experiments were legally permitted and which were not, and he...well, preferred not to ask.

Why had he become a cop again?

Ah yes. The whole “being plagued with dreams of the end of the world in which he had a direct hand in bringing about” part.
...that probably wasn't the worst reason to become a cop, really.

He was about done with the bags from the closet when Ryan came out carrying a backpack and a small duffle bag, all dressed for travel wearing a coat, jeans, and proper shoes, followed by Boomer at his heels.

“Hey kiddo. Is that everything, or do you have more to bring out?” Joshua said, holding out his hand to take the bags.

“No, that's everything.” Ryan said, sounding rather subdued as he handed the bags over. “...are we going to be okay?”

“I hope so,” Joshua said in all honesty, completely serious in his demeanor. “We'll do our best to make it so, me and your mom, and other folks all around, alright?”

Ryan nodded, and Joshua gave the poor lad a reassuring pat on the shoulder before turning to hoist the two bags into the bed of the truck along with the others.

Rae Rae came out then, carrying another small luggage bag, a plastic lunch bag, and her rifle slung over her back. “Here Ryan sweetie, take this, it's a bit of breakfast for us all and a few treats for Boomer. Hop on in the backseat and help yourself to a bite, and make sure not to feed Boomer any of the bread, you know how it makes him gassy.”

“Okay mom.” Ryan took the lunch bag as Joshua pulled open the passenger-side door and bent the seat forward, allowing Ryan to climb in.

Rae Rae looked to Boomer then, indicating the truck with a jut of her chin. “Go on boy, up into the car.”

Boomer whined a bit, circling a couple of times before hopping up into the back seat.

Resetting the passenger seat, Joshua looked over at Rae Rae. “Anything else? A dog crate for Boomer or such?”
Rae Rae nodded, handing him the small luggage bag—the bag had tiny dog faces printed on it, how cute. “Yeah, I'll go fetch that, and the other hand gun we have in the garage. Can we fit that bag in the front?”

“Yeah.”

“Alright, I'll be right back.” Rae Rae turned and went off to the dark building that served as her family's garage as Joshua went about the game of luggage tetris in the front, what with the dog-print bag, his new backpack, his air rifle, all while leaving the gear shift clear and enough room for Rae Rae to fit.

Boomer growled then. Joshua froze, head snapping up as he looked about, scanning.

Ryan picked up on the sudden alert from both Joshua and Boomer, craning his head to look about in the predawn darkness.

Lights on the road, coming from down south. That was probably not friendly—nope, he could see multiple lights now, and they were all from white trucks that looked a whole lot like the one Joshua was driving. So, probably cultists unless a bunch of Resistance-minded individuals had gone about pilfering Peggie trucks. Joshua shut the passenger door and ran around to hop back into the driver's seat, fumbling to put his seat belt on in a hurry as he turned to look over his shoulder to address Ryan, “Ryan we're going to go get your mom before we split, alright?”

Ryan nodded rapidly, looking a little bit like a bobble head with how wide his eyes were as he did so, hugging Boomer beside him real tight.

“Make sure you're wearing your seatbelt,” Joshua said as he shifted gears into drive and put his foot on the gas, causing the truck to lurch forward in a hurry towards the garage. He heard the click of the seat belt buckle snapping into place, along with Boomer barking in surprise as the truck moved, and mentally checked that off the list of important to-do's while driving—no point in foregoing safety practices particularly now of all times,
would make him blank out behind the wheel, he needed to focus. Do not think about the bad memories. Do not think about the bad memories. They haven't happened. He's driving, Ryan and Boomer were in the back, they're at the pumpkin farm, nothing is on fire, they're going to get Rae Rae, it'll all be fine.

Joshua wasn't fine, but he could pretend to be fine until it was safe to have a little panic attack later. He could do that. He could manage.

*Count the motherfucking pumpkins in passing if you need to, just stay calm, stay here in this moment, don't space out, don't space out. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, shit that pumpkin's big enough to be the Great Pumpkin*—

Leaning out of the driver side window as they drew near Joshua yelled to get Rae Rae's attention as the truck pitched to a stop, “Rae Rae! We got company! Get out here, we need to move!”

A span of a second later, Rae Rae bolted out the door and around the front of the truck, face pale with fright, carrying just her rifle and a handgun, along with a few haphazardly balanced boxes of ammo for the latter. The dog crate was nowhere in sight, left behind in the garage. As soon as Rae Rae was safely in the car, Joshua shifted into reverse as she slammed the door shut—

*Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound*...

He drove backwards at a more careful speed than he had going forward, so as not to cause Rae Rae to fall off balance. “Seat belt on, it's going to be a bumpy ride,” Joshua said to her as Rae Rae juggled the guns to fit them and herself in the compartment.

The trucks were getting closer. He could definitely see the Eden's Gate emblem painted on the side now, out there, and the glowing silhouettes of the Peggies inside—they were definitely more heavily armed than he or Rae Rae could take on in a straight fire fight.

He pulled the truck out of the driveway and turned it around, accidentally bumping the mailbox along the way as he put the vehicle into drive and hit the gas. “Sorry about that,” he said in distracted apology to Rae Rae and Ryan, moreso out of reflex than genuine thought, but still—mailbox.

Boomer was barking now, and Rae Rae leaned around to hush the dog as she buckled herself in. “Quiet now Boomer—Ryan, you alright?”
Ryan nodded, still holding on for dear life to his dog as Boomer craned his head back around to peek out the truck window with a grumbling whine, ears pricked.

The trucks in the distance were now picking up speed, as was Joshua because this was not going to end well if the Peggies caught up to them.

Shit, what could he do to keep the Peggies from shooting out the wheels, or any of them in the vehicle? Particularly him as the driver, that'd be a quick way to end the chase if the Peggies were on point with their marksmanship. Also a quick way to die, but who was counting?

He had to reflect, as they zoomed down the dirt road leaving a cloud of dust rising in their wake, that he had never in his waking life EVER driven this fast down country roads as he was now. It was kind of terrifying because the potholes and dips in the road came up a heck of a lot faster—obviously—than he was used to. His reaction times were a bit lacking at the moment for that, but he'd have to adjust. Or not, and send them all careening into a ditch with the truck overturned if they were really unlucky. Hopefully not. Don't think about it, Joshua, just focus on driving better at high speeds.

The turn off to the main road would be coming up soon. Should they go back to the bridge and to the Henbane region? Or turn left and keep going on the road to Black Horse Mountain? They could get to Fall's End, maybe it would help to get there now if the Peggies hadn't taken the town yet and warn some folks to get the hell out of dodge, at least for the initial invasion. But how many Peggies had been involved with taking the town hostage? He doubted it was just the few individuals he always remembered still being there on patrol in his dreams—plus the Goddamned airplane.

...shit, he hadn't considered how things might pan out differently with Danny alive instead of dead. Danny would be a fighter for sure, but would the cult be looking to take him alive like Mary May and Pastor Jerome, or would they just put a bullet through his head and be done with it?

The turn onto the main road arrived, and he turned left before he'd even thought about it thoroughly. The Henbane just didn't feel like a good option right now, he didn't know how that would stack up if he had to pull Faith into this mess—he was reasonably sure she'd have to be the dutiful Herald and try to catch him, but how serious an effort would that be?

How much effort would she need to apply really, with how infused with Bliss her part of the county was? And with how hyped up on Bliss his brain probably was right now. Actually, why wasn't he still just tripping and stoned out of his head even after waking up? ...granted, a lot of the cultists he remembered in his dreams as having those Bliss clouds around their heads seemed pretty
lucid. Was that something to do with that last dose she gave him? Either way, heading to the Henbane region right now didn't sound like that wasn't going to go well he reckoned.

They could go to the Lamb of God Church—shit, that might be a good idea, but wait. Was Grace there or not? If she wasn't, this was all for naught. If she was, she needed to have her sniper rifle plus ammunition to boot. Was Father Brian still there at this time? Surely he was. The Reaping was only just getting underway now, he might still be there, which could be bad, since Father Brian was rather old, and nowhere near as feisty as Pastor Jerome. It was a longer drive to the church compared to heading to Fall's End though.

Time for a gamble—and to check if the cult had blocked cell phone reception yet. “Rae Rae, do you have your cellphone on you?” Joshua asked, not taking his eyes off the road.

Rae Rae shoved her hands frantically into her pockets for a few seconds before pulling out her phone, tapping at the screen.

“...no signal!” Her tone betrayed her surprise, laced with panic as it was. This area was usually okay for signal so long as the weather wasn't too horrendous—so that probably meant the cult had already pulled the switch on that.

_Another thing to add to the to-do list, later: reactivate the bloody cellphone towers or figure out if they're jamming it or what._

The sound of gunfire along with the following ricochet of bullets off the side of the car made the thought of cell phone signals definitely low on the list. Glancing in the mirror revealed a cultist leaning out the passenger side of the car, trying to take aim at their vehicle.

*HE MISSED, HOW COULD HE MISS, WE'RE RIGHT IN FRONT OF HIM,* a part of Joshua's brain jabbered with a surprisingly indignant tone. He was grateful not to be shot and that the man had missed, but that _marksmanship_, good Heavens. Why weren’t they aiming for the tires?

Well, whatever the reason, the idea could occur to them at any moment, so it was definitely time to try to be a harder to hit, moving target. While also trying not to die or crash.

“Turning off road!” Joshua called out as a belated warning to the others in the truck as he swerved off the road through a clear portion of the trees to his left. He'd have to get back on the road soon with how the layout of the woods panned out in this stretch of the road, but maybe this would bait
the other trucks to follow him. If that happened, they'd at least have some temporary cover for a
minute or two. Better than nothing.

This was also counting on the cultists not being familiar with the woods as much as Joshua was
reasonably certain he himself was—primarily from dreams admittedly, but he had put in the hours
to have some real life wanderings around the County.

Shit he hoped he was remembering this part of the woods right.

If not they were going to be in real big trouble real soon—

*Burning trees falling all around them, birds scorched and dead tumbling down from the skies,
everything orange and turned to dust and ash—*

HE WAS REMEMBERING THE WOODS CORRECTLY not thinking about bad memories, he
took another swerve slightly deeper into the woods, keeping his eyes on the path ahead. “Rae Rae,
are they following us into the woods?”

“I think so,” Rae Rae called, craning her head back out the window just enough to see—and got
whacked lightly in passing with a pine tree bough. The sounds startled Joshua into turning to look
—NO don’t do that you know better—no injury though. He could also see Ryan and Boomer
bouncing in the back seat despite the former’s seat belt as the truck rocked suddenly over a sudden
swell in the hillside—SEE SEE YOU KNOW BETTER—causing Boomer to bark in alarm again.
Ryan quickly tried to get back to crouching down low and keeping Boomer low too, hopefully out
of the line of fire, panic clear upon his young face.

*We’re gonna die, we’re gonna die, WE’RE GONNA DIE—Joey’s panicking and screaming in the
back seat, Staci’s sobbing hysterically, Earl’s yelling to watch the road—he can’t breathe he can’t
breathe HE CAN’T BREATHE EVERYTHING IS BURNING THE AIR IS ON FIRE—*

The sudden shattering of Joshua's side mirror was way too close for comfort and startled him out of
the memory, breath sucked in sharply as he jumped in his seat, knuckles gripping the wheel tight
enough to drive the blood from his fingers. His heart was pounding harder than it had been before,
feeling like it was trying to burst out from his chest—

*Red red RED everywhere the blood the gore bodies strewn bodies hung gutted bleeding not moving
all dead they’re all dead—*
he was still here, he was still here, he needed to focus it was okay _NO IT WAS NOT_ it was not okay they were still alive he needed to drive. Focus. They hadn't shot Rae Rae during that one moment she'd peeked out, his brain supplied randomly as an observation. They needed to tip the scales in their favor. He'd try to fake out turning down a side road and bust back onto the main road around a patch of trees.

“We're going back on the road now, going to try to get around the bend and fake them out with looking like we're going down the side road—think you can shoot out a tire on the front car after we break line of sight with them around the turn Rae Rae?” Joshua said, swerving again, causing them all to list to the left as the truck veered back out of the trees and into the open.

“I'll try, I'm not that good of a shot though!” Rae Rae called back, smushed slightly against the door as she scrabbled to ready her rifle ahead of time.

“Try to hit it as many times as you can, but don't hang out of the window too long, escaping alive is more important than the shot,” Joshua said, teeth gritted a bit. He'd rather be the one doing the shooting here but he was driving. If Rae Rae failed the shot then well they'd hopefully still be alright but it was a long stretch of open road and easy line of sight for the trucks if she missed.

_Not okay not okay not okay HE WAS RIGHT! HE WAS FUCKING RIGHT! Staci’s screaming Earl’s yelling too no it’s not real it’s not here it’s not now not now not now NOT NOW._

Was it worth it to ask for the handgun and stopping the truck once they got around the bend and trying to add more bullets aiming at the front most pursuing truck's tires?

They'd lose ground if he did that. And a handgun wouldn't be that accurate at range compared to the rifle, not at all. Certainly not in this position but was it worth the gamble?

Fuck. He'd put his money on sticking with driving and hoping the cultists were not terribly smart about shooting out the wheels—or accurate enough to shoot them.

Were there fields or buildings he could detour around? Some barns along the way, but it'd lead to unworkable mountainside terrain, and the woods were largely too close together down that way for vehicles.

_Were there any closer residences they could use for cover? If it'd been pitch dark still then maybe,
but the dawn was coming on and as sneaky as Rook was, as sneaky as Boomer was, he couldn't account for Rae Rae and Ryan and their survival were part of the whole point of this hare-brained venture.

WHY WAS KEEPING TWO PEOPLE ALIVE SO DAMN DIFFICULT? IT WASN'T EVEN A MEDICAL EMERGENCY HE JUST WAS TRYING TO KEEP THEM FROM BEING SHOT DEAD.

“Bend coming up, pop your seat belt and be ready for it Rae Rae!” Joshua said, giving the other a few seconds warning before he spun the wheel, the back wheels skidding out in a lazy semi-circle before grabbing traction and rushing them forward again.

Rae Rae didn't even wait for the turn's inertia to ease off before she was scrambling to half-seat herself on the edge of the door frame, the whole of her upper body poking out through the window now as she brought her rifle to bear. It was an old-fashioned .45 caliber hunting rifle with lever action she was using, which meant she wouldn't have much time to take too many shots in their window of opportunity.

There was a few seconds' pause in which the world kept moving around them and Joshua held his breath waiting for the sound of the rifle, hoping, praying to God Rae Rae's aim was better than the cultists—

_Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen—_ Staci’s voice cuts through his memory for a moment before it shorts back out to Joshua’s own thoughts, he feels sick and disoriented like his blood is running too fast and too thin and he has to remind himself to breathe properly and focus on driving, focus on hoping that Rae Rae’s shots land.

_Or just let her be lucky enough to hit the tire at least the one time, please._

He heard her fire once, twice, thrice as the first pursuing truck slid into view, slowing down as the other driver tried to account for the abrupt turn in the road. Bullets flew back in response, making Joshua's heart climb into his throat as Rae Rae actually took a fourth shot before quickly slithering back into the flimsy safety of the truck cab.

_Ought to be at least one more shot in her rifle’s chamber_, his brain supplied as background chatter.
“I think I hit the front tire maybe once or twice from the side,” Rae Rae said as she started to reload, speaking in that trying-very-hard-not-to-sound-panicked voice people used in tense situations like this.

Thank you God and thank you Rae Rae, now hopefully this will actually work out in our favor and that other truck will cause a block in the road.

“If we're lucky they'll have a blow out or a flat soon at the speed we're going,” Joshua said, glancing at Rae Rae reflexively to check that she wasn't bleeding anywhere that he could see—DON'T LOOK AWAY FROM THE ROAD that's how accidents happen and everyone DIES—before fixing his eyes back on the road.

It wasn't like the trees were going to fall over any time soon and this portion of the road wasn't all that difficult to drive along, so said part of his brain trying to help keep him as calm as was possible in this situation—the road ahead was a big slow curve following a valley cut through the mountain peaks, down into the rolling hills of the farmland surrounding the town. Shit. Should they go for the dirt roads? They were twistier certainly than the main road...but would that be of help to them?

...actually wait shit, going to the Lamb of God Church might either be a really good idea or a really bad idea—good because it was relatively close to the turn off to Black Horse Mountain and John's Gate, bad because it was relatively close to the turn off to Black Horse Mountain and John's Gate. That could mean Peggies. A lot of Peggies. Reinforcements for the chase? Shit.

Speaking of Peggies, oh look, one of the previously mentioned roadblocks! That being two trucks parked across the road with orange traffic barrels stacked along them. Not made for swift traversal of the road—and that was two counts of parking violation that part of his brain was nattering away about, drumming up all the little details and check boxes he'd have to fill out on a parking citation concerning roadway obstruction for the both of those trucks. He actually quite welcomed that little train of thought, if only for the faint reminder of once-normalcy he’d had, not so long ago.

That would've been more his typical workload as a junior deputy aside from minding the detention block, along with helping with paperwork processing and shadowing some of the other more senior deputies and Sheriff Whitehorse about. Amidst the bullets flying about and in the middle of a high speed car chase, Joshua could safely say he missed even the more boring parts of office work now. That was no surprise of course—at that moment the front most pursuing truck's tire finally giving out and shredding wasn't either, but it was certainly welcome.

The Peggie-controlled truck veered from side to side before coming to a halt, partially obstructing the road behind it enough to slow the other two trucks down. This was good, it'd buy Joshua and his lot a few extra moments to gain ground.
The roadblock was coming up quickly though. That was bad. They most certainly heard the gunfire, which was also not good...not that Joshua could pass as a cultist while still in his police uniform and with Rae Rae’s family in the back. So even if he’d ever entertained the idea of trying to sneak by the rest roadblocks as he had by the bridge guard, that idea was most firmly thrown out the window at this point.

Time to drive off road just enough to try to squeeze on by the trucks then.

Fuck, what he'd do for some smoke grenades or even some better tear gas right now, just to lob out of his window as a distraction for the two cultists in the middle of the roadway in the hopes that they wouldn’t shoot as Joshua swerved to drive along the dirt shoulder.

There was another series of yells and staggered gunfire, and there went the windshield, with a big spider web crack crawling across it from one corner.

_Multiple charges of assault, intent to kidnap and harm, and assaulting a police officer,_ Joshua's brain rattled off in the back of his mind. Not helpful right now, really, but it kept him from panicking too much, so there was that.

“Everyone okay?” Joshua called as he veered back onto the road.

“I'm fine!” Rae Rae responded, clinging for dear life to the door handle—she hadn't put her seat belt back on. “Ryan?”

“I'm okay! Boomer's okay too!” Ryan answered.

That was good. The fact that they probably had to drive right by a bunch of other roadblocks which brought them way too close for comfort to Peggie guns? Not so good.

Would the Peggies radio ahead though? _Had_ the Peggies pursuing them called ahead before Joshua drove around the roadblock? Would the Peggies at the next one possibly shoot before he got even close to driving past them?

Hm, maybe it was time to take the dirt roads instead. There would be less Peggies and roadblocks
in particular on those roads, but the dirt roads wouldn't have as generous a shoulder to veer around obstacles, and how many Peggies would be on them right now? He didn't know.

Shit, it might be faster and safer to go to Fall's End at that point then. Or maybe Nick and Kim's place.

Then Joshua remembered that message from Mary May in his dreams of Dutch's bunker. That had been the morning after Dutch had pulled him from the river as he recalled. Shit. That would mean Fall's End was besieged now, or was about to be. But from what angle, what roads?

Shit they wouldn't just crash right into the back of a Peggie convoy of armed trucks if he took the side road, would they? This unfortunately was one of the many details he did not have access to from his dreams, as nice as that would be at the moment.

What he wouldn't do for Nick manning the skies overhead right now to do some aerial reconnaissance—with some cover fire too, though that would involve some death, naturally.

Would it really be much of a loss for these Peggies in particular to die though? They willingly shot both Rae Rae and Ryan, despite Ryan being “marked” by John's lot in those future-dreams where I didn't intervene.

It'd be easy to kill them if he could just plant Rae Rae, Boomer and Ryan out of sight for a bit and borrow one of the guns. The temptation was real, and it felt like an escape from fear to a security of knowing a threat was gone for good.

But it wouldn't be good, would it.

He didn't know what else to do in answer to that feeling, that feeling of fear laced with despair in the narrowing tunnel-vision of the desire to survive. He didn't want to kill if he could help it. Could he help it though? Could he help it at all? It would be too easy, and the next time after that all the more easier, until everything was red red RED and burning in the fires of nuclear fallout again.

So Joshua prayed.

Heavenly Father, I believe that no temptation comes to any of us that is not common to all men and that by Your grace, You will always provide an escape from temptation. Your Word promises that I
will not be tempted beyond what I can bear. Help me not to be tempted and give me the eyes to see and grasp hold of the escapes from temptation that You, in Your grace offer me.

Amen.

He didn't know if he counted as a faithful worshiper of God, or even a believer. The word “faith” meant strange nebulous and undefined things to him, when it wasn't Faith the sister of the Seeds being spoken of.

He hoped perhaps that there was a God, and that He, or She, or They were good, and caring, and not as cruel or capricious as humans could be, as some stories or interpretations made Them out to be. He couldn't make sense of all the things people believed, religious or not, and his knowledge of religion was paltry at best.

But he hoped.

But was violence natural? Yes, as was death. Death was built in all throughout the web of life—animals, plants, all different sorts of life had variations that killed and preyed upon others, ending lives.

But not like this. Not to this extent. Joshua did not want to kill—but could he still protect Rae Rae, Ryan and Boomer if he didn't? Could he protect anyone if he refrained?

He didn't know.

Joshua knew that he could protect no one though if he did kill as often and as freely as he had in his dreams of once-future times that were now upon them. But if he killed with restraint?

It hurt his soul to think of it, like a crack in the dam of his ironclad control that held back the rage, —the Wrath —the fear, the thrill.

The joy.

There was another roadblock in the distance down the main road, just in front of the turn off for the
way leading to the Reservoir Construction Yard—ugh, that was an ugly series of road swerving to do at high speeds, but it wasn't like he had to drive with the damn truck on fire. Sharky would either be so proud or so disappointed when Joshua told him about this later, and damn if this didn't bring back memories he was happy to use as a cover up of the mental weighing of pros and cons regarding killing Peggies.

How they'd managed to survive doing that the one time they'd been drunk enough to think it was a good idea to take turns recreating the Flaming Baptism, he'd never know. The car had actually blown up just a smidge when Sharky had taken a go at it, and somehow that pyromaniac—emphasis on maniac—had walked away without so much as a scratch or a single singed beard hair. Fucking jaw dropping, that.

“Going off road again, try to provide some cover fire Rae Rae, just keep em busy and ducking, and don't put yourself in danger if you can help it,” Joshua said as they rapidly approached the next roadblock.

Carefully stuffing her rifle with the safety on down by her feet, Rae Rae instead took out the handgun and switched the safety on that to off, bracing herself with a sharp inhale as the truck ran off the road around the parked matching Peggie trucks. Staying in the truck cab this time, Rae Rae fired off several shots as they zoomed past the startled Peggies,—ah the Peggies didn't radio ahead then—scattering them all into taking cover. Apparently the more distant gunshots and the cracked windshield didn't tip this lot off to the car chase just yet. That was fine, it made their attempted escape all the easier. Glancing in the mirror, he could see the two Peggies' silhouettes behind the most recent roadblock and was pleased to see they weren't dead or apparently dying, but also still a bit conflicted about feeling that way about Peggies in general.

Too messy an emotional tangle to sort out and think about in a high speed car chase. Or maybe ever, if he could get away with that.

“I hope you have your seat belt on Rae Rae!” Joshua called again, having a fleeting feeling of being a little bit of a worrywart, but this was a reasonable situation to be worrying in, in his opinion.

They zigged and zagged down the S-shaped curve of the road leading to the construction yard so much that Joshua was suddenly glad he hadn't eaten too recently. The drive from the Henbane had been long enough that his little munching at the clinic wasn't even trying to put forward the thought of threatening to come up from all the leaning they were doing from one side to the other, thankfully.

As they cleared the last bend, the construction yard's main building came into view. Judging by how empty the area was around it—namely, the very conspicuous lack of bright avocado-
smoothie-green Bliss containers among other things—it looked like the cult hadn't started stockpiling supplies around the place yet. That was good because that meant there would hopefully not be many Peggies down this way.

That was what Joshua thought until they were coming around the side of the building and got a clear view of the Peggie trucks driving up from the opposite direction, loaded with the previously-absent supplies and there upon one truck was a mounted gun.

*Well fuck me five ways till Sunday for not knocking on wood when I thought there'd be less Peggies.*

The road coming up was too narrow for them to easily avoid possible blocks by the upcoming trucks if the Peggies were at all on the ball with figuring out Joshua's truck was fleeing and harboring fugitives from the whole Reaping business currently going on.

That left one option.

Shit. Sharky would be so proud. That probably was not necessarily a good thing.

“Rae Rae, roll up the window!” Joshua said, sounding just a tad urgent and possibly panicked, double checking that his window was rolled up. “Ryan, make sure your windows and the back are closed! There's going to be fire!”

“What!” Even if Rae Rae hadn't given voice to her surprise and horror in that single exclamation, Joshua probably would've still felt it just from the look she was giving him.

Ryan in the meanwhile was checking and double checking the windows very, very carefully—as much as he could in a fast-moving vehicle that was driving over uneven dirt roads—to make sure no fire would be getting into the cab from the back. Boomer's fur would just not be the same, even with all the black and grey in it.

“I'll try to avoid the fires as much as possible but hold onto your seats and say a Hail Mary for us,” Joshua said as he drove them right into the Clutch Nixon Flaming Baptism course—cross country, he was most certainly not following the road down unless he had to, given the regular bouts of flame and lighter fluid set up at regular intervals. He did try to avoid the triggers for the jets of flammable substances and accompanying flames, but with how the trees were laid out between the curves of the road, there were a few trigger plates he couldn't avoid.
So the truck was on fire now. Just the hood and sides, and they were all safe so far inside the cab, but this did have the problem of would the engine blow up if the flames and the lighter fluid had in the most unlucky of scenarios managed to leak into some part of the engine block that was near a gas line or something?

*Just what I always wanted to do, drive a flaming bomb with civilians along for the ride. Not.*

Joshua might have been panicking a bit more in his head than he would ever want to admit to. This was a more workable panic than before though. He could deal with this.

On the plus side though, the Peggie trucks pursuing them were also on fire.

It was kind of cool to be driving a truck while it was on fire, he had to give Sharky that even while Joshua was most certainly stone cold sober—though he was technically sort of really fucking high on Bliss still but his mental comprehension was inexplicably clear enough that no one would know that fact just by looking at him or talking to him—but he also had to say: this was TERRIBLE AND EVERYTHING WAS ON FIRE NOW.

No one was dead as of yet, so that was two for two of his experiences being relatively positive in actual real life instances of driving cars while said car was on fire. He did not unfortunately have an accurate number as to how many times that was unfortunately not the case in his dreams though.

*Speaking of fire, what was with the Bliss being on fire when Faith upped the dosage?* There went Joshua's brain thinking of irrelevant things at inopportune times again. It was an interesting thought, but not one he really needed or could afford to pay attention to while he was sending the truck up and over the edge of the road in a graceful, flaming arc into the rough off-road terrain that separated the Clutch Nixon stunt course and the dirt road leading past Red's Farm Supply.

Oh look, it was the main road again! And hey, that was *another* roadblock full of startled Peggies they were zooming past to continue a little ways down the main road, before they veered off onto yet another dirt road to try to head to Fall's End.

...was that more trucks behind them than before out in the distance? Or was it just some other Peggie trucks milling about in confusion from all this zigzag chasing?

“Rae Rae can you check how many trucks are tailing us for me?” Joshua asked, glancing in the
rear view mirror briefly and then shifting his focus back to the road ahead of them.

Rae Rae craned her head around for a long moment, before answering, “Less than half a dozen, I think. Not sure about one of them, so maybe five?”

Ah. So, they'd picked up another two or so. Well...that wasn't too bad. Still bad, but, they could manage...somehow.

“One of them has a mounted gun in the back of the truck, he's trying to aim for us Deputy,” Rae Rae added in warning.

Oh. Well goody goody gumdrops, their day was just getting better and better!

“Terrain's too rough to drive off without—” don't swear in front of the kid Joshua, his brain reminded him, “—getting our lunch eaten by our Peggie pursuers. We have to make the bridges or they're going to be reeling us in like a tether ball.”

It was at this point that Joshua realized that his usual fear response was getting a bit burned out from all this adrenal stimulation, and he was starting to feel real inclined towards fight over flight.

In retrospect, he should've taken the more eastern road rather than the western road—the western one did get them to Fall's End swifter, but the other way would've given them more room to improvise their course off-road.

Looking up ahead however revealed a rather large number of iconic and familiar Peggie-white trucks cluttering up the main road in Fall's End. There were more than enough of them to be easily seen from this distance, and suddenly, going to Fall's End at this particular moment felt like a capital Bad Idea.

So Joshua abruptly swerved them back to the left, which caused all the other passengers in the truck to cry out—or bark—in surprise. “Sorry! Too many Peggie trucks in Fall's End, we'll try for the Lamb of God Church, I doubt they'll have much to draw them there.”

Aside from the graves of the veterans and John’s preferred little baptismal scene by the river, of course. But if they were lucky—which they admittedly had not been, in some reckonings—Grace would be there to provide cover fire. If not, well.
He'd have to wing it with Plan B: Figure out how to hide Rae Rae and her family quickly while not getting them shot by the Peggies, then take care of the Peggies, and hope no one dies.

Sound plan. Could use some work on the details, but it was what it was.

This was all assuming he didn't get them all killed or total the truck while driving over bumpy hillsides between way too many trees. Wait, if they went along the main road, they still had to deal with roadblocks, and it'd take them past a couple of hot spots for cultist gatherings, namely US Auto and the Davenport Farm. Davenport wasn't too big of a concern...but he rather suspected the Peggies might be a bit more on the heavily massed and heavily armed side of things at US Auto if they were busy working on building the Revelator right now, which Joshua reckoned they were. Probably.

...yeah no, taking the back roads past Larry's old place and then swinging past Grace's home might be better—should they stop to check if Grace was there? That might be the best option now that he'd thought of it.

Actually, how did she learn about the Peggies attacking the veterans' graves at the church?

Did that mean she was more likely to be at the church as he'd originally guessed—

At that moment though, Joshua found himself...done. Just done with all this worrying because fuck all this, he was going to the Lamb of God church, and fuck the roads, fuck the Peggies, fuck it all, he was driving cross country even if it meant a rougher ride and a higher likelihood of accidents.

The Peggies could try to follow him all they wanted, he was just going to go from point A, to point B, and if something was in the way, either he'd go around or possibly run it over. There was still a tiny voice in his head that objected to the “running over” part of the plan, but he was...tired. And cranky now. Burnt out definitely.

Apparently he wasn't well-rested from his little nap in the dirt and then later on in Faith's care so much as he'd been running on adrenaline. Or maybe this had been his second wind. Could also be that coming down from all the Bliss and Bo's concoction was hitting a bit harder than he'd counted on, on top of all that.

“Heads up, we're just going to be riding rough for a bit going across the fields, might be running
over a fence or two.” He said.

And maybe a cow, given the number of them in the field directly ahead.

No, you are not going to run over a cow if you can help it, Joshua scolded himself, we do not need to kill a cow to get away safely right now. Nor do we have the time to deal with the very likely possibility that it'd turn the truck over.

Aside from the cows who were wisely running away from the speeding trucks, there was definitely a bull that was looking to mix it up with their truck by charging in from the side—not fast enough to hit them once Joshua veered farther out of the bull's path to avoid the collision, thankfully.

A somewhat happy surprise followed then. The bull continued running, looping around before coming in at a sharper angle to ram into the leftmost Peggie-controlled truck with a loud CRUNCH of dented metal, causing the whole thing to sway enough to tilt dangerously far up onto the right side tires, ending with the truck in question hurling forward and crashing into its side.

“The bull got the Peggie!” Ryan yelled from the backseat—he'd craned his neck around to watch the whole affair.

And the bull was still going. Score one for the bull, damn.

This was why Joshua never cut across pastures on foot, he didn't want to have to deal with a beefy, walking forklift with a bad attitude.

That whole mess also got at least one of the other pursuing trucks to peel off to circle around and make sure their fellows were okay. As luck would have it, it was the truck with the mounted gun. Even better!

This morning was actually taking a turn for slightly better rather than absolutely terrible!

Well...not entirely terrible. He did have granola and ramen.

Back on another dirt road leading away from Fall's End, and there went Larry's old house, looking
rather forlorn without the resident mad scientist building a teleporter or a Faraday cage or some other more fringe-science project-of-the-month outside of it. All the better right now that Larry was back at base really, it wasn't as defensible spot as Joshua cared for. Too easy to sneak up on people through all the underbrush and thick woods surrounding the property.

Another volley of gunshots went off from behind them, followed by the crack of glass and the tinkling sound of scattered fragments, and a surprised bark from Boomer. A bullet had left its regards in a small splintered hole with long winding cracks radiating out from it.

“Ryan? Ryan! Are you alright?” Rae Rae called back, trying to look her son over frantically as she reached back to him.

Fuck.

Joshua knew better than to look—but there he went, turning around to look with the justification that they were still on an open stretch of dirt road, it was safe to look just for a moment, just to be sure, just to know—

YOU KNOW BETTER.

“I'm okay, I'm okay,” Ryan answered, reaching forward to grasp his mom's hand reflexively.

Joshua whipped his head back around to focus on the road. He knew better. He shouldn't have looked back. He knew what happened when he didn't pay attention. It felt like his heart was going to bust his ribcage from the inside out again, with how hard it was pounding against his sternum.

He knew better he knew better he knew better he would not do that again, he would pay attention, he would not get everyone killed because of his mistakes. But doubt followed the shape of those thoughts the way a shadow mirrored a silhouette cast long and dark against a wall. He knew he would look again, just to be sure.

He just...needed to know if they were alright. Whether it was fear or trauma that drove him, he couldn't pinpoint right then and there—but he also didn't have any ideas for a good workaround for it other than to perhaps not be the one driving the getaway vehicle as often as he could manage to avoid it.
They were approaching the Armstrong residence now.

“Rae Rae, check if you can see any sign of Ms. Armstrong being home while we jet past her place, like a car out front or something,” Joshua said as an aside as he checked on their Peggie pursuers.

He was going to pay attention to the road, and not get distracted looking out the side for Grace's presence, and just trust Rae Rae to be able to judge whether Ms. Armstrong was home or not.

He was not entirely sure what he would do if she was home. Stop, tumble out, get Rae Rae and the others under cover?

“Nothing out front that I can see!” Rae Rae said as they zoomed by.

That was both kind of good and kind of bad. Good that Grace wasn't likely to get jumped by Peggies in her own home—at least not yet—but also bad because Joshua wasn't sure where else she might be if she wasn't at the church. What to do if she wasn't in either of those locations? Go to the Ryes' place? That would be under siege right about now if he had to guess—the Project's membership was numerous enough to be hitting quite a few locations all at once. How many total members were on active Reaping duty for the cult? How many were combat capable? Two thirds? Half? One third? …probably a lot of people, whichever way they cut it.

It also occurred right then that there were likely quite a few combat capable Peggies over at John Seed's ranch house, just around the bend from the Lamb of God church.

SHIT.

HE KNEW HE'D OVERLOOK SOMETHING OR OTHER WHEN HE HADN'T PLANNED THE ESCAPE AND RESCUE EFFORT AHEAD OF TIME.

That was kind of a big one to overlook, but he really needed a map. Preferably with markers and notes drawn on it. There hadn't been one in the glove compartment of the truck, nor had there been any to snatch at Faith's clinic. He'd have to hike back to his base to get one of his copies for it...shit wait, if he brought the maps out with him, what would happen if he lost one or was kidnapped, and a Peggie got ahold of it? Fuck he hadn't considered that. He'd need a sparsely marked map then and would just have to make cryptic notes and memorize the rest.
Not that memorizing would do him much good in moments where he had to fly by the seat of his pants and make panicked snap decisions, like right now.

And look! There was the church turn off, oh happy day. Time to see if his questionably-informed-psychic guess was at all of use to them or not—oh wait, there was another Peggie truck parked around the corner of the church!

They might be really screwed here. Where should they go for plan B—?

There was a bullet hole in the windshield of the parked truck, and a Peggie corpse listing to one side in the driver's seat. Promising, maybe.

Much more promising—and much more dangerous to Joshua's immediate health—was the green laser sight was flickering over the still flaming hood of the truck he was driving, and up into the cab. There was a glowing silhouette he could see through the walls of the bell tower, crouched with a sniper rifle.

Lord please don't have Grace shoot him yet and let her recognize his uniform as Definitely Not A Peggie, because that would be hilariously tragic to be shot to death by a Resistance member.

_Not that it'd be the first time—_ Joshua interrupted that little dark thought because actually yes, it _would_ be the first time in reality that Grace shot him, because dreams of The End and the fight with the brainwashed Resistance members under Joseph's control did not count. Not chronologically. Or actually.

_They count._

The thought still had him shaking just a little bit, if it wasn't the adrenaline from the chase, but no time for that now.

He hit the brakes abruptly enough that Boomer gave a startled and confused garble-noise of a woof, and tumbled out into the road with his hands raised in a big overhead wave towards the bell tower. “GRACE! GRACE, DON'T SHOOT, WE'RE FRIENDLIES! DEPUTY ROOK FROM THE SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT AND CIVILIANS! PLEASE HELP!” He yelled up at the crouched figure, waving his clearly empty and unarmmed hands for all he was worth.
There was a very brief pause followed by a yell from above, “Deputy Rook you're going to want to get yourself and the others out of the open, the Peggies trailing you are coming in hot and looking pissed! Father Brian's still inside the church, get the civvies over to him and get your butt in gear, I need someone to watch my back on the southern flank!”

Definitely Grace up there then, thank God.

Joshua didn't have time to heave a sigh of relief, turning immediately to run around to the other side of the car where Rae Rae was already jumping out, helping her tilt the seat forward to let Ryan and Boomer out of the back.

He was glad he had his gloves right then—they wouldn't do his hands much good, but the gloves at least would help give him a better grip with how cold his fingers were as he grabbed his dart gun along with some ammo. Then he hurried Rae Rae and Ryan towards the church with Boomer at their heels, glancing over them one last time to check for signs of injury and blood, needlessly he knew, but he still felt the need to be sure. “In through the back door, Father Brian is probably in the side room, keep yourselves low and behind cover as much as possible, now go, go.” He said, before darting off around the back of the church, into the woods.

The small family ran in, shutting the door behind them. With any luck, none of the Peggies would be able to get into the church itself between his and Grace's efforts. Immersing himself amidst the trees and thickets, it was like a huge weight was taken off his shoulders, making Joshua feel immensely more secure and sure of himself. Granted there were Peggies about, namely the three trucks—oh thank God only three—that came to an abrupt halt on the road leading to the church, but he was far more hidden now than he was before. This was familiar territory. This was where he liked to be—out of sight and out of mind for any passing hostiles and observers, not out in the open like he had been for this whole trip.

Except for that small moment of panic where he wondered how effective these Bliss darts would be, if the dosage was enough and could even act fast enough to be of any help whatsoever in this situation. SHIT maybe he should've asked Rae Rae to borrow that handgun—no wait what was he thinking, this wasn't a normal tranquilizer drug, it was motherfucking Bliss. He'd been hit with it often enough in dreams to know this shit worked fast.

...shit he needed to practice with this gun though, he didn't have a lot of memories to draw from for tranquilizer guns. He had some, but nowhere near as many hours as he had for more conventional guns. He checked the pressure gauge, pulling out one of the darts to load up—these bad boys were LONG. Like syringe-needle long.

...the irony struck him then of how much he disliked needles and here he was, shooting what amounted to a weaponized needle-gun.
Well. It was pre-vengeance, and that usually wasn't supposed to be pleasant.

Time to test his new gun out and see if the Bliss was as effective on Peggies as it had been on him all the times they'd shot him in dreams-of-future-times.

Seven Peggies—there was the singular sound of a gunshot, and then there were six. Damn, the guy hadn’t even had time to get out of the truck, much like that other truck with the dead Peggie in it. Good shot by Grace.

Six Peggies then, that wasn't so bad...though both he and Grace were going to be managing relatively slow reloading speeds. Shit. Well, there was a shovel over by the church's shed, he could always—wait that might be lethal if he overdid it beyond just concussing people. Plus concussions didn't necessarily make a person pass out...SHIT, why was not killing people so damn hard?

_Way to go and sound like a deranged psychopath there, Joshua._ It was a thought meant more in jest but, well, he wouldn't be the only such person around if there was a kernel of truth to it.

He glanced at the pressure gauge again, guessed that the pressure was probably enough,—or maybe it was too much, but if the dart left a mark, that wasn't really his problem—lined up his first shot for his chosen Peggie's thigh, and pulled the trigger.

_Wonderful thing about air rifles: they were largely silent. Also wonderful: Seeing the Peggie flip the hell out with a whole-body jerk while looking down in disbelief at the feathered-dart sticking out of his leg, followed by the Peggie pulling out the dart...and then slowly keeling over onto the ground, the dart rolling away in the dirt._

That was satisfyingly effective, and fast! ...how did the Bliss DO that? Tranquilizers usually took way longer to take effect, like more like half an hour, Joshua was...reasonably sure. Maybe. It wasn't among his areas of expertise, but hell, if the darts worked, that was all fine and dandy!

He hurriedly pulled out another dart to reload, hearing the crack of Grace's shot ring out amidst a smattering of other gunshots, and looking up to see the remaining four Peggies scattered in terror. Looked like they’d been trying to pull off a charge with some cover fire against Grace. Apparently it hadn’t worked out all that well, and they hadn’t realized just _who_ was up in that belltower until just now. Must’ve been the green laser sight finally becoming apparent to them.
...how was he going to explain to Grace or anyone else in the Resistance that he wasn't killing Peggies, or even shooting them with actual bullets.

Crap he didn't think that far. WELL. That was a problem for Future Joshua, namely Joshua in the next half hour, not right now, because three of the remaining Peggies were trying to take cover behind their trucks, while one of them had dove into the southern woods on the side of the church that Joshua was hiding out in.

Not that it'd help the Peggie much.

Joshua adjusted the air gun's pressure down for a closer shot, and quietly snuck around the Peggie as the other man crunched his way through the underbrush towards the back of the church. He waited for the Peggie to get near the treeline, and then proceeded to dart the man in the butt. Specifically the right butt cheek, because it struck him as funny.

Joshua ducked back out of sight immediately then, listening to the satisfying yelp of surprised pain and watching with his second sight through the trunk of a tree as the cultist grasped his own ass and pulled the dart out to give it a confounded look before throwing it away and trying to spin about with his own rifle held up at the ready.

And then the cultist slumped and fell over.

He could get used to this, it was so nice, quick, and easy! And so quiet! ...though Joshua did have concerns about how long the Bliss darts' effect would last on the various targets. Collecting the spent darts could be a pain—but leaving needles around for random people or animals to get stabbed by was not a responsible thing to do and he could practically feel the imaginary combined gazes of Whitehorse, Danny and Joey, all of them Disapproving of even the very idea of Joshua not policing his brass...or darts, in this case.

Grace in the meanwhile had taken down another two of the remaining Peggies—one had met his end leaning out from behind cover to try to take a shot at Grace, while the second had panicked and run off across the road, trying to reach the woods—he'd failed. That left just the one cowering behind the truck.

...well, he could just wait and let Grace finish the last one off, but...was that cruel, since he could dart the man instead?
Or was that a waste of ammunition, if Grace or Rae Rae felt the downed Peggies needed to be killed regardless? The thought of killing the unconscious men was enough to spike Joshua's anxiety. Yeah okay he was going to have to figure out how to sneakily...get rid of...well, still-living-but-unconscious Peggies, somehow. In a way that didn't fuck anyone over. Shit they couldn't keep the Peggies in custody, the Resistance would be strapped for resources like food as it was. Letting the Peggies go could mean letting precious intel get back to the cult though, and in this case John.

Oo, that was not a good thought.

He wasn't sure what was the better option, so putting that line of thinking on hold, Joshua hastily snuck around to get a good view of the last Peggie crouched behind the truck, and darted the man in the upper arm. That had to hurt, but better the shoulder than the thigh if shooting low made the man pop up like a whack-a-mole target for Grace to finish off. The Peggie thankfully only startled, dropped his gun, and reached around to grasp at the dart in a long moment of terrified contemplation, before his eyes fluttered shut and he slowly flopped back onto the ground in a heap.

Damn that was weirdly effective, he was keeping this gun. Scanning their surroundings, he could confirm that this was indeed all of them. Now back to his moral crisis.

Could they in theory take back information of importance to John, that they might not have already transmitted via radio?

...he had no idea. If they were clever and efficient, they would've been giving concise updates along the way plus location.

Hmmm, how disciplined were John's lot? Probably not as disciplined at Jacob's, but...maybe more mixed? It seemed a fair guess that John's wouldn't be as evenly trained as the cult's primary militia task force. John's people were more...general cult-y know how with more practical specialists, like engineers and technicians and such compared to the other Heralds', if memory served well. Jacob and Faith had technicians and so forth, but not in as abundant numbers as John, from what insights Joshua had of the cult's make up.

He grimaced. That didn't make this decision easier. On the one hand, paranoia would say don't let anyone go back with so much as a single shred of information, don't let them learn from their mistakes. On the other: that's fucking murder, how about we don't?

...Shit. Honestly, he'd already made his decision, he just...hadn't entirely accepted it yet and was being an antsy little bastard about embracing the fact that he was not-killing Peggies. Admittedly
that was his entire plan, yes, but...still. The reality of the matter was he didn't know what the consequences would be.

But he knew what the consequences would be if he DID kill them all, so, there was that.

Fuck this situation, his stomach was in knots. “All clear down here, Grace! You good?” He called up from his hiding spot in the trees.

“Clear!” Grace called back. “I marked seven in the vehicles, got four. You?”

“There. I'm going to take advantage of the lull and move the bodies and trucks out of the road, we're too close to Peggie-controlled locations, I don't want to invite more of them to come looking if they don't already know what's gone down. Would it be better if you stayed up there or went to check on Father Brian and the others?” Honestly he didn't know what was the tactically soundest thing to do with a protect-civilians situation when in a chaotic cult-warzone, and Grace was the one with real life experience in actual real life war and combat training, not him.

“Roads are clear, I'll go check on the others and come out to help you clear the trucks and bodies, then we got to plan what we're doing and figure out what the hell's going on.” Grace said, her words crisp and orderly as she packed up her spare ammunition and hopped down onto the roof to head on into the church.

Uh. Shit that didn't give him much time. This was probably high time to try that one mix Tweak had said gave people a strength and energy boost. Joshua dug into his stash in the secret compartment in his belt for the homeopathic mixture in question, unscrewed the lid off of the little bottle of The Furious—Tweak had a strange fixation on those movies—and swigged it down, grimacing at the taste. He hadn't actually tried this formula before on account of it having Bliss oil in it, but no point in being shy now. Plus he needed the strength boost if he was going to lug three unconscious, fully grown men into the back of a truck before Grace came back.

...Oh.

Oh shit. Yeah okay he did NOT know about the weird visual displacement doubling effect that he was pretty sure was a side effect of The Furious...or hell maybe it was just mixing bad with Bo's recipe and the Bliss shots Faith’s people had injected him with. His dreams had been sketchy about the details of the effects for all of the currently-in-use drugs, and he'd really only had a general idea of the recipes prior to his actually going and learning about the ratios and dosages from Bo and Tweak a few summers back.
His usage of the drugs before he actually learned the proper ratios to minimize side effects had made for an interesting few years in his late teens. They’d been useful even then, but definitely not recommended.

...hm.

In retrospect Joshua really needed to stop taking questionable drugs to solve his problems...not that this had ever been a serious matter for him before. He usually stayed off most of this stuff, aside from using that Ultimate Hunter mix on what he deemed necessary occasions...fuck he didn't want to end up addicted to any of these—even if that Hunter recipe was super helpful.

He was a homeopathic-remedy-druggie, wasn’t he. Fuck.

Wait. Why were all the reds and greens so much more vivid? And had those flowers been there before?

...no wait, those were Bliss flowers again, and they were more sparkly than before. Shit he probably just fucked with that Bliss dose Faith had given him, hadn't he.

No time to admire the scenery however. Joshua hopped up, feeling oddly light as he jogged forward, keeping an eye and ear out for any other signs of Peggies in the distance as he reached down to collect the spent dart. After encasing said dart safely, he then grabbed ahold of the first of the unconscious cultists.

The ease with which the Blissed out Peggie came up off the ground startled Joshua a bit, almost causing him to drop the man.

This shit was weird and he'd had Doubts about it actually making him “stronger” because drugs just didn't do that. You did not get super powers from swigging a tiny vial of plant materials, especially two seconds after ingestion...said the psychic.

Shit, was this just making him think he was stronger and after this was all over the end result would be he’d have to deal with massive day-after-workout body-wide-cramps later?
...time would tell, but he hoped not. But how else would it work? Magic?

He slung the Peggie up over the edge of the truck bed and dumped the man in—none too gently, this was the lot that would have been responsible for killing Rae Rae and Ryan, after all.

...why did he save these assholes again?

_Slippery slope, Joshua, slippery slope. You start killing the easily condemnable ones, and the next thing we know we're just murdering cultists on reflex, and then the world collapses around our ears._

He pulled the man's rifle and ammo belt off with a scowl, doing a quick search of the cultist's pockets for anything else of use. Ah, a pocket knife! Confiscating that for sure, since the cult had been so kind as to confiscate—steal—his. It wouldn't make up for his hunting knife, but maybe he’d find a replacement or ten along the way. He set the gun and ammunition on a clean patch of grass out of the way and hurried over to cultist number two, looking around for a moment to try to find the dart he’d shot the man with. The fucker had tossed it somewhere in this direction—aha! There it was.

...The dart had an odd shininess to it that it hadn't had before, pulling the eye towards it readily...sort of like that odd sparkle that had led him to the lab room with the air rifle back at the clinic. Yeah okay this Ultimate Hunter drug shit was definitely doing weird things for him now. Blame it on the Bliss mixing with it. Useful side effect though. Joshua tucked the second dart away and went about stripping the man of all his weapons and anything else useful—such as the man's chest holster of belt pouches and goodies. Sometimes you just wanted the whole kit and caboodle, and hey, it was helping Joshua put together a more believable cultist disguise. He heaved the second unconscious Peggie like a sack of flour right into the back of the truck, alongside unconscious Peggie number one.

The last Peggie—and technically the first one he’d shot—was still lying there in the woods right where Joshua had left him, with the dart in plain view next to the unconscious man's body all nice and easy to collect. Ah, a handgun too! That was tucked right into Joshua’s woefully empty hip holster with a pleased pat. He was keeping that, along with his previously collected rifle and other goodies. He'd definitely need to keep a pile of ammo for both guns, though not as much as for his air rifle by far. The rest he’d hand off to Grace to hold onto or give out to other Resistance members who might need the firepower.

Peggie number three was unceremoniously pitched atop his fellow still-living brethren in the truck bed, and Joshua hopped into the cab to put the truck into reverse and back it up the church driveway, out of the way—but with a clear path to drive out. He was going to be taking this one with him, and then figuring out where to dump the “bodies”.
It was quite nice to have a truck that wasn’t shot up, on fire, and that he had the proper keys to, he
had to admit. Hopping back out, he jogged on over to the first of the trucks with the dead Peggies
seated in the driver’s seat and pulled the body out, tossing it into the bed of the truck. Not much to
scavenge off of this one, curiously enough. A handgun and a few clips. That was strangely under
armed for a Peggie, let alone a member of Hope County. He took the gun and ammo nonetheless
and squirreled it away about his person for later adding to the stockpile for Grace and the
Resistance. This did not mean sticking the extra gun down the back of his pants, and he’d never
say that he’d done as such nor let any seasoned gun handler see him doing so, especially Joey,
Whitehorse, or Dutch. He looked at the driver’s seat and paused, making a disgusted face. He was
NOT wild about the idea of getting blood on him, and there was blood all over steering wheel. That
needed cleaning up before he’d handle it willingly as this was merely a not-quite-life-threatening
situation, not a life-threatening situation.

...time to steal a shirt off of that dead Peggie. There was definitely some blood on the corpse’s shirt,
but it was clean enough to wipe off the blood on the steering wheel and surrounding surfaces. He
climbed in carefully and backed the truck up to near the shed out back. His parking was a bit messy
but he had more important things to worry about—even if the angle of the truck still bugged him.
Running back around to the front of the church, Joshua pulled open the other truck with a dead
Peggie driver in it and unbuckled the second dead man from the seat before tossing him into the
back of the truck. This one at least had a rifle in the passenger seat along with a full ammo belt,
necessitating Joshua to make a quick run to drop off the extra guns and ammunition in the growing
stockpile before getting back to corpse duty. He was NOT getting paid enough to deal with this
many dead bodies all in one day. He probably wouldn’t be seeing his next paycheck at all honestly
given the situation, but money was money! He’d worked hard to earn that cash, God damn.

Next was one of the dead Peggies sprawled out on the road, followed by repeating the same
process once again of looting all the useful stuff off of the body, and then hefting it into the nearby
truck. He could see Grace was coming back out, along with Father Brian surprisingly enough. He
quickly dropped the dead body into the back—being seen lifting that much weight was probably
not something he needed to have happen, because if the situation came up where he was not doped
up on The Furious and tried to lift something heavy and failed, it could bring up questions.
Questions he did not want to answer, because lying was a hard thing to do well. One could just
pass it off as a result of the adrenaline and stress of the situation...maybe. Better not to chance
accidentally mentioning it involved drugs though. That wouldn't go down well with more upright
folks like Grace or Father Brian, he reckoned.

Heaven preserve him if Joey, Danny or God forbid Whitehorse learn he had some questionable
just-in-case-of-emergency stashes of such things. He’d never hear the end of it, and he’d probably
drop the stuff out of guilt...which was probably a sign that what he was doing was morally wrong.

BUT IT WORKED AND HE DIDN'T HAVE THE PREPARATION OR SKILL TO WORK
AROUND IT JUST NOW AS HE WAS. HE WAS TWENTY THREE YEARS OLD, AND THAT
WAS FUCKING YOUNG FOR ANYONE TO BE INVOLVED IN POTENTIALLY
HERALDING THE APOCALYPSE AND THE END OF THE WORLD.
But not as young as Ryan, poor kid. Hopefully this wouldn't be too scarring for him—assuming this all turned out okay and he and Rae Rae both survived all this mess. Boomer too.

That also reminded him of Faith—she was around Joshua's age too, WAY too young to be in this cult business. Same with Wheaty. And Tracey. Mary May wasn't exactly among the older folks either...Jess was closer to the older side of almost thirty, but her little brother wasn't. Fuck he hoped the Black family was still okay. He wondered if they’d caught on to the trouble brewing and gotten out yet. One could hope, but he just didn’t know.

Add that as another thing on his to-do list: check if Jess and her family got out okay. Nudging them to go to Dutch's bunker probably wouldn't take much, he reckoned, Jess was on good terms with Dutch if he recalled correctly, as were her folks at this point...or he hoped they still were. Crisis might be enough to set aside any possible disapproving opinions on prepper activities—especially with Eden's Gate breathing down everyone's necks to convert or die.

Shit. Dutch was going to be a little bit cranked up that Joshua hadn't affirmed that he was still alive after the whole arrest. That was going to be a right talking to if anything. He'd...deal with that later. Eventually. Way later eventually.

Shit shit shit wait he's getting tunnel vision on to-do's and smaller things—he needed to figure out how to get help from outside of Hope into it. He doesn't want to be the one dealing with this.

Does he?

Doesn't he?

...he has mixed opinions on that, he doesn't know how to feel. He doesn't want the Seeds to die, despite all the things they have done, are doing, will do, but is that because of the whole opening-of-the-seals thing, morals, or personal—fucked up—reasons?

He was of two minds, or more, on the subject.

*You have no reason to care what happens to the Seeds outside of keeping them from hurting more people. So just get help, and let what happens, happen.*
That was a lie but he could use the lie to focus on just moving forward right now. The lie would wear out soon enough and he'd have to deal with the far messier truth underneath it all, but that was then, not now.

The convoy though. Smart thing to do was to not go after it because it would have some guards—Faith had said it was lightly guarded, but he was just one guy and his name was definitely not Rambo. Ultimately, it'd be the smarter and safer plan to go get help instead. Get out of Hope County and go get more backup, serious backup.

The prisoners in the convoy wouldn't be expecting anyone to come save them anyway.

That thought didn't help. It hurt more.

Fuck. Okay, sensible thing won, he'd just...pass the info off to Grace or something maybe? Could she do something about it? Maybe. But what about Father Brian, Rae Rae, Ryan and Boomer? They'd be unprotected...though Rae Rae DID have a gun or two. Would it be enough?

It wasn't before, in the dreams.

But this wasn't a dream, it wasn't even at the pumpkin farm, it was somewhere else entirely different, was that enough?

They could still die in another time, another place.

...that was the kicker, wasn't it. No real promises of survival for anyone in life. Or, he didn't believe there was, at least, even if the dreams suggested some people—Joseph—would inexplicably make it through every time, in every scenario.

“—Deputy? Dep? Dep.”

Rook snapped his attention back into reality for a moment there, looking at Grace's hand waving in front of his face from where he'd been bracing himself against the side of the truck with his hands, staring into the back with the one dead cultist sprawled out in it. “What? Oh. Sorry. Spaced out. I'm not...doing entirely well with all this. Trying though.”
Understatement of the year, really. Not the first time he'd spun that line though and it wouldn't be the last...unless someone managed to put a bullet through his head.

Grace looked at him closely at that point, a little too closely for Joshua's comfort in all honesty, but he refrained from fidgeting or turning away from her and just let the veteran study him, his features, and his expression.

“Is this the first time you've seen a dead body or been in a live fire combat situation, Dep?” Grace asked at long last.

Joshua looked down, eyes unfortunately ending back up on the dead cultist's body again, face turned thankfully away from them...but in ways it wasn't any better. “...yes. Hope County's usually quiet, we don't have...” He waved a hand at the dead man lying before them both. He didn't have words for this.

He'd had dreams, yeah, but this was real. Actually real, no matter how real the dreams had felt, this was permanent. They were actually dead.

*Countless people have died, and it's all your fault. Was it worth it?*

Joshua suppressed a shiver at the chill running down his spine. *He* hadn't killed them, they'd died from Grace's shots.

*But could you have prevented it? You Blised the other ones.*

He couldn't have reloaded fast enough to get them all before Grace shot them.

*Could you have asked Grace just to lay down cover fire and non-lethal shots?*

...yes. Yes, he could've done that.

*It's interesting that she's already going for kill shots, and that she was all set up with her gun and ammo, isn't it?*
...that made Joshua wonder what the Peggies had already tried to do. Had they threatened Grace with violence? He hadn't seen any Peggies living or dead at her place, nor any cult trucks as he could recall.

Had she already killed some before now, then? Were there more dead people lying in pools of blood elsewhere in the county already?

_They're dead. They're dead, and there's nothing you or anyone else can do about it._

That point hadn't really started to sink in yet, even now, staring at the results as Joshua was. It felt like shock, emotional shock, like he was just numbing out or drowning everything like feelings and sound and thought with white noise with regards to reacting to the death of actual people, cultist or otherwise. And it'd be better if his brain kept doing that for the time being seeing as he had things to do that were really fucking important and key to his survival and the survival of other people so having an emotional or moral breakdown right now would be pretty awful timing.

Which was why he was trying not to think on it any further for the moment. It was definitely not going to go away, but he could stick it in the mental box in his head labeled “Later”...at least for now.

“I don't know how to deal with this.” Joshua admitted quietly. “We still have things to do though so...I’ll deal with it later, somehow. I don’t know. Rae Rae, Ryan, Father Brian and Boomer are all okay though?”

He could tell the others were all okay from the silhouettes he could see glowing through the walls, but in _theory_ he shouldn't know. So he asked.

Grace nodded, humming an affirmative. “All shook up, but alive. Not even a scratch on them. You did good Dep. Now come on, let's get the bodies out of the road and kick up some dirt and dust to hide the blood.”

Joshua nodded, following her to the nearest dead cultist still left out in the open. He was sort of grateful that she didn't prod him further at that moment, or ask about the obvious line of observation, “ hey you look like the cult leader what's with that?” or some such. It gave him a tiny little spout of hope that maybe it was just him overthinking it, maybe it actually wasn't a big deal. Maybe it wouldn't matter.
He wasn't sure how he'd feel about that with regards to his own box of messy, unresolved Problems with his blood relations—including adopted relations, specifically Faith—and feelings concerning them, but...well, if it wasn't a problem for the Resistance members, that'd be one less hassle or fear to deal with then. Hope sprung eternal!

“Get the hands, I'll get his feet,” Grace instructed after a quick, business like search and strip of anything useful off of the dead man. She scooped up the corpse's ankles and heaved the lower half of the body up easily as Joshua hoisted the upper half. The two of them made a hurried retreat back to the truck and dumped the body in, before turning to head to the last one. Rinse and repeat, and the last one was in the truck bed too, sans weapons and goodies.

“Where were the others dropped?” Grace asked.

“Oh, I uh, dumped them in that other truck and got it out of the way,” Joshua said, pointing to the truck with the definitely-not-dead cultists he'd already spirited away. Fingers crossed mentally that they were still 100% unconscious and totally Blissed out and quiet, and that Grace wouldn't think to check.

Grace on the other hand turned back to him, an eyebrow raised. “You're telling me you moved five bodies in the short span of time where I was checking on the others?”

“...I might've been a bit panicked about the idea that more Peggies were going to show up and did my level best to drag them out of here asap.” Joshua admitted. Which was true, just not the whole truth. “Two of them were easier, it was just pulling them from the front seat and into the back of the truck. I uh, stopped with that fifth one because I needed a breather.”

A breather as in, he'd stopped and spaced out while trying to not be too fucked up about all of this happening and such. Which counted for a definition of a breather. It was awkward to have to say that though because if he admitted to himself, especially out loud, how bad this all was he might just have to go sit in a corner and have a panic attack.

_It's fine. Everything is fine, we're all fine. We're doing this. It's good, we're good, it's all okay._

He couldn't shake the sensation that the attempt to reassure himself was a lie.

Grace looked at him for a long moment, almost long enough to make Joshua's anxiety start
creeping up again. “Guess the county Sheriff's department has a higher standard of fitness than I figured.” Was what she finally said, smirking just a little bit.

Joshua sputtered out a surprised laugh, ducking his head so the brim of his hat hid any possible signs of blushing. It wasn't that big of a deal, but it counted as a compliment in his book and everyone liked compliments. “Oh well, uh, we have to be fit enough at the time of hiring, mostly involving stuff like being able to do a certain number of situps and pushups without stopping within a time limit plus the 500 meter dash, but otherwise it's pretty lax after that point. Nothing like the physical standards for firemen or members of the armed forces or such.”

He could lift an average-sized person, carefully, without The Furious running in his veins. Just not as quickly or as easily. He probably would've only had the second unconscious Peggie in the truck by the time Grace had come out otherwise.

“It's a good standard to maintain. Back this truck out of the way, I'll go grab the last Peggie and the other truck to get them both out of sight.” Grace said, before turning to jog up the road to the last dead man left out in the sun.

Joshua gave Grace a nod as they broke off from the conversation, and slid into the front of the vehicle to carefully drive it backwards to park it behind the church, out of sight of the road. He could see Grace's silhouette stoop as she picked up the dead body and fireman carry it over to the truck with little trouble.

...damn, he wished HE could do that and make it look that easy—sans drugs, of course. Unfortunately he was still just a little too much on this side of young and lightly built to have worked up the strength for that yet, given his late start focus on working out. He'd never be a linebacker, but he wouldn't mind putting on a bit more muscle and getting in more strength training, just for the satisfaction of being as physically fit as he reasonably could be. A few more years of proper training and eating right would hopefully do it, but, well. It was Apocalypse Now times.

He really needed to save those Furious mixes for emergency only situations, the weird red and green distortion kept making him think he was looking at a film that was meant to be seen with 3D glasses. Just floating the concept of reality appearing to be visually flat was making his head hurt and spin a little bit.

...no, wait, his head actually was hurting and spinning a bit, not just from the visuals. The lights and the colors were making his eyes hurt. He shut his eyes and rested his head against his hands on the top of the steering wheel for a moment, just...trying to breathe.
He didn't feel very good.

Even with his eyes shut, it felt like the world was slowly spinning without him, before blinking back to its starting position and repeating the spin just a bit, like a segment of a movie caught on loop, all slowed down and overlapping itself.

It occurred to Joshua that he was tired at that point. From everything before all of this pursuit and the stress of the whole car chase and ensuing gunfight. Adrenaline crash. Fuck. His hands were cold, his feet too.

He knew some time had passed, but he sat up abruptly at a tap-tap-tap at the driver side window. Grace was there, looking at him again with a measure of concern. She stepped out of the way as he opened the door to slither on out in a hurry.

“Sorry, sorry, I just felt kind of dizzy for a moment there, it's been a long...something or other.” Joshua said waving one hand, sounding and feeling a bit frazzled.

“Is everything okay?” Rae Rae asked, leaning around the church's back door to look at the two of them.

“Yeah. No more Peggies, for now. We should discuss what's next though.” Grace responded.

“Oh shit, right. Our problems have problems.” Joshua said, scrubbing at one ear with the palm of his hand, trying to organize his brain as to what to tell Grace and Rae Rae so they had a general idea as to what was going on at large. Part of him was antsy about standing around talking when there were things to do and people were dying but intel was important, and they had to organize and present a coordinated front...or as close to a coordinated front as they could muster with the ragtag bunch of misfits the Resistance was potentially going to be made of.

“Fall's End is under siege if it hasn't already fallen from what we saw on the way over here, the Peggies are out in force kidnapping people and stealing everything not nailed down and some things that are all over the county it sounds like, communication seems like it's been cut or jammed, and uh, I don't know where all my fellow officers are, or if they evaded capture. Specifically the others who were with me when we attempted to arrest Joseph Seed. Danny's—shit, he's in Fall's End. That's what I know of the situation, at present.”

“SNAFU then,” Grace muttered, thumbing at her nose in thought.
“Snafu?” Rae Rae asked, stepping out from the door to stand closer to the other two, hands wrapped around herself, her rifle slung across her back.

Joshua didn't know either, though the term sounded familiar—wait he might've heard it from a memory of Jacob's, it was an army term, wasn't it—?

“Situation normal: all fucked up.” Grace responded.

Yep. That fit, and sounded familiar too.

A faint and creaky hum came from the door leading into the church, and Father Brian gently pushed the door open, neatly brushed silver and black hair glinting in the daylight, almost a match for the white roman collar and black cassock shirt he wore as a denotation of his faith and practice. “We do live in troubled times, don't we? The gathering storm has been unleashed upon our people, and now it is a matter of sink or swim.”

Joshua and Grace both nodded at that.

“We need to plan and figure out our objective, and go from there,” Grace stated. “I don't want to let the Peggies take over the church and defile the tombstones here, but staying might not be an option if they're out in force. Are they heavily armed, Deputy Rook?”

Joshua nodded. “I counted well over a dozen assault rifles, shotguns, and pistols all told just in the initial contact when we went in to try to carry out the warrant, to say nothing of the mounted guns on the trucks or flame throwers. That was just in a little over two dozen people present at the compound, on obvious display. No telling how many they actually have, I'm sure there’s plenty more to go around. Also: planes. With guns and bombs. Probably helicopters too, also kitted out. No telling what else they have, they've had years and plenty of money, resources and means to stockpile all kinds of equipment.”

Grace made a noise of grim dissatisfaction. “They've been waiting and preparing to make a move for a long time then, and here we are caught with our trousers down.”

“There was a US Marshal with us, Burke,” Joshua added, “I don't know what happened to him, if the cult caught him or not. His absence might be noticed by his superiors, but I wouldn't rely on it. We should prioritize getting word out of the county and getting reinforcements in as one of our top
goals. No signal even here though, so I think the cult's got jammers or something going on, that's not right in this part of the county, we've got more than enough cell phone towers to have strong signal here.”

“So what you're saying is we need to get someone out past the jammers' range to get word out then. Nick Rye would be a good choice for that, if the Peggies haven't hit him yet.” Grace said.

“I honestly would be surprised if they didn't try to steal his plane along with any other aircraft folks own hereabouts as the first order of business, but it's worth checking.” Joshua said, before looking to Father Brian and Rae Rae. “I expect it to be dangerous though—what about you two, and Ryan and Boomer? I wouldn't think it safe to stay here, the Peggies will send more people in due time for this place once the others fail to report in, if they're organized enough, which I reckon they are. I don't know of a currently safe place for you all to stay at.”

“I doubt very much they would want to kidnap an old rickety man such as myself,” Father Brian said in a sober tone that suggested it was far more likely his fate would be on the receiving end of a bullet if the cultists got hold of him. “They have little love for men and women of the cloth.”

They all knew what the Peggies had done to Pastor Jerome—beating him near to death and leaving him senseless and bleeding upon the ground.

It made Joshua question his decision to not kill the Peggies all over again.

“It may be ultimately that for those of us unfit to fight, the best place to hide is out in the wilderness or somewhere that the Project does not know about,” Father Brian continued. “There are those who have bunkers out there who have no sympathies for the Seeds and their lot. Perhaps they will help us in our time of need.”

“Just make sure it's not up north in the Whitetails,” Joshua cautioned. “Jacob Seed's area of influence is up that way, and his men stalk the wilds as readily as they do the roads I hear. That might just be rumor and hearsay but right now as things are, I wouldn't chance it up there. Eastward's dangerous in its own right too, the Henbane region's covered in green clouds of that Bliss drug the cult cultivates, like a fog. We nearly got caught that way before we all ran and got scattered to the winds. So, hiding out here in the valley might be easiest—relatively speaking. If the folks in Fall's End manage to throw off the invasion, it might be somewhere to hole up, should we try to help, you think?”

Fuck. That might box him into going to Fall's End, which wasn't necessarily a bad decision...but what about the prisoner convoy? Could he even do anything about that if he wasn't going to kill the
Peggies? If he asked Grace to come with him though, that was increasing the odds he’d have to explain his lack of Peggie-kills.

...wait SHIT HAD SHE NOTICED HE’D BEEN USING AN AIR RIFLE? Fuck he hoped not. Fuck fuck fuck, please God let it be she hadn’t noticed amidst the chaos, and it wasn’t that she was just not saying anything about it. He didn’t want to find out if he was screwed on account of this.

Grace took a deep breath, exhaling as she turned to look in the direction of Fall’s End. “I think we'll have to. We should try swinging around and checking out the Ryes' place, it's a smaller target than the town so there should be fewer Peggies milling about if they've hit there. If we can clear that and Nick's not down for the count, that could be another hand to help out. He's an okay-enough shot on the ground, but better up in the air. We'll have to be quick about it though. Rye's air field isn't that far from Fall's End, we could get reinforcements coming down on us real quick.”

Hm, yeah, this was sounding more and more like a concrete got-to-go-with-them plan then, rather than splitting off. Better mention the “gossip” he “overheard” from a Peggie when he supposedly stole the truck then, just to see if the convoy was something they could do something about. Which was technically true, seeing as Faith was a Peggie, and she'd told him while he was stealing the truck. That was probably plausible enough a source.

_and whatever choice we end up making, it's still going to lead to people dying on both sides, both cultist and civilian alike._

He tried not to think about that fact too hard.

“There was also something I overheard a Peggie mention—there's some sort of prisoner convoy that’s going to be headed down the main northern road to the Henbane region from up on top of Black Horse Mountain sometime early today. Is there anything we can do about that you think?” He looked at Grace in particular, just a little bit hopeful that maybe she had a good idea of how to handle that—maybe she might even feel she could deal with it herself, though that seemed very, very unlikely. Most sane people did not try to take on “convoys” with multiple hostiles present. That was strictly movie-hero fodder work and didn't work in reality. Usually.

Grace raised both her eyebrows in concern, and disbelieve. “A prisoner convoy?”

“Lord have mercy,” Father Brian said softly.
Joshua nodded in confirmation. “Yeah. I have no idea how they kidnapped enough people to have a convoy of prisoners already, it's only the first morning of the Reaping or whatever the Peggies call it. They must've been working all night or something.”

“This is worse than I thought.” Grace said, pausing for a good long, few moments, staring thoughtfully at the ground in concentration. Looking back up at Joshua she said, “We don't have the manpower to go after a convoy, unfortunately. We might not even have the numbers to do much about Fall's End either, even if we do get Nick and he still has access to a working and armed plane. We need more information, and we need to find a weak point to hammer on. If the convoy is a softer target that we could take, even partially, it could mean more willing hands to help fight. If it's too heavily guarded though, it's a waste of time that we don't have. If we go to Nick's we're taking the chance of getting so close to Fall's End that the Peggies won't just migrate south to sweep the Ryes up along with everyone else in town.”

“Scouting then? Both north and south, radio back the details to determine which way looks better? We can use some of the short wave radios the Peggies had on them,” Joshua suggested. “The convoy we can probably spy on just by heading up around the road a ways, while the other heads to the Ryes'.”

“That'll work,” Grace said with a nod, “risky though, we don't know what frequencies the Peggies are using and monitoring, but that's more likely a long term problem to deal with later. That leaves the matter of safety for the non-combatants.”

They both looked to Rae Rae and Father Brian then.

“It sounds to me like there are no safe harbors here in Hope County, so long as the Project reigns,” Father Brian said. “It may simply be best for us to flee as far as we can manage.”

“They might be blocking off the tunnels through the mountains leading out of the county though is the thing,” Joshua added. “I would suspect they have air patrols too, but if it's enough to keep people from flying out or sneaking out through one of the mountain passes is a question I don't have the answer to.”

“Is there really no hope for us?” Rae Rae asked, her voice was quiet but her face was set in grim lines. “If needs must, I'll fight alongside you two, though I'm no marksman. I won't let them take my son.”

Well, props where props were due—Rae Rae had managed to hit and blow out the tire on that one Peggie truck. Granted, that might not mean much in Montana where everyone and their grandmas
had at least three guns they knew how to shoot. Especially compared to Grace’s marksmanship...but among mere ordinary mortals, Rae Rae seemed like she could handle herself reasonably well in Joshua’s opinion. At least as far as just shooting at a target went, anyway.

Father Brian exhaled slowly through his nose, looking down at the ground in a moment's contemplation. “So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish,” he quoted, lifting his head to address Rae Rae. “I am but an old man, weathered and waning in my twilight years, but if these ancient and frail hands of mine can help keep you and your family safe, I will do so, Ms. Weaver.”

That was good, hopefully with two armed adults among them, the civilians wouldn’t get murdered...probably still for the best they avoid being noticed though.

Rae Rae nodded, a quick jerky motion, her brows pinched together in worry. “Thank you, Father Brian.”

“Hopefully it won't come to that,” Joshua said. “Grace is the more experienced one on a battlefield, perhaps you should go with her and conceal yourselves in the woods between the Ryes' and the Laurel residence—at a distance and out of the way, since I expect there to be a firefight. Would that work?”

That last question was addressed to Grace, who nodded.

“It's the best we can offer right now, but it'll still be dangerous.” Grace said, thinking it out as she spoke. “You'll need to keep low and stay behind cover. There's some old boulders in those woods, keep those between you and any gunfire. Can't account for where a bullet flies if it misses, and these Peggies aren't all disciplined about their firing practices from what I’ve seen.”

It was kind of surprising she was going with his ideas, but Joshua was certainly not going to complain, he had stuff to do that was more easily done without sane and responsible adult supervision.

...well that did say something about what he was going to do, now didn't it.

“Are we going then?” Came a small and quiet voice from behind the door, followed by an inquiring woof. Ryan pushed the door open just enough to peek out, eyes as wide as saucers.
“Ryan sweetie, were you listening in?” Rae Rae said, moving over to kneel before her young son, taking his hands in hers. “It's not polite to eavesdrop on polite conversation baby. We might be discussing things that are not meant for such young ears as yours, okay?”

Ryan nodded, before looking up at Grace and Joshua. “Are we splitting up though? That always leads to things happening in the cartoons, like the old Scooby Doo ones when the gang splits up and they get chased by the monster.”

Oh boy. Time to try to reassure the little bean then—with the emphasis on try.

“Hey now,” Joshua said, kneeling down so he could be eye level with Ryan, “it'll be alright Ryan, Grace is a soldier, and I'm a cop, we chase the bad guys and protect innocent people like you and your mom as part of our job. We'll do our best to make the county safe again, okay?”

Ignoring the fact that they’d just been chased by said bad guys, but they’d won in the end. He certainly hoped they could continue winning without triggering a nuclear apocalypse. But this was said for Ryan's benefit, with any luck it'd help reassure him and make things a tiny bit easier to deal with. Probably not a whole lot, but maybe a little.

Assuming they don't die later.

He was going to be stressed and worried about their continued survival for ages, Joshua could see that now.

Ryan nodded and then looked over to the still slightly-on-fire truck they had arrived in. “Are we leaving our stuff here then?”

Uh.

“How about we just move it all to one of the nicer trucks along with the stuff we got off the Peggies, and you all take that one instead? Hide it in the woods or maybe behind the Laurels' house until the coast is clear.” Joshua said, looking at the truck in question. It had served them well, but it was definitely on its way to being a wreck now. Still worked fine at least, so the damage was mostly just cosmetic. Or he was reasonably sure it was mostly just cosmetic. Either way, bullet holes and scorch marks did not make for a nice looking vehicle. Sue him, he was picky to a degree when there were options and he didn't want his vehicle standing out. Easier to sneak around if everything looked boringly normal and unremarkable to cultist eyes.
That might be an eventual problem later on if the Resistance got enough armed and ornery people out on the roads to potentially try shooting him if he was trying to pass as a cultist, but that would be a problem for later-Joshua to solve. Assuming it was indeed later and not a sooner than expected problem because everyone in Montana had guns, opinions, and opinions on who and what to use said guns on. Especially cultists, or in Joshua’s case people who were intending to sneak around looking like a cultist.

Maybe that was a bad idea.

...the cult was probably more dangerous to his day to day safety in that regard by a hair or so though. At least a smidge. Disguising himself seemed like a slightly safer idea.

“We're wasting time now,” Grace said, also eying the faintly flaming vehicle in question as well.

“This is going to be a squabble over resources against the cult, and the Weavers have got it all packed up already, won't take but a jiff, and it's better we have it than Eden's Gate. Traveling light only works for so long,” Joshua said, standing up to trot on over to the truck and to start pulling out the luggage into a fresh truck. It was probably his magpie and hoarding tendencies at work there, but he felt it was a good point at least. You can always ditch extra stuff later, but it can be hard to find needed stuff if you're in a combat zone and everyone else is looting too. Which was why finding your enemy's supply stores and stealing their shit was high on his to-do list in the near future, among other things. And hey, the baggage looked like it had survived their wild ride quite well, not even a burn mark on any of them!

Grace relented and pitched in, along with Rae Rae and Father Brian to move all the luggage over, finishing it all up in a tidy few minutes. They also shooed Ryan and Boomer back inside so they could shift the one cultist body out of the truck Grace and the rest would be taking to the Ryes’—a token effort not to traumatize the kid any more than necessary, but an effort nonetheless. They then also loaded the extra guns and looted goodies into that truck—no point in leaving them around for the Peggies, after all. Father Brian was now equipped with a rifle and ammunition belt, creating a look which didn’t quite suit his clerical garb real well. They’d have to see if they could get the Father some body armor, armed priests needed that to complete the look—and to protect their organs of course.

Joshua in the meanwhile had snagged one of the chest holsters with all the nice fiddly little belt pouches and one ammunition belt full of rifle rounds to strap about his person. Wouldn't do to have new guns with no ammunition, which was also why he packed away a handful of clips for his new handgun too in his handy-dandy new holster-of-cool-pouches. He was feeling a bit more secure now, albeit also a bit more encumbered with so many guns on him but it wasn't anything to worry about, at least not right now. He took his backpack and carted it on over to his selected truck that
had the definitely-still-alive Peggies in the back, hoping all the while that the cultists wouldn't pick just this very moment to wake up and raise a lot of very awkward and uncomfortable questions. Questions that might get Joshua shot, which would be very, very, very unfortunate. He quite liked not being shot up.

“Try to meet us at the Ryes’ place within the next hour. If you're not there in two, I'm going to assume you ran into trouble.” Grace said, walking over and handing Joshua one of the newly liberated hand radios they'd got from the Peggies, turning it to show him the settings. “We're going to be using this frequency, so don't forget it if you drop this thing and scramble it all up.”

Joshua nodded. “Thanks, and I'll remember.”

“Drive safely!” Rae Rae called over as Joshua clambered into the truck.

“I always drive safely!” Joshua called back.

Grace looked at the flaming truck, then back to Joshua in his new, not-flaming truck. She said nothing out loud, but her expression said it all for her.

Joshua held up a finger. “That was under duress while we were being pursued by Peggies, and the fire only happened because I couldn't take the regular road instead of driving over the Clutch Nixon track over by the construction yard. I'm a wonderful driver under normal circumstances.”

That was true...it was just they were no longer in normal circumstances. He really needed to find better ways to travel without being a driver, he was going to die in a car or truck or something and that would be the ultimate fulfillment of one of his many worst fears come true.

And oh shit. He had all of one to two hours to go and stop the prisoner convoy. He checked the time—6:40 AM. Well damn, he had next to no time to set up anything remotely close to an ambush. TIME TO FLOOR IT—after carefully driving out of the church’s driveway so as not to accidentally commit vehicular homicide by hitting any of the others present. He waved to them all as he pulled out onto the main road one last time, getting a straggling round of waves from the others and a farewell bark from Boomer as Ryan and the dog came back out to rejoin the others. At least they were all alive, at least for now.

Fuck, the Lamb of God church was going to get all redone and made up in the Project’s image now that they weren't there, wasn't it? He could see in his rear view mirror Grace standing before her
father's grave to pay the departed man a few last respects, and he felt bad for her in that moment, and for her father.

Maybe they'd get lucky and the Peggies wouldn't do too much damage...or if they did, maybe he and Grace could commission a tombstone engraver to make new ones.

This sucked. But he had an appointment to keep, and not much time to make it. He put the pedal to the medal and despite his earlier assurances to the others, drove like a maniac to ensure he wouldn't be late.

Chapter End Notes

I led us into the new chapter. I thought it would be gloriously short. I was wrong, to paraphrase Joseph in New Dawn. But we try things and we learn things, however they turn out. We're getting into the fun bits now that we're properly out of the opening sequence and everyone's moving. I'm real excited! Definitely enjoyed writing Staci's section, and Joshua's too, but oh boy the next chapter had me so impatient to start writing it, I started it while I was still proofreading this one. The chaos has begun, and it's going to be a fun game of Calvinball for all! Metaphorically anyway.

This chapter's title comes from the song "Superstition" by Run River North. Thank you to my good friend Abbie for recommending a wonderful list of songs while I was scratching my head over what ones would suit Staci! I feel it really fits Staci to a T, especially all of his personal struggles in his life both past and present. He's growing still, so we'll see how he does in this AU compared to what happens to him canonically. Parts of this song do fit Joshua as well, the title especially but it is really more so a song for Staci in my opinion. Have a good one, all you fine sorts!
You Give No Quarter For My Love

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning Content for this chapter: Emotional manipulation, unhealthy interpersonal dynamics, misappropriation of religious scripture, distorted religious views that are strictly the characters’ and not the author’s, referenced child abuse via fragments of John's childhood backstory, fantastical body horror via psychic visions, etc.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

John

“You know, if you’d just put your weapon down and come out with your hands up, we could resolve this whole affair quickly and peacefully, Deputy,” John drawled into the radio held in his hand. He was situated comfortably in a chair in the map room, leaning back with one leg resting atop his other thigh, comfortably taking up as much space as it pleased him in an artful sprawl.

He let go of the transmit button, waiting patiently in good humor for the response. He knew the answer was going to be no, but he liked it when sinners played hard to get. That was what he specialized in—making them say Yes.

It was what he enjoyed doing most, in a manner of speaking.

It was what he was called to do, in the deepest sense of the word, through flesh, through blood and bone, right down to his soul.

The radio crackled to life right on time then, as expected.

“With all due respect Mr. Seed, go fuck yourself,” the deputy said.

John laughed to himself, grin spread wide across his face as he brought the radio closer and clicked transmit as casually as could be, “Very well, Deputy Li, but you’d best remember that I did give you a choice to come out willingly. You could have set a better example for the town, you could have chosen the gentler path, the path with less bloodshed, if you’d just said Yes.”
John sat up slowly, resting both his feet on the floor now, his elbows upon his knees as he idly looked over the map of Holland Valley, all the pins and notes laid out neatly and precisely with threads connecting them to various pictures of individuals of interest, each photo accompanied by their own little brief summary of personal information. “You could have spared their lives, Deputy,” John said slowly, voice lower and darker, relishing in this moment of twisting and pressing the knife of doubt deeper into the other man’s psyche, “but you chose the way of pain. You chose the route that will lead to their deaths, and it will be upon your ledger that their spilled blood will be marked...because of your Pride.”

It wouldn’t break the deputy, but that wasn’t the point. It was the beginning, the beginning of leading Deputy Li to understand how thoughtless his so-called heroics and his stubbornness were. Deputy Li needed to understand that actions had consequences, and those consequences extended beyond just oneself. The world was deeply connected, and whether or not people knew it, they were affected by one another in mass scale.

Deputy Li would be resistant to such truths, John knew. The man had a certain kind of social tunnel vision that had been bred into him by Li’s estranged parents, a subtle superiority complex that had been compounded by his upbringing. With better parenting, it could have been caught early and corrected...but there were many people who were unworthy parents who still went on to have children, and those children suffered for their parents’ folly.

The thought made his lip curl up in a faint sneer that came and went like a shift in the weather, a cloud passing before the sun upon the wind.

“That’s rich coming from the man who’s launched a full scale attack on the town,” Li retorted over the radio.

It was less professional, more of a snappish comeback rather than cool and calculated than Li’s demeanor had started out as. Good. That meant John was getting under his skin—easy enough to do with proud sorts like the deputy. John had a more than sufficiently detailed dossier on Deputy Daniel Li’s life to make use of it with his particular talents—both the supernatural and the mundane, if anything about John could be considered “mundane” with his level of skill. That could be considered a moment of pride, but it was a pride well earned—John knew just how persuasive and just how effective he was. His was a rare talent, and it was his to use as he pleased, in service to the Project at Eden’s Gate.

“And I graciously offered you a way to prevent bloodshed Deputy,” John said smoothly without missing a beat. “Yet here you are, valuing your Pride over doing the right thing in this situation. Tsk, tsk, tsk. One would have thought you’d know better, as an officer of the law, sworn to uphold the peace and protect the public.”
“Yeah and that includes standing against unlawful behavior such as attempted kidnapping, murder, and extortion,” Li flatly answered back, perfectly playing the part of the prideful, shortsighted young gun that John had expected once again.

“Tut tut, Deputy Li, you adhere to rules far too readily without truly understanding why, without understanding the nuance of a situation. It’s a problem that’s plagued you all your life, hasn’t it. I’d know, I’ve been there. But the difference between us in this particular aspect would be that I realized how blinded I’d become by society’s expectations, by my parents’ expectations...and you haven’t.

You still feel the need to try to strive and live up to impossible, unhealthy standards, all without asking why. You do it without even thinking, you don’t even consider the consequences, to yourself and to those around you. Again, and again, and again,” John continued, standing to pace to and fro with a completely self-assured stride, “you repeat this cycle, Deputy, and yet you never learn. You refuse to look up and realize, you REFUSE to acknowledge and understand what is before you, within you. But I can help you realize, Deputy Li.

And I will.” The promise tasted sweet upon John’s tongue, dark and heavy with the iron taste of promised blood.

“Because the Collapse is upon us, and with it the end of the world. The end of the world that caused you to suffer so, that made you as you are, Deputy Li. You’ll see. You’ll see when I open your eyes to the truth of it all, the truth of your very own existence and being, and then? Then you will be free from the shackles you’ve struggled against for the entirety of your life, up until even now. You’ll be free from the sins of your parents that they’ve burdened upon your soul, along with all the sins you’ve committed in their name, and in yours.”

He knows Li is frustrated by now, and sullen, and stressed, but there’s also despair in the air, not his but Li’s, soft and fragrant like the steam rising off of a well-brewed cup of coffee—lightly roasted, freshly ground, containing all the aromatic notes of origin and character.

Li won’t say anything, John’s sure—odds against, but if Li does say something it’s more likely just further useless insults, serving more as distractions to keep Li’s attention from his own uncertainty. No class. The deputy would surely latch onto anything John said at the moment as a distraction as well, so now was the time for John to let Li stew in his own doubts and give the man’s overdeveloped guilt complex room to feed on Li’s mental stamina, corroding the other’s resistance. People were so often their own worst enemies, and it was gratifying to give them enough rope to hang themselves with—metaphorically, of course.
Leave a man alone long enough and he’ll come back the worse for wear nine times out of ten. That was partly due to humans being such social creatures...but that was further compounded by society’s disease-ridden attitude towards self reflection and all things nourishing to the soul. No, nevermind what’s good for the body, mind, and spirit, work and sweat and bleed yourself dry until you have everything the Joneses do—but oh look, the Joneses just got the latest cutting edge useless gadget with the massively over-inflated price tag! You’d just have to have it too then, or be ridiculed and seen as pitifully poor and unworthy without it, one of Them and not one of Us—and you don’t want to be one of Them, one of society’s pitiables, rejects, unmentionables.

If you were one of Them then you were one of the deliberately forgotten, poor souls who fell by the wayside, bone and blood and spirit crushed to grease the mortar laid out between the giant blocks of unfeeling stone serving as the base of society.

That’s what Li’s parents had feared, falling and being crushed beneath society’s well-turned heel. That’s the fear they instilled in Li. Like a pile of fresh-caught blue crabs in a bucket, all trying to climb up over each other to get out, nevermind the others. What happens to your fellows doesn’t matter so long as you’re the one who gets out—but no one gets out. Not really. Not while you’re still in the rat race, still in society’s clutches. Li had run from that pressure John knew from combing over the other’s files—had cracked really, dropped out halfway through his second year of university as a medical student despite his 4.0 GPA. Or rather, because of it. Having to keep up that high a level of “perfection” the old fashioned way was not for the faint of heart—or anyone with a whisper of a heart defect, like the prescriptions to treat hypertension and insomnia he’d found under Li’s name, but John suspected they’d been a stopgap measure brought on by the man’s parents instead of addressing the actual problem. The long nights, the grueling pace, the endless need to keep up and to grind...John knew that well too.

He had however found it far easier to simply ensure he could bribe, blackmail, and cajole his professors into giving him the grades that John wanted and his own parents had demanded with far less stress—something Li would turn his nose up at, sneering at the idea as immoral, as if the entire system wasn’t entrenched in the idea of exploitation of the student body at large. As if a college tuition wasn’t a complete and total extortion racket in everything but name at any named college or university—named for the prestige to show you were worth something on your resume, because your resume was all anyone cared about if you didn’t already have connections and wealth at your disposal. Li hadn’t had the high societal advantages John had had, scion of the Duncans that he was.

Ah. Greed, or Envy, then. Envy might fit Li better, if the man’s utmost basest sin wasn’t Pride. Yes. Envy might be a good fit with the way Li would decry those options not presented to him personally as debase and immoral, as if the entire system wasn’t entrenched in the idea of exploitation of the student body at large. As if the world wasn’t all about pulling that wool over the eyes of the lowly sheep to keep them complacent and focused on busy work, keeping the herd moving through the motions of the everyday to wring every last drop of usefulness out of them as beasts of burden. Tell them it’s the right way, praise them for their hard work ethic, twist the wording and the accepted norm so that people think they’re doing the morally right thing...but it’s all just fraud.
It was simply a matter of what was legal and what was not—what was permitted and what was not. You could get away with murder if you had the means, and that usually meant grotesque amounts of money and at the very least an ounce of brains. That was just the way of the world—it was the biggest lie ever told that the world worked based on merit instead of exploitation, and Li had brought into it hook, line and sinker, even in spite of the underlying moral corruption that plagued his outlook: be better and be more than everyone else to make sure you have more, even if you don’t need it. Thus, Pride. Envy. Greed.

And in a way, Sloth.

They were all of them guilty of the sin of Sloth, the moral decay of the soul, the could-have-been-better’s and should-have-been-better’s that no one looked at twice because that would require thinking outside of the groupthink, outside of the norm.

And John knew just from the way Li walked and talked that he’d never thought outside the box in his life. If there were any deviations from what Li viewed as normal, they were brought in by others, held up as an acceptable kind of “normal” en masse, like the common pastimes of hunting, shooting, and afterhours (or during work hours) drinking shared by most if not all of the locals of Fall’s End.

Li had never looked twice past the boundaries set by his family and society in the confines of his own mind, had never so much as tried to understand what stood on the other side of that metaphorical fence. And Li knew it, on some level. John knew. John knew he was feeling that nameless sensation, John knew that was one of the main roots of the man’s doubts and fears that were plaguing Li right now with so many miles between the two of them from here to there.

Ordinarily, John would be picking up such cues from watching a person, their body, their expression—no one is truly capable of hiding all their tells, and few people were as good at holding a poker face as they thought. Ordinarily, this would have required John to be face to face while conducting an in-person conversation with the other individual. This was not an ordinary method he was using right now though, of course. Few things about John Seed were ordinary at all.

Over the phone, or in this case radio, you could gather quite a lot just from when and how someone said something. Even silence was telling in its own right. People were easy to read when you’ve spent your entire life learning the nuances of this overlooked subset language that all had some skill in, but few truly mastered. To master understanding people required one to research, to question, to pay attention. And few people paid that much attention to how much they said indirectly, or when they said nothing at all. Many people needed great big neon signs to understand what another person was telegraphing, for the words to actually be spelled out, of all things. Deduction, inference, observation—all of these were crucial skills in the kit of what made humanity unique, so uniquely capable among all the beasts of land, air and sea to be the rulers of the world. These skills, sharpened to a razor-fine edge, were the keys to the world.
For many though? They misused these God-given gifts with all the grace of a clumsy novitiate. John had been like that once.

Once.

Not anymore. Now? Now, John’s already formidable skills in that arena were only further compounded by this.

God’s gift? Supernatural abilities? Preternatural mastery of skill? It mattered little what it truly was, of more importance was what name to call it to the audience one was spinning it to. For John and John alone though...it was a matter of the soul.

Perhaps God had given him this gift. With Joseph he would call it such, without doubt.

Perhaps it was simply psychic abilities they as a family had lucked out on in the genetic lottery. With Jacob he’d name it that, and that was that.

Perhaps it was malleable, a matter of a little from column A, a little from column B. With Faith, he’d shift to and fro as to what he thought of it, letting her take comfort in the blurry greyness of in-between that hid questions of other things in the spider-silk web of connections crisscrossing through her soul.

He knew she doubted.

He knew she’d hid something.

He had an idea what.

And John had silently applauded her for it...even as he had mentally made a note of what processes he might have to set up for her confession and atonement of that lie. Of her lack of faith in the Project. Her lack of faith in Joseph.
But he couldn’t fault her for that. No, no, not at all. He understood doubt. He really did. You
couldn’t help but doubt, you couldn’t help but feel—or not feel. That’s just what was in your heart,
and God forgave that. God loved that, loved you. God loved everyone...even the sinners. And they
were all sinners, all of them, even John, even Joseph. All of them.

But some of them were more entrenched in sin than others, more... corrupt.

Like he had been.

Like you still are.

Always corrupt, forever corrupt.

Unclean, whispered the phantom voice of his mother Kate.

That instantly soured John’s mood. Even after more than fifteen years in the grave, the memory of
her and father dearest still came back to haunt him on occasion. Not as often as they used to, the
occurrences growing rarer and rarer as time went on...but they weren’t yet firmly entrenched within
the grave in both body and mind. Gone but not forgotten, as much as they deserved to be forgotten
as nothing more than dust on the wind. If only he were so lucky to be able to cut them out of his
memory like the rotten, misbegotten, worthless pile of refuse and SIN they had been and still were,
may they burn in Hell.

That had always been father dearest’s most favorite subject: Hell. Not that they’d said as much to
the adoption agency of course, because

sinners don’t understand a proper fear of God, John. But you will as our son, with God as my
witness.

Ah, Gideon Duncan. Now there had been a real piece of work.

The thought of his parents still made John want to break something—or someone—out of reflex,
but the urge was less pressing now than it had used to be. There were times in the past when his
luxurious home would be neat and tidy to pinpoint precision one day, and an absolute disaster zone
of wreckage the following day during the periods in his life when he tried to get clean from all the
addictions all the sin —trying to get clean meant he’d had nothing to bury his fury and rage with.
Thus externally destructive tendencies surfaced as an outlet, which was a step better than some of the more self-destructive habits he’d used to have.

He’d tried therapists as a method to quell his rage and his pain, to try to understand it all better than he had. He’d walked in and out of more than one office, and some of their suggestions had even been helpful. But ultimately, none of them had ever really been enough.

*Love-starved*, one of them had described it as.

And he had been.

He still was.

That was the hard truth of the matter.

Was he love-starved because he’d been deprived for so long and now in that lifetime of deprivation could never feel like he’d ever have enough... *or was it because his siblings ultimately couldn’t—or perhaps didn’t—give him enough?*

He stared at the map of Holland Valley again, silent and still, radio loosely held in one upraised hand.

He could lay the world at Joseph’s feet, he could give Jacob all the world’s weaponry and armaments, he could give Faith endless fields of Bliss flowers and the freedom to do with them as she pleased...but it’d never be enough. Not for them to give him what he—wanted desired needed—

No.

No, it’d never be enough, would it.

He knew that. He knew that like a famine loosed across the landscape of his soul, decimating all in
its path down to bare earth, the way the world would be striped down to bare bones in the Collapse.

Always needing, always wanting more more more. Endless consumption, endless needing.

He’d talked about it to Joseph and Jacob, and they had tried to accommodate his requests—more talking, more quality time, more words of affirmation, and little affectionate touches that didn’t hurt.

Pain didn’t scare John, either physical or emotional. He’d been through it all enough times to even look death in the face and laugh. It’d be a broken and brittle laugh at the end of it all, but he knew better than to ever beg, ever again.

The silence had gone on long enough now. Deputy Li had clearly elected not to say anything, and couldn’t claim he was busy trying not to get shot at so long as he’d stayed behind cover, per John’s orders to his men to keep the deputy contained within the station until the very end.

That brought a humorless smirk to John’s face, and he took a deep breath, putting his game face back on, that same self-assured sense of boundless confidence that had paved the way for him all throughout his teen years and smoothed the way through his adult life, even if he didn’t feel it.

He hated it, hated the lying instead of just being honest, but sometimes you needed to put on a false front to better coax people down the path you wanted them to go down. With any luck...after the Collapse...the need for him to lie would diminish to a rarity. It had decreased during his time at the Project, but he knew well enough the ways of life to know lies would always be a part of everyone’s lives to some degree. It was simply a matter of whether one could be honest with the ones who mattered most about the happenings that mattered most, in the times of most import.

He felt a little bit better, knowing he at least could be honest with his Family and his people for the most part. Could be, but he wasn’t entirely honest with them all just yet. It was a work in progress...and one day he would be. But not yet. Trust took time to build, excluding extreme circumstances.

But then, this was the beginning of the End. What more extreme circumstance could they wish for?

Holding up the radio with his thumb poised over the transmit button once more, John considered what words he wanted to say to send Deputy Li off with. What words to say, to cement that it was
Li’s fault that the people of Fall’s End still resisted the Reaping, still insisted on bloodstained struggle rather than peaceful surrender.

It was simple enough, just a farewell address with a final stab at the man’s pride, leaving the door open for Li to surrender even though they both knew Li’s pride would never allow it. Simple and easy, a standard sort of statement John had given as a polite and friendly barbed threat in passing that would inevitably come true, a standard practice in the world of power and politics. Nothing more than that.

The radio turned into a blur as he hurled it against the wall in an impassioned fit of rage. The plastic outer case split open along the seams, the parts clattering down in a disemboweled, interconnected heap upon the floor.

Grabbing the nearest decorative pillow on hand, John shoved it against his own face and screamed into it as loudly as his lungs could manage until his breath was spent.

F**K THE BASTARD AND THE HORSE HE RODE IN ON, LI COULD HAVE SAVED MORE OF THE TOWNSFOLK IF HE’D BEEN WILLING TO SWALLOW HIS FUCKING PRIDE. Now? Now they were going to get the stupid idea stuck inside of their heads that fighting against the Project was the way to go, instead of just coming in quietly and waiting out the Collapse.

WHY THE F**K SHOULD WE SAVE ANY OF THEM IF THEY’RE TOO STUPID TO LIVE?

Because Joseph said so, his own thoughts reminded him in a mocking sing-song tone.

Because they deserve not to be forgotten, John.

Because they deserve atonement, John.

Because they deserve love, John.

F**K THEM ALL, F**K ALL THE GODDAMN SINNERS AND LET THEM BURN IN HELL FOR THEIR BLISSFUL IMMORALITY AND DISCONSIDERATE WAYS. THEY’D NEVER COME TO HIS OR HIS BROTHERS’ AID. THEY’D NEVER COME TO ANY OF THE PROJECT MEMBERS’ AID. HE’D HEARD THEIR STORIES, OVER A THOUSAND OF THEM ALL TOLD, AND HE KNEW. HE KNEW HOW THE WORLD AS A WHOLE HAD
THE PEOPLE OF THE PROJECT HAD BEEN FORGOTTEN BY THE SINNERS AND THEIR SOCIETY.

THE PEOPLE OF THE PROJECT HAD CHOSEN TO ATONE, HAD STRUGGLED TO ACHIEVE IT, TO BECOME BETTER THAN THEY HAD BEEN EVER BEFORE ON THEIR OWN INITIATIVE. THEIR OWN CHOICE.

THE PEOPLE OF THE PROJECT HAD EARNED AND RECIPROCATED THE PROJECT’S LOVE.

WHY DID THE SINNERS DESERVE ALL OF THIS, WHEN THEY WERE SO UNGRATEFUL?

SO UNWORTHY.

The smell of rage was the smell of blood, metallic and heady and permeating through the skin as if his veins were boiling hot, evaporating in crimson trails from his person. He wasn’t bleeding, not at all, but God Almighty he wanted blood and REVENGE for all this wasted time and blood and all this unnecessary fighting and hurt.

ALL DEPUTY LI HAD TO DO, WAS SAY FUCKING YES.

THAT WAS IT. THAT WAS ALL HE’D HAD TO DO, AND IT COULD’VE HELPED SPUR ON OTHERS TO PUT ASIDE SENSELESS BLOODSHED.

But no. They valued their crass little falsehoods of freedom more so than any greater purpose.

SELFISH LITTLE DRUG-DREAMS OF FALSE UNTHINKING FREEDOM.

He’d rather just leave them to burn in the Collapse if they said no. Let the sinners go as they would, the Project had enough for the population to be genetically viable, certainly for the short term. Long term? Science was still out to lunch on that. Some counts said as little as one hundred
healthy humans was all that was needed—others, well, others were of the opinion that humanity
would need well over ten thousand.

So more would be welcome to add to their numbers, but not as fucking unbelievers.

He didn’t understand why Joseph insisted on saving those who did not want to be saved. He hated
them for it, just a little bit. It was casting pearls before swine, the sinners wouldn’t appreciate the
gift because they hadn’t elected to willingly partake, because they had been forced to accept
salvation. And forced salvation wasn’t salvation. They needed to say fucking YES on their own
damn motivation.

But, if Joseph wanted obedient little broken minions, John could certainly make them so. Jacob
could make them. Faith could make them.

John knew on some level Joseph didn’t actually want that...but Joseph had this odd tunnel-vision
mixed with what John could only call naïveté—how could Joseph have anything like a naive
outlook of the world after all they’d been through John would never know.

That thought left John’s intuition nagging at him though. There was something he didn’t know,
couldn’t see. His focus shifted, and he prodded at the thought, turning it over in his head. Joseph
was too smart for this. So it wasn’t naïveté, surely. But what would motivate his brother to persist
on this course of action?

John pulled his face from the decorative pillow, smoothing it out with a hand, rubbing his
fingertips over the silken embroidered threading partially in thought, partially to soothe his own
remaining ruffled feathers.

Something was driving Joseph’s insistence there, and John was sure it wasn’t The “Voice”, or God,
or whatever powers that were. That something was a matter much more human, particular to
Joseph’s mental makeup.

But what?

Something he hasn’t told us...or at least, hasn’t told me.

That stung a bit, and John was left wondering if Jacob knew something Joseph had entrusted him
with that Joseph hadn’t seen fit to entrust John with.

That was Joseph’s prerogative naturally, as it was with anyone deciding what to tell of their life and what not to...but that didn’t change the fact that hiding something big—and John’s intuition told him it was big/impactful/important in some form or other to Joseph to affect his brother so—still hurt.

John had shared all that had happened to him in his life. Even the parts that still hurt him up to the present day—the parts that might not ever stop hurting him.

Joseph hadn’t, John could tell.

He knew Jacob hadn’t told them everything either.

That lack of trust,—that lack of intimacy—of real, genuine, emotional connection hurt. You couldn’t genuinely love someone unless they chose to tell you everything. Everything that they were, everything they had been, how they had come to be as they were now, their hopes and dreams from past and present and future...

John had gotten more honesty and heartbaring connection from strangers and followers of the Project than he had from his brothers in totality. From his sisters so-named Faith too.

Joseph, Jacob and Faith had been honest with him...up to a point. They still kept secrets. They still lied. To themselves, through omission, and thus to him. So John loved them the best he could...but it was at best an incomplete love, and they were all the more separate in this existence he had long ago learned was so utterly a lone, individual souls passing each other like ships at sea in the night.

You could communicate, and through that build tenuous connections to one another on the hope that what you said was what you meant, and what you meant was what the other person interpreted your words to mean, that the other’s interpretation was the same as yours. But it was never really truly the same, only close enough.

Close enough to understand.

Close enough to see the nightmare-dark shade of the ill-defined outlines that made up another person’s entirety, the entirety of all those things both good and bad and everything else that no one
else could ever really truly see inside another’s head. Only ever the imprints, the dark matter warping of space as the world bent around them, little gravity wells to show that something was there, something.

Something.

But it was always a guess, even when you knew, but it wasn’t ever truly knowing for sure what was, only knowing how that dark matter warped the world around it. Predictable effects. The observable mathematics of psychology, of emotion, of behavior.

You could understand the numbers, the formula, the equations and calculate down to a nicety how someone would act or react.

But as beautiful as the numbers and their functions were, as elegant as it was to understand the mechanisms and how they mixed and matched to drive behavior...it was still just the silhouettes.

You could never really know the ghost in the machine.

The soul.

You could get close, close enough to almost touch another’s soul, that feeling of looking at someone else and knowing them, and knowing that they knew you too.

He knew it existed because of the hints of that feeling when his brothers, his Family, would open up and see him, while letting him see them. Fleeting moments of light refracted off of broken mirrors, sunlight tracing sharp and shattered edges.

He’d seen it he’d seen it and it was right there they could have it—

They could have had it all.

They could have it all, still.
But his brothers were still so afraid. It made John so angry and sad and afraid for them that their fear would drive them to an end that would be so full of regret that he could already taste it like blood like iron upon his tongue bitter and sweet and sour and sad so full of rage overflowing into despair and yet so hollow—

Why.

John breathed out an unsteady breath, some faint echo in his head trying to count in order to calm but there went the rest of him too caught up in the feeling of too much that threatened to shake him apart from the ribcage out, like the bones and heart and lungs were all going to splatter outwards in red and white and pink the way a plume of fire from an explosion roiled and engulfed the air before dying out into smoke and falling ash, burning spring flowers of both destruction and light. Light, and guidance.

Like Joseph.

Joseph, who was standing in the doorway of John’s map room, looking on at him silently, for who knew how long. He did that a lot, just watched.

For a man who could motivate and rally people to him as powerfully as Joseph did...there were times John was incredibly certain that Joseph just did not understand people. Not the way John did. Joseph didn’t work the way John did either, not internally, nor in how they interacted with people.

It hurt John a little in ways to see how Joseph tried, tried in his own way to reach out and make that connection in the dark empty spaces between souls with the others around him in the only ways Joseph knew how—with touch, with words. Joseph tried. He tried, and in a way, people understood. People heard. People rallied to their banner.

But they didn’t really understand Joseph. Not the Father, but just Joseph.

Joseph the ordinary man. A man chosen by God, or perhaps Fate, yes, but still a man nonetheless. One imbued with a remarkable purpose and drive...but remarkable people usually were. That was why the faithful flocked to Joseph in droves. To Jacob. To Faith. To John.

But it was also why Joseph and in ways Jacob and Faith too, alongside John, were at times so incredibly lonely.
Lonely in the way that Jacob and Joseph and Faith lied.

Everyone lied, John accepted that fact.

But did they have to lie to each other?

To him?

Even now Joseph was lying with how his face was so completely still, just like the rest of him as he stood watching.

Watching, and trying to understand. Understand, but not react. Not showing what he was feeling without checking that it was an appropriate feeling first. That it was a safe feeling first.

His brother was a master showman in his own right, they all were, but the fact that Joseph still did this, with him, with Family, made John angry in the saddest of ways where anger felt too much like the ephemeral, tumultuous and twisting crests on ocean waves, spun up from dark and deep and cold waters with too many heartbreaks and shipwrecks lying down below to be anything else but sad.

It made him angry and sad because life had made Joseph this way. Life had been the cruel lashings of Mad Old Seed, the biological father John could barely remember and didn’t care to, beyond the abstract phantasms of bible-spewing drunken rages and a Devil-sent fondness of wielding a belt.

No, John didn’t remember their old mad father, but he remembered the lashings, the emptiness, the way Old Mad Seed had bent the world around him for all three of them when they were so much smaller. He remembered how it bent and in John’s opinion, broke the world for Joseph and Jacob...and for John too, to a lesser extent. But the breaking of John’s world was more thoroughly laid at the feet of the Duncans, and at the feet of the system that had broken his little broken family apart even further, scattering them to the winds.

He can still see how those world bending rends in space had scarred over, how they had shaped Joseph, shaped Jacob, the way gardeners shaped bonsai trees, were gardeners demons from hell and the bonsai trees helpless souls of young children.

Warped, scarred, forever more changed. He could see it, but he knew not everyone could. Scars of
the mind, of the soul, were invisible. Invisible, unless you looked at how they warped the fabric of the world around them. Warped the behaviors and mechanisms of a person’s words and actions.

This calculus of the soul, of spiritual wounds and swiss watch gears that made up each individual’s personality, that explained what made them tick, was John’s specialty.

He could never claim to know everything of course—that’d be Pride—but it was the honest to God truth to say he was damn good with the many, many cases that he’d handled already. There’d been much he’d learned about the how and why.

There was still much to learn about how to actually change the internal mechanisms, and not just the external results.

You could do much to convince a person to act a certain way, to do a certain thing. But to change what they believed, to change what motivated them?

No. That was no easy feat.

Wisdom dictated that ultimately only the individual in question could really change those gears inside the dark places of their head where no one else could go.

But one could certainly encourage people to make that choice at times, given sufficient external change.

Such as in the face of adversity and extreme hardship. That was something both he and Jacob had latched onto in their own ways. Not immediately or directly at first...but they had both arrived at that conclusion and found that, more often than not, you could pull from people personal and universal truths, and help them see when they were stripped down to their bare, raw souls.

Their basest animalism, in Jacob’s case.

Their most honest self, in John’s.

Joseph didn’t entirely understand that. He did, intellectually...and Joseph had certainly suffered
enough to have experienced those truths, so their middle brother grasped it somewhat on that other level...but Joseph didn’t accept it. Didn’t entirely accept those truths, that connection with nature’s violent lack of moral principle, that bare faced honesty of all that you are, that Jacob and John had found.

No, Joseph preferred Faith’s honeysuckle-sweet lies. Her drug-fueled cajoling of admissions via the Bliss.

John hated that.

He HATED that because what in all the nine levels of Hell was it worth to have someone admit their darkest truths if those truths meant and inspired nothing? If the confessor didn’t feel the weight of their own words, the realness of their admission, didn’t make the conscious choice to do it for whatever reason be it fear, pain, faith, or trust?

It was still a truth when under the influence of the Bliss, yes, but if you didn’t feel it, did it even matter?

They were not in the business of stealing secrets to control and manipulate political strings—the Bliss’s effectiveness would be grand for that, minus the mindfuckery and escapist-addictions it provided.

The Bliss was a fucking lie, and all it did, in John’s opinion, and Jacob’s too John knew, was make people weak. It made them run away rather than solve their problems, and people were all too good at running away as it was, they didn’t need more help in that regard.

But Faith was never one to truly face her problems. No, she preferred to drug her problems into submission, whether it was her personal problems or other people.

She always had, even before. Before she came to the Project, before she became one of the faithful, before she became Faith.

The aversion to conflict was beaten into her by her parents, John knew. She let that fear and trauma shape her so entirely, it was laughable in his private opinion that she wasn’t named Fear instead with how she guided people this way and that with the fear of losing the Bliss. The fear of facing their problems. The fear of reality.
Reality was an awful place. John understood that. Many had come to the Project because it was so incredibly and so terribly awful.

But they were here now, here at the Project. They shouldn’t still have to run. If there were demons in their heads that still needed dealing with, drugging themselves into crack-twitchy, zombie-shambling Angels wasn’t the better way to deal with it.

It was the same bullshit the system they all so hated had used, and Joseph and Faith didn’t understand. They saw, but chose not to see. They claimed their cause was different. And it was, in a way. But the method was still the same. The result, spiritually, was still the same.

Asylum patients, undesirables, drugged into docility and complacency.

They were given about the same respect as those patients were as well, little care and consideration beyond what was needed to pass muster, and upon death nothing more than a toss into a mass pauper’s grave.

No appreciation for the inner workings of the soul, the individuality made up of a hundred thousand little differences and more.

Just drug-stupored dreams of complacency without even shreds of their proper selves and souls left—little wonder they got no final rites or final respects, they were even less than people when they were Angels.

He hated that she called them that—called them ANGELS, twisting Joseph’s word, twisting beliefs, expectations, twisting the PATH the faithful took—

But she was effective. She was capable. She was soft and deadly in a way that Joseph found more palatable than the bloody work of his brothers.

Joseph was blind to the sins of humanity. Blind to the fact that sin and humanity were bound inseparably as part of the inherent nature of people. Taking that sin, that temptation, that choice away from people? That wouldn’t change the nature of beast.

No, the Devil only needed idle hands, and mischief would always find a way.
And there was no point in saving humanity, if it was only in the form of hollow and broken little drug addicts. He respected Faith’s ruthlessness, but he despised her cowardice and how she’d neuter the world to salve her own damn fucking fears.

He had mixed opinions on whether she should live to see the New Eden.

He didn’t think she was a good influence on Joseph, or Jacob either.

Useful, yes. But dangerous like the Bliss was, sweet poison that didn’t kill so much as warp and bend and drain the soul dry.

He wanted her gone and away from his fucking Family, not hers. Never truly hers. She didn’t help, she only buried bodies.

And he’d be damned if he’d let her bury Joseph and Jacob alive in their fears and doubts in the Bliss.

She meant well, in her own twisted way. Hell, they all did. But the difference was, the brothers Seed all knew what they did was monstrous, to some extent or other. Faith denied it, to herself and others, even if she admitted it was so out loud.

Lies upon lies upon lies.

Joseph was a bit more like her in that regard. Not as bad, nowhere near as in denial about that aspect of their actions and lives...but that was one reason why Joseph took such a shine to her. To Rachel.

There were other reasons too reasons he didn’t tell us, didn’t tell me—

The thought that Joseph might have told Faith of all people whatever it was that he didn’t tell John always, always made John’s blood rage and boil with breathtaking speed, like the burning molten air and debris that came as a speed-blurring rush down volcanic mountain sides in a pyroclastic flow.
Envy.

She didn’t deserve that trust, that closeness when all she did was enable and poison Joseph into complacency with whatever dark truths he was leaving to fester in his soul.

And it hurt to think Joseph didn’t want to trust John with that, even if it wasn’t to help, as horrendously frustrating as that would undoubtedly be, at least then John would know. At least then, Joseph and he would see eye to eye more so than they did now.

At least then he could do more to support Joseph as his brother and not just as his Herald.

It didn’t have to be so lonely.

But the choices they made, out of love, out of fear, still managed to leave them all so very, very alone.

And John wasn’t certain if they—all of them—would ever get better at this.

Maybe if they’d started this all when they were younger, wounds still fresh and raw running blood red and spring sap green before age had grown tree ring layers over the scars into gnarled and twisted entanglements, maybe they would’ve been better.

But that wasn’t what was and it isn’t what is.

This is their reality, and this is what they have to work with.

And maybe it wouldn’t work out, in the end.

Some things just didn’t. Relationships, dreams, lives.

Some star crossed loves withered up alongside the once fondly remembered bouquet of roses.
Some heart held passions died stillborn, because life wasn’t fair, because people invested in workers, not dreamers. Some people died young, from illness or violence, be they either in the grave, or sleepwalking through life while too torn up from trauma to be anything more than still-living ghosts.

John knows Joseph can see all this crossing his face, all these thoughts, all these feelings—it’s a long way John’s come from hiding everything, but now it’s so damn hard to not just show everything.

And why shouldn’t he show everything, bleeding his emotions out like a car crash victim bleeding out across the scarlet spattered pavement? It’s a pendulum swing of extremes from one far end to the other, John knows, and he’s still trying to find the middle, the balance, the best way...but he’s not there yet. He’s still here on the far side of showing and feeling everything and too much. It’s too much for a lot of people.

It’s too much for Joseph, John knows.

Not all the time. But sometimes? Sometimes Joseph’s little brother is too much feeling, too much sin, too much rage for Joseph to know what to do with.

Joseph is a man of measured extremes. Compartmentalized like cubicle farms, each emotion set in its own little neat square, never mixing and matching. It’s always a list of emotions for Joseph, one emotion after another, bullet points that are examined calmly one at a time before moving on to the next one like items to be discussed at a board meeting.

It drives John mad.

John is a man of messy extremes, a thousand and one different things to feel all at once like a whirlwind of colors, like leaves and petals in a blurred maelstrom of everything and not enough to be just one thing. A hurricane shredding its way through a forest, all red and gold and green and orange, foliage that looks like embers in air, life that’s dying and life that’s moving.

Calm is something John can do, when the situation is calm and all is well, in those precious moments of normality they’ve found with each other—in the breakfast nook, sitting out back on the porch, riding in the car together, taking a walk along the riverside.

But he isn’t calm now. Not in situations like this, not when he feels anything but calm, when he’s
the furthest thing from calm.

And Joseph still struggles with learning how to deal with John, with feeling.

Of them all, Joseph is the most distanced one from his own emotions—and wasn’t that fucking saying something with Jacob in the running too.

But Jacob feels, and their big brother’s feelings run deep and wild, a raging current and force of nature in their own right—he’s just gotten more elusive about it when in front of select company. With John though? With Jacob’s own people, his Chosen? Jacob is honest about the coming and going of his moods, shifting like the weather on fickle high winds. Fickle and quick to change, yes, but dependable—there will be rain, there will be sun, there will be wind, eventually. You need only wait. Their big brother’s mood shifts had nothing on John’s though, which John openly acknowledged.

That was another reason why Joseph had an easier time with Jacob than with John—Jacob felt intensely, but it was a quieter intensity until the bullets rang out and shattered the air.

John was not quiet. Not anymore.

“Joseph.” He said, a bit more curtly than he’d meant to. It was more to prompt his brother to do something, say something, than just stand there staring at him like an unfathomable puzzle—it made John feel too distant from the here and now and from Joseph, like there was a fucking chasm between the two of them.

It pissed him off.

He wasn’t pissed at Joseph though, not really. It was hard to be mad at a man who took anger with such a blank face, like it was just another piece of bureaucratic paperwork to stamp and file. On the other hand, that blankness and lack of reaction rankled at times, and rankled deeply. But, it was how Joseph had adapted to survive, not just Old Mad Seed’s beatings, but all the rest of the shit the world had seen fit to throw at him too.

“Angry, John?” Joseph inquired as he slowly closed the distance between them, knowing perfectly well that John was indeed angry, and that John knew that Joseph knew that, but asking anyway in the usual Joseph-style attempt to defuse and calm familial situations down through calm and sedate-paced conversational inquiries.
John just gave his brother the most unimpressed, flat stare. “Among other things, yes.”

Annoyed was now on the list too, but only minutely. He didn’t want to be calmed, he wanted Joseph to understand and to feel something in response—John wanted acknowledgement, affirmation, that what he said and felt was heard and understood by someone else in this giant lonely world full of numbed indifference and hate.

But one couldn’t say Joseph’s methods were ineffective, even when you knew he was doing it—and Joseph had long ago learned not to use his God-given gifts on John without asking. That much at least helped mollify John in part.

Joseph reached out, hands resting lightly upon John’s shoulders, before reaching up to frame John’s face. From anyone else it would’ve fallen straight into a far too familiar level of gestures, and John would’ve refused it—he hated when people got their hands too close to his face, outside of select situations. Bad memories there, even if he hadn’t flinched in decades.

John didn’t know where Joseph had picked it up as a habit—certainly not from Jacob. He accepted it, and it didn’t bother him anymore. It did leave left him a bit sour in this instance though. That gesture was addressing the symptoms, not the root of the matter. They didn’t see eye to eye on what was and was not acceptable policy with regards to the sinners, which just meant more of these stalemates, more dissatisfaction, more little hiccups of tension.

John was sick of them—the problem was, he knew Joseph was getting sick of them too. And Joseph, patient though he was, willing as he was to persist for as long as necessary to achieve his ends, was also incredibly, incredibly stubborn.

And so fucking damn sure that his way was the best way because the Voice said so. The Voice picked him. Picked Joseph to hear the master plan for humanity, and said he had to go gather his brothers to enact it. But the actual fucking wording had been pretty damn vague with more loopholes than substance in John’s professional opinion—but his specialty as a lawyer was in real estate law, not contract law. Handling other areas of law were what the rest of his legal team were for.

“I know the times upon us are trying, and that reaching out to those who refuse to listen even more so John,” Joseph said, voice pitched soft and soothing as it always was in situations like this, “but we must be collected, and strong. You understand that, don’t you?”

And just like that John was back to full on fury and rage.
HE WAS FUCKING TRYING, AND HE WAS BEING COLLECTED IN FRONT OF THE GOD DAMN SINNERS, THAT’S WHY HE WAS DOING HIS LITTLE BITCH FIT IN HIS PRIVATE OFFICE.

He took a deep breath, held it for a few seconds while counting silently in his head, before breathing out through his mouth as slowly as he could manage, trying to stifle the urge to explode.

He didn’t hide that this was what he was doing, and he watched as Joseph’s brows drew together as the only tell that he was acknowledging the mere existence of John’s rage. More concern, not as to why John was angry, but only that John’s anger was not according to plan, not what Joseph wanted in his picture perfect idealization of what they should be as a family and as Family, instead of looking at what was.

“I do, ” John hissed, voice low and laden to the gills with venom. “That’s why I’m not chewing Deputy Li out. It’s why I’m having my little “hissy fit” in private where no one can see, minus people who walk in without knocking.”

His glare directed at Joseph simmered down to a glower as his anger flared out and banked itself into embers, still far too hot to the touch but nowhere near as dramatic as a full fledged flame. The emotion in his voice likewise eased back a tad...but his displeasure was still making itself markedly known. “It’s all under control, Joseph. I’m putting forward a good front for the Project just the way you like it, just as I have in the years leading up to this point, but you have to realize—these people don’t want to listen. Our little blogger invaders aren’t keen on listening, aside from the one little lost lamb that was so desperate for acceptance and an easy escape from her teenage-angst brand of loneliness she drugged her brain into ignoring her problems instead of confronting them.”

Now he’s just fucking upset, shoving the pillow he’d been holding against Joseph’s chest with a solid thump. It’s not quite enough force to really make an effort to push Joseph away, not enough to even really make Joseph move, but it’s enough to make the sentiment clear: Move.

But underlying that sentiment was the other contradicting one: Don’t go.

Don’t leave me.

The corners of Joseph’s mouth turn down minutely, cracks in his mask showing only in miniscule details because that’s all Joseph dares show, and it’s too little. Not enough.
Never enough.

Never.

Not even with the slight tightening of Joseph’s grip on John’s face and the back of his neck—not tight enough to hurt or even pressure much, but there are bad memories that lurk on the sidelines for their time to shine again.

He trusts Joseph. But he also knows Joseph.

Now John’s just cold and angry in a sad way that feels a little hurt when a little means a lot because if you admit it’s more than it is then the feeling might be too much.

But John’s always too much, these days. And knowing this makes him reckless in a way that sends them both down a path made of words that hurt, not from malice, just from pain wanting recognition even if it means they’re both hurting instead of comforting.

“You don’t trust me the way you trust Faith, Joseph. I told you we should’ve taken more precautions with that Lindsey girl—”

“Linny,” Joseph corrected gently, as if it mattered with how Faith treated the Angels and those who were practically an Angel in everything but the final fucking jump off the Goddamn metaphorical ledge.

The girl’s given name was fucking Lindsey, shortened to Linny to her friends and family. Now, it was hardly of any import since the girl barely answered to either name any more noticeably than a simple “hey you”.

And what was the point, then?

Lindsey, Linny, it wouldn’t matter if the damn druggie of a girl ended up lost in the Bliss with how heavy her use of Bliss was running, last John checked. Too many of the ones that followed Faith were like that, always toeing the line where the whole world turns to impressionist paintings and they’re as far away from it as they possibly can be, but not quite enough to lose themselves in that
one last little step of gone forever, leaving their body behind as an Angel.

_Soulless._

Fucking damned and unable to do a Goddamn thing to repent and save themselves because they’re too busy chasing the butterfly high of the Bliss.

They could’ve been _saved_, if it wasn’t for Faith’s enabling of their addictions.

Their _sin._

John’s sin too, once upon a time. Back then? If he’d had the option of the Bliss? He would’ve done the same. He isn’t sure he would’ve come back, honestly.

It’s why he hates seeing them so, because he sees himself in their vacant eyes, their false-happiness that comes from a pile of glittering white dust.

He’s been there.

Some days he’s still tempted. Some days he’s sorely tempted. He misses it in a bad way, not because it fulfills him but because it’s a habit that feels _good_ —that’s what addiction was, after all.

And God knew he’d tried every last indulgence from Hell and back again, tried them in such novel ways and with such indulgent levels of luxury beyond what most if not all members of Eden’s Gate could fathom.

He knew the sins so much better and so much more personally than just taking a hit. He’d taken the hit and taken the hit apart, taken the drug users apart, the drug dealers, the drugs.

He’d understood before he’d ever had words for it just how damn hollow that happiness was, he’d felt it in his bones and in his blood and in his heart and he’d understood it was absence, trying to fill emptiness with another kind of emptiness to make it all seem normal and plausible and livable.
But it was never that.

Never.

It was an unending hunger for what wasn’t there, a famine for something else when all they could find was the empty calories of spiritual junk food to kill themselves faster and lie to themselves that this was enough, this would keep them alive for now, this was worth it.

Consumption without knowledge. Without understanding.

If they didn’t know, if you didn’t know, how were you supposed to make a better more informed decision? How were you supposed to learn from your mistakes, to be taught right from wrong, good from bad, healthy from destructive, if you weren’t there to know?

A person needed to learn, to understand, to Confess, and then they could Atone, and it would have meaning.

Drugs didn’t mean anything. They were a tool at best, a temptation at worst.

Sloth.

Faith tempted too many into the sin of Sloth, and Joseph turned a blind eye to it because it suited the Project’s purpose, because they’d be safe enough for the Collapse, because they listened so fucking faithfully to the words of the Father and his Heralds—but they didn’t understand.

THEY DIDN’T CARE.

THEY DIDN’T CARE SO LONG AS THEIR FUCKING HIGH WASN’T INTERRUPTED.

No, so long as they got what they wanted, their little fucking Bliss dream of fake happiness, a happiness that came in a pill bottle or a puff of glittering dust instead of meaningful human connection and engagement with one another like Joseph fucking PREACHED—
Goddamn but he was tired of that. Tired of Joseph and Faith just not fucking owning up to their own damn hypocrisies and the sins therein openly and respectfully. None of this brushing it off shit for later with justifications that it wasn’t actually a sin because they were saving people. Jacob at least did state it was sin, the things he did, he’d look you right in the eye and say so, and that? John respected that.

And John? He fucking knew and admitted that what the sinners who came unwillingly to his Gate were going through was nothing more than forced conversion. But they’d get an experience that could change their lives for the better if they took it that way, in a similar vein as Jacob’s trials...when those trials were repurposed towards actual attempted salvation, even if it meant going through Hell to do so.

It was easier if people would just say Yes. For them, for him, for everyone. But they had to mean it, they had to want it, want salvation.

Wanting drugs wasn’t the same thing, not by a fucking longshot.

And that was all that was left when you made a fucking Angel—that want, that hollow craving and appetite for addiction and mindless repetition of sin.

And isn’t that just a bitter taste in John’s mouth, because Angels aren’t fucking saved in his opinion—they can’t fucking Atone if their brains are rotted out of their skull and their souls are wandered off into God knows where in the Bliss until their bodies finally give up the ghost and die.

He hates Angels, hates the way Faith uses the Bliss to excess, hates how her people think that just taking a drug is an acceptable path to salvation.

He’s tired, burned himself out again in a flash fire second because he knows himself, and he knows Joseph. He knows how this is going to go, the way it always goes.

The silence stretched between them, and John already knows he’s lost, as always, and the chasm’s still there, between him and his brother, between where they should be in John’s opinion, between who they could be as people.

But he’s not the one the Voice fucking chose. He’s only meant to be a follower, even as a Herald, not the one steering their course.
“Linny,” John says, accepting the correction, yielding the name, and already sliding towards
yielding this same damn fruitless rage and fight to Joseph the way he always does, because
nothing’s changed. Nothing will change from what he can see, until something does, either from
Joseph’s end or from an external source. “You should have listened to me. I told you having her
join without finessing her separation from her family was going to bring trouble, and here we
fucking are, ushering in the Collapse.”

“John, John…” Joseph pressed in just a little bit closer, a tiny step forward as John relented the
fight, still holding the pillow between them, but it was a meaningless gesture—just an echo of the
metaphorical barrier between them both, only John couldn’t remove the emotional gap between
them the way he could with a mere pillow.

“John.” Joseph pressed his forehead gently against John’s, and John closed his eyes, accepting, and
giving up again. There was nothing to do but to say Goddamn fucking Yes to doing things Joseph’s
way, even if it made John so fucking unhappy.

“To save humanity,” as if humanity was fucking worth saving when so much of it didn’t want to be
saved.

But Joseph’s the fucking Father, and we’re all his fucking children.

And no one listens to children or what they want.

Both Joseph and Jacob at the end of the day still saw him as their baby brother, a child to be taken
care of in the moments when push came to shove, because his skills weren’t obviously hyper-
masculine with the whole fucking warrior ethos Jacob had, sure, he could’ve seen that line of
reasoning coming from Jacob at least and John would’ve called that the bullshit it was to Jacob’s
face if their older brother had ever thought to try pulling that line on him, but Joseph? What was
Joseph’s fucking reasoning, other than once upon a time, John had been a baby when Joseph had
been old enough to walk, talk, and change John’s nappies? They were both adults now. Joseph
didn’t fight and kill the way Jacob did, same as John. They both dealt with people in less warlike
more social ways, and John did his job well. He knew he did—when he was allowed to.

It was easier to avoid trouble and head it off at the pass before it came to fruition than it was to
clean up a Goddamn mess that was already made, a fact that none of his siblings really seemed to
fully appreciate. Jacob on a good day understood that, but on the bad days there went Jacob, just as
likely to fucking leave the corpse out in broad daylight covered in his fingerprints and the barn on
fire as he was to understand discretion and tact.
And Faith? Well...fuck Faith as the Father’s latest favorite pretty little princess of a stand-in sister and child to dote on. Fucking letting the Angels just wander about in broad daylight where anyone in or outside of the Project could see—Jacob might have been able to sell the idea that the Angels had made an “ultimate” kind of sacrifice for the Project, but John hadn’t been selecting for fucking fanatics in his ranks. He’d been selecting for useful people with diverse skills over malleability. How the fuck were you supposed to explain fucking ANGELS? He knew many of his doubted Faith’s methods, and he agreed with them. Even some of Jacob’s had dissented with it, he knew.

Jacob himself?

...John wasn’t sure where Jacob sat on that.

Jacob wouldn’t tell him. Wouldn’t tell him a thing about it.

Which made John suspect Jacob was elbow deep in something similar with those Judges of his, maybe even influencing Jacob’s followers that way too, because if Jacob was doing something like that and he lied to John about it? John would know. Jacob knew that. They all knew that.

John was the best fucking Goddamn lie detector on the fucking planet, short of an actual omnipotent God in his opinion. And that was why his own damn siblings refused to fucking tell him anything about the fuckery they got up to if they thought he’d disapprove.

And he would disapprove if they were doing what he thought they were doing.

Joseph let them all get away with all the wrong things, including John himself, in all honesty. There were certain things people had to be held accountable for, and Joseph was doing it wrong. John didn’t understand why, because this kind of discipline was easy to understand in his opinion for how to run a large, complex group of people like the Project was.

But then, Joseph had never been a leader before now. Jacob had. John had. But not Joseph, and not Faith.

And what a crash course to learn on the fly, with the end of the world right around the corner.
Joseph said he wanted to save people. And Joseph was honest about that. But what Joseph didn’t say was all the other things Joseph wanted, that maybe Joseph hadn’t admitted even to himself. And all those other things Joseph wanted? Those were warping their direction as they moved forward. That was why this was all such a mess. Because Joseph got what Joseph wanted...and John didn’t know how to sway someone who had nothing to fucking lose—well. Nothing John would threaten.

Joseph knew this, too. Knew that John wouldn’t threaten the one thing Joseph had and valued above anything else in the world: Family. Because that was the one thing John wasn’t willing to give up either, not even bluffing a threat of it. John would never threaten to leave, because Joseph would know it was a hollow threat.

They were all they had, the Seed Family, even among the Project, there was still an invisible line drawn between Them and Us, even among the faithful.

But John also drew an additional circle around him and his brothers that excluded Faith—she wasn’t trustworthy, she wasn’t *Family*. She wanted the way a greedy child wanted, in totality with little understanding of the harm she caused.

Well. Perhaps “understanding” was the wrong word. *Appreciation*. She’d come from nothing, like the Seed brothers had, but she still *valued* nothing other than how it served her interests. Her love was the measured clinical dose of a drug hit, just enough to get a person high and hooked, and then it was all a fucking drug deal transaction where she came out better at the expense of others.

He knew the type. He’d mingled with that kind all too often with far more glamorous surroundings, all of them dressed in designer clothes, sipping on imported wines, and nibbling on Michelin Star quality canapés. They’d had a prettier kind of misery and had grown up sharpening their claws on far more powerful and resourceful people—he wouldn’t deign to say those marks were necessarily smarter than the schmucks Faith reeled in by the bucket load like it was trout fishing season.

No, she preyed on the weakest of the weak, and those who weren’t taken in by her pretty little lies, she drugged into submission until they couldn’t formulate a coherent thought.

And Joseph was okay with that.

*Fucking. Okay.*
So John had to play fucking pretend like he was okay with it too. But they all knew the truth that he wasn’t, and skirted over it like thin ice layered over the river’s surface. One of these days this whole matter would break, and he’d make sure that when it did, it wasn’t him who fell into the deeps. No, no, he’d make sure it was Faith who fell into the dark.

She feared that, he knew. Feared falling into obscurity, falling into the dark, falling from grace. She’d be forgotten, just like all the other fucking intruders Joseph kept trying to add to their family, to replace—who? What?

John didn’t know. Joseph wouldn’t talk about it.

His wife? John knew that much at least, had dug up the marriage certificate while digging up details on his brothers’ lives, details the others wouldn’t tell him. Intrusive? Yes. But if they were going to ask everything from him, he expected equality back. He’d given them everything and more. Given them more than they could ever give back in terms of financial support—this whole damn Project would have gone nowhere if it wasn’t for him.

The least they could do was tell him the Goddamn truth.

It didn’t have to be down to every last detail. Just...acknowledging what was there. Just enough.

Ironic for him to use the word “enough,” John knew, but there was a line he’d accept, even if he wanted to know everything. He would’ve accepted that much of a boundary at least. Just enough to not feel shut out.

But John was fairly certain that it wasn’t Joseph’s wife that Joseph was trying to replace. Clementine Rook, the wedding certificate and death certificate had both named her as. Presumably, they’d skipped switching Clementine’s last name due to the fees involved for a legal name change—money had been tight to say the least, from what Joseph was willing to mention to John of his early adult life. Joseph had loved Clementine enough to get a portrait of her tattooed in memory of her—and none of the Faiths had looked at all like her, a fact that John suspected was unconsciously purposeful on Joseph’s part. That was not who the Faiths were replacing then, not in the role of a sister and, looking at the way Joseph treated his Faiths, not as a child. He would’ve found another wife if that was what Joseph was about, presumably.

Had Joseph had a child? One that he’d lost? John didn’t know. Hospital records were maddeningly confidential in regards to that, even when you had connections. John had looked into seeing if there were any children born with the surname Seed born going back a full five years from the time of death of Joseph’s wife, even if that would’ve placed Joseph as far too young to be a father. A few
had come up, but none of the birth certificates had named Joseph Seed as the father, nor Clementine Rook as the mother.

No seemingly relevant death certificate either, under the surname Seed for a child or infant.

Nothing for Jacob either, in terms of any signs of marriage or civil unions or anything as a sign that their eldest brother had found someone he’d wanted to love and keep.

But then John was hardly one to talk, he hadn’t found anyone he trusted in that way, not really. Not in love,

*And do you trust your family to that extent?*

Yes. Yes he did. He trusted them with his life, and more.

*But do they trust you? Trust you in the same way?*

No. No, they didn’t. Not all the way. Close, but not enough. Not enough for him, but it was enough for them to think he was safe, that they were all safe. But they weren’t fucking safe—lies always festered and went to rot, because they weren’t real.

It wasn’t meaningful if it was a lie.

And their safety was so precarious, and so very, very much a lie.

He wonders if they’ll all make it in the end, whatever happens. He doesn’t know.

“Everything is happening as it should be, John,” Joseph said, words soothing and unintentionally cold with the calm Joseph carried, numbing instead of soothing John’s anger and pain and frustration into unhappy acceptance for now.

Irony of ironies it was nothing more to John at this point than the softening of life’s jagged edges in the same manner alcohol served drunks and “functional” sorts. The downside was he missed out
on the pleasant buzz of an actual drink—but he could fix that, after Joseph actually fucking left. And what his big brothers didn’t know wouldn’t hurt them now would it. John’s lies were far smaller in comparison, and while there was a savage satisfaction, the feeling ultimately left him hollow and wanting, wanting for something he knew he couldn’t fucking have.

Not yet. Maybe never.

“You must believe, and be patient. It will all work out, John. The first seal has been opened, the rider of the white horse has been loosed upon the world, and now we await the second seal, the red rider, to be unleashed upon the earth.” Joseph said, soothing, numbing, promising as he always did that this was the way, the only way, his way, to achieve their end goals. That it would be worth it, in the end of ends.

John believed that Joseph did see true visions. He did not believe that Joseph could assure it would all be okay, not if their family couldn’t even be a Family properly.

“I am being patient, Joseph,” John said, weary unto death of having his brothers think that it was fucking unseemly to for him to express anger in private unless someone had wronged him or some bullshit like that. “Things are progressing as planned, I told you this already.”

“I know, but your anger concerns me, little brother.”

John couldn’t have withheld the disgusted sigh that left his lips right then even if he’d wanted to. And he most definitely hadn’t wanted to. He pulled the pillow out from between them and tossed it carelessly upon the sofa before flicking his wrist upwards in the general direction of the broken radio he’d thrown against the wall earlier.

The radio’s parts shuddered and shimmered, vaporizing like a liquid mirage in the desert heat before reappearing in John’s outstretched hand, working and whole.

“I’ve told you before Joseph, it’s not a problem if I decide to trash something once in a while. It serves a purpose in helping me vent my anger on an inanimate object and serves as an appropriate outlet,” John said crisply, twiddling the knobs to set the frequency back to the one he’d been chatting with Deputy Li on. John couldn’t fix everything, but he definitely could fix quite a few things with his abilities if he knew how an item was supposed to work and all the parts were present. Inanimate teleportation was his specialty, and he’d made very sure to refine it well alongside his knowledge of mechanical workings for the benefit of his people, and the Project.
But even with that skill in his arsenal, it still got Joseph’s underwear in a twist to see John breaking something that costed money, God forbid. John would’ve thought Joseph’s whole stint as a hobo would’ve come with a claim to forego all worldly possessions, and in a manner of speaking it had—but Joseph still also kept to the poverty stricken mentality of not wasting a single damn thing no matter how disposable or useless it was unless they’d made doubly sure it had no further use. So much for not caring about materialism.

Jacob was not one to waste things, nor was John, but what “wasting” entailed meant very different things between them all—and that was saying nothing of Faith’s policies on the matter.

“I know, but your anger, John,” Joseph insisted, pulling John’s head forward gently just enough for them to rest their foreheads against one another’s. “You need to love them, John. Do not let your sin prevent that.”

Anything further Joseph might have meant to say, he held off from giving voice to as the radio in John’s hand crackled to life, letting his hands fall and stepping back a little as John took advantage of his brother’s distraction to simultaneously move away to ostensibly pay attention to this latest development. Truly though? He just wanted a break in the cycle of anger-despair-acceptance-rinse-and-repeat—even if he also still wanted the moment of familial closeness with Joseph that came as a consolation prize for all of this. He was put out about missing out on that and at the same time petulant, bitter and relieved.

“Deputy Li this is Deputy Rook, what’s your status?”

Both Joseph and John went still at that.

That surname had been of mild interest to John just because of the coincidence of it being shared by Joseph’s late wife. Curiously and frustratingly, the records on Deputy Joshua Rook had been corrupted when they’d been brought to John earlier that morning—beyond gleaning some of the basic information, there hadn’t even been a regulation picture, only a broken jpg file. The people John had loosed to gather information on the relevant persons of interest in Hope County had turned up surprisingly little on the Junior Deputy—the man was practically a ghost, almost as much as Jacob and Joseph had been in their times outside of the system.

Originally, John had written Deputy Rook off as of little interest, being the youngest of the deputies—ghost or not, someone that young was less likely to be a problem than the older ones like Deputy Li. Not as much time to accumulate experience, but that wasn’t saying much since most of the Sheriff’s department deputies were young guns, all told.
“10-10, keep it 10-3 Rook.” Li responded almost immediately with a tersity that practically screamed shut up deputy we’re being listened in on, making it pretty clear what he was trying to say in code even if John and Jacob both hadn’t memorized the local police codes, to say nothing of their Chosen who’d done the same. Easily done given that the information was in the public domain and on the internet no less. A needless precaution perhaps given how small the police force for the entirety of Hope County was, but it’d made for a fun afternoon.

Whether Deputy Rook would cotton on to the severity of the situation at hand for Deputy Li or not was another matter entirely of course. Presumably he would, since he’d been a member of the original arrest team sent to try to bring in Joseph. The thought of last night was still so damn fresh —John hadn’t slept much, too wired and too busy to do so, especially after all the stress and tension. He’d spent most of the night checking in with his squadrons and shifting their time table up a bit with the preparation teams running smoothly and on time for this first day of the Reaping.

The AWOL deputies and the Sheriff were still at large, but John’s men would find them soon enough, without Jacob’s Judges to track them down by scent. They’d reported finding the trail upon the river bank some hours ago before dawn—it’d looked like only three sets of tracks were found, so one of the officers was separated from the arresting party, perhaps. Which one was of little consequence—whether that was Deputy Rook or not meant little, aside from whether the other officers would hear Li’s answer or not. Even if it was an obfuscation tactic to hide that it was the entire group listening in, they’d still be brought in to join the Project, one way or another.

John waited a beat to see if Deputy Rook had anything to say, but the line had gone silent at that point. He clicked in then, watching out of the corner of his eye as Joseph glanced at him with a look of consternation with a smidge of disapproval. This just gave John the very reason to smirk he’d wanted, the corner of his mouth curling up in amusement at his brother’s reaction—not that Joseph would say anything, they were transmitting after all. Wouldn’t suit the Project’s image if they were heard fighting after all, no no. Far too undignified for the Father of all people to be seen bickering, despite claims of being an ordinary man like any other.

“Deputy,” John drawled, sounding every bit as amused as he was feeling, “you needn’t stop on our account, feel free to enlighten your plus one on the current going ons. You can even invite him to join the party, if you’d like.”

“I’m guessing it’s a bring your own beer affair since it’s a Peggie party, John?” was the dry response from Deputy Rook.

That made John laugh—with the transmit button off, of course. Oh he liked this one far better than Deputy Li already. They’d have to see if Deputy Rook was the sort to turn brattish and insulting under pressure though. That was always the trouble with young adults these days, far too sure of themselves.
“Bravado will only take you so far, Deputy Rook.” John said. “Come join us here at Fall’s End, why don’t you? The more the merrier after all, and I’m sure Deputy Li would be missing your company were you to skip out on the festivities.”

“Aw, but the Testy Festy isn’t until next week, Li.” Deputy Rook fired right back, drawing out a southern Georgian drawl to match John’s—making John narrow his eyes in suspicion of it being a form of mockery, but then his brain supplied one of the few tidbits he knew—Rook was also a former native of Georgia, as Mrs. Bennett had mentioned. “Did you get started on the Rocky Mountain oysters already Li? That’s cheating.”

“ROOK, this is John Seed you’re talking to, STOP TALKING,” Li said, finally able to get a word in edgewise between Rook and John, sounding like he was about to bust a blood vessel.

“Why? He’s a perfectly amiable gentlemen and he’s throwing a party after all. Even invited all the neighbors and everything.”

Rook was clearly messing with Li, though John had to wonder why—snapped under pressure? Mrs. Nancy Bennett at the station hadn’t mentioned anything of note about Deputy Rook being out of the ordinary other than as a transfer freshly graduated from the police academy. When pressed for any reasoning why he’d transfer all the way to a middle of nowhere county in rural Montana, he’d apparently told Mrs. Bennett he’d come out to visit some extended family. She’d gotten little more than that from him that she’d reported back on to her handler.

“ROOKIE, HE AND HIS FOLLOWERS ARE TAKING OVER THE TOWN AND KIDNAPPING OR KILLING EVERYONE IN IT, WHAT PART OF THAT DID YOU MISS?”

“Careful Deputy Li, your blood pressure must be skyrocketing right now,” John commented, amused more than anything as Joseph looked on silently. “And we wouldn’t be killing them if you’d both just put down your weapons and come in quietly as a good example of cooperation, deputies.”

“Not on your fucking life,” Deputy Li said flatly.

“Blackmailing with the threat of murder? Damn John that’s cold.” Rook added as a follow up to Li.
That Junior Deputy was being awfully familiar with John’s name there, but it made it easier when people just called him by his first name anyway—far too many Seeds to differentiate between one “Mr. Seed” and the next.

Then the next thing he heard made John go perfectly still.

“You have to love them, John. Do not let your sin prevent that.” It was incredibly eerie to hear what sounded very much like Joseph’s voice coming over the radio, when Joseph was standing right there next to John.

It was an excellent mimicry, right down to the intonation—if Joseph hadn’t been right there, John would have had a split moment’s panicked wondering if it was Joseph. He would’ve ruled out the possibility that it was actually his brother due to circumstance, but still...eerie.

John looked to Joseph.

Joseph was looking at the radio, brows furrowed, reaching out for it—before John held it far out of Joseph’s reach, raising one finger up to stop Joseph right where he was.

“Ah ah ah, this is my region to rule and my show to run, Joseph.” John said, waggling his upraised finger at his brother. The transmitter was off, obviously. He was going to have this out briefly with Joseph, and he was going to win this because this was his region and he was the Herald of Holland Valley. They’d been over this before. “I’m the one who gets to deal with the deputies in my territory.”

This was in private, away from the eyes of the flock, away from Joseph’s power base, from the need to present a united front. John could push more here.

Then Joseph just gave him that look.

That look of disapproval.

It made John falter internally, as quickly as a late frost could wither the newly planted seedling crops of spring. He intensified his It’s MINE look instead though. He wanted this, and to deal with it as he saw fit.
In the brief span of seconds that followed, Joseph made no move.

John took that as close to a victory as he could since Joseph generally didn’t back down at all, with rare exceptions. Raising the radio once more, John clicked the transmit button back on and spoke, still staring Joseph down, one finger upraised to keep his older brother at bay. “A rather interesting choice of words, Deputy Rook. Perhaps you know more of what’s going on than you let on, hm?”

Faith had said one of them was special. John felt an absolute certainty that it was this one—and he had to wonder just what this would mean, that the Deputy was parroting Joseph’s own words right back at them. The mirroring Antichrist figure to Joseph’s Messiah, to tempt and to test and to lead the faithful astray?

He had little doubt Joseph would view it as such. No, no doubt at all.

“Or is it perhaps that you speak from experience? Sin is pervasive, after all, and I have no doubt you know your share of sin, don’t you, Deputy.” John finished, fishing for information, waiting for a response from Rook. His intuition was pointing him in that direction, because no one was that clean with so little on their record, no one was that coincidentally lucky to stay off the radar. No, it was deliberate obfuscation, John was sure now. But why? How? Too many pieces to guess at still with the way things were right now.

“Don’t let anyone deceive you in any way, for the day of our Lord will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction,” Joseph murmured.

John glanced over to his brother, brows drawn together—but Joseph didn’t meet his gaze and was instead staring out vacantly into another place, another when, his eyes unfocused and dilated with the rest of him stock still.

*A vision? Now?*

That was from Thessalonians chapter 2, verse 3. Somehow for some reason, that took all the wind out of John’s sails. He didn’t know *why*, but there was a lingering feeling of...something sad.

Sad?
For him? For Joseph? For their Family? The Project?

It was one of those rare, odd moments where neither John’s natural capacities nor his more supernatural ones gave him any help in discernment, leaving him spinning without direction like a compass pulled too close to the magnetic pole of the world.

That was the problem around Joseph sometimes—there were moments where he could perform miracles and make everything seem possible, make everything easier.

Then there were moments where everything felt like it was falling apart, coming undone at the seams. This was one of those moments, like getting enveloped and lost in the fog where highbeams didn’t cut through the curtain of grey anymore than a knife through stone.

Everything was heavy and sad now, and he didn’t know why, only that it was, and that he wouldn’t get an answer as to why it was. Not now, perhaps not any time soon. Maybe not ever.

He couldn’t even work up a proper rage about that, just...a stone-heavy sensation of depression in his chest.

He clicked on the transmit button. “But we’ll have to hold on that train of inquiry for another day, Deputy Rook. We’re all busy people these days, so how about I pen you in for sometime later next week, say this coming Wednesday? Deputy Li is very demanding of attention, after all, and it would only be fair to attend to your coworkers by seniority. Don’t worry though, you’ll have your turn.”

He couldn’t manage enthusiasm right now, but ominously normal-sounding commentary with threatening undertones? John definitely could do that.

“Oh. I see.” Deputy Rook sounded a little caught off guard, stopped short by the sudden shift in the conversation. That was fine. John would deal with him later, after all the officers were brought in.

What John did not expect was to hear the crackle of the radio, followed by the very flat statement from Deputy Rook that went as followed, “John I’m stealing your plane.”

His thumb practically clicked the button of its own accord as John said, “Excuse me?”
Excuse me indeed WHAT exactly does Deputy Rook think he’s doing?

Gone was the heavy shadow of depression, for which John was fleetingly thankful, and in its place was a much headier, lighter feeling of affronted and incandescent rage.

HE was threatening to steal JOHN’S plane?

“You heard me.” Rook said, still sounding very flat and noticeably pissed off now.

“Rook what in the world are you doing?” Li interjected, but John promptly ignored and dismissed the more senior of the two officers in favor of the little shit who was talking about biting off a Hell of a lot more than he could chew.

That didn’t stop the undercurrent of pure anxiety from electrifying John’s spine, his fingers tightened to the point of blood-drained white knuckles around the handheld radio.

“Big talk from a wet behind the ears sap-green rookie,” John hissed, voice low and dark with threats and promises. “I rather think you’re out of your league, Deputy, and you’ll just have to sit and wait your turn like a good little boy, and we’ll make sure to dissect your various sins in great Detail.”

The Deputy couldn’t actually steal John’s plane, John knew—Affirmation was safely ensconced at his ranch house, and that was guarded by no less than a full dozen of John’s top people at all times, to say nothing of the maintenance crews and other comings and goings—it was a base of operations and his people were using it as such during operation hours.

“Yeah and school’s back in session now, John. I put all your lads and lasses down for their mid morning nap at your place, and when they get up they can go review their ABC’s like good little girls and boys. I’ll even give them gold star stickers for effort. I’m also confiscating the oregano that one of your followers must have left on the table. Because good little girls and boys shouldn’t play with spices at their age without their PARENT’S permission, now should they.”
John was going to fucking break the radio again just from crushing it with his bare hand at this rate, if his blood pressure didn’t kill him first.

Nevermind how the Deputy might have managed to take down his entire security team in such an unlikely scenario, John had to check if his people were alright.

Switching to a second radio—he couldn’t be bothered to keep fiddling with the frequencies if he was doing command and control for multiple groups—he clicked in for the security teams’ frequency. “This is Command and Control, Sierra Alpha team check in, over.”

...he waited.

No response.

*If he fucking killed them all I’m going to peel the tally of their deaths out of his SKIN—*

Then—“I did say they were down for a nap, John. Them and the caravan along the north road, just so you know,” Deputy Rook said, definitely needling John, and definitely speaking over the security teams’ frequency. So, they were probably all dead, then, and the Deputy was toying with him using such frivolous wording. “And here I thought you’d take me at my word.”

There was an ominous slide of what sounded like metal followed by a loud clack from Rook’s end.

“Deputy,” John said, seething to the point of frothing rage as quietly as he could without absolutely fucking losing it, “if you stop, and turn yourself in now, I promise I will only maim you slightly for your transgressions. If you don’t...I will make sure every last one of your senior officers regrets ever having associated with you.”

John didn’t like losing people. Not good people, people who’d willingly Confessed and Atoned, people who were doing their damned best to fucking help under motherfucking orders from both John himself and Joseph—

“Lying is a *sin*, John,” Rook said both mocking and chiding all at once—and John can pick up that oddly enough, Deputy Rook is angry too. Why? Rook continues though, “Admit it, you were always going to hurt them, no matter what I did. Because confession without pain, *isn’t fucking*
confession, is it JOHN.”

Oh. Maybe he hadn’t killed John’s people...that seemed unlikely, but John would need to send out teams to verify what was what there. How interesting that might be though if the Deputy was actually playing a more merciful game—and it also sounded like the Deputy had a bone to pick with John. He’d have to have some of his people comb through their registries for if there was someone connected to the Deputy that had converted to the Project. Perhaps they hadn’t survived—perhaps they’d been turned into an Angel and met their end in the Angel’s Grave. It was likely not one of John’s, he didn’t care to waste perfectly good minds as hard laborers. So, perhaps that someone special was still alive and within the Project’s ranks.

But then, it sounded like the issue of contention was what people went through in their Confession with John...curious.

And how PROMISING.

If Deputy Rook was indeed refraining from killing...that would be so very, very VERY interesting. And so promising, yes. There’d be work to be done on the Deputy, but it felt like there was so much POTENTIAL.

John liked that. It was interesting. Promising.

Deputy Rook wasn’t done talking however. Or raging, more precisely. “Saying you’ll hurt them worse because of little old me? Nah, that’s just you using me as an excuse for your own damn Wrath. You know sin rather intimately don’t you John so stop fucking getting cozy with it right now. You want proper atonement, blame me for my transgressions and no one else. You blame anyone else for what I do? That’s either you blackmailing or lashing out. Own up to it you motherfucker and face ME. ”

There was the distorted roaring sound of what John could contextually guess was an engine starting before the transmission cut off, purposefully left to run a little long so he could hear.

John didn’t really care about that though. Gone was the rage for the interim, and in its place was a giddy sense of swirlwind excitement.

Does he know?
Is he like me?

Does he understand?

John still wanted to kill him of course, but he wasn’t going to. No no, he wanted this one to join them, join him, he wanted Deputy Joshua Rook as one of his Chosen, his people. It’d be hard to win someone like that over, John knew, because Reaping-conversions were largely not willful joining, that meant breaking people into joining the Project so they saw the light. And he didn’t want to break Deputy Rook quite so thoroughly as that. Just break him a little bit, to repent and Atone for all the death and trouble he was causing right now. But not broken all the way, no. He wanted Deputy Rook to retain that spirit and to say Yes, and say it willfully. Deputy Rook clearly had some issue with the Project and with John, and that always made people more resistant. Rook was calling him out, not bartering, not begging, just straight up raging.

Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Do not go gentle into that good night.

Did he get it? Did Joshua Rook know? Did he know how it felt? Did he rage against the injustices of the world?

Oh this was MUCH more interesting and promising than Deputy Li.

There was so much promise in this one.

But John had to make sure not to get too caught up, not to expect too much just yet. It might be a false positive, might turn out to be a disappointment. Life was full of disappointments after all. It might just be juvenile raging, lashing out in the same hypocritical way that Deputy Rook had accused John of.

Fuck, John knew he would be SO VERY MASSIVELY disappointed if Deputy Joshua Rook didn’t turn out to be what John hoped he might be.
Someone like me.

Even among the Project members with their colorful pasts, it was hard to find someone who both understood, and that he clicked with. John had friends, of course, but truthfully? It was a very difficult, very rare thing to find people who were friends. Who got you.

He had people he loved, he had people he cared for, and who loved and cared for him in return.

There were people who understood him, and some who even understood, but then there were those who were…

More.

Really good friends. Best friends. Soul mates. Whatever you wanted to call it, it was meaningful connection.

And the fool wasn’t born yet that could deny that it was this that John wanted above all else in this world.

With the people he loved and cherished? Yes. Above anything else.

He didn’t have that though, not entirely.

Perhaps one day, he and his family would have that.

Perhaps one day, he’d stop looking for that understanding in the newly converted of the Project.

They understood a glimmering of it through Confession, yes…but they rarely if ever truly understood.

They hadn’t truly suffered to reach that understanding, because they by and large had trusted John —those of them who went willingly, at any rate. They knew John wasn’t there to kill them. They’d
been assured.

John hadn’t had that assurance. Not ever.

You will **atone** for your **sins** or die trying, John Duncan, I swear it with God as my witness.

Gideon.

They hadn’t laid bleeding upon the kitchen floor, too small too helpless for anything to be more than futile while Gideon Duncan— *the father* —stood looming over him like some Hell-sent devil from the depths of the earth, and realized that no one was coming for him. No one could help him. **Would** help him. They didn’t know what it was like to be so utterly **alone**, in the face of overwhelming fear, the fear and realization that he was so very fragile and so very **mortal**, and that he could **die**. That he could die right then and there...and there would be no justice for him. The Duncans had seemed so sure, so **powerful**, there was no other power they answered to but for their own delusions of a hateful, **wrathful** God.

He’d learned later that they were indeed above the fucking law, above reproach, too well shielded by the pretty porcelain masks of The Perfect Family when out in public for anyone to think that what they did behind closed doors was anything more than a shocking attempt at slander.

So few people understood that fear that **pain** that **reality**, when everything was a lie, everything was fragile, and you couldn’t see anything but the truth of the falsehoods’ existence.

He couldn’t ever truly push people to that point, to **understand**, to see that turning point on the mountain tops of humanity’s desolate existence, and never to be able to unsee it ever again.

That would require going farther than Joseph was okay with. It meant risking the **end**.

It meant staring into the face of Death.

But that hadn’t meant that John hadn’t **tried**.
But he’d already known before he’d ever picked up a scalpel or screwdriver that he couldn’t put someone in that same place he’d been put into. He couldn’t be Gideon Duncan, even if, in what even John admitted was a twisted way, he was grateful to both Gideon and Kate Duncan for teaching him— *FOR BREAKING HIM IRREPARABLY* no, no, he wasn’t irreparably broken, he could be better, somehow, someday, he was getting better, he knew that now, he had to keep trying, had to keep *looking* for an answer— that particular truth.

Even if he hated them for it too.

*Are you broken like me, Joshua Rook?*

*Are you broken like us?*

*Like our family?*

*Our Family?*

He’s sure Joshua Rook is *broken* somehow, he knew it in his gut, knew it intuitively both organically and otherwise.

And John can work with that.

But John had to *understand* first, had to *know* how Deputy Rook was broken. Broken people were unpredictable, whiplashing to and fro at unexpected triggers, stronger in some ways and brittle in others.

So of course he’s going to need his people to bring Deputy Rook in.

Switching to the third radio with a third set frequency, John spoke, “This is Command and Control to 3rd Fighter Squadron, come in, over.”

“This is 3rd Fighter Squadron, go ahead Command and Control, over.”
“A situation has come up—an enemy hostile has seized at least one cult plane, suggested to be *Affirmation.*” John said, “you are tasked with subduing and capturing said hostiles alive, using any means necessary. Over.”

“Roger that, Command and Control.” Was the response. “3rd Fighter Squadron out.”

That would take care of that. John’s Chosen were among the best fliers the Project had to offer—*the* best in his opinion, though he knew Jacob would contest that. The facts were the facts though.

Satisfied, John glanced back at Joseph to check on him, but his older brother was still lost in trance, staring off at whatever vision his gift was bestowing upon him. That was fine. John was quite happy with how things were going at that moment—now to deal with Deputy Li.

Ugh that felt like such a chore, but duty called.

Clean up and damage control first though. Deputy Li wasn’t going anywhere, after all. He’d radio in the clean up crew and rotate in another security team with heavier armaments and numbers to check out what the damage was on his ranch home. Hopefully not much, there couldn’t have been much of a window in time for the Deputy and whatever tagalongs Rook had brought with him—John refused to even consider that the Deputy had done it all *alone,* that would be preposterous!—to steal too much. But then, given the residents of the county, they believably could’ve been about the business of just wanton destruction. No smoke reported, so they didn’t set fire to his house, at least.

He clicked on the second radio again, “This is Command and Control to all security personnel, switch to backup frequencies until further notice.”

John had complained a tad at the time when Jacob had insisted that they *all* take up the suggested discipline regarding their communication practices among other things, but both of them had known it was simply for the sake of complaining, rather than an actual grievance—this immediate situation was precisely the reason why. John had understood the intention and use of such practices, but Jacob needed a good ribbing from time to time, otherwise he’d sink into the quagmire of training, training, training with his people and never emerge.

A quick check of his rotation list for who was standby and where on his pushpin-speckled map was all he needed to be sure.
“Command and Control to Sierra Echo team, check in. Over.” John said, clicking in on the new security frequency—on yet another of his laid out spare radios. Joseph really did need to stop fussing whenever John broke something, they had backups and the technology to repair and remake such little conveniences and then some. It was all under control.

Even if Joseph wanted to go full on Amish instead of embracing reasonable technology.

John was not going to fucking go rustic just because the world was ending though. Some people needed insulin shots, others needed surgeries, some needed specific food preparation practices, all sorts of things that only advanced civilizations could provide. So fuck going back to nature, they were rebuilding the world. Only better.

So fuck the dark ages, they were coming out technological guns ablazing. That was the purpose of John’s Gate. In his opinion, anyway. Joseph wanted him to be more about simply gathering PEOPLE and increasing their numbers. John shot a dirty look at his still-zoned-out brother.

He loved Joseph more than the sun, really he did.

But his brother really sucked sometimes.

“This is Sierra Echo team checking in, Command and Control. Over.”

“Sierra Echo, we need you to stack up with Sierra Foxtrot and head out for reconnaissance and recovery,” John said, a grim smile plastered across his face as he checked his maps and the time tables. He had this under control.

Joseph

Joseph could dimly hear John rattling off orders and moving around the room, around him, and was also dimly aware of seeing what was transpiring before his very eyes. His physical eyes, to be precise. But it was like background noise, set apart, faded and distant. Unreactive, like the way the far away mountains faded into the blue of the sky—they were there, but they were not the immediate, up close and personal concern.
He was watching the fire. It was spreading slowly, like a feverish infection, creeping within embers and coals slowly, slowly, and ever outward. Even under the torrential downpour of rain and water from the stormy skies overhead, it still crept on, determinedly.

It was real, it was in the Bliss Joseph knew. But it was also a vision—and the vision insisted this was important. Joseph knew not how, just yet, but it was a portent of things to come. He watched as time blurred, and there in the possible futures he could now see the flecks of orange glowing within every grass blade, every flower, every bush and tree of the Bliss, and there were yet more faint sparks floating through the air as the world of the Bliss turned dark beneath the shadow of the Collapse. It was a reminiscent dream of the summer evenings where he and Jacob and John spent lingering in the fields for an hour more away from home, catching fireflies in jars like little whispered hopes and dreams.

They’d always let them go afterwards, because Jacob had said it was cruel to keep them in jars, as fireflies only lived for a few days. Like fragile little dreams, was the thought that swam across the surface of his consciousness more so than having anything to do with Joseph actively thinking much right now—he could simply only observe, like he had with the fireflies.

That memory rang true though, it felt like it applied to what the vision was trying to tell him about the fire and what those embers meant.

The rain began to let up then, fading into a gentle misting for a brief while, before finally ceasing and breaking before the soft shafts of sunlight that cut through and parted the tumultuous grey clouds overhead. The sky cleared, and the clouds faded away entirely, leaving only a sun-filled field surrounded by the treeline and distant mountains before him, all of them glowing with the light of that hidden fire within them. The vision split then, and he caught the sense of two futures above many other little tributary splinterings of possibilities—on the one hand, the embers remained just that, only embers, glowing and warming from within, absorbed and accepted as a part of the Bliss, symbiotic and mutual.

The good path, then. Of benefit to the Project, to humanity.

Fire was among mankind’s oldest tools, and one of both great creation and destruction. It was fitting for it to be a part of the Reaping and Collapse, and they had all known it would be how God cleansed the earth.

On the other hand…
On the other hand, Joseph watched as the same clearing caught flame all of a sudden, wood and grass and stone and earth splintering as the fire erupted from within, tearing it all apart from within into a great cacophony of destruction and horror. Within the roaring crackles of the flames he could hear the distant wailing of human voices, and an involuntary chill went up his spine with how Hellish the landscape turned. The trees and the land and the sky and the moon all began to weep blood, raw and ragged and red.

Before him now in the fiery clearing stood a white horse, *the herald of the end times*, Joseph thought dimly with a recognition that was not *his*, and he watched as the smouldering flames turned the horse’s white coat a deeper shade, spreading like dye across virgin cloth. Then there stood a burnished red horse in place of the white, rearing up and screaming to the sky as it glowed with the light of the fire both within and without.

*And when he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say,*

“*Come!*” screamed a voice from within the dream, as if beckoning someone, not him, not Joseph —

*...And out came another horse, bright red. Its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that people should slay one another, and he was given a great sword.*

The red horse before Joseph screamed and frothed at the mouth, bucking and kicking wildly, as if trying to dislodge an unseen rider from its back. The arch of its spine bent and crumpled, and the skin grew thin across the ribs and vertebrae as the bones roiled and revolted—no. No, not the bones.

Something else.

A shape began to grow within the horse’s skin, centering upon its back, reaching up with limbs that grew more humanlike, more handlike...but not human enough to be right. There was something sharp and angular and wrong about it. Alien. Something alien that made his soul recoil from the sight of it. A head and shoulders and spin pushed up to match, fighting and struggling to lash out and break out through the horse’s flesh.

The world splintered again in time, another splitting of paths, and he saw another binary theme among the most likely options, a yes or a no, an action or inaction.
In the path of inaction, the parasite—for what else could he call it?—was allowed to grow unhindered, and the red horse suffered, the foam at its mouth turning pink and red as blood began to seep from its mouth and nose, eyes rolling in fear to show the whites.

The red horse screamed and it screamed,

But no one came.

No one heard.

Except Joseph.

From the red horse’s mouth came lies, then. Lies Joseph didn’t quite hear, but he knew them for what they were. Lies that denied that this was happening. Bartering lies that said it would all be okay, angry lies that it was what they all deserved, despairing lies that it would all be worth it, accepting lies that it would all end soon—no.

No, that last one was not a lie. That it all would end soon, all the events in the dream and possibly in waking reality if this was allowed to happen? That was true. Joseph could feel it in his bones.

Inaction would usher in the apocalypse that much sooner.

But at what cost?

The ground beneath the horse’s trampling hooves was now a muddy mire drenched to overflowing with blood and bone and bits of viscera, a hellish lake of the wages of sin. The horse reared up one last time, screaming with a loneliness and agony that Joseph’s very bones ached with a sympathetic pain, before a loud snap erupted through the air. The horse stood still and quiet as a statue, its neck tilted at an unnatural angle.

Blood poured from its mouth now like the flow of a fountain, ornamental and to excess, like the decorations of the repulsively wealthy—and that thought too, Joseph felt was relevant to the vision and its message.
The pity and the disgust he felt were encouraged by the Voice, the Presence—pity for the horse, and disgust for its fate in how it was used and left to suffer.

*Save this one,* Joseph could swear he heard said in the sound of silence, because that one could be saved, surely. Surely.

He hoped it was so, but the vision was not done yet. Not by far.

The red horse’s neck shifted with an eerie mechanical quality, the sundered bones snapping back into place with the ominous shift of claws and hands beneath the horse’s flesh, manipulated like the hinges and clockwork gears of a puppet. Slowly, with a carefulness that spoke of inexperience, the horse’s body lowered itself back down to stand upon four legs once more, eyes dark and empty and glassy with soulless death. The hands and claws and everything else hidden within the horse’s flesh stilled and sank away from sight, leaving the horse to look almost normal...but for its eyes.

Then the darkness of its dead gaze quickly clouded over with a familiar whitish green of the Bliss-addled, and the horse began to move. It began to move, much as it did before, screaming and trampling the ground around it, churning up the bloody mire beneath its feet—but now there was another voice screaming beneath the horse’s hollow calls. The beast within.

The mire of blood and sin spread, then. It spread outwards to their fiery surroundings, engulfing and causing to sink what little had escaped the destruction of the initial explosions from within.

Smoke rose, and the air turned brown and red with rust and blood.

But from between the columns of smoke came a figure, tall and imposing as it strode forward through the hellscape—and Joseph’s heart sank as cold and heavy as a stone into the blackness of the ocean.

It was Jacob. Jacob, his dear brother so full of conflict he had to lash out at the world to try to quiet the demons within.

*Jacob no,* was what Joseph wanted to say, but the words and his lips both were still and silent. All he could do was observe, now.

*See this as the price of inaction.*
Whose inaction though? Joseph’s? Jacob’s? The Project’s? Fear encircled his heart as he watched.

He watched as his brother reached out to grasp the reins of the bit and bridle that now appeared upon the red horse, taking hold—taking control—of his would-be steed.

The horse fought Jacob, but only put up a token resistance, pulling at the reins for a moment before Jacob stepped closer to swing a leg up into the saddle.

Now it was his brother Jacob astride the red horse of war, looking for all the world as if he was the leader of a grand charge that would be heralded by the wings of victory for the fight over humanity’s collective soul.

And Jacob did command, riding the horse about at a canter and then a gallop about the clearing, calling out orders to both his mount and to the shadowy suggestions of his brothers and sisters of the Project out in the gloom of the smoke and fire. Then, one figure in particular stumbled out of the shroud of ash surrounding them—a man Joseph vaguely recognized, knew he wasn’t a member of the Project, before his brain remembered the name Eli Palmer, linking that name to the memory of him being a widower and a once dear friend of Jacob’s.

At a cry and a pull of the reins from Jacob, the red horse reared up, hooves flailing through the air before striking down the man before them. Palmer fell with a shout that was buried beneath the rain of blows, down into the blood and muck.

The trampling slowed and quieted, and Jacob patted the red horse’s neck. “Good work...you did it, you passed your test. You made your sacrifice. But you and I know you’re not going to quit or turn aside, don’t you? No...I’ve been waiting for you. I’ve been waiting a long time now.”

The claws and hands began to shift beneath the horse’s hide once more, slowly stretching out from behind where Jacob sat upon the saddle, reaching up with infinite care and slowness as Jacob continued to speak.

“You know it too, don’t you. That it doesn’t matter, what we build or achieve...in the end, all there is, is the endless cycle of creation and destruction, the old giving way to the new. And now the world is on the brink, and all of history will be wiped away in the flames, as if it never was.

But you know that we can’t ever outrun our history and all of the things we’ve done, don’t you?
You know it, I know it. That’s why I’ve been waiting for you for so long. I’ve never been the type to run, and I knew someone like you would come along someday. That’s just how humanity is...it was only a matter of time before someone came who was finally strong enough. It was only ever you, wasn’t it? It had to be. Only another soldier would’ve understood all this, and that’s what you are. This was your purpose all along, and you knew it.”

The skin began to split and peel back slowly, unfurling away to reveal scales and talons rough and reptilian and jagged, reaching to cage the air around Jacob’s head. There was no way Jacob didn’t know.

“This was always going to be my purpose, and I do it gladly—you’ll understand that too one day, if you survive long enough to come to know the monsters and the regret inside of you. I am Joseph’s sacrifice, simple as that. There was never going to be a garden of Eden for me...not after all that I’ve done. Not after all that you’ve done, either, you poor bastard. You might survive the Collapse, if you’re unlucky...and then you’ll be alone, with the weight of all your sins upon your shoulders, and no one left who will really understand you. You were always meant to be an implement of destruction, to herald in the end of this world. That was your fate. And this, is mine.” There was a soft laugh of resignation at that, too raw and too exposed for Jacob to ever really admit that to Joseph or John in the waking world, and Joseph’s heart bled at the hint of all the things their oldest brother knew but would never tell. All the suffering, all the hurt, all the sin he had shouldered as he’d made his way through the horror that was this old corrupt world.

The claws then suddenly sped up in their descent to sink into his eldest brother's flesh, Jacob’s voice carried forth one last thing to say, “I always knew you were going to be the death of me.”

And as Joseph watched his older brother be torn apart to nothing more than the same shreds of blood and gore that littered the ground indiscriminately, he didn’t know if those last words were meant for the red horse, or for him.

The beast crawled forth from the carcass of the red horse, and it grew in size to monstrous proportions, sundering the sky with its terrible height. Blood red scales shone wetly, both with their own crimson hue and with the arterial lifeblood of both the horse and the slain many. Seven heads arose, each bearing a glittering diadem like a crown, and ten horns to pierce the heavens with.

One head bled freely from a deep and mortal wound, and that injured head reached down to grasp the long-dead carcass of the red horse before lifting it up, and swallowing it down.

There was significance there, but Joseph did not know what, precisely. Only the urgent, incessant feeling that it was.
He heard a cry then, somewhere in the distance—a woman’s voice, sad and heartbroken, crying out a name he couldn’t make out...but he could feel and could know the intent in the context of the vision, and knew she was calling out for her lost son.

He couldn’t make out her voice...but there was something important about it, something he would know later he sensed, that was important.

The wounded head healed itself whole then, and with a roar and a sweep of its segmented tail the dragon—for it was most certainly that—drove a full third of the nearest stars down from the sky, falling like a rain of white-hot sparks to the mourning earth below.

And the earth trembled and was smote open, as the seas boiled and the sands below were exposed to the enraptured sky, and the world became a desert of intoxicated salt water deserts full of blue, and the bleached gold deserts of sand.

The remaining stars began to fade as the new dawn broke over the world, and Joseph could see and feel with a bone-deep, absolute certainty that the last dwindling numbers of humanity were winking out in this desolate future, just as the stars did before the rising of the sun.

Down that way lay death and destruction, then.

Then came the other way. The better path.

The woods returned, still glittering with glowing coals in every tree and surface like scattered jewels, but not with flame, and the red horse stood alive and whole once more.

The branching point was when the red horse was still itself, still alive, then, surely—

“Come!” it cried out, for someone, anyone—no one.

For him. For Joseph, though the red horse knew it not. The fear in its eyes Joseph now could feel as visceral as if it were his own, was the fear that it would cry out—and no one would come.

That loneliness struck deep, because it was a fear and reality that Joseph and so many others,
including his own brothers and sister, knew all too well.

_Poor soul._

If that was not a sign the one represented by the red horse in this dream was meant to join them, would be better off _with_ them, Joseph didn’t know what was.

Joseph heard his own voice then, calling out indistinctly—but he heard the final name his voice called out in the dream: **John**.

And so came his brother John into the fray from somewhere in the ember-studded forests, blue silk shirt glittering like the oceans all rolled into one twist of fabric as he strode fearlessly forward, one hand reaching outwards to the horse’s head.

The horse reared up, and Joseph for a moment was afraid that John would meet a similar fate as Jacob had in the previous vision, but the red horse turned away then, galloping towards the other side of the clearing away from John.

John broke into a run after the horse, somehow keeping up with it impossibly here in the vision and dream as no man could in the waking world, chasing the steed about the clearing.

_Herding it,_ Joseph realized, as John called out to cause the horse to shy away from breaking out of the direction their youngest brother was corralling it towards. He could hear the frustration in John’s voice, but there was also an eagerness to it too—a desire to lay hands upon the steed and make it one of his own.

Then from the forest’s edge stepped forth Faith before the red horse. The horse stumbled and slowed, its head lowering before her as she spread her arms wide to embrace it, her hands resting upon either side of the horse’s face. The horse’s outline shivered and darkened, black flowing to replace what once was red—and the red condensed and flowed away like water to drip over Faith’s hands like blood, staining her arms from fingers to forearm a bright crimson red. Now he could see the glitter of tiny embers glowing upon her skin and dress and hair—or perhaps in, or perhaps under. The now black horse stood still a while longer as Faith tucked a white Bliss blossom behind its ear, and then John drew near.

Then Faith’s Bliss-fueled hold over the horse was broken, and the black steed reared up and high—
And all faded to black at the end of the dream.

Joseph felt himself falling slowly out of it, like waking up slowly—and between the cracks of the vision-sent dream and conscious reality he saw fragments of context and understanding.

Where the horse had stood, mirror shards slipped between his sight and the steed, and in the once-white-once-red-now-black horse’s place stood a figure with their back turned to him.

One of the deputies, he could tell by the muted green uniform and the department patches curving around the shoulders’ sleeves.

Brown hair, tied back in a ponytail, the wings of glasses tucked over the ears.

“Deputy Rook,” Joseph heard John’s voice tune in from outside the dream for a moment, like a radio signal surging in clarity for a moment before fading back out into white noise, and Joseph knew that this was him. The chosen one. The Lamb of God, the Lion of Judas. The one who would open the seals. The one who was meant to join them before the gates of Eden, and who would help usher the worthy into the new paradise.

The one who would judge.

Rook, though.

*Dear Lord, is this a sign that you sent one who shared her name? My dear Clementine?*

A Rook—a raven.

Clementine, his dear Clementine had always joked—believed—that her surname was a sign that she’d be alright,

“Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them. And how much more valuable you are than birds!”
Luke 12:24. She’d laughed as she’d told him that, so bright and beautiful, dancing her way through life even with all the misery that God tested the two of them with. Always looking up at the starry sky as both proof and inspiration that life was not all drudgery and suffering, but that there was beauty then and there, too. She’d always had faith, that even though they, just the two of them at that point, had had nothing to their names beyond a wisp of hope and each other, would be alright. That it would all turn out alright.

And here now was another raven sent by the Lord, come to give them hope, as the ravens had taken care of the prophet Elijah in the first book of Kings—and that thought of the prophet Elijah made Joseph wonder then, will we ascend to the heaven that is our new Eden by a blazing chariot and horses of fire as Elijah did in the second book of Kings, oh Lord?

It fitted so well with the visions of moments ago, and would that not reflect upon the piety and devotion of the Project? They of the Project were, in this the end of ends, the ones who believed.

Deputy Rook walked to and fro, but curiously, always kept his face turned away from Joseph’s sight, seemingly on purpose. Then the clearing flooded then as a torrential rain came down, turning the embers into underwater jewels that lay glowing beneath the shifting currents. Still Deputy Rook kept pacing to and fro, face turned away and obscured from sight, his steps sloshing through the swirling clear water that swept clean the blood and viscera that had polluted the earth beneath their feet.

_AFTER forty days Noah opened a window he had made in the ark and sent out a raven, and it kept flying back and forth until the water had dried up from the earth. Then he sent out a dove to see if the water had receded from the surface of the ground._

Genesis 8:6-8.

The Bliss had been flooded too, when Faith had sought to purge the fire from the earth. But the fire had refused to be expunged.

How fitting that the Lamb would bring the fiery wrath of God with him both in the waking world and the dream world of the Bliss...but that meant that their internal world was also to be born anew through the fire. Was the Lamb to judge them all to test if they were worthy, then, among the Project? To separate the chaff from the wheat, the unclean from the worthy?

Fitting then, that a Rook—a raven, an unclean animal per the word of God, but a child of God nonetheless deserving to be saved upon the ark—would be the one to seek out the unworthy. Was not the raven an eater of carrion, a shadow of sin that stalked the battlefields of yore? Yes. That
would fit in God’s plan were that what the Lord intended, to have a Rook haunt the battlefield that the end of the world would become. Doubly so, when Deputy Rook stood in place of the white horse, bringer of conquest, then too the red horse, bringer of war, and then after that the black horse, the bringer of famine.

But what of the pale horse? The one who comes bearing Death with Hades in his wake? Joseph wondered.

In due time was likely the answer, whether it was that Deputy Rook would become the pale horse or that Joseph would later understand what lay in store in God’s plan, it was all one and the same—God was watching. And the Lord would judge them there on Judgement day, as the final reckoning drew rapidly closer.

The waters dried out, leaving the woods dry and filled with both mist and smoke, a hazy blue sheen cast over to the green and grey of the foliage and the orange-gold of embers—until the embers all winked out, leaving the Bliss-dreamed woods so much darker than Joseph had ever seen them before. So much lonelier, so much stranger now, to be without the firefly light of those ember fragments that had dwelt in their garden for only a brief time.

But that was the ephemeral nature of a fire without fuel to burn or a caretaker to tend it.

A woman with dark hair stepped from nowhere to walk beside Deputy Rook, her hair short and striking against the shining white of her dress. Linking her fingers between the Deputy’s, she spoke again in that voice Joseph couldn’t make out, and the two of them faced away from him still, speaking with words he couldn’t make out.

There was something so very terribly lonely and sad about it, and Joseph felt his heart seize suddenly with a deep, overwhelming sense of panicked tragedy, as the woods parted before the Deputy and the woman in white to reveal a path leading...somewhere. Somewhere beyond, through the grey-blue mists, somewhere neither he nor anyone else of the Project could follow.

Not yet.

“No,” Joseph cried out, reaching for them without knowing why, startling them into turning to him, looking at him—

—but he couldn’t remember their faces, as his vision swam and he was standing there in John’s
office again, still half-dreaming, but more awake than slumbering now.

He could hear John taunting one of the Deputies, he wasn’t sure which one—the names slipped from his awareness like water over river stones, the vision plucking at the significance of Deputy like silver minnows flitting about through sunlit currents with a presence he could barely hold onto.

The flickers of silver and gold and thought and knowledge spoke to him in those transient moments where he was awake enough to speak and to hear and to understand, but they had precious moments to tell him what was to come and to prepare, giving only riddles that meant more than they said with so much to say yet so little time to say it with.

*Don’t let anyone deceive you in any way, for the day of our Lord will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction.*

Thessalonians 2:3.

The sound of those words and the dim awareness that John was looking at him suggested that the voices had said it, and Joseph had said it with them aloud.

The line gave him pause. It felt very relevant, right here, right now.

It all tied together, he knew it in his bones, but how?

The vision faded away entirely then, and he was left staring into vacant space as his senses resituated themselves in the everyday mortal world rather than immersion in the omens from on high.

“— *What do you MEAN he shot them down?*” John hissed into the radio as Joseph gathered himself.

The radio clicked back almost in protest as the party on the other side of the transceiver responded sounding very harried, “It was an ambush sir, there were others hiding up in the clouds and against the sun overhead, they came down shooting at our people and knocked them right out of the sky!”

One of the other handheld radios John had laid out crackled to life as well as the faithful was
finishing his report to John.

A familiar voice Joseph couldn’t quite place right away came through then—“Oorah! That’ll teach you stupid Peggies not to mess with the Ryes!”

John’s hand snapped out in a blur to grab the offending radio, clicking it on with a voice as smooth and lethally sharp as a polished damask steel blade. “Nick Rye, I would have thought you had your hands full with matters at home—I’ll be sure to send a few helpers along to make sure nothing’s being overlooked in your absence.”

“Fuck you, John Seed, you don’t get to threaten my home and my family and steal my God damned plane without getting what’s coming to you in return! You send any more of your goons our way and we’ll make sure to send em all off with a proper Hope County salute. With machine guns.”

John laughed, angry and sharp and vicious, the sound coiled up and tense like a diamondback rattler, fangs unfolded and bared. “My my my! Someone’s gotten bold—but Pride cometh before the fall, and we’ll just have to teach you some humility, now won’t we Rye. And don’t you worry, I’ll make sure your precious Carmina is safe and sound, provided you return that plane of ours you presumably stole from my ranch.”

Then the deputy—The Deputy—called out over the radio, his tone sounding like it was a little bit taunting, but ending more as a threat, “Technically Nick didn’t steal it, John. I loaned it to him, seeing as he’s short a plane. Consider it confiscated under pressing need until he gets his plane back.”

John rolled his eyes, but as he raised the radio with the intent to respond, Joseph interjected.

“John,” Joseph said, reaching out to grip his brother’s shoulders—but only after John had shifted his finger away from the transmit button. Joseph didn’t see any need to undermine his brother before the eyes of both his men and the sinners they sought to bring into the fold. “He is the one. The Deputy—Rook. He is the Lamb, John. He is the herald of the Collapse, he will be the Lion of Judah who sorts the worthy from the non believers. He is meant to be here, with us, with the Project, and he must march with us to Eden’s Gate, one way or another. Do you understand, John?”

He watched as John’s face eased just a bit with the barest hint of incredulity, but his brother was being attentive. John was listening.
Joseph shifted his hands up to wrap them around the back of John’s neck, framing his brother’s face with the base of his palms. “Our time has come, John. It is the hour of our reckoning, and we must persevere to prove ourselves worthy. You must be prepared, or the Gates of Eden may be shut to you, John.”

He could feel John’s neck tense with a faint tell of fear. The fear of being left behind, the fear of being alone. He hushed John gently, meaning it as a reassurance that there was nothing to fear—because there was nothing to fear. John would walk through the gates. He had to.

Joseph didn’t want to consider the possibilities that John wouldn’t. He would forewarn John of them, to help his brother avoid the potential pitfalls of an early death, and John would persevere.

John had to.

He had to.

He would.

“It’ll be alright. You’ll be alright, John. This is a test. This Deputy will determine if you are able to overcome your sin and to walk the path. You must guide him to the path, or he will fall to death and ruin, and bring the world to its knees with him. He is doomed to destruction, and he will incite rebellion and deafness to our message in those who have not accepted the Word into their hearts...But we can help them. You can help him. You must. It must be you who shepherds him to redemption, and in saving him, you will save yourself. I believe in you, John. I’ve seen you walk through the gates into the New Eden that awaits us, and I will help ensure that you make it. I’ve seen you fall short of the gates, burdened too heavily by your sin, covered in blood. But I will help you, brother. I will help make sure you are cleansed and free of all the trials and tribulations that this grotesque old world has heaped upon you unfairly.”

John was silent. Silent, and still. Then, he flicked his eyes up to meet Joseph’s with a look that Joseph couldn’t quiet interpret. Calculating perhaps, and...something else. Something else in a way if the light in someone’s eyes could be something dark and terrible, hidden and haunting in the night, like an imagined monster hidden out of sight beyond the too-thin pane of the bedroom window when they were children.

The monsters in the woods were never so frightening as the monster that lived in their own home, passed out on Jack Daniel’s like a corpse laid out in the couch before the TV screen—a body that should’ve been dead with all the poison imbibed, but each morning rose again as if the dead walked the earth, and the end of days was just a long running marathon whose plot twist was that
they had all along been locked down in Hell.

No, the monsters in the woods were never truly monsters. Not in the way that their father had been. Those imaginary dangers hidden in the underbrush were companions in suffering, friendly shadows that were more honest than the devils who walked about wearing men’s faces.

John wasn’t a monster.

But there was something monstrous in his face, with how he looked at Joseph then. Hungry, forlorn, intent, almost...angry. Determined, certainly. John had always been determined, even when he’d been lost.

“You must learn to love them fully, John. Love them, and love yourself. Forgive, and be forgiven. This world will burn, make no mistake. But you will have to learn to let go of your anger, or it will consume you, like fire in the brush when the forest has known only drought. Love will be your salvation, and ours. Do you understand?”

Joseph knew John didn’t understand. Not yet. But he did believe that one day, one day John would. Love was something you had to experience to comprehend, and when one was starved of love and given only hatred masquerading as love, then one’s heart grew cold and twisted, bleeding as if from the constriction of wires from a too-small cage pressed into flesh, infected and weeping.

John was learning. Slowly but steadily. It would take more time, Joseph had hoped they’d all have more time, before the Collapse, before the final test. But they were out of time, and he hoped—no, he knew that this would be enough.

—They’re not ready—Joseph—Jacob—Faith—

He had no doubts.

John’s eyes were like ice now.

—He’s not ready—
“I understand.” Those two words were terse and clipped, chilled and sharp like cracks running through the ice, the threat of cold both above it in the arctic chill, and below in the hidden, yawning depths of the polar seas, both ready to leech the warmth and life out of any who strayed or made a mistake.

John was straying.

—John—

He didn’t understand.

—John no—

Not yet...but this test, this test surely would help, it was granted by God, ordained by God, and surely He would see to it that his faithful would not be led astray.

God wouldn’t let John die.

—Are you sure?—

—What if he’s unworthy—

—What if he’s always been unworthy—

—What if his sins run too deep?—

—What if he does n’t WANT to be saved ?—

—What if he does n’t want YOU for a brother and for a family ?—

—You left him to suffer—
—You left BOTH of them to suffer—

—You knew what was coming even before the true visions came, and you did NOTHING—

—You stopped Jacob from saving all three of you the first time, until it was too much for him to bear—

—But you didn’t stop Jacob the second time, and in so doing damned all three of you to aimless wandering and torment—

—You know what is coming but do you know how to LEAD?—

—You can’t save them—

—You can’t save anyone—

—Every choice reveals your sin—

—And where have those sins led us? Where have those sins led YOU?—

—“Pride cometh before the fall,” John said, will it be his pride, or yours that leads him to his death?—

—If he fails to learn to love, is it because you failed to teach him love?—

—Did you fail to love him? To love John, love Jacob, love Faith, love your followers?—

—The way you failed to love your child—
Clementine’s child

The same way you failed to love Clementine

You should have drove

IT SHOULD HAVE BEEN YOU

IT SHOULD HAVE BEEN YOU THAT DIED NOT HER

IT WAS YOUR FAULT

YOUR CHILD’S SUFFERING WAS YOUR FAULT.

HE CAME INTO THIS WORLD AMIDST DEATH AND TRAGEDY AND YOU KNEW THEN

YOU KNEW YOU COULDN’T SAVE HIM

NOT FROM DEATH, NOT FROM SUFFERING

NOT THEN, NOT EVER

YOU KNEW YOU COULDN’T SAVE HIM SO YOU MADE SURE HE DIDN’T NEED SAVING ANYMORE

ALL FOR YOUR PRIDE

YOUR FEAR
—YOUR LACK OF FAITH—

—YOU'RE A FAILURE—

—A NOBODY—

—FROM NOWHERE—

—WITH NOTHING.—

—And you’re going to fail all of your children, just like you failed everyone else.—

—Everyone.—

—They’ll all die, regardless—

—And it’ll be all your fault.—

—You’re afraid.—

—They’ll die if you do, or die if you don’t, so you lie, and say that they must save themselves so that you can stand back and do NOTHING and then if they die it was THEIR fault, NOT YOURS.—

—LIAR—

—Coward—

—YOU STAYED AT HOME BECAUSE YOU DIDN'T WANT TO DRIVE THAT DAY—
—The same way you don’t want to lead in case something goes wrong—

—So you’ll wait—

—Wait until it all ends—

—Wait until they’re all dead—

—Every last person in the world outside will be dead—

—Just so you can be sure you were right—

—You will kill them all for your pride—

—And it won’t ever be enough—

—Because you’ll always be afraid—

—And you’ll always doubt—

—The way she never did—

—She’d never do half of the things you have your followers do—

—You’ll damn them all, because you weren’t strong enough to stop them—

—Stop them from sinning, stop them from harming—
—you should have been strong enough to lead them—

—you should have been strong enough to be their shepherd—

—God gave you love—

—God gave you Clementine—

—Even if it was only for a little while—

—Even if it was too short a time—

—You knew what love looked like—

—You knew what you should have gave John and Jacob and everyone—

—But you failed—

—you failed the first test God gave you, to show that you knew how to love—

—you're failing your remaining family now, too—

—Because you couldn't be more like her—

—Because you can't love anyone they way they deserve—

—it should've been you that died—

—not her—
—She would’ve known how to love everyone, lead everyone—

—She would’ve been the one worthy of leading humanity into the New Eden—

—Not you.—

—I’m sorry—sorry to everyone—

—I’m so sorry, Clementine.—

—It should’ve been you standing here, not me, Clementine.—

—I’m so sorry.—

Joseph had stood there, silent and still, just looking at John for a long, long moment then.

“Alright then.” Joseph said, voice soft and accepting, gently pulling his brother’s head toward his own for a gentle forehead bump, closing his eyes as John closed his. Trust. They trusted each other. but not with everything— you don’t tell him what you should tell everyone—and he knows you’re a liar—he knows—you know he knows and he knows you know—“I have complete faith in you, John.”

—LIAR —YOU HAVE NO FAITH IN HIM—YOU KNOW HE’S STRAYING—HELP HIM

—you can’t help him—

—HELP THEM ALL—

—you can’t help anyone—
He could feel John relaxing just a little in that familiar little gesture of affection—one of the few happy things they’d kept from way back when, that they’d all remembered. One of the bonds of their childhood, of their family, to each other.

John was still tense, but it was the Collapse after all—*he’s going to die*—so that was understandable.

—he’s going to die by his own sin and it will be all your fault because you refused to help because you were afraid—

—and if you help he will die because of *YOUR* sin—

—*Pride*—

Then the radio in John’s hand crackled to life, sundering the fragile moment where Joseph could feel *like he could pretend* that everything was going to be alright.

“Holland Valley Command and Control come in, this is Henbane Air Traffic Control requesting immediate assistance, over.”

John twitched in annoyance, pulling away from Joseph with the corner of his mouth curling in brittle irritation. “Affirmative, this is Holland Valley Command and Control, we read you, Henbane, go ahead, over.”

“We have a code red Holland Valley,” reported the other faithful manning Traffic Control, “an aircraft from the valley was spotted coming in over the river at 0940 hours, we hailed them and got no response. We dispatched an aerial patrol squadron to go investigate, the squadron failed to make contact before the aircraft’s pilot crashed the vehicle into the Father’s statue. The Bliss clouds in the area and the interior are all on fire, we require immediate transport assistance, firefighting
crews and equipment to contain the blaze, over.”

John bared his teeth, sucking in a sharp breath as he stood and thought for a split second—Joseph remained to one side, surprised by this turn of events but at the same time it wasn’t surprising at all.

_The man doomed to destruction and who would incite rebellion_— this situation certainly fitted that description to a T. Rather symbolic, too.

John moved then to pull out one binder among many neatly arranged on shelves, all marked and organized with neat alphabetical segment names and numerical denominations for resources, personnel, and everything else John held dominion over in his portion of the Project. “How bad was the damage, and how widespread is the fire? Is there a danger of it spreading? How many known dead, missing, wounded? Over.”

That wasn’t necessarily all information John needed to know, but John _liked_ to know as much as he could about any situation—he was a worrier, Joseph knew, and if he heard there were wounded he’d definitely send more emergency medical responders as he could spare. Not that there had been any question that John _would_ be sending some teams over regardless.

It was a form of love that John excelled at, even if there were times where he faltered at it too.

—I wish I understood him better—I

—I wish I understood why he changes moods like the wind—I

—Jacob’s more predictable—

—How did John become so different from the two of us?—

—Was it the Duncans’ fault?—

—Was that your fault?—
It was the Duncans’ fault

The same way it is yours

Joseph didn’t think about that too closely. His brother struggled with many things, many burdens, it wasn’t Joseph’s place to criticize John’s efforts to be a better person, or the moments when he stumbled. They were all of them merely mortals, and all of them had mortal flaws.

The answer that came back was not the voice of the personnel manning the Henbane’s Air Traffic Control.

“Some minor injuries, but I can confirm that no one’s died on my account, John.” Deputy Rook said smoothly, “I’d send you a picture of the damage but cell phone reception’s gone to the dogs lately around here, hasn’t it. Shame too, that plane’s lodged almost perfectly atop of the book portion of the statue, right through the chest. Really lights a fire in one’s soul looking at it, that spiritual sense of affirmation. I’ll leave you to guess what plane I crashed into it.”

The Deputy’s tone was far too sly when he said those last words for the implication to be anything else but John’s own favorite personal plane Affirmation Joseph was sure, if John’s own sudden murderously quiet expression and how he was trying to crush the radio in his hand hadn’t been a clear indication.

The binder creaked in John’s other hand, his knuckles and fingers all bloodlessly white as he took a moment, then two, then three, to breathe in deep, and slow.

Honestly Joseph was impressed with John’s control in that moment...but John’s temper was ever unpredictable, at times raging like a flashfire, other times running deep and cold like a deep ocean current. He didn’t entirely approve of John’s materialistic attachments, but John had his points with them, and he did make the effort to not indulge in the more sinful side of materialism.

He still struggles with wanting too much though, and he likely always will

New Eden as it should be will be hard on him
— We’ll have to fight with him later about all of the things he’s gathered for the new world’s reconstruction—it’s all of the conveniences of the modern world that’s led us to the brink of sin, and John doesn’t agree with that—

— His Greed still rules him almost as much as his Sloth—

— Is it actually Greed on his part and not Envy on yours that he managed to make something of himself and get somewhere in the world whereas you failed?—

— There would be no Project without John’s contributions, we wouldn’t have all that we need; all the connections and resources, if it weren’t for him and everything he’s given to us—

— You wouldn’t be here without him, you’d just be another madman rambling about the end of the world on a street corner, if it weren’t for him—

— You wouldn’t even have found Jacob if it weren’t for John. Everything you have, everything you could wish for, is thanks to him—

— And you can’t even be a good older brother to him—

— You can’t love him the way he deserves, the way he WANTS to be loved—

— You know it, and you know he knows it too—

— He’s laid the entire world at your feet, he’s laid the Project and the new world to come at your feet, and you still can’t give him something so simple as unconditional love—

— All you can give him are empty platitudes and breadcrumb gestures to say you love him—

— And you know that’s just enough to keep him coming back for more instead of realizing that you’re just a hack who doesn’t know how to LOVE. Hypocrite.—
—You know you CAN’T love him like he should be loved—

—If you could maybe he’d be better now—

—Maybe he wouldn’t be a monster—

—Maybe Jacob would be willing to live for the Project rather than to die for it if you could love them like they need to be loved—

—Maybe they would be alright, maybe they wouldn’t be monsters, if you weren’t a monster too—

—That’s why you don’t know how to love—

—God showed you how to love, He showed you Clementine’s love, but you still know NOTHING—

—You still can’t love them right, even after all this time together—

—Can’t, or won’t?—

—That’s why you’re a monster.—

—It’s all your fault.—

—It always was, and always will be, because you chose. Chose not to do anything when you should have acted, chose to act when you should have left well enough alone.—

—Fool.—
Everything was fine. He wasn’t distracted. He was focused on letting John just...do his thing.

—I’m scared.—

—It’s hard to breathe, I’m so scared—

—Do nothing or do something, all roads lead to Hell, because you never left, we’re still all here—

—There is no escape, not for you, and not for them—all because of you.—

Joseph stood waiting, watching, just letting John sort this out on his own, choosing to hold off on interfering—OUT OF FEAR—out of respect, just yet. This was John’s test—YOUR TEST TOO WHICH YOU ARE FAILING—and he just...wanted to let John try it on his own first.

—COWARD.—

He believed in John.

—No you don’t.—

Even if John stumbled, everyone made mistakes, that was how people learned.

—Not when the mistakes kill them, they don’t. The dead can’t learn to better a life they’ve already left.—

“I must admit, Deputy,” John said, voice even, polite, and full of promised menace and death, “I’m rather curious as to why you’re so Hell-bent on catching my attention. You’ve surprised me, I didn’t think you capable of such wanton acts of property destruction. So. Why?”

The Deputy’s response was prompt and polite, even a bit jaunty. “I just wanted you to notice me, senpai.”
And sassy. Sassy to the point that Joseph was taken off guard, until he told himself that the Deputy was likely doing it purely to antagonize John.

And it worked.

“Well,” John said with a smile that was all teeth, “consider yourself noticed then, Deputy. My men will be coming for you, so you and I can have a nice talk face to face real soon. We’ll have a lot of ground to cover together, starting with your inspiring tendency towards sinning.”

Should he tell John that the Deputy was trying to divert his attention?

No, John surely knew that, didn’t he?

“Only if you can catch meeeeeeee,” The Deputy sang back through the radio.

Definitely winding up John, and definitely succeeding.

It was when John’s face pulled back into a snarl that Joseph reached out, not even fully planning out entirely just what it was he meant to say, only aware that—John’s angry and I need to stop him from hurting down this path too far because his Wrath is all too easy to inspire and to spread, and he and the Lamb will both burn if they don’t have someone to check them, Oh God what do I say?—he needed to help them both with a firm and loving moment of guidance.

He reached out to clutch John’s shoulder with one hand, causing his brother to pause, and then wrapping his hand around the back of the one of John’s holding the radio, pressing the transmit button down with his own thumb. “I’ve seen what you’ve done. I know what you’re doing. I’m not angry, but I’m disappointed. My people are coming to show you my displeasure.” His own voice was a bit more tense than he’d hoped to convey...but there was something in his own Gifted intuition that told him this might do something right.

— Or maybe I’m just grasping at straws —

— You’re upstaging John now, you’re going to shame and infuriate him with this —
Faith is already going to be frightened at the idea that you’re angry with her for this even if you all know this wasn’t her fault, that you’re not angry—this call will make her more paranoid—why would you do this to her and to John?

There was a very long pause, almost long enough to make Joseph think that the Deputy wasn’t going to respond, and he wasn’t sure if that was a win or not—John would be better at discerning that, it was among John’s Gifts to read and understand a person’s soul like that, not Joseph’s—

You wish you could understand people half so well as John does, such ENVY—so perhaps he’d have to ask John later— if John’s amenable and not frothing mad to the point of avoiding you.

The Deputy’s response actually did surprise Joseph. “Hi, Father. For what it’s worth, I am a LITTLE sorry to have damaged your statue, but really, could you and your heralds NOT go about kidnapping, mugging, torturing, drugging, brainwashing and on occasion killing the unwilling? Bad enough to do it to willing sorts just for the morality of it all, but this is just all going to the dogs at this point—or wolves, in some cases, even if it is on the eve of the Collapse and all that.”

The Deputy called Joseph Father. Did the Deputy believe him?

John had a very, very strange look on his face, somewhere between surprise, disbelief, and a genteel sort of rage, like he was trying to decide what best method and weapon to challenge a man with in a duel to the death. This look was directed evenly between Joseph and the radio, so in truth Joseph had no idea what John was feeling or thinking, nor which of the two of him and the Deputy that those feelings were directed at.

He hadn’t... met someone before who perhaps believed him but didn’t ultimately join the Project. Most would deny they believed any such thing, even if in their heart of hearts they felt the truth of Joseph’s words.

Perhaps this is the test, perhaps we are meant to convince the Lamb to join us willingly!

Hope bloomed in Joseph’s chest. Yes, perhaps this was what that dim and vague sense of intuition had been pointing him towards.

Joseph needed to think a moment about this, just briefly, lest he look weak or like there was some truth to these accusations—There ARE grounds for the Lamb to Judge ALL of you and those of the Project for what you PERMIT and ENCOURAGE to happen, ADMIT-IT—
...everything they did, needed to be done in order to save humanity.

—LIAR—

—YOU’RE JUSTIFYING—

He’s honestly pretty anxious about this, more so than he was leading up to the initial attempt at his arrest by the police force. Giddy, even.

What do you say though, to convince the Lamb of God that you and yours are worthy?

—You mean what do you say to convince them that your sins are to be OVERLOOKED—

“You need to understand child,” Joseph said, voice soft—his form of address meant kindly and not disrespectfully in opting to call the Deputy his child, and there was something that felt so right in calling Deputy Rook his child, “sometimes one must go against the wishes of the person you are trying to protect, and while they may survive on their own through the Collapse, they most certainly will if they are in our care during that time—we are prepared, far more thoroughly than any of the individuals and tiny groups that cluster here and elsewhere, barring those few nations that have put in resources at the national level to prepare in the face of the inevitable.” Those nations were few, but there were some.

“Torture though, Father? That’s not something one can justify ever, I would say.” The Deputy said, very clearly critical about their methods. Perhaps a tad incredulous as well.

—Understandably so—

John was staring at him. Staring at him with such an intense look that Joseph was actually put a little off kilter by it. John looked so...fixated, like he was staring at a puzzle he didn’t know how to solve, and that offended him. And then there was that trace of Envy upon John’s features, bold and clear as daylight. Envy of what?

—You know why he’s angry. It’s because you don’t listen to him, his objections to helping the
Their goals align — John would rather not waste our time on unbelievers, and the Deputy wants those same people to be left alone.

We can’t do that though.

— This is stressful, awkward and terrible —

— You shouldn’t be defending this —

This is necessary to achieve our goals. We must persevere, or humanity will suffer for it.

— This is uncomfortable and wrong —

“‘It is not torture,’” — LIES — “it is pain with a purpose. To correct, inform, instill. Pain is a teacher, and we have but to listen and learn, and the lesson is over. No life is without pain, and those who are shielded from pain overly much suffer for it, and cannot connect with their brothers and sisters in humanity if they do not understand that sympathetic pain. You understand, don’t you child?”

“That IS the definition of torture, Father.” That title sounded less like respect and more like anger now upon the Deputy’s tongue, so very much like John in this argument, “using pain to force someone to do what you want them to do or say what you want them to say. It isn’t true choice if you’re hanging the threat of suffering over one of the options. Willfully inflicting pain this way is unnecessary.”

John was staring Joseph down with such intensity now it was a wonder Joseph hadn’t caught fire yet, in all honesty.

— John’s waiting to see if you capitulate to the Lamb’s judgement, the way you wouldn’t for him —

— NO, WE ARE RIGHT —
—Are you sure?

—WE CAN’T BE WRONG—

—We’re only mortal, and prone to fault—

—NO, WE HAVE SUFFERED SO MUCH, DONE SO MUCH, IT CANNOT BE WRONG, IT CANNOT ALL HAVE BEEN FOR NOTHING.—

—I can’t be wrong, not on THIS.—

—Otherwise I will have been wrong on everything, everyone will fall, and they will all suffer, they’re relying on me, I can’t falter, not now, I can’t be wrong about this, about our fate, our course, our path to the New Eden, or else their faith in me will be misplaced and how can I convince the faithful to remain and trust in me that this is the path to our salvation, if I was so wrong in this?—

—SO MANY WILL DIE THAT COULD HAVE BEEN SAVED IF THEY WAVER AND LEAVE—

—I’m afraid—

—I’m going to fail everyone no matter what I do, there isn’t time to build back up their confidence, not now, not on the eve of the Collapse—

Gritting his teeth just a little bit, Joseph steeled himself to respond. “All things can be made necessary in the right circumstances, my child. You will understand this, in due time. For now though, I must insist that our circumstances are dire enough to warrant such measures being necessary to ensure that humanity itself does not wither beneath God’s righteous fire in the coming Collapse. That is far grander a goal than any one person can deny.”

—I’m right I’m right I know I’m right I must be right—
The radio crackled one last time, and the Deputy responded, sounding as chilly as the deepest ice-cold depths of Dante’s hell might be, with the devil chained and bound in the middle of a frozen lake—"We’ll see about that.”

And there was no more said after that, and Joseph didn’t expect any—those words held an ominous kind of promise to be fulfilled on another day, both dismissal and farewell.

He let out a breath he didn’t know he’d been holding, just a little bit...but didn’t find it any easier to breathe.

John was still glaring at him silently, intently, looking both envious still, and...disappointed?

—No. Don’t think about why. You know why. We can’t focus on that, or we’ll waver and falter from our path. We can’t. We can’t falter, or else we shall fall.—

—Are you sure about that?—

—No.—

“You should go now, Joseph. I’ve got to see to the fire crew transport and back up, and you’ve your own Chosen to rally and see to.” John said, exhaling and suddenly all the tension was simply gone, and Joseph’s little brother simply looked like he was in the middle of a busy day, with nothing further troubling him on his mind. A swift and sure change in mood as surely as the weather could shift in its fickle days—sunny one moment, cloudy and threatening rain the next.

John wasn’t being rude or dismissive per se...so much as wishing to avoid conflict—there were times when their little brother would fight tooth and nail without respite to achieve his ends, and other times when he would disengage and pull away entirely, swift as a storm-driven gale. In the latter instances, it was usually with good reason—to avoid further conflict might be the reason now, particularly if John was in a mood. Such confrontations never ended well for any of them, and John was nothing if not a quick study.
It left Joseph feeling a bit out of sorts, and sad. Sad that he and his brothers didn’t always connect as well as he’d hoped, as he still hoped in truth.

---You would all connect better if you yourself were less stubborn, less afraid.---

But people rarely did fit one another’s personalities so well as puzzle pieces from the same box, and concessions had to be made, workarounds had to be found. This was a work around, circumventing a topic they’d butted heads about many a time before, and now they had no time to do so again—nor the patience.—

He was perhaps a tiny bit disappointed and upset about all this, and how John was behaving.

---And you’re also displacing how upset you are that the Lamb Disapproves of your actions onto John and the other faithful. Undeservedly so, because the Lamb was right.---

Joseph took a deep breath, slow and even to steady himself as he inclined his head to his brother, and turned away. The thought of reaching out to squeeze John’s shoulder in passing occurred to him...but the bitter emotional current running between them both right then made the very idea of that gesture feel brittle and unpleasant—even as an ice-cold shard of fear whispered in his ear that he might regret it later, might regret missing an opportunity to try to make amends, to love his family members as they should be.

It slowed Joseph for a moment, but he continued on. He would make it up to John later,—provided later wasn’t too late, John and the others might be stolen away or dead and you’ll have failed them again just like you always have—and they would mend their broken bridges again just like they always had. There was no time for it now, duty called, and they both understood that. They would improve, in due time, when they were all safe.

Doubt still nipped at Joseph’s heels, causing him to waver as he slowed in pulling the door shut, listening to John dole out orders to his people with authority and sureness.

He was proud of John, regardless of their differences.

He hoped...he was sure — no he wasn’t—they’d have time after to be better to one another. They were better than they had been, before. They’d all grown, they’d all learned how to better love one another. It was still a long road ahead, life always would be...but they’d all be together.
They had to be.

—Are you sure you don't want to relent? It'd make John happy, if you'd just listen to him. It'd be easier on Jacob, easier on Faith, if you'd listen to your own heart of hearts, to your family and their silent fears, the things they do not say out loud.—

His heart twisted in a sick and unhappy way, and Joseph felt ill as he shut the door, reciting silently to himself his own prophetic words regarding what he knew would happen, what he knew to be true.

A mighty upheaval shall curse the nations of man. Blood will stain the soil as the cries of the Judged erupt in a chorus of anguish. The blade of righteousness shall cull the herd and smite the skeptic. And from the ashes of this great extinction you shall lead your family to return to the angels you once were.

He prayed, as he walked away from John's office to attend to his own duties. Prayed, that he was right. Prayed, that this would be enough. He prayed that he would be less afraid.

Chapter End Notes

Title of this chapter is from "Kamikaze Love" by Poets of the Fall. This one feels like it fits John very well in this interpretation, specifically the way he loves the people he holds most dear, and also regarding his at-times strained relationship with Joseph, and to an extent his relationship with Jacob. To a lesser degree it also reflects on Joseph's attitude and love for his family and his flock—and towards those whom he has decided are to be saved. "Take me where the angels fall" also feels like a nice bit of allusion towards the Henbane and Joshua's little stunt in this chapter.

This was a fun but tough chapter to write, as evidenced by it taking two months rather than just one—John's an emotional whirlwind and as entertaining as he is to write, that emotional-whiplash took some getting used to. Joseph on the other hand is his own kind of difficult, with his absolute and total denial of some things. I was stumped for a good bit on how to show that, until the thought of striking through the relevant text came up. Also tidbit I have learned with trying to get this ready to post: strike-through does not copy-paste over well into Ao3's chapter text field, alas. Had to go in and re-strike-through all the relevant bits, so hopefully I found all the lines that are intended to be struck through. The relevant poem lines in the narration during John's segment are from Dylan Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night," which I do recommend as a classic to read for any who have not come across it before now. That's about everything I think. Have a good one, all you fine sorts!
Faith

She’s furious.

Furious to the point of shaking in silent, apoplectic rage. She couldn’t remember the last time she was this enraged and in all honesty it was alien and strange and she didn’t feel quite herself.

Wrath is unbecoming on you, she heard Rachel mock-chide her in a mimicry of what John might have said if he knew what was passing through her head.

And wasn’t that another mess and a half that she didn’t need—here was another emotion that it’d been a long time since she’d felt, the rampant discomfort of being in her own skin: of being her. She wasn’t the same. Her skin didn’t fit, not completely, feeling more like a coat that she’d outgrown just a bit and now it was too small, with a particularly undeniable need for it to be tailored to fit better.

Rather, she would’ve very much liked simply to throw it off and be done with it, put that skin or soul or whatever it was that didn’t fit back into the grave it’d crawled up from and bury it anew.

“Any sign of the Deputy?” She asked, the question flowing through the connections in the Bliss, little more than a ripple through a dream. But her priestesses felt and heard it as clear as if she spoke beside them. She kept the inquiry soft, restraining herself from imparting any of her impatience or anger into her tone or pushing it forward with more power than necessary—however much she might have wanted to.
Then the voice she hoped most to hear rolled back to her ears with welcome news.

“We are closing in, Herald. The spotters tracked where he landed and we have worked to fence him in from behind and the sides. Our people are keeping at a distance and avoiding direct engagement, per your command.”

It was Athalia, Faith’s Head Priestess and second in command of the Henbane region only to Faith’s own self. Faith felt a smile creep up her face at those reassuring words. Athalia never let her down, never disappointed her. “He is progressing in the same direction as before?”

“Circuitously, yes. Something has spooked him. He may be experiencing some sensitivity to the activity in the Bliss around him.” Athalia answered.

Faith nodded to herself, satisfied with this progression so far. “And what of John’s men?”

“They still are spread out and searching in grid-fashion, my Herald. Our people still assist and misdirect them without openly impeding them to buy time...as you ordered.” Yes, good. That wouldn’t last long of course, but John and his folk didn’t know about Joshua’s induction into the Bliss network just yet and that was to her advantage. *Her* people could find the Deputy with relative ease, and she wanted a *word* with Joshua Rook about his behavior—

“My Herald, if I may speak?” Athalia’s voice, deep and strong, rolled through the Bliss like wind through the tree canopy, shifting dark and quiet shadows across the forest floor and the trunks of nearby trees. There was something peaceful and strong in her voice and how she carried herself, one of the many reasons Faith had picked her to ascend to the role of Head Priestess.

This time however was a less restful one to hear Athalia speak—Faith had long intuited her priestess’s misgivings about the Lamb. She would hear Athalia out though, the woman deserved her respect both as her most trusted follower, and as what Faith would term a friend.

“Speak, Priestess.”

“I realize this Deputy is the prophesied Lamb, but...this *outburst.* ” Faith could hear the disapproval radiating from that one word like the burning heat from the sun in the dead of summer. “To antagonize Herald John is one thing, but to openly disrespect both your work and the Father himself by vandalizing the monument to his glory...the Deputy must be mad.”
Ah yes. That was one way to explain how the Deputy, now marked as the chosen one foreseen and destined to serve as the Judge for separating the worthy from unworthy and determine what souls would stand before the gates of Eden to enter the garden, might still fit into the grand scheme of things. It wouldn’t be a good fit, but after Rook had gone and blown a hole in the statue—her statue, with how she’d overseen the sculpture’s inception and progress from start to finish—any believer could have doubts. That statue had been an idea she had thought of early, holding the ongoing construction up as yet another delicate thread in her invisible defense against thoughts of unseating her from her position as Herald. With its completion, she had looked upon it proudly, knowing already that even if...even if the worst were to come to past, she would be remembered as the Faith who built that. The monument to the Father, and a testament that she had been here. She had changed the landscape of the Project, and all of Hope County. They could forget her, pretend she’d never existed, never speak of her again...but the towering figure would always be there as a silent statement that she had been, and no one could take that away from her.

Except for one batshit insane, reckless, thoughtless Deputy. He was threatening EVERYTHING she had worked for! She had given him a chance, and how had he repaid her? By putting her very life and soul in jeopardy! He was a problem. A problem that had to be solved IMMEDIATELY.

But he was the Lamb. To doubt that the Deputy was the Lamb was to doubt the Father...or, if the Lamb was righteous in their actions, that also meant to doubt the Father’s own righteousness in the eyes of God. It would instill a crisis of faith in many of the faithful were they to consider either of those options for long—she would have to do damage control and manage the flock’s perception of this.

Rook had no fucking idea just how terrible and awful a situation it was he’d just tossed into their laps. How was she to explain this to the faithful? How was she to explain this to the Father? He would undoubtedly be awaiting the report on this, and if she didn’t capture Rook and bring him before the Father...she didn’t know if she could afford that price. She suspected she could, but it would expend far too much of the good will she had painstakingly accumulated over all these years, and there was no guarantee she would ever be able to get it back.

He might have damaged her position in the Father’s eyes irreparably.

She’d TRUSTED him.

Foolish, Rachel sneered inside her head. Foolish of her to trust another, foolish of him to do such a thing, foolish foolish foolish.

And now she might be on rails for her own execution— as if you weren’t already, for all you knew. And you do know. You knew better than to think you were going to survive anyway...so why not strike back and further your own mark on the Project? Be the Faith that no other could be.
Rachel’s honey-sweet words were poison, she knew, but her own Pride and Wrath found appeal in those words—if she could not be the one and final true Faith until she died happily of old age in the new Eden, she would be the most Memorable of the Faiths, the one that could not be forgotten, in both blessings and curses.

And so too would she have vengeance on Joseph Seed and his brothers, for ever thinking she was someone who could be used and thrown aside without leaving marks. Jacob had taught her better than that. John had, too. But neither of them would stand for her unwaveringly if Joseph proclaimed her unfit to be Faith. Unfit to live.

She would have her revenge for the black, twisting hatred and fear that nestled deep inside her veins, the memories of the torture that had been coming clean under the false promises of something better waiting for her on the other side, and the outright lie they’d told her when they’d said she’d be Family. That she’d be loved. Cherished.

That she’d finally have a home.

That she could finally be herself.

That she’d finally be free.

All lies, in the end.

The Deputy was no different, more naive perhaps despite his experiences, but a liar just like his kin.

But she could still turn this entire situation to her advantage—the only question was how.

To turn Rook in and hopefully salvage some of the Father’s good will? As if you’d be able to garner any after this, Rachel said, sulky and just a touch panicked as Faith herself was.

Hm. That was an option of diminished returns if any, but if she didn’t...was it signalling the end?
If she didn’t capture and bring Rook to the Father right away, would the impending Collapse buy her enough time to maneuver herself into a more secure position once sealed into her bunker with her own loyal followers? Would Rook be able to sway the Father’s opinion? Could Rook serve as a shield for her?

The Project didn’t have the time to replace her. There wasn’t time to induct a new Faith to the Bliss, not securely, and the Family was relying on the Bliss as the primary method of communication and connection between the bunkers’ inhabitants—in the Bliss, members of the flock could see one another, touch one another. Without the Bliss? They’d be restricted to radio communications and John’s teleporting of mail and items in packs.

Faith knew the Seed brothers couldn’t cope well with the idea of being apart for another seven years, not when they’d already spent decades separated from each other. They’d fought about which bunker the Family would ultimately all end up in together, and had eventually agreed on John’s, with Jacob’s second, and Joseph’s third. A concession to their youngest brother, with Jacob marking up more of his preparation time prior to the Reaping to ensure his chain of command could run the bunker with him at a distance.

There’d never been any question that they wouldn’t stay at Faith’s—a polite mention of it, mere lip service she was sure, but she’d felt it then as she felt it now: she wasn’t Family. Not to them.

Not to anyone.

No one stayed without ulterior motives. Everyone left once they got what they want.

That was why she made sure her followers, her Angels, always wanted more. More of what only she could provide: The Bliss.

It was through this spider silk thread, ephemeral, shimmering, and almost invisible, that she wove her trap. She’d been infinitely careful to implant the idea in her people’s minds that if anything happened to her...the Bliss would be no more for them. If something did indeed happen to her...if the Seeds DID turn against her...she’d tear down the Project’s whole Bliss-connected network, regardless of the damage it did to the remaining living minds. She actually wasn’t sure if she could do that, but if she did die prematurely, she’d do her damndest to make them pay with their blood and their minds.

She’d spoken honestly with Joshua when she’d said she couldn’t leave the Bliss even through death until someone else was made into the new Faith...but she hadn’t mentioned that she would remain as powerful as before, more powerful even, as then she’d be without a physical body to
threaten harm to.

Faith didn’t want to die. Rachel didn’t want to die. But she couldn’t rule out that the Father and his brothers might have already slated her to face her end as yet one more Faith in their perverse little parade of...of errand girls intended to stand around and look innocent and holy and pure and to help the fucking flock forget their problems. The flock was fully connected through the Bliss, and while Rachel was the only one so far capable of maintaining control...she couldn’t rule out that the Seeds might decide she wasn’t worth the trouble—especially if they’d found another potential candidate to take her place. The way they’d already been looking when Lana, the second Faith, was lost and dying in the dream realm that had become the Bliss—Rachel’s Bliss.

Selena and Lana had both been used up until they’d died, empty and broken, having spent their all for the Project. Lana had told Rachel that, secretly in a mind-to-mind whisper full of fear, where the Seeds couldn’t hear them speak. Now? Now that the Father had what he wanted...now that he had the connection he so sought from his visions among his followers...at what point would her role as Faith meet its expiration date? It was on the Father’s whim she served at all, that she lived at all, for who would question the Father? Who would question if Rachel, the latest in a line of women parading about under the title of Faith, died and Joseph merely handwaved her as “not the true Faith” and continued looking for “the one meant to fill the role”? It’d made her paranoid to have finished building out the network of interconnected minds that had claimed both of her predecessors, but she’d done it. She’d succeeded through her own gifts and skill where they had failed!

But what then?

She’d panicked, trying to find more ways to be of use to the Project, afraid that they might just trap her the way Lana had been within the dream-before-the-Bliss—had held Lana there to make sure the woman couldn’t leave and let the entirety of the dream realm collapse before it could be passed on.

Distract them like she was some kind of carnival sideshow freak, to be looked upon with novelty and pity. Appealing to the baser instincts and hypocritical sin coursing in every last person’s veins, both desire and lust. The desire for purity and goodness, the lust of sheer animal attraction to a pretty, alluring, young and soft-looking woman.

It enraged her, if she was perfectly honest. Enraged her to be constantly in the role of the victim. To be threatened, to be casually considered weak at first glance after all she had been through and all of her struggles.

But she could deal with that. Faith could use that to her advantage, to draw them in for the Project—even if she resented it so. But even in the name of the Project...they were hers. She’d made sure they were. They served her above the Project, her Angels, her Chosen, her people, and no one could take them away from her—except for the Father. Jacob. John.

If she lost her standing in their eyes, they could turn the rest of the Project against her...but she
could lock herself and her followers inside her bunker.

That was assuming she lasted long enough to get to that point, through the time of the Reaping—she could do it. She’d have to make sure the Father and the other Heralds were all busy during that time though. She also needed that time to build up her stores in the last ditch scramble for a final intake of souls and resources. Rook could provide both a distraction and another link in the chain of reasons for the Seeds to keep her alive—if he continued taking up the Heralds’ and the Father’s attention, that would buy her time. If she also tied him more securely to her realm in the Bliss, she could give the Father and the other Seeds information on where Joshua was at any given time—not too much, just enough to keep them chasing the Deputy in circles. She’d have to get more Bliss in Rook’s bloodstream to ensure he had a strong tie to the Bliss plane, and figure out how to enable him to escape once he’d recovered enough to be mobile. If she presented the Deputy to the other Heralds while he was drugged up on Bliss, that would earn her more prestige and standing in their eyes, which meant she’d need to ensure that Rook was locked in someone else’s keeping. John’s most likely, Jacob was perhaps too...paranoid, for Joshua to easily escape. But...if Joshua did escape Jacob, that would set a high, fine standard of how slippery the Deputy could be, and that would be to her benefit, giving her more breathing room for any “near misses” she had with catching him in the future.

Rachel most certainly did not want them to be able to keep Rook, and she’d have to feed Rook’s fears of his blood family and in particular of the Father to ensure he kept running for as long as possible. He would be caught permanently in due time of course—and she’d have to make sure it was her people who caught the Deputy, not any of the others’.

For the best results, she’d have to keep him out of the others’ clutches as much as possible until the end of the Reaping, when the other seals were broken and the Collapse was eminent. But that was the rub, wasn’t it: what triggered the seals? Joshua had asked as much, and truth be told she didn’t know for sure. Joseph decreed when a seal was broken, and it was known only to him...in theory. Joshua had foreseen some possible events that triggered the breaking of the seals, but it went without saying that her dying to open a seal went against her intended end goals. John and Jacob dying...it would be unfortunate, but if it was necessary, then it would weaken Joseph’s base of power certainly.

She’d never considered what it’d be like if the Father’s brothers were out of the picture. They’d always been so steadfastly tied to one another, despite having spent the better part of their lives apart, and despite the recurrent conflict that arose from their disparate personalities and experiences. Rachel...wasn’t sure if her desire to see the others brought low from their place of power over her life and death went so far as to want them dead, but she’d already killed and done much worse for the Project, for them.

It felt weirdly final to think of killing them...or better, to have the Deputy kill them.
But if she managed to maneuver Joshua into a position where he DID kill John and Jacob...would that lock her into assuredly dying? Rachel didn’t know. Faith didn’t know.

She’d have to wait and see. Perhaps the breaking of a seal without one of the three Heralds dying would be enough for her to decide on that. It was a frightening idea, to think she might be able to kill and rise up from it...but wasn’t that the point of Jacob’s whole mantra? The strong preyed upon the weak, and Faith excelled in weakening people faster and more easily than any of the others could claim to, with her power over the Bliss. If she weakened the Seeds enough, she could weaken the Father enough so that he couldn’t kill her, and so that she—

...could she truly kill the Father?

This was the crisis of belief. Did she believe the end was coming? Did she believe that Joseph was right…?

Joshua certainly believed the end was coming. He wasn’t brought up in the Project...but if he was dreaming often of the Father, the other Heralds and the Reaping...would it have ultimately the same effect from exposure, that Joshua bought into the Project’s dogma? Did he truly see the Collapse…? It could be that he only saw a bliss-induced hallucination, Faith and Joseph both were capable of creating such spectacles in the Bliss.

...it’d be safer to bank on Joshua and the Father being right, she decided. If it didn’t, well, she’d take precautions to guard against backlash and that she was painted as the victim of extortion and threatened into doing what she needed to do to survive.

There were those who would disagree and speak against her, of course...but that was a matter to put on her to-do list for later. With the chaos of the Reaping underway, there would definitely be opportunities to deal with any possible “road bumps.”

She paused at the thought of Tracey though. That pause was quickly followed by a sick sort of rage, twisted by the sense of betrayal and resentment she still harboured for her once “friend.”

It might be that Faith would need to deal with Tracey...she didn’t want to think on that much. It was a sore matter that she could definitely examine later. Not now. She had other things to focus on right now, namely getting Rook set in place to best ensure that Rachel would survive whatever was coming next.
And what indeed was coming next? The fate of the world was potentially on the line—it could all be ending soon...or just going on as usual, with the Project being little more than one more in a long list of doomsday cults that had sat and waited, watching as the sun rose and set, and rose again with the world none the worse for wear.

Faith could plan around both outcomes though, and expand from there as events developed. She had to consider that if the end was indeed going to happen, would killing the other Seeds and weakening Joseph ultimately be a bad move and undermine their, and specifically her prospects of survival in the new world? Would she be punished by God himself if she raised a hand against his supposed chosen prophet...? She wasn’t sure. Faith was also not sure if it mattered if there was a God or not, because if there was a God and it was the kind of God Joseph certainly believed in, then that kind of God would approve of ruthless murder to fulfill His vision, wouldn’t He?

If the end wasn’t coming, then...she wasn’t sure if that meant Joseph was just crazy, and maybe...there wasn’t a God. Or at least not a God like Joseph believed in. Maybe that’d be better, given all of what Joseph had done in the name of his beliefs. What they’d all done in the name of their beliefs. In the name of Joseph’s beliefs, she corrected herself. He was the driving motivation behind all of them, whether it was through an inspired, fervent belief in the Word of the Father or through fear of consequences, Joseph got what he wanted.

Even if he wasn’t God’s chosen prophet...she wasn’t sure if she could face him and win. He was just a man...but he was a frightening one, and being human was reason enough to fear anyone.

No. No, she couldn’t think like that. She had to find a way to win. If she couldn’t win against Joseph, she would win through him. That meant she had to ensure what he wanted, was the best possible option for her. Somehow. It was not a new fear for her to consider that because Joseph thought she was special, something she had long craved for so long, would be her downfall. To the Father and most of the Project, they had considered her past of drug use to be her true sin, that the depression she had worn like a veil of translucent lace over it had been sourced from the ravages of life and had been cured upon her rise into sobriety and becoming Faith.

John hadn’t said it was so, though. That had been a secret he hadn’t told the Father, one of many Faith had found out. John liked having secrets. He hoarded them the way dragons hoarded gold, even from his brothers at times.

Your sin is Tristitia, she could clearly recall him saying as he stared into her soul with those unnervingly blue, blue, blue eyes, raising one hand to point a finger at her knowingly. Tristitia is the sin of Despair, and it will haunt you forever the way your shadow haunts your steps, Rachel. Despair...is insidious. It colors everything you do, even in its absence. It is Wrath’s cousin and close kin, and as the other sins share blood and bleed into one another, so does Despair. Wrath and Despair are the wretched twins that most acutely inspire a soul towards the other sins most deeply and profoundly, second only to Pride. You will have to cut it free from your soul for the
sake of the Project...but you and I both know even the carved out hollows of Atonement’s scars upon a soul can still well and fill with blood again if reopened with a knife.

She’d thought at first in fear that it’d been an implicit threat when he’d said that. The threat of having to go through re-education, Confession, and Atonement all over again,grueling and soul-baringly painful as it was to have her life taken apart and examined piece by piece like it was merely some interesting jigsaw puzzle to be solved. John had been looking for something, but whatever it was...he hadn’t found it in her. In a way, that had been a stinging insult at the time, with how Joseph had lavished her with praise and how the Father had believed in her. Now...now she knew that John was looking for his own Bliss, metaphorically speaking. Joseph was too, in the Project’s adoration of him as the Father and as God’s chosen Prophet. Jacob...was a different matter entirely.

But now, when she knew better, now when her eyes were open...she was glad she wasn’t a point of fixation for Jacob or John as she still was to Joseph. She was family, in his eyes.

But only conditionally.

Only so long as she was Faith Seed. Only so long as she played the role perfectly and lived up to his expectations, to his visions of a family.

And she would’ve been more willing to try to play along...if not for Joshua.

Joseph’s long lost son.

Joseph hadn’t foreseen his son returning to them. He hadn’t told them all about what he had done. To kill one’s kin, that was one of the sins that incurred the wrath of God, so she had been told growing up. To bear the mark of Cain, as a kinslayer, when Abel’s blood had cried out to God in heaven for vengeance...

Perhaps Joseph was dooming them all.

Wouldn’t that be a great trick to play upon them all, following a sinner masquerading as a savior down into the depths of eternal damnation.

Maybe Joshua was right. Doubt grew thick like thorny briars in her heart she knew, but that was an
old growth that had been years in the making. Joshua simply helped bring it to fruition, bearing lovely, poisonous flowers upon the vine among the sharp and bristling thorns.

Could it be salvaged? Could they be saved? Could she be saved?

Perhaps Joshua was more important than even what Joseph thought, as the Lion and the Lamb. Maybe Joshua was the one who would save them all, if he was also the Judge who would decide.

But with that first doubt, she doubted everything, including the initial doubts.

What was the safest route? What was the one that got her what she wanted? What did she need to do?

She decided then. Rachel would stick with the original plan, work with Joshua, let him distract the other Seeds, and hopefully amass enough resources to survive the Collapse and beyond, and build her plan out along the way.

Perhaps...Joshua’s plan to try to convince the other Heralds and the Father to take the better path was of more importance than she’d given it credit for, before.

Perhaps she should try to follow his suggestion.

Perhaps doing so would get her killed. The thought of his optimism, his lack of immediate danger for the consequences of failure, angered her deeply. He could at least disappear into the woods. She couldn’t run. Not anymore. She’d never been able to really truly run away, if she was honest.

She would have to consider her course carefully. For now though, there was unquestionably potential going down the line while working with Joshua.

But she needed to exercise more control over him.

He needed to walk the Path...and he most assuredly needed to be cemented as one of hers. She had a moment of fear and doubt, that trying to establish control over Joshua would potentially lead to disaster. The superstition and inkling of religiously-inspired fear...that maybe to tamper with the
Lamb was to invite judgement and ruin and damnation.

But she brushed it aside. She could always change her mind later and pull back if she was careful about how she proceeded, and Faith was always careful. She had to be. She had to proceed. To be kept from acting out of fear, was how people died alone and in the dark, forgotten. She would not be one of the souls lost to the dark.

“The Bliss will reveal if he’s mad or touched either way. Bring him to me.”

There was the slightest sliver of hesitation before Athalia responded in due deference. “Yes, Herald.”

The tension in Faith’s shoulders eased, and the waiting was easier then.

Athalia wouldn’t fail her, not ever.

She wouldn’t dare. Of that, Faith had no doubt.

———

Joshua

———

It’s fine it’s fine it’s fine, everything was NOT FINE, everything was terrible his heart felt like it’s about to explode and that was not. Fine.

He coughed, a wet and damning sound when paired with the ensuing splatter of blood upon the ground. His head hurt like it was set to split open the same way a ripe melon could crack down the middle, to boot.

Joshua didn’t know what was wrong. He’d jumped before impact, he’d parachuted down for an easy enough landing that he hadn’t hit the ground hard, and he hadn’t been shot. Why was he bleeding? And from where? Internally was his only guess and that was Not Good. Part of his brain was also screaming at him in a demand for answers as to why he’d thought it was a good idea to
have what amounted to a snit fit and crashing a **PLANE** into the Father’s statue. For what it was worth, he hadn’t actually crashed Affirmation into the statue—Nick was piloting that in lieu of Carmina, since Rye’s own plane hadn’t been at John’s ranch.

Carmina might have been there later if Joshua hadn’t jumped that shark a bit early, but needs obliged, and Nick was doing well enough in Affirmation with helping the Resistance take back—or at least contest—Fall’s End.

The question now was whether John had any sightings on where Affirmation was—he’d find out eventually about that little sort-of lie, but not right now. But John might go after the Ryes even harder when he found out.

Shit.

*This is WHY you shouldn’t act impulsively, for fuck’s sake.*

He feels sick. Fuck, should he turn around and head south and east to try to find Dr. Lindsey? That might be a fuck-up of a decision even if it was something serious—the man was a veterinarian after all, not a medic.

But Dr. Lindsey was pretty good at patching people up though when push came to shove...those were usually more obvious injuries however, bullet wounds and lacerations and the like, not...whatever this was.

Joshua patted himself over one last time to check for injury, his hands shaking and twitching, the movements jerky and too fast for comfort.

Though on the other hand Dr. Lindsey was pretty cute—no wait what the fuck was he thinking about THAT for? *PRIORITIES, MAN. FOCUS.*

Oh wait fuck maybe this was a result of all the *motherfucking drugs* he was currently strung out on. Shit. They should’ve burned out by now, but it just felt like it was all getting worse.

Were these withdrawal symptoms??? Or just after-effects? Fuck he felt like he was *dying.*
He swiped a hand across his forehead angrily as he continued trekking northward—he’d originally planned to try to get out of Faith’s region as soon as possible just to make it harder on John to find him, and hopefully to avoid any clashes with Faith herself.

...oh she was not going to be happy with what he’d done either, was she.

**MOTHERFUCKER, THIS IS WHAT YOU GET WHEN YOU DON’T. THINK. THINGS. THROUGH!**

He was having a terrible time of it. Terrible day, really, he was all fucking jittery to Hell now and Joshua really didn’t think he should try taking more of any of those drugs—”homeopathic remedies” be damned, they were too effective AND these after-effects were WAY too much trouble to deal with—but on the other hand, would he fuck himself over if he didn’t take more? Had he overdosed? He was sure he hadn’t, Tweak had measured it out carefully since the man liked repeat customers over dead ones, and Bo’s recipe Joshua had already used enough times over many years to classify it as tried and true. Bad mix-effects of them all running in his bloodstream all at once? He hadn’t seen anything of this sort in his dreams before. Shit.

Anger and frustration and fear whirled in his head at lightning speed, and Joshua found himself shoving both palms against his mouth as a reaction to muffle a quiet scream before he could think about either action.

No no no no this was **NOT** okay. He had things to do, had to get away, had to—had to—had to get out, yes, get out and get help for the Resistance outside of Hope County from the world at large the government yes, the missing Marshall Burke should be reason enough, kidnapped yes.

Fuck he was a wreck. He stumbled on through the woods, crouching behind cover to check his surroundings every so often because he couldn’t shake the silent-alarm fear that someone was going to get the jump on him and oh God he was being paranoid—*but justly so.*

It was an entire cult out to get him after all, and it didn’t matter if it was shoot on sight or capture both were bad well the first option is infinitely worse than the other you can’t fix death are you sure the second option isn’t worse you know what they do to the people they capture and they’ll have even more reason to pick a bone with YOU.

This was ridiculous, he’d see anyone coming from a long way off with Bo’s mix still affecting his sight even hours later. *How worrisome.*
He coughed up another blot of blood, not quite coagulated enough to be a blob, but getting there. *Much more worrisome.*

Fuck. Okay. He’d go find out if anyone knew where Dr. Lindsey was at presently. Good plan. Or was he still at his office perhaps? Or had he gotten the news of the impending Reaping and evacuated the premises?

The only other slight flaw in that plan was that instead of turning around to head south east, he kept heading north.

“All right, I give up, why am I still heading north?” Joshua muttered to himself out loud, because there was no one there to judge him and he was an adult and could do what he wanted, including being childish and unruly about health-threatening situations.

It was a fairly good question, and he was fairly certain the answer was because he didn’t want to head in a south easterly direction. But why?

Was it because he didn’t want to hang around in Faith’s region, for various aforementioned reasons? That felt like part of it, certainly.

It was a bit surprising seeing as if he turned east he could go round up Sharky if his bud was still hanging out at the trailer park. He probably was. Unfortunately, however much he enjoyed Sharky’s companionship, that was not tempting enough bait to make him *stop* walking north.

Was he afraid of something?

Yep. Yep, that was it.

Was he afraid of Faith?

Oh yes. That was definitely up there on his reasoning for not wanting to stay. Main motivating reason, actually. Yeah, that felt right on the mark.

But why? He was...reasonably certain...he could talk his way out of this. Somehow. Spin it as a
good thing that he got John and Joseph’s attention this early. Frick he’d have to think about why. Come up with a plausible reason.

...he didn’t have one, aside from being showy and destructive to get their attention.

Okay. So. He wanted to leave, even at the risk of serious unknown hazards to his health, because he was afraid of Faith’s...retribution? Yes. For the statue? Partly. For...what then? Pissing off John? Nah, that was what they’d agreed on before he’d crossed the bridge, more or less. Pissing off...Joseph? Well. He wasn’t sure where he stood with regards to Joseph. That conversation with the Father had been...unexpected, unnerving, and definitely not what he’d been wanting or hoping for. He’d done his best though. Granted, he probably should’ve been more prepared in general for it even then, but…

...yeah no he did pretty damn well not to just leave the line silent the first time he’d heard Joseph speak instead of John. It’d felt like his heart had just about stopped, but he’d still tried.

He’d not managed to get very far trying to wean Joseph off of the...whole fucking mess of justifications for all the crazy shit the cult would be—and was already—getting up to, but that had been as far as he had been able to manage before the fear had been too much. Fear and whatever else, but definitely a whole boatload of fear had been mixed in there. Still was there, really.

If he could swing all this and make it work without talking to the Father anymore than needed, that’d be just grand. Not likely, but a boy could dream.

Something flickered suddenly in the corner of his eye and he flinched away for a split second before turning so quick to look at it he just about gave himself whiplash—but there was nothing there.

Had it been just Bliss sparkles then?

No...he was certain it’d look like a lot more mass, bright white or something else luminous, fuck it was hard to tell with the Bliss and the psychedelic color-tripping effect that came and went on a whim.

The hairs on the back of his neck stood up and he had a sudden urge to hide—an urge he immediately obeyed, ducking down to crouch behind a tree with a shrub bush growing real close to it. What was it? What was happening?
Was this just paranoia from the drugs? He felt like someone was watching him or looking for him and he knew the cult certainly was looking for him but there was the inherent immediacy of hide as if he could feel like someone’s eyes picking him out from amidst the undergrowth.

**SOMETHING OR SOMEONE WAS LOOKING AT HIM BUT FROM WHERE AND WHO.**

There was no one there that he could see, scanning his surroundings. The drugs were still in effect so he’d see them long before they saw him, so...where?

...it must just be paranoia. He couldn’t just stay squatting in the bush all day. He had issues to attend to, like, say, mysterious bleeding. End of the world. People dying. Important stuff.

But he couldn’t shake the feeling that someone was looking for him and that they were TOO CLOSE.

It felt like his heart was going to explode from the fear.

Or the drugs. It could’ve been the drugs. He really should maybe not be taking drugs without testing them in smaller quantities first. Or mixing them. That probably would bring about undesired side effects, LIKE PARANOIA.

It was fine. He was fine. **HE WAS NOT FINE.**

Fuck.

Right. He’d just have to leg it and hope it really was just paranoia and not...actual intuition or something. How long had he been faffing about in the woods now? It must’ve been the better part of twenty minutes at least since touch down.

It was fine. It was fine. Just...hoist his pack up a bit more, quietly, and then one step forward, and then another. It was harder to convince himself to go out into the open, so for the ease of just making any progress he kept to cover—was something off to his right on his two o’clock? He kept wanting to keep trees and shrubbery between him and that direction.
And whatever was over there.

**NO WAIT HE SAW IT NOW. SOMETHING WHITE—** _was it Faith?_  

No. No, it wasn’t Faith—an Angel?

Angels. Plural.

They were staying just shy of his sensing range, but some of them had gotten close enough to flicker into view as tiny, distant white silhouettes for a brief moment. Staying out of his range was purposeful according to either his gut instinct or paranoia, he wasn’t sure which or if it mattered. Angels weren’t purposeful unless directed, so—he had company, and they _knew_ something about him, did they? Surely they did otherwise they wouldn’t be keeping such a healthy amount of distance between him and them.

“Deputy Rook!” A voice rang out, causing Joshua to freeze for a split second before ducking down again.

It wasn’t Faith’s voice. It was someone else’s he recognized, but he couldn’t quite put a finger on who. Someone from the Project? He didn’t think it was one of the Resistance members, certainly not any of the more prominent personalities.

“We have you surrounded! Put your weapons down and come out with your hands up! Herald Faith requires you to come with us to stand before her judgement and answer for your actions of defacing the statue of the holy Father.”

Oh shit. Shit shit shit he did NOT want to answer for that. _Well if you didn’t want to face the consequences Joshua maybe you shouldn’t have DONE that in the first place._ Unhelpful brain was unhelpful with retrospection and snippy commentary.

The familiarity of the voice was still niggling at the back of his brain—who was that? One of Faith’s surely. A priestess? Sounded like one. Which one though?

He must’ve been silent and lost in thought longer than he’d thought, because he was roused from
his ruminations by the priestess calling out again.

“This is your first and only warning to come peacefully, Deputy! If you resist, we have been permitted to use whatever means necessary!”

SHIT.

It was at this point that Joshua panicked and apparently took leave of his senses. Instead of doing what he knew was the sensible thing, namely acquiescing and letting them know he was coming out peacefully, he instead chose to hurriedly struggle to take his pack off, doing his best to bury it quickly in a pile of leaves alongside his dart gun, rifle and ammunition holster and belt. Fuck fuck fuck he had to mark it so he could find it again hopefully SHIT would he find it again later he fucking hoped so. Knife! Knife knife knife he should mark the tree and hope no one looked at it too closely. He marked the tree with a quick cut on the bark and moved a lumpy rock to mark the place before staggering off in a blind run in a different direction—there was an odd sensation in the back of his head, like a faint tugging, and he glanced back out of bad habit— the fuck was that?

It wasn’t like the sparkle he’d seen in the clinic earlier when he’d first woken up but there was something there where he’d left his gear.

What in the ever living fuck was that and what was going on? Fuck it, whatever, if it was still there later he could use it to find his stuff but holy shit that was too fucking creepy—if he’d been more superstitious like Jacob or spiritual so to speak like Joseph he might’ve thought it was some weird you were meant to have this bullshittery with the dart gun but fuck that noise, there was surely (hopefully) a completely rational logical reason why this was. Amidst all this psychic end-of-the-world bullshittery. That was a matter for future Joshua, right now he had to run—WAIT FUCK WAS HE SURE HE WANTED TO BE DISARMED RIGHT NOW no wait he still had his handgun, he was fine OR WAIT WOULD THEY TAKE HIS HANDGUN SHOULD HE HIDE IT TOO? He nearly whirled fully around half off balance as he considered going back to hide his handgun too wait that’d be suspicious if he was entirely unarmed he should keep at least the handgun shit was it more suspicious if he didn’t have another gun should he bring his rifle? No fuck his brain was going in a thousand different directions, he was fine, just keep going as it was, he didn’t have time to waste. With that he reoriented himself to continue running northward at least for now.

Honestly he was expecting to be caught so he couldn’t quite figure out why he was still running away. He chalked it up to panic, honestly. But why was Faith that terrifying? Even in the light of all the things she’d done, was doing, and might still do, he hadn’t been afraid enough to want to run from her but here he was, running while his heart felt like it was going to explode right out of his chest.
WHY THOUGH?!

Oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck what were those white threads? FUCK were those Bliss-things? Shit wait he should’ve figured they’d use the Bliss, Faith had done something like that when she’d first dragged him into the Bliss also wow what a weird parallel, he’d been bleeding then too—

Oh.

Oh.

WAS HE BLEEDING BECAUSE THE DRUGS WERE FUCKING WITH HIS STAMINA?

Fuck fuck fuck he got bloody noses when he tried to do difficult psychic shit, was all this prolonged drug-effect-second-sight stuff putting a strain on his systems?

Shit. That was probably it, wasn’t it?

Shit. HOW COULD HE TURN IT OFF? It should’ve worn off hours ago. Both of them, he was certain. Bo’s mix definitely should have, the Furious he didn’t know for sure but in THEORY it shouldn’t have lasted six fucking whole hours at this point.

Fuck fuck fuck he did not need to deal with all this priestess nonsense from Faith right now, even if it was a direct result from his own damn actions. He very, very, very briefly considered taking one of his doses of the Fast to see if it actually enabled him to run away faster from his current situation. That being said he knew even before he thought about that option that taking yet another drug was a Royally Stupid Idea given his current predicament, which was why he wasn’t going to take it. It was still a tempting idea though, however monumentally stupid it was in the not-far-off long run.

Nothing else to do but to go for broke and run like hell with just his own two legs then. He made for a running leap over the white threads, all of them waving slow and fluid and low over the ground ahead of him and wait they MOVED ON THEIR OWN?! The damn things curled up like they were trying to grab him of their own volition—they missed, but they kept moving after him even as he kept running. Fuck fuck fuck were they actually moving independently or was the priestess moving them from a distance, or was it something to do with like a proximity-detector? There were more glowing white threads weaving towards him from through the trees, some in swarms large enough that the uppermost ones were flowing along above head height as if the
threads’ movements weren’t already creepy enough—now he couldn’t look at them without the scenario of being overwhelmed and subsequently drowned by the damn things running through his head.

Shit. He had to get out of the Henbane—were there any vehicles nearby he could commandeer for a faster getaway? Fuck no, he was in the middle of the woods, people didn’t fucking park vehicles out here so far from the roads.

He stumbled as one foot skidded over a patch of dry packed earth, sending him sliding down the slope to one side and far too close to an approaching cluster of Bliss threads. He managed to skirt away from touching them successfully but he was off balance—wait, why was everything going white—? Fuck.

He kept running but his movements were quickly getting a lot sloppier than they had been, and he was starting to feel like he was watching from a first person camera rather than actually being actively a part of the immediate situation.

*Note to self then: proximity to said Bliss threads still induces Bliss exposure* —he felt the first threads curl around his arms and legs, dragging at him until he tumbled to the ground in a sprawled heap. The white-out effect was coming on remarkably faster now.

*And actual contact with said Bliss threads obviously induces Bliss exposure faster,* he thought, mentally kicking himself as he passed out of consciousness,

—and woke up in the Bliss.

There were a LOT more flowers here.

And oh God his head was killing him now. He groaned, trying to roll onto his hands to push himself up, but his arms wouldn’t take his weight.

And oh that was a lot of blood starting to form a little puddle on the ground in front of his face now. A little too quickly for relative peace of mind in this admittedly shitty situation—he coughed and then there was a fresh layer of blood in his mouth, he was really starting to hate the taste right then.

A hand grabbed him tightly by his upper arm, hoisting him up enough for him to get his feet under him with minimal staggering about. “You should have known better than to think you could outrun
the Bliss,” the Priestess hissed at him before stopping short to frown at all the blood on his face and front.

Joshua in the meantime was fighting a splitting headache and the weird groggy feeling of the Bliss filtering into his head—he was 100% sure he’d seen this Priestess’s face before, but where? “You look kinda familiar,” he slurred, already feeling like his brain was unlatching and floating away in a cloud of Bliss and, unfortunately, pain, “have we met before?”

No wait duh he hadn’t met her before, he wasn’t in cahoots with anyone in the Project aside from Nancy, sort of. He must’ve seen her face in a vision or a dream or something...but which one?

The Priestess gave him a slightly incredulous look before frowning harder. “You shouldn’t be this cognizant in the Bliss.”

She and Faith had both said that. As Joshua recalled though he’d been WAY more out of it when he’d been talking to Faith that first time in the Bliss. The thought still made him wince. “Yeah I’d rather I wasn’t cognizant either right now. My head’s killing me.”

It hadn’t hurt the last time he was here, it’d just felt like his head had been stuffed with cotton, not unlike coming down with a cold. Right now it felt like it was set to pop—or like he was about to get one of those ensuing wicked hangovers that came strolling along after he’d spent the night before drinking more than was advisable with Pratt, Sharky, and Hurk.

No alcohol this time though, so he’d just have to chalk this up to another don’t-mix-drugs life lesson, assuming he made it out of this in one piece and of one mind.

“—unwise, Herald.”

Apparently he’d drifted out of consciousness for a split second or something, since Faith had shown up and was mid-conversation with the Priestess. Said Priestess was no longer holding him up, having passed him off to be held up between a pair of Angels who looked...creepily out of place in the Bliss with the whole lights are on but nobody’s home vacant stare, the mask-muzzles and bliss-white eyes. It probably would be too much to ask that he not be held up by Angels right now—or have them anywhere near him. The odds of Joshua getting up and going anywhere as he was feeling right this minute in the Bliss were slim to none, but that was probably not a factor of consideration for either Faith or her priestess. He looked back groggily to where Faith was frowning at said Priestess, arms crossed in either disapproval or defensiveness. He wasn’t sure, with Rachel it could be both. It still bugged him that he couldn’t place the Priestess’s name...
He snapped his fingers then. “Athalia!” he said, causing both women to pause their conversation and glare at him—Faith with what was definitely disapproval aimed at him, Athalia with incredulousness.

“Sorry, just remembered your name is all. Don’t mind me,” He slurred a bit sheepishly, letting his head flop back down because good GOD it hurt, and pain was exhausting. He tried turning his head a bit to try to watch what was going on, not wanting to expend any energy whatsoever if he could help it.

“This isn’t right, Herald,” Athalia insisted, gesturing to Joshua, who was feeling a bit like a powerpoint presentation at that moment, “he knows too much and is too much here in the Bliss. We shouldn’t proceed any further with his integration—he shouldn’t have begun integrating with the Bliss at all!”

She sounded more stressed than before. That probably wasn’t good. Maybe he shouldn’t have said anything.

…

He felt sick.

He definitely felt sick when his stomach started twisting and roiling unpleasantly.

Then he was sick all over the ground—there wasn’t much to cough up, it’d been long enough since he’d eaten to ensure that. He did gag at the sensation of something catching in his throat, dry heaving until he managed to cough up...a glob of congealed blood?

Oh good, his insides were bleeding or something. Splendid. Just what he needed.

Wait, were his insides bleeding? He was vomiting blood clots in the Bliss, not reality. Fuck, what was the difference?

Faith quickly moved back with a look of disgust, giving Joshua’s brain a moment of conflicted confusion. It wasn’t that much blood nor close enough to even dream of staining her lacey white
skirts, but on the other hand it was understandably blood. Was she rather adverse to blood and such then? ...that might be another reason why she had the Angels’ mouths covered up, if all that drool was sometimes laced with blood alongside the traces of bliss.

“There is something wrong with him, Herald,” Athalia insisted, and she sounded...scared?

What was Athalia afraid of? She wasn’t the one currently being held captive in a drugged stupor, at least not as directly. Cult brainwashing blurred the lines of consent, and all that.

They couldn’t all be hemophobic or whatever it was going on.

“Obviously,” Faith said, clearly annoyed as she lifted one hand and beckoned the Angels on either side of Joshua forward with a commanding gesture.

Being dragged along the ground, be it in the Bliss or reality, was never a pleasant experience. It was equally unpleasant being dragged by someone in reality as it was by a pair of what amounted to bliss-zombies by any other name in a...spiritual dream world or whatever the Bliss plane technically was. At least it wouldn’t wreck his pants in the real world, he’d just gotten them cleaned earlier. Granted it was by Faith’s people but still. No one liked being covered in mud when they only had one pair of clean pants available.

“What have you done, Joshua?” Faith asked—demanded, with how she was glaring daggers at him...but the softer way she pitched her voice, a little bit quieter, not really meant to grandstand before Athalia as a Herald, felt...a bit more like something else. Worry? Surely she wasn’t worried about him, was she? She’d just met him, he was potentially a threat to her place in the Project, there were so many reasons. No, she must be worried about him being an idiot and ruining her plans. Right?

...honestly he felt a little bit bad assuming that. He knew he should know better, should be sceptical, should assume she was going to double-cross him or something else rather nefarious. But he was an idiot and wanted to hope she actually did care.

Well fuck. That was Rachel playing the Faith role to a t now wasn’t she? The whole Siren gig. Either he was a born-again fool or she got him good. If he was unhappily honest with himself, it was probably a little bit of column A, a little bit of column B, and despite knowing that, he was still apparently going to do the dumb thing in the slight hope that maybe being “genuine and trusting”
“I might’ve taken a couple of drugs to help with dealing with everything,” He said, before realizing right about the same time as Faith’s expression shifted that his given word choice was NOT the ideal thing to say, in particular to Faith. “Not like that! Not those kinds of drugs. It’s to help me see, and uh...lift heavier things? That sounds like utter rubbish, doesn’t it.”

He wasn’t sure what did and didn’t sound absolutely loony in this instance to Faith. They were in Hope County after all. The entire area was full of batshit weirdery, honestly. It was selective batshit weirdery however, which was what made it difficult to figure what would slide and what wouldn’t with different people.

Faith was looking at him like he was out of his mind. Yep, he’d done something unacceptably batshit in her eyes then. He was feeling a little bit judged in a hypocritical way right now.

“Why would you do something like this?” Faith demanded. Wow she actually sounded pissed off, that was...actually kind of impressive, not really in a good way, but Rachel being willing to actually show that she was annoyed and upset was more than he’d expected of her here. He’d expected a more...Herald-y show of imperiousness and holier-than-thou-ness in front of one of her followers.

That being said, Joshua was still in hot water.

“I didn’t know it’d fuck with the Bliss in my bloodstream!” Which was true, he’d had no idea it was going to mess with him like this.

Faith held up a finger, seemingly as much to tell herself to take a moment before responding as it was to gesticulate and express herself as she continued, “Let me rephrase: Why would you take drugs at all, Joshua? You’re a police officer. ”

“I know that!” He said defensively. “And I already told you—I needed the edge to deal with everything going on, time is of the essence, and it’s not like it’s addictive or something, I knew what they were generally supposed to do. I’ve taken one of them enough times before to know what to expect, it never behaved like this before! And the other one I knew shouldn’t have had any negative side effects like this even mixed with the former, I never saw them reacting badly with the Bliss even when the three were mixed together, sometimes even with more concoctions tossed into the mix. It’s not like anyone ever mentioned not to mix stuff with Bliss anyway.”
God his head was killing him. He wasn’t feeling quite so out of it anymore, but it did feel like someone was hammering on his skull with a sledgehammer.

Athalia looked on at the two of them with concern, and suspicion—surprisingly at both Joshua and Faith. Huh. She didn’t know what Faith was up to then? Didn’t seem Faith cared much if her priestess saw what was going on right now though—unless Faith thought she could smooth this slightly-too-familiar exchange she had going on with him out with a plausible excuse later? He didn’t buy that, but he didn’t know Althaia well at all, beyond her name and some sparse impressions.

“I shouldn’t have had to warn you of all people, Deputy,” Faith responded scathingly and woo, even if it was reiterating her former point, he felt his respect for her climb up another notch with that display of attitude. She was growing as a person! He didn’t appreciate said attitude being turned on him much, but still.

“Yeah well I fucked up, I admit it, okay? I’m sorry,” He grimaced as soon as those last words came out of his mouth. The apology had come out as a reflex, regardless of whether he actually had something to apologize for—and in this instance this wasn’t something he thought he owed her an apology for. “For the statue, anyway. Not for the drug use.”

“That would be something I wanted to ask you about: What, exactly, were you thinking destroying MY statue?”

“I was getting John’s attention! ...and I got pissed at him for being dismissive and I panicked that I couldn’t get him to focus on me instead of on Deputy Li over at Fall’s End,” Joshua said, his tone petering out into a mutter towards the end.

He didn’t know what happened with Li. Distracting John was all well and good, but that wouldn’t draw the Peggies on the ground in Fall’s End out and away from the town. He sort of hoped Grace and Nick and the others had managed to save some of them, but that would likely mean more dead people. But if Grace and the others didn’t save the others, then that would mean the townsfolk would be enduring the tender mercies of John’s attention and cult baptisms. It didn’t really feel like there was what he’d consider a winning outcome there, certainly not at present. Fuck. Should he have kept this purely in John’s territory instead of crossing over into Faith’s?

In retrospect he could’ve crashed the plane into John’s YES sign, but the Father’s statue was more dramatic and symbolic. He’d also figured on an easier escape, at least as far as terrain went—while he could likely escape easily in the mountains and woods in the area around the YES sign, it was not a hike he really wanted to undertake right then, too much to do, not enough time or energy to be running amok like a wilderness enthusiast. Fuck he was going to be doing a lot of running around now, wasn’t he. Fucking end times.
“Herald. This is wrong. ” That little insistent comment from Athalia put a halt on whatever Faith had been about to say to him. “He is wrong! He should not be here like this! He shouldn’t be lucid, he shouldn’t be bleeding! He brings pain and blood, can’t you see?”

*He shouldn’t, he shouldn’t, he shouldn’t,* Joshua sucked in a sharp breath, rolling his eyes skyward in irritation. He didn’t have the patience for this, his head hurt, the rest of him was beginning to ache too, and overall he felt like shit mentally too after all that had happened so far today. “Well that’s just the pot calling the kettle black now isn’t it, it’s not like I’m the one who drugs and drag people away to fuck them up with torture implements—and your faithful have to be pretty damn high on something to think there’s anything glorious about a place called The Misery, you two, so stop giving me shit about my using. I’m not even using that much, it was supposed to wear off hours ago and it would’ve. And if I’d known not to mix it, I wouldn’t have taken it. Jesus.”

...running his mouth off was probably a bad idea. Oh yeah, it definitely was indisputably a bad idea with how Faith turned to look at him, her hair twisting about her at the motion.

Athalia however had gone a bit pale, looking still angry—but now also scared.

“How would you know of The Misery?” Athalia demanded. “I haven’t mentioned it to anyone yet, not even Herald Faith.”

Joshua was already just giving her the most sarcastic look he could muster before he’d even thought about it. “Well GEE, I WONDER, IT COULDN’T POSSIBLY BE BECAUSE I SAW IT IN A VISION AHEAD OF TIME, NOW COULD IT. It’s not like I look like someone you might know WHO DOES THE EXACT SAME THING, NOW IS IT.”

Athalia flinched but glared right back, meeting his gaze. “The Father’s visions are holy and sent from on high from God himself, you were sent by the destroyer to wreak havoc and ruin on all that we have wrought, and to tempt the faithful off the true path!”

He couldn’t resist glowering at her. Even on a good day he wouldn’t have had patience for this kind of talk, let alone right now of all times. Yes he’d fucked up their giant statue, but they were also fucking up people’s homes and lives. One was symbolic and singular as an event, the other was an ongoing chain of happenings and were far more crucial to people’s lives.

He’d also fucked up the plane, but it wasn’t Affirmation, so John would be fine once he figured that out. It’d probably mean he’d lose traction with keeping John’s attention at that point, but
hopefully by then Fall’s End would be liberated and they could at least get the townsfolk...out of Hope County? Somewhere safe? He was quite sure they were not at all interested in going to ground and hiding out in a bunker, no matter who owned said bunker.

This was all an absolute fucking mess, and it didn’t have to be, if the cult could just stop playing marauders and keep to themselves. Fucking hell.

“Nah, I think you all are more than perfectly capable of doing that yourselves,” Joshua responded flatly. “It’d be nice if you left the rest of us out of it though.”

“Athalia,” Faith’s tone brooked absolutely no bullshit and she sounded as if she was most definitely 100% done with all this, “administer a dose of Cleanser, and a double of the Chosen’s Sacrement.”

“What!” Athalia sounded shocked and surprised, enough so that Joshua was feeling kind of offended by it, even if he did feel something similar in the surprise department. More towards apprehensive in a “where is this going and can I opt out somehow” kind of way. He wasn’t wild about getting MORE Bliss in his system, let alone something new like this Cleanser mix, but he rather suspected the answer was probably no, he was out of options to enable opting out of all this. He wasn’t...mentally fit? Physically-fit-in-the-Bliss to try to pull a runner with how much he was feeling like roadkill at the moment, and he was fresh out of emotional pull with Faith.

He also didn’t like this mention of “Cleanser”, whatever that was. It sounded like household cleaning products and those were never something to ingest. He doubted it was that of course, but that didn’t make it sound anymore appealing.

Faith simply smiled a venom-sweet smile at Athalia, all hidden knives and teeth waiting for blood. “Did I stutter?”

“No, my Herald, but—”

“No. No buts. Administer the dosage.” Her face went disturbingly cold for a moment as she addressed Athalia, before switching back to that poisonously sweet smile as she looked at Joshua. “We’re going to be purging the extraneous drugs from your system with the Cleanser alongside a strong dose of Bliss. Since whatever you took seems to have interacted with your previous dosage, we’re theorizing that your additions bound themselves to the Bliss molecules in your bloodstream. This was a problem we ran into early on in our introduction of Bliss to congregation members with...past histories of substance abuse, shall we say. Dr. Feeney went through some lengths to find a solution to their suffering—and that is how our Cleanser Bliss strain came about. It helps remove most tainted-strains of Bliss, and you’re going to need a double dose to keep up with your intended
trajectory of integration with the Bliss...and so you don’t suffer withdrawals. The side effects would be quite...severe, in response to your blood having insufficient levels of the Chosen’s strain at this point, especially so abruptly. Mind you, this will be most unpleasant. It takes a long time for the body to recover from such a trial, but you’ll have plenty of time to recover at the clinic later.”

Well this was deja vu all over again watching Athalia’s blurred real-world-self stoop to pull Joshua’s sleeve up to start tying off a tourniquet and preparing the injection site. Fuck, he couldn’t spare a long time to recover—plus he wasn’t sure if Faith meant to let him go or not. On the other hand though, how fucked up were his bodily systems right now? Probably bad, since he was still fucking bleeding—he really needed some gauze or one of those cotton plugs or something to stop that.

Athalia frowned, tight-lipped in focus as she moved in the physical world, working with a briskness that clearly portrayed her disapproval of this entire business as she filled the syringe with the three doses of Bliss-derivatives, ensured there were no, and pierced the inside of Joshua’s elbow with the needle.

There was no way Joshua should have felt as immediately sick as he did—it couldn’t possibly have hit his system that fast, the injected Cleanser hadn’t even gotten around to circulating yet. But nauseous he was—and his headache was steadily getting worse too. He was definitely going to be sick, with the way his brain felt like it was listing from side to side and how everything was looking like it was rolling about as if they were on board a ship in rough seas. Joshua didn’t notice Faith backing up a few judicious steps away from him, what with being a little too preoccupied with the sudden ill-feeling gripping him.

There was a disconcerting little pop from...somewhere internal, too brief for him to latch onto a location in his present state. Then he was gagging as something wet cut off his air inside his throat, instinctively bending over to try to dislodge whatever it was lodged in the back of his throat. That was when he vomited blood and slimy, slug-shaped crimson bits all over the ground in front of him.

The pain subsided a bit into a dull, aching throb in his head and the body-wide aches were starting to recede, thankfully. He felt a lot lighter, dizzy almost, and surprisingly better in a tired-out-way—apparently he’d really made himself sick with the drug mixing. Gross, but he was thankful for it. The glowing effects from Bo’s mix was already fading out noticeably, which was a relief both for his peace of mind and his eyes—all those glowing silhouettes made his eyes tired...even if they weren’t actually light sources. Or they weren’t light sources as far as he knew, anyway. He didn’t know what science if any was applicable to that—that’d be Larry’s department, not his. The red-green edging effect was pretty much all gone, and what was left was on the way out—hopefully a visual indicator that The Furious was also wearing off. Well. He had to hand it to Faith and the Project, the Cleanser did at least help in this instance, even if it was in a rather macabre fashion. But damn that was a lot of blood, with disgustingly gooey blood clots mixed in—ONE OF THEM WAS MOVING.
Shit. This was the Bliss so maybe it was metaphorical or just imaginary nightmare fuel but why was it moving —THEN the damn wriggling blood clot started screeching, like a high pitched version of dragging a fork over glass.

“FAITH, WHAT THE FUCK IS THAT?” He hadn’t meant to yell, but that was one hell of a nasty surprise to see face to face.

“Athalia! Contain it!” Faith forewent answering Joshua’s panicked exclamation—but there was an urgent tension and a wavering note in her voice that betrayed the fact that she was afraid too.

If it was slightly less freaky circumstances, Joshua would’ve laughed at this—it wasn’t unlike two people yelling over a spider, calling for the third person to catch it.

That being said, it was freaky circumstances and Athalia looked none the less freaked out as she reached out to one side. An Angel flew over in a blur, handing Athalia a...tall plastic container? Really? That did not seem like a thick enough layer of protection between one’s hand and whatever that thing was, but maybe Joshua was just extra squeamish since that thing had apparently come out of HIS insides. Athalia was less perturbed by having only a flimsy layer of flexible plastic between her and the thing, using the container to scoop up the screaming wriggling little mass and quickly capping it shut.

It looked like a blood-stained leech.

EW.

“Nothing comparable has happened in the physical world?” Faith demanded, staying far, far away from Athalia and Joshua, her hands fisted in the sides of her dress and her mouth drawn tight in a disgusted, teeth-baring grimace.

The Angels holding onto Joshua at least seemed to be drifting back and dragging Joshua away from the puddle of blood, which he was thankful for.

It did make him wonder if Faith was puppeteering them or not to do that? She seemed like she was pretty distracted by the...really gross leech-critter and that’s why their appearance had faltered. That wriggler would’ve been pretty fucking freaky in its own right, even if it hadn’t come out of him personally. That just made it ten times worse, and gave him the willies.
“No, my Herald,” Athalia said, holding the plastic container away from herself, her nose wrinkled in revulsion as she regarded the bloody leech-thing. “I shall send for supplies in case something does happen, though.”

“Take him and that _THING_ to the clinic, restrain him as you see fit and hand _that_ off to the on duty researcher once they’ve stepped over into the Bliss,” Faith ordered, pointing to the wriggling leech-creep in the container to clarify her words...not that her words really needed clarifying in Joshua’s opinion. “I want to know what that is and what caused it.”

“Yes, my Herald.” Athalia said, dipping her head in acknowledgement.

The screeching at least was tapering off, weakening in tandem with the creepy leech-thing’s struggles. Then the thing went quiet and still with a gross little gurgle. A death rattle? He wouldn’t trust it, he’s seen enough of the Alien movies to not trust weird biological things he doesn’t understand. It wasn’t a face hugger or something, but it was freaky enough for him not to want to have the container opened in his general vicinity.

...fuck he didn’t have MORE of those things in his insides, did he? The thought gave him the willies—he hated just the thought of parasites.

The ensuing quiet lasted all of about two minutes, tops.

Then there was a deep rumble that Joshua thought was thunder in the distance before his brain realized it wasn’t _that_ far away, and the Bliss’s sky wasn’t stormy.

The treeline broke like water scattering across rock as a massive wave of dirty white and _RED_ and a pair of enormous, wide-set Bliss-bleached eyes staring him down fit to kill with looks alone—and far too many _GIANT_ teeth in a gaping maw that blocked out everything else in front of him **even the SKY** for a brief split-second moment before slamming down shut.

There were giant fucking _TEETH_ sunk into his middle and his _ARMS_. _HIS HEAD WAS IN A GIANT FUCKING WOLF’S MOUTH WHAT IN THE EVER LIVING HELL WAS GOING ON WHERE DID A GIANT WOLF COME FROM????

Well obviously it came from Jacob, seeing as it’d had the Judge’s cross painted across its skull, his
panicked brain supplied him unhelpfully as the rest of him panicked and he tried to wriggle out of the grip of the wolf’s way too large jaws.

**HE HAD TEETH IN HIS GUT AND ARMS AND HIS FACE WAS COVERED IN WOLF DROOL, OH GOD IT WAS IN HIS HAIR.**

_Priorities, Joshua_, he snipped at himself, not capable of being amused amidst his panic. But this was **WAY** more drool than anyone should have to deal with in a lifetime. He was going to **drown** in wolf drool, what fucking kind of death was that? Granted it was a Bliss-death so it...hopefully...wouldn’t stick, but this was shaping up to be a really disgusting day.

He just wanted to be **far away from here**, **NOT** being chomped on by a nightmare-sized wolf, and having a nice clean shower **not made of wolf drool**.

It was then that Joshua noticed he was screaming in a panic. From the sound of it, Faith and Athalia were screaming too, in angry surprise rather than panic though. Or more likely the two of them were yelling orders very loudly to be heard over all the noise. The Angels were growling and screaming too—but then the motherfucking granddaddy of all Judges **growled** and Joshua thought his ears would vibrate right off his skull.

**WHY DID IT SMELL LIKE BLOOD AND BLISS AND OVERRIPE MEAT IN THE WOLF’S MOUTH** mother of God, why. **WHY**.

Then Joshua’s day got worse.

The motherfucking wolf to end all wolves decide to start shaking him like a God-damned _chew toy_. It was going to fucking break his spine, he just knew it, this was all going to be horrible and he just wanted to go home in one piece **why was this happening to him**.

Faith and Athalia had been bad enough, he had **NOT** needed to be fucking chewed up by an elephant-sized. Especially since he effectively couldn’t **DO** anything given how the damn behemoth had his arms and torso clamped down tight.

He was praying for death. A Bliss-death by exsanguination, not a real death. He was bleeding a whole lot more right now—and his brain was catching up with the fact that he was _hurt_. Hurt **bad**. All those injuries were starting to set in with a great deal of pain to make themselves perfectly
Joshua you done fucked up and are now royally fucked up.

He couldn’t hear much aside from the angry growls vibrating through his entire skeleton but he could’ve sworn he heard Faith screaming something, he only caught the high pitched notes of it, before suddenly he was airborne, suspended up at the apex of his trajectory for a brief, brief moment. Instinctively he looked down. He immediately wished he hadn’t, as he felt himself beginning to fall.

The wolf was baring its teeth and for a brief moment Joshua was worried the damn thing was going to eat him whole like a baby bird or mouse it’d caught hold of. It all seemed to happen in an all too smooth slow-motion as the giant fuck-off teeth opened in full horror-movie style to engulf him for a split second, before suddenly everything was moving in a blur and the wolf’s jaws slammed shut and Joshua heard and felt the impact of splintering bones snapping through him as his arms and ribs and one of his legs promptly lost the contest to resist breaking beneath the wolf’s teeth.

There was a weird gurgling noise that took Joshua a moment to dimly realize was coming from him as the wolf starting swinging him about again, jaws suddenly swinging open only to crush down on him again and again and again —

He lurched up with a horrified and ragged gasp—no giant wolf or teeth to be seen just dirt and tree roots,—choking on his own air as his body tried desperately to suck in a breath while simultaneously trying to throw up.

He dry heaved, but nothing came up, thankfully (or maybe not thankfully, he didn’t know what counted as good in this situation.) Joshua felt sick. Wobbly, weak, and most definitely, horribly sick. But no one was holding onto him out here in the physical world—Athalia was there and was looking surprised. But the priestess was quickly recovering from said surprise: that meant it was time to run, if Joshua could get his legs to work.

He had to get the fuck away before Faith and Athalia got their wits about them enough to try to catch him with those Bliss threads again, holy fuck. Somehow Joshua managed to scramble away, nearly falling as he struggled to get his hands and feet under him and more or less threw himself down the nearby slope, leaving behind Athalia’s hurried commands to stop.

It was a quick and rough tumble down the hillside in a flurry of dead leaves and bushy grass that swirled dizzyingly with the clouds and sky overhead into a confusing mess until he finally came to a halt at the bottom. He lurched to his feet, staggering several steps to one side as he started to half-run in the direction he was half-certain and desperately hoping would take him to the riverside borders of Faith’s territory. He nearly fell when the underbrush broke open to reveal flat and level ground—a road! And a truck!
FUCK. He’d been this close to a convenient getaway vehicle this entire time?!

He turned his head at the distant sound of what he was certain was Athalia issuing orders to...he was going to guess Angels to come tumbling down after him. Well, at least she wasn’t coming down herself. Why wasn’t she hitting him with Bliss threads?

He didn’t know, and he didn’t care honestly.

He half-ran, half-fell his way to the driver side door, scrabbling at it for a moment and thanking God above that it was unlocked—fuck that meant Peggies nearby though—but that also happily meant the keys were in the ignition.

There was a God after all! Thank fucking Christ.

He made to grab his backpack straps—and then remembered he’d buried his stuff under the marked tree. SHIT. He was going to have to come back for those later. Fuck. He only had his handgun on him which was leaving him feeling mightily underarmed, but at least Athalia hadn’t had the foresight to disarm him while he’d been Blissed the fuck out.

There was more yelling coming closer, and some of it definitely sounded like Angels—yep there were some in the distance that he could see in the rearview mirror.

Then a crack of glass and a gunshot—someone had taken a shot at him! HOLY SHIT.

To be fair he was stealing a car—best add grand theft auto to his growing list of offences, in front of witnesses no less in broad daylight—and the Peggies WERE out to kidnap and murder everyone in sight who wasn’t a Peggie, but still.

Today was not his day. At least the Peggie had missed him, though with all the blood on his uniform Joshua wasn’t sure he’d know the difference if he didn’t notice the moment of impact and ensuing possible pain. But that was what adrenaline was for—putting off the pain while hopefully escaping from a deadly situation.

The engine sputtering to life had to be one of the most beautiful sounds Joshua had ever heard in
his entire LIFE. He couldn’t shift into drive and hit the gas fast enough in his opinion, leaving behind a huge dust cloud in his wake.

Driving was great for an attempted getaway. What driving was not great for was his current state of health. He was pretty sure he’d accidentally mentally blipped out for a moment or two of consciousness here and there despite the immediacy of his potentially impending capture and doom—he had a belated little scare when he corrected his course away from the edge of the road, which overcorrected due to how sluggish his reaction times were. It was like his hands—along with the rest of him—were responding at half speed. Maybe he’d gotten a little too used to the rush of all the earlier drugs in his system. Might also be the Cleanser Faith had mentioned taking its toll on him.

Fuck. He had to get somewhere safe to lay himself out for a nap at the very least, but where? He couldn’t just drive off to Dutch’s place, the Peggies would swarm it and find both him and Dutch’s bunker in a hot minute if they hit the island in numbers.

It’d also be closer to Jacob’s territory. Just a smidge closer, but being as far away as possible from Jacob, say the other side of the county, was sounding real good right now. That also went for Jacob’s people and especially his Goddamned Judges right now—he couldn’t help but flinch at the sudden all-too-fresh memory of fragments of bone grinding against one another between that set of far too large teeth in the Bliss.

He definitely did not want to be anywhere near Jacob’s people for a good long while if he could help it.

Those sounds were going to haunt him for a long while now, to say nothing of the rest of the experience—

No. Nope. He was not going to talk about it. He needed to focus, he needed to drive, had to find somewhere to hole up safely for a while. Fuck that meant he’d have to ditch the truck at some point and get off the road before they got ahold of him.

He should just head back home to base, grab a boat or jetski if he could find one and skedaddle further downstream and back into John’s region, no Bliss threads threatening to entangle him there.

This seemed like a good plan. He’d have to keep driving along the riverside to find a watercraft...and hope that the Peggies weren’t patrolling the rivers too much yet. Faith didn’t until later in the visions, but given that they were veering off script at this point, who knew? She might
send her Chosen out early to patrol the waters just on account of him running off like a headless chicken earlier.

Fuck that was going to be one hell of a burnt bridge to repair, and he’d be lucky if it could be repaired at all given how angry she’d looked.

That was later though. For now, he had to keep looking.

Wait wait, there’d been one of those zodiac-salacia motor boats off that doc near that radio tower.

Shit. He wondered if the cult was guarding that tower. It honestly was too useful a resource to leave unattended like that—but then they hadn’t been worried about a resistance movement before then.

The riverside came into view, and Dutch’s island along with it. He turned off the road into a nearby apple orchard and dove out of the car, running straight for the riverbank. He stopped just as he came to the water’s edge, blanching. The boat, as expected, was on the other side. Which meant he’d have to swim, unless he was feeling like driving along to the bridge. He didn’t have a disguise this time around though, and it was broad daylight no less. There also wasn’t time to waste, since he didn’t know the how’s or why’s of the Bliss-threads Faith used to pull him into the Bliss the last two times. It was very much in his interests not to go through that experience a third time, he reckoned.

Which meant swimming. Fuck.

He waffled for a few moments, his reluctance to jump in blatantly apparent even in the face of the danger of remaining on Faith’s turf.

Taking a deep breath, he steeled himself. He had to jump, he had to do it now, he couldn’t wait because if he waited either Faith would catch him, or he’d sit down and end up passed out because of exhaustion and then Faith would likely catch him anyway, but with less effort.

He remembered to unstrap his handgun this time beforehand since at least this time, even if holding it overhead meant having a harder time swimming. It’d be fine, he was a good enough swimmer to manage.
He’d be alright.

A deep breath and in he went, his body tensing at the sudden temperature shift as he waded out into deep water. It was a nice day out, the temperature starting to warm up as they drifted into the early afternoon. The water however was chilly as fuck. Not as bad as last night with how cold the evening air had been afterwards, but still unpleasant by and large. Or at least it was in his uniform. Fuck he’d have to wash it afterwards.

It was worse this time, only using one hand. He couldn’t keep his head above water as reliably. The panic ran a different kind of chill up his spine whenever he felt himself dipping below the waterline, and he had to work to keep from thrashing wildly—he mostly succeeded. He couldn’t stop his brain from conjuring the phantom memory of hands holding him down under the water whenever he started sinking, followed by the moment of surprised relief when he broke the surface into breathable air again. The one upside was his brain was too tired to do much panicked yelling at him with everything that had happened so far today.

And it was only day one of the Reaping. Damn.

That thought just made Joshua feel more tired than he already was. It’d be okay though. Some rest and he’d be good as new...or so he hoped. Could’ve done without all the drug-related mishaps and whatever Faith was intending for the Bliss products to do, he reckoned. Or maybe not, maybe it was unavoidable. Fuck if he knew, it was done now though.

God he was tired, and it was still a long way back to base. The river felt too wide and his progress felt too slow. Being out in the wide open where anyone could see didn’t help the feeling of being exposed and vulnerable either. His limbs were heavy even with the adrenaline of fear coursing through his veins—he was struggling halfway across, needing to pause to suck in a few extra breaths even as the river’s current slowly pulled him a little further off course.

The water dragged at his shoes and his uniform, it all felt so heavy and his arm was tired from trying to hold up his handgun out of the water.

There was probably something metaphorical to be said about that...actually, why the hell wasn’t Faith trying to talk to him through the Bliss? She’d done it after the clinic, was it different right now? Or...was she letting him get away? Surely not, right?

Right?
Fuck, he didn’t know what she intended now.

Maybe the Cleanser did something to the Bliss connections or whatever. He resumed swimming, switching his gun holster to his other hand to rest his tired shoulder. Almost there, the boat was just ahead. He twisted his head about as much as he could to check his surroundings, but so far the banks of both Dutch’s island and the banks he’d left behind seemed safely empty of Peggies. Was this actually going off without a hitch? He almost couldn’t believe it after the morning he’d had with driving Rae-Rae, Ryan and Boomer about.

The relief was practically palpable as he drew up close into shallow waters and reached out with his heels to try to scrabble about on the riverbed for purchase. His boots missed the first few swishes at a foothold just barely—he could feel the tips of his soles almost catching on the rocks underneath. Fucking solid land! Glorious, fucking, dry solid land! He staggered out, listing so far to one side he half-tripped under his own weight.

He half considered just heading to Dutch’s since it was right there, but fuck it, he didn’t want to hear about the resistance yet or get roped into thinking about all the things he’d have to do to try to counter the cult. Back at home base he just had to put up with Larry pulling out an extremely technical wall of text commentary about his current work and talk of alien invasions.

With ANNE unmasked as one of those kinds of aliens that, as Larry had put it, “were selfish lovers and real dickheads,” Larry had then thrown himself with an alarming amount of abandon into working on a series of projects including some sort of wave jammer. “To prevent THEM from overhearing us and reading our minds,” as Larry had put it, which had Joshua privately considering said wave jammer to be Larry’s equivalent of a giant tin-foil-hat. A tin-foil-hat in a souped up mechanically-engineered form, but a metaphorical tin-foil-hat in practise nonetheless.

...but then they were dealing with psychics right here and now on Earth, so who was he to question Larry on his projects? Or aliens. It wasn’t like Joshua hadn’t foreseen robots and aliens on Mars and what could happen to Larry, Nick, and Hurk out there. That’d been one of the main kickers for Larry, hearing about ANNE and Hurk’s exchanges, as it turned out. More so than the fact that she’d been using Larry and hadn’t paid him so much as an afterthought.

The thought that Larry and Hurk could somehow end up romantic rivals over an evil AI lady was a weird thought at the best of times. Definitely not something he’d ever told Sharky or Hurk about, since for all he knew, Hurk might try to go to Mars anyway to try to win ANNE over or something. He’d also made sure to make Larry promise never to mention it to Hurk, under pain of possible robotic alien invasion. And Hurk coming back as an immortal Bro-bot, much to Larry’s intense displeasure.

That particular tidbit had been something Larry had mentioned as part of the inspiration behind building that laboratory to study alien samples, actually. Said laboratory had come equipped with an all new extraterrestrial-DNA-scanner that Larry had finished only last month.
That DNA-scanner had originally come off as a little bit odd in Joshua’s opinion since ANNE’s threat had been robotically-based as Joshua could recall, but upon asking Larry about it the other man had gone off on a very long, fast-paced explanation of the bio-organic material used to create the robots’ AI interface and network. It’d taken Joshua a few minutes to boil it down to “the robots are made out of processed alien-parts”, which...honestly was pretty gross in a shiny-sci-fi-aesthetic Frankenstein way. Seriously, who went to the trouble to create machines out of flesh and bones?? Those were just mass-manufactured zombies at that point.

Not that humanity could really complain, what with the Bliss-created Angels. They weren’t as...Soylent-Green-levels of processed, but they were freaky enough.

Fuck it, he’d take the mad science that was way above his perfectly-serviceable average community-college-level education over stressing about having regular updates on what the Resistance was up to while he was recovering. If he heard too much he’d throw himself out early before he could walk straight and wouldn’t that be hilarious for the Peggies. Jacob’s hunters in particular would be able to nail him with one of those blissed arrows like a state fair shooting-booth duck target, complete with painted bullseye. Yeah no, he was going back to base.

Plus, well. The sleepwalking issue. Fuck that was going to be a problem during the Reaping if he tried sleeping rough.

He carefully clambered aboard the boat, wobbling a bit as the boat shifted between his weight and the gentle sloshing of the water below. Never in his entire life had he been so relieved to be off his feet before, even when training to get his running time up for the police academy physical. Another quick glance around to make sure he was well and truly alone, and he started up the motor, guiding the craft out and onto the water, heading downstream.

He was so damn glad to be heading back to his base, God damn. With any luck Larry wouldn’t be done yet with his work on that “Accelerated Logistical Intranet Exporter Network System” the other man had mentioned—Joshua didn’t have it in him right now to play lab assistant with running about fetching test objects for that, or whatever else. The odds were in Joshua’s favor though, as Larry usually underestimated the time he needed for his projects by a mile—Joshua typically doubled Larry’s given estimated time and tossed in a handful of days for good measure. That being said, Larry sometimes managed to nail his target time...albeit with not-quite-as-intended outcomes. Like exploding vegetables. Larry had claimed that’d been on purpose and most definitely a rousing success—namely because Larry hated broccoli.

The boat ride down the Henbane was going surprisingly well. All was quiet and peaceful, he could practically pretend that nothing was wrong and the cult wasn’t out doing terrible Reaping-things to the rest of the populace. The quiet was actually making him a tad paranoid, but he was also too tired to do much more than the baseline of necessity.
Even passing under the bridges that he knew should’ve been guarded didn’t seem to draw any attention to his presence—but he also didn’t see the white cult trucks at the ends of the bridges. Had they moved the guard points somewhere further along the roads? Or perhaps they were busy with...well, the chaos that was happening with the fight for Fall’s End? And maybe the Father’s statue too...but in theory they’d have enough hands and discipline to maintain guard, or…? Fuck if he knew. Joshua was too tired to think overly long on that, and just accepted the boon of not having to dodge Peggies on foot back to his base. That’d be a long fucking walk he couldn’t deal with, and he just wanted to be lying down somewhere safe and familiar. The boat ride was way more manageable right now than it probably should’ve been. The bridge to Dutch’s island he could understand not being guarded at the very least, the island was “supposedly” deserted after all and Faith had better uses for her people.

...actually, how DID Dutch manage to build a secret bunker without anyone the wiser out there? It was a secluded location yes, but surely someone should’ve noticed that much construction happening, right? John was a snoopy bastard, he would’ve turned up and looked through all the public property records available on all of Hope County—which was why Joshua’s base was technically in the next county over. The fact that there was an entrance that opened up on the northern side of the mountain range into Hope? Absolute total coincidence, plus some hired mining and construction work that was also from out of county. There was no telling who among Eli’s construction contacts were in with the cult or not prior to them showing their true colors during the Reaping. At least, as far as Joshua had seen—he didn’t know every single last member of the cult, obviously there were too many, and his visions didn’t give him THAT thorough a look at everything. He’d seen enough though to know some more prominent faces.

Of course, he couldn’t really say for sure that the crews he’d hired weren’t a part of the cult, or possibly turning to the cult afterwards. They hadn’t had any ties to Eden’s Gate that he’d managed to find, but his ability to dig for background details was limited to what he could discreetly find out, and what he could ask about through indirect inquiries. He was hoping they weren’t or this would be a real fast ending to this venture.

Actually that was another tidbit there: How’d Eli keep the Wolf’s Den bunker a secret?

Was everyone building bunkers in Hope County without actually purchasing the land first and applying for permits?? ...aside from the cult, ironically enough.

Hm, but what about the bridges between the Henbane region and Holland Valley? Those should have John’s people manning them, right? John wouldn’t take them off of guarding a choke point just because, he was smarter than that. Was it perhaps a set up for an ambush then, intended for people trying to cross the bridges? Or for him? Those all seemed unlikely. Joshua couldn’t tell right now where John’s people might be if they weren’t in plain sight, not without using Bo’s mixture and he definitely was done with that for now.
Fuck, when was it safe to use the mixtures if his system was hopped up on Bliss? Faith had said that the Bliss didn’t leave quickly, right? Was he going to have to work at a disadvantage?

That’d be shitty, he needed every advantage he could get.

...there were a lot of bridges across the river. He’d known that, but he hadn’t really considered that on his trip downstream.

Where were all the guards??

He probably shouldn’t question it overly much, it was to his advantage right now anyway.

Still, it made him nervous. And all too aware that if there WERE any guards on the upcoming bridges, they’d likely hear or spot him and then it was all fucked since the Peggies were one and all armed to the teeth with heavy firepower. There would inevitably be somebody with an assault rifle or two, and they wouldn’t have to bother with sniping-precision—burst shot or sustained fire would be more than enough to nail Joshua, particularly on a boat with no cover.

Maybe he should’ve just stuck around and crashed at Dutch’s. Joshua knew he wouldn’t because he’s committed now, and he couldn’t be bothered to turn around without a really compelling immediate reason. Possibly not even then, if only because he’s steadily getting more and more tired and would rather sleep in his own bed instead of, say, the couch— or being handcuffed to the foot of the bed —

...and that was one of the other reasons to not want to hang around Dutch’s. He liked Dutch, BUT there were no ingrained bad memories to haunt Joshua at his own base, only incidents he himself had been a part of in this lifetime. That in and of itself was another very compelling reason why he’d initially picked it as his hideout for this entire mess.

He was definitely sticking with going home as his plan.

The shadow of another bridge drifted past, and still all was peaceful. It was beginning to feel more like a road trip down a long stretch of a freeway, with the long rolling hills out in the sunlit distance folded and crumpled almost sleepily like a tangle of blankets, all pushed to one side of the bed. It had that same air, except on a river instead. Between the constant drone of the boat’s motor and the low background noise level of flowing water mixed with rustling trees, it was too easy to feel the lulling temptation to just...take a nap.
Or maybe sleep for three days.

Joshua was tempted to slap himself awake at that, but he was as likely as not to accidentally smack himself off balance and overboard, as exhaustion-drunk as he was now. So he kept on driving.

This had to be the quietest, least tense hour Joshua had experienced all day since before the failed arrest at the church. Well, aside from the Bliss-drugged sleep, but that didn’t count for a proper sleep in his opinion.

He felt like he should’ve been hearing a lot more gunfire in the distance than he was...that was probably bad. Or was it good? Fuck if he knew. That was a matter for future-Joshua, not presently-tired-and-drugged Joshua.

Turning off to head down Orville creek, Joshua debated how far up he should take the boat—or more specifically, how much effort he had to expend to get to his base. The water was just deep enough to continue a little farther, and that would mean a few minutes more before he had to work up the effort to get his legs to move. As it was, what energy he did have was dwindling fast even with him not doing much. The cold and wet clothes stuck to his skin weren’t helping the matter either.

He had to remind himself that it was an absolutely, positively, terrible, awful, bad idea to just sit down and rest once he got on land, even for just a second. He knew it wouldn’t be a second if he did that. Plus, he’d be cold and stiff. The thought of a nice hot shower before sleeping so as to avoid waking up like a stale pretzel was tempting, admittedly.

The walk wouldn’t be TOO bad if he parked it farther up the creek and continued on foot. Security was likely the better option here, even if he did risk a faceful of dirt with a longer trek back. The earlier he stopped the boat, the farther it was from the hidden entrance. The farther the boat was from the entrance, the less likely John’s men were to find said entrance...maybe they wouldn’t find the boat either if luck was on Joshua’s side. Or they’d just assume it was abandoned, in the best case scenario. There wasn’t much in the way of civilization this far south, especially at the base of the mountains—not even roads on the Hope County side of things. Hopefully that meant John wouldn’t take a page out of Jacob’s book and have people hunting in Joshua’s front yard, so to speak. They hadn’t so far in the years Joshua and Larry had been set up here, but those had been pre-Reaping times.

With the Wellington residence discreetly bought out as a “hunting lodge” under a reasonably-well-fabricated company as a group retreat for its higher ups and was blatantly and clearly never used as far as anyone was aware of in the last two years, there was literally no reason for John’s people or anyone else to come this far south beyond a quick check of the premises for scavengables. Which
Joshua had made sure there was little to nothing to be stripped of in the cabin, because he could put all those materials to better use, in case of emergencies. Like the Reaping and possible end of the world after that.

This all hopefully meant no one would be any the wiser about the Wellington place being situated right on top of those old mining tunnels—which were now connected to the much bigger mining complex Joshua and Larry had turned into their hideout. Larry had described it as their very own dwarf fortress, and insisted that they have a “tavern.” A tavern with a very strict no cats allowed in the tavern rule though...for some reason. Something about alcohol poisoning?? Joshua was too tired to recall correctly at the moment, but that sounded strange, even by Larry standards.

He drove the boat up onto the shoreline before cutting the engine, his boots sinking into the damp sand as he staggered onto dry land. His socks were disgustingly squishy from the earlier swim still, it was horrid. Heaving a deep breath that took far longer to breathe out than it had in, he dragged his gaze up the hillside he’d have to climb, and started walking. The knowledge that there’d be even MORE hills to climb after this first one lent a palpable weight to the air around him.

Even his face was fucking aching and tired, Christ.

There was one advantage to being absolutely dead tired was that he had a very poor perception of passing time.

...well. It was technically an advantage in his opinion right then while he was busy trying to make sure he just kept walking one step at a time forward, up the hillsides and down across the slopes into the occasional dell. It simultaneously felt like ages but also only a moment had passed when the leaf-littered hillsides gave way to sparse woods and familiar rock formations at the base of the southern mountain range. But that was exhaustion for you. Played tricks on the brain.

Said brain was not doing so good at remembering basic directions, which was why Joshua had to slow down and wobble in a zigzag as he tried to recall where the route leading to the Hope-County-side door was located. The fear that he might not start again if he stopped walking was all too prevalent, and he was at least still capable of walking in a loose circle while he racked his brains for that seemingly simple memory. Walking in a circle also helped him to look at the area from all angles as it turned out in a moment of unintentional brilliance—his brain had a much easier time bringing up a memory of leaving the base than going to it right now, but he’d take whatever he could get.

Yes, this was the right way, he recognized the tilted tree and the small cliff nearby. And yep, there was the doorway with the fake rock face covering it. Even Joshua in his current state couldn’t miss it this close up...they’d have to make it blend in better. Probably not a priority...so long as the Seeds didn’t start looking for him here.
Shit. Maybe it was a priority.

Not right now though. Now, he just needed to get in, and get some rest. And get his fucking river-logged socks off, God damn.

He banged a fist against the faux-rock-surface wearily, before a small portion clicked under the pressure and then swung out, revealing the doorbell and intercom panel.

“Larry, you there? It’s Joshua, lemme in,” He said while pressing down the buzzer, with a bit more pressure than necessary but fuck it he was tired.

There was a long enough pause without a response that Joshua was getting concerned that something had happened, and by something he specifically meant that Larry had gone and science’d himself into another problematic situation. He hadn’t trapped himself inside of an electrified fence or lightning barrier yet, and hopefully wouldn’t with how things had diverged from that particular potential future, but this was Larry they were talking about.

Then came a buzzing sound over the intercom followed by a familiar, stuttering voice. “JOSHUA! You-you’re back early?? It-it’s not even nightfall yet!”

“I know. It’s been a shit day, I need to lie down and conk out for several hours, at least. Let me in?”

“Yeah-yeah sure, just, just give me a moment!! One moment!”

“...Larry did you block the door again.”

“No!! Not, not intentionally.”

That probably meant Larry had been moving equipment around for another of his projects and used the hallway as storage. Joshua just...gently thunked his head against the fake-rock wall. He was just going to rest his eyes, just for a moment. It could take Larry a while to clear the passageway out if he’d been particularly energetic about moving shit about earlier.
He might’ve dozed a bit standing there, startling awake as the intercom crackled to life once again.

“Alllrright! We-we’re good! Come on in! And-and be sure to, to mind the doors. I was calibrating the hydraulic pistons earlier because they weren’t opening and shutting the doors fast enough for-for my liking so it might be a little bit auh-aggressive.”

“…” Joshua quickly moved back as fast as he was able to a safe distance away from the doors’ swing range.

It was good that he did, because the doors shortly thereafter opened a lot faster than he recalled them doing so the last time he’d been there, namely about a day and a half ago. The thought of being hit by the door at that speed had him immediately concerned for his bodily integrity.

“There we are! And don’t-don’t worry, I’ll adjust it again to a slightly slower speed, later.” Larry called out over the intercom. “Come on in!”

That didn’t fill Joshua with confidence but they’d…work out a reasonable rate later. For now he was just glad to get indoors somewhere safe. Safeish.

Upon reflection, he probably should’ve figured his day was going to go further downhill a little bit farther the moment when he trudged inside and then suddenly all the hairs on his arms and neck stood up.

“Larry?” He called out, his pace slowing down as he glanced about cautiously. The other man had far too much of a fondness for electrical engineering—without safety precautions like, say, keeping his wiring and circuit interrupters up to code. The entry corridor looked…close enough to the last time he’d left it that he was reasonably certain all was the same as last he’d left it—none of the defense systems were actively pointing something dangerous at him, so Larry hadn’t been tinkering with those he was…reasonably sure of.

Then the doors slammed shut behind him, startling Joshua enough to make him jump and whirl around. The whirring and metallic click from above had him mentally sighing as he looked up—was THIS how he died after avoiding potential death all day? On his own doorstep? He was too damn tired to be more than annoyed. That was the moment when a weighted net was shot down at him, knocking him off his feet as intended.
“Larry what in the ever living fuck,” Joshua called out as best he could, both winded and irritated.

“Don’t, don’t worry!! This is all for your own good, Joshua!!” Larry called out over the intercom system once more.

Oh God he was going to die. He was going to die in his own home base and it was because of some mad science experiment of Larry’s. That would be the most ironic death of them all, wouldn’t it. Not shot by a Peggie or mauled by some Bliss-maddened animal or killed by toppling over a cliff while being chased by hostiles. He was going to die just by walking through his front door. Fuck his life, this could actually happen—OH GOD WHAT WAS THAT???

A giant mechanical...arm?? With what looked like a neck and head brace connected to the end had extended from behind a ceiling panel to roll along the suspended tracks and was most definitely reaching for his head. Panic finally cut through the exhaustion and Joshua struggled to get out and away, but the weighted net was more than heavy enough to keep him down and his movements sluggish.

“LARRY STOP I DIDN’T SIGN UP FOR WHATEVER THE FUCK THIS SHIT IS!!!”

“Just hold still! Wouldn’t want to to accidentally take your head off or something like that!” The nervous little laugh following Larry’s words did nothing to reassure Joshua. “I am ninety eight percent positive this will ALL go smoothly!”

Faced with the possibility of either accidentally dying early from whatever Larry was trying to do or possibly dying later with the slightly better chance of surviving, Joshua chose to stay still as the mechanical arm closed the brace frame around his neck and head. The entire thing was a bit uncomfortable with the rope netting also stuck between the brace and his neck and cheek, to say nothing of the impending potential for death-by-mishap.

An additional pair of mechanical arms extended from behind the ceiling panels, this time equipped with a matching set of large, blocky, upside-down-L shaped pieces of hardware that Joshua wasn’t sure what they were, but they moved to frame his head on both sides. He sincerely hoped Larry wasn’t going to accidentally bash his head in with the damn things because of a mistaken input at the computer terminal.

A loud, rapid, mechanical series of clicking ensued then as the two framing arms slowly started to move down along the sides of his sprawled out form.
It reminded Joshua slightly of the more modern styled dentist office x-ray machines.

The clicking stopped once the arms finished doing...whatever it was they were doing. Scanning? A few moments passed in relative silence, and then—

“Huh. You’re clean now.” Larry said.

“What the fuck do you mean clean? ” Joshua asked, sounding a great deal more tired and irritated than he’d meant to. He was tentatively relieved, but he wasn’t believing this whole surprise ordeal was over until he was up and out of this little death trap.

The mechanical arms folded away as the ceiling panels slid back into place, and the doors opened to admit Larry who came bustling over to start pulling the netting off of Joshua.

“Clean from the- their influence, Joshua. Have you not been listening to what I’ve been saying? We have to to be prepared, the fate of the world is at stake!”

“Their?” Joshua asked on reflex before realizing.

“ALIENS, Joshua, ALIENS! Eminent global invasion! World wide catastrophe! The cult is just a distraction, I-I’ve told you this before! With ANNE being a turncoat Skynet AI villain, we-we’re at a disadvantage and-and have to pick up the slack to make up for the-the lack of a robotic ARMY to eliminate the alien-arachnid population on Mars, the-they’re ripe for industrial exploitation by other, SUPERIOR extraterrestrial forces!”

“Wasn’t ANNE in the exploitation business rather than the elimination business?” Joshua said with a grunt as he rolled the rest of the weighted netting off of him, heaving a sigh of relief at being better able to breathe again. He didn’t really care about the answer much, but if he kept Larry talking about this thing the likelihood of the other man haring off on some new mad idea was slightly lower, at least for now. At this point he just wanted to get through this encounter, check the fridge for something fast, shower and bed. Skipping showering was tempting but he knew it was a bad idea—FUCK.

He just realized he’d left a vegetable wrap in his buried pack. That shit was perishable, SHIT.

...well it hadn’t been his food to start and he’d grabbed it for free from the clinic, so it wasn’t really
much of a loss.

Still a waste of food, which was just enough of a bother to make at least half of his brain consider hiking all the fucking way back to go get it right now, however utterly unfeasible and ridiculous that was to do, for a free vegetable wrap of all things. Well, maybe it’d still be good when he got back to it...maybe. Probably not. It’d be a toss most likely, but the rest of his food was shelf-stable over there, it’d be fine.

Assuming it was at all a good idea to go back into Faith’s territory for a bunch of freebies he’d nicked.

He did go through the motions mentally to try to persuade himself not to go into dangerous areas to get his lost stuff back, but...well. Joshua knew himself more than well enough to know he was going to go back for his stash sooner or later.

Shit, that wasted vegetable wrap though. It was just one piece of food, but he could feel his anxiety spiking even just in response to that.

“Technicalities!” Larry said, gathering up the netting into a neat bundle to reload it into the defense systems a little later. “Exploiting the native fauna of the Martian landscape for a shuh-short term ramp up in production would devastate the arachnids’ population and-and viability as a resource for other competing hostile f-forces! And-and with her robotic forces offline, her facilities and deactivated units will be ripe for salvaging alongside the local arachnid population!”

Joshua clambered back to his feet, giving a reflexive but ultimately futile swipe at his clothes to remove any dust or particles stuck to them from the ground—the lingering damp from his dip into the river was not doing his efforts at cursory cleanliness any favors.

“‘Kay. So. What’s all this clean business have to do with alien influence?” Joshua knew he was going to regret asking that, but he asked it anyway.

A split second later due in large part to fatigue-delay, Joshua also realized this was going to set Larry off onto another of his alien rants.

“It’s part of THEIR efforts to infiltrate the earth! Turning unwitting inhabitants of earth into their minions to-to do their bidding!” Larry insisted, launching into his latest theory with such enthusiasm Joshua felt even MORE tired just watching him. It did make him wonder if Larry was
running on a bit too much caffeine and sugar again right then. “My-my preliminary scanning technology showed troubling signs that they might have gotten to you, as a DELIBERATE attempt to sabotage our efforts at protecting the-the earth by depriving me of my most trusted and effective helper! Or, or just a possible side effect of you being situationally exposed to alien matter while harvesting the samples for me. It could- _could_ be the latter, though I’m inclined to think it was engineered to increase the-the odds of infecting you and any-anyone else who got too close. And AnyTHING! That-that’s why animals go crazy from the humming! The infection drives them mad! Aggressive, angry and CRAZY!”

“...” Joshua squinted as the gears in his head turned. “Wait, when did you figure that the alien samples were infectious? What’d they infect me _with_, an extraterrestrial cold?”

“Oh! Well I hypothesized they-they either had some sort of aerosolized biological agent possibly used in tandem with a weaponized form of radiation that specifically targeted disrupting and agitating key neural connections when-when I first learned of Their presence on Earth and observed the effect the samples had on nearby wildlife.”

There was a brief pause as Joshua, in his worn down state, took a few extra moments to double check and triple check his train of thought to make sure it made actual sense before he asked in a distinctly suspicious tone, “…does that mean you knew the entire time you were sending me after alien samples in the field that it might drive me fucking batshit crazy, Larry, because if you did, I have _issues_ with you not telling me of the danger there.”

Larry just gave him a look like Joshua was being particularly dense. Which, in Larry’s opinion, Joshua knew he probably was. “Luh-look mi amigo, I warned you to handle with care and that it drives animals CRAZY. Humans are part of the kingdom Animalia, why would you think we-we’re immune?”

In response to that impeccable Larry-level of logical oversight, Joshua just looked off into the middle distance for a long moment and sighed. “Warn me explicitly about this kind of thing next time please?”

“Shuh-sure, I already do try to-to do that, but this kind of thing slips past me a-a lot you know.” Larry said, sounding a bit miffed. Oops.

“Yeah. I appreciate the effort you put into trying to not fry my bacon. My bad.” Joshua said. In a way...it was a mistake on his part. Larry’s too, but mistakes happened. It might’ve driven Joshua absolutely batshit mad, but...well. Fuck. People died through mistakes too often. “By the way, what were you going to do if I had come up positive from the...uh, scanning equipment?”
“O-oh, quarantine you and begin experimental treatment! The alien biological samples seem to respond badly to some select drug strains, particularly ones including a measure of that cult’s hippie-wippie Bliss mix.”

The metaphorical penny dropped. “...what.” Dropped down a very long, long, long dark abyssal hole into the center of the earth with how slow the moment suddenly felt as Joshua’s blood ran cold.

“Joshua, I major in mechanical and electrical engineering, not pharmaceutical sciences. I can’t tell you the fine details of how the Bliss works and WHY the aliens don’t like it. I taught myself a crash course since I did take chemistry back in college but BUT you have to realize pharmaceutical chemistry is a specific and wide subfield of expertise. You’d need a specialist in that area, like that hack Dr. Feeney.” Larry said with a derisive sniff before bustling off with the net to reload it into the defense system, leaving Joshua staring after him.

Had...had the Bliss Cleanser done something about that alien-infection, if that was what it was? Fuck, is THAT why everything had gone haywire when he’d taken the drugs, or was that just the drugs interacting with the Bliss, or...?

...fuck he was too tired for this.

He had no idea what was actually going on and how much of anything alien-related that Larry talked about was actually serious in cases like this. Sometimes it clearly wasn’t, like that one time with the lead-lined tents and that small clowder of cats. It’d been a suspiciously short test, with a lot of running back and forth with cat treats on Joshua’s part.

Said cats had ended up migrating to their base’s interior, along with a lot of cat toys. And then they’d added so much cat food to the inventory for the cats’ apparently long term stay and the possibility of future kittens, some automated litter-cleaning boxes (because Joshua was NOT cleaning that many litter boxes every day,) and a small shrimp/fish farm in a lower cavern made entirely out of giant blow up pools and a pipe-and-filter system. Also an amazing amount of allergy medicine, just in case.

Joshua wasn’t sure if the test was actually a real test that had failed, or if Larry just wanted some pet cats. Might’ve been both.

This time though...?

Joshua heaved another deep breath in hopes that a little more oxygen to his brain might help things. It didn’t really, but it didn’t hurt either. He trudged through the secondary blast doors and finally, finally stepped into the base proper.
Artificial blue-white and red lights streamed down into round pools, turning to white where they overlapped upon the sea of green foliage flourishing beneath the lights. Most days, Joshua found them comforting to see. Other days, they just served as a reminder of what was to come, twisting his stomach into knots of anxiety. Today was one of the bad days. Still, as he made his way through the main cavern, the fresh smell of greenery combined with knowing it was... relatively safe, helped lower the tension for him a little bit.

Hopefully Larry wasn’t going to surprise him with any more ambushes, if he was in theory “clean” of alien influence. Turning off into a side branch passageway, he wound his way through the familiar carved rock hallways until the plaster and tiny mosaic tiles began to cover the walls, marking the living areas. The wall coverings were a work in progress—on again and off again when he had time and nowhere to be, to break up the monotonous grey.

— Grey like the shaped concrete bricks, the locked doors at night—first day, through the metal detectors to the showers and then a standard issue uniform just like all the other throwaway kids—

Joshua stopped, covering his face with his hands, trying to shut out the sudden intrusion of memories that weren’t his. They’d never been his. He hadn’t wanted to know, he still didn’t want to know. It wasn’t even psychic bullshit when the memories came up like this—or, at least he didn’t think it was. Just normal human brain bullshit with associative memories and bad brain days mixing with stress.

It’d definitely been a bad day. Too many emotional hurdles and stresses. Most days he was fine, passing through these halls. But this was not one of those days. Today, the memories haunted him the way the shadows clung to the walls between light sources. He was reminded of what it was like to be locked away in a juvenile detention center—prisons for children when it boiled down to it.

Joshua knew that not all juvenile detention centers were good. Not all were bad. Some supported their inmates better than others.

But Jacob’s had not been one of the more supportive ones.

Too similar, all confinement, all for convenience’s sake. He didn’t want to remember his own memories of confinement—that was a choice between evils. Joshua had never been to Juvie or prison...and he most certainly never wanted to.

He had enough problematic memories to span a lifetime as it was on his own, without the addition of his dreams. In a way, it was almost a relief that these memories of Juvie were Jacob’s, not Joshua’s. It was less personal that way, to some extent, even if they were still just as visceral an emotional experience carried through dream-visions and memory. They weren’t horribly
unpleasant in and of themselves compared to other memories he’d had poured into his skull over the years...but he couldn’t get rid of the smell of rage—smells like blood—that came in response to the fury Jacob had felt to be locked away. The way the punishment had felt like it was merely an automated and unfeeling response to a lack of conformity, rather than addressing the underlying true issue at the heart of it all.

— They should have helped us.—

Jacob had known what he’d done was bad, but he’d lost faith in institutions and the government a long time ago even as a child. Another memory chained itself to that feeling, the burning and raging despair of fighting something so intangible and widespread, how was a soul supposed to win against that?

Joshua crouched down, hands still buried in his face. He was tired, he didn’t have some impending danger to force him out of the rising swell of memories and trauma and broken beliefs. He let the current take him then, spent from the day’s trials and unable to fight it.

“Jacob?”

He’d woken Joseph up first, a gentle shake of the leg—never the shoulders. Never like the way the old man had. The simmering fury in his gut spiked a bit at the memory of him, but Mad Old Seed was sent to prison, sent to prison to die and to rot until the sun fell from the sky.

Sent to die and rot away from the rest of the sheep of the world who fucking conformed to whatever they’d been handed as their designated due in life. Sent away because he was inconvenient enough to have caused enough of a ruckus to be a nuisance. No one had ever come for them before, not for his sake, not for Joseph’s sake, not for John’s sake, too damn young and each fucking time the cycle had repeated and nothing had changed.

The world didn’t care about what was right. Didn’t care about them, about children, and if the world couldn’t be bothered to extend even the bare minimum of compassion towards the young, the weak, the vulnerable...then there was no value to be numbered among the victims.

Better to be strong, to be one of the ones who could take what was needed, protect those who needed protecting, from the whole Goddamned world.

But to protect Joseph and John...he wasn’t strong enough. How in the living hell could he be, at age seventeen? He could scrape together scraps, steal, forage...but they only ever managed to eke

There was an entire fucking world of food, of warm clothes, of proper shoes and so much else out there...why couldn’t they have enough?

Because the world was weak. The world was unfair. The world didn’t care.

He’d tried to conform, tried to stick with the plan he knew was sound and would be best for them all in the long run: Work until he was eighteen on the fucking little miserable farm they were legally stuck on, then take off with both his brothers somewhere far away where they wouldn’t be found across the states, get a job, and then...then they might be okay. Just the three of them.

He could have survived that long, he was old enough, big enough, strong enough to endure, if it had just been him. If it had just been him though, he probably would’ve taken his chances on the streets alone a long time ago. No, he wouldn’t have stayed.

But the reason he’d stayed was for his brothers. Joseph, too rail thin with a neck small enough that Jacob had feared if Old Mad Seed had ever shook him awake by the shoulders just a little bit harder, his brother’s neck bones would’ve snapped the same way a dog’s did when a group of young hellions were in a cruel and bored mood. But cruelty was the norm, here in Rome. It was like that book he’d read in school, before Old Mad Seed had pulled them out ranting that public education as the devil’s work.

The book had been William Golding’s Lord of the Flies.

Jacob had finished reading it the first day it had been handed out with a fervor that came from recognition and familiarity of the tale the book had to tell. Would it have answers for what to do and how to do it in a situation like his, like the boys lost upon the island?

He’d despised how the boys had neglected their duties, their survival, with the negligence that only those born into privilege could. The ones who didn’t understand the primordial fear that arose when one’s very survival was threatened.

He’d despised how the boys had acted with no regard for each other, had been all too damn willing to turn on their fellows, to the point of murder. The utter lack of brotherhood.
It was so achingly, embitteringly familiar because that was his reality, too. Stuck on an island made of concrete and rusty chain fences, overgrown with weeds and ramshackle tenement houses.

He’d recognized it like his own damn reflection in the mirror, had hated the careless boys who were no more than words on paper with a fiery intensity that made his hands shake. He’d had to put the book down for a few minutes and breathe in deep when he’d gotten to the part where the little savages had set fire to the entire island, purely out of malicious glee at the thrill of attempting to kill yet another of their own, destroying the entirety of their microcosm of a world and any chance of survival with it—if it hadn’t been for the serendipitous timing of the naval officer. Fan-fucking-tastic. They’d deserved to die for what they did...even if it had spared their latest would-be victim, it still burned Jacob at how unfair it was, that so many could get away with such blatant murder of those that should have been one of their own, namely Piggy, Simon, and the boy with the mulberry birthmark. But that was the crowning irony of it all, wasn’t it? The adults were no better. Civil wars, world wars...in the end, all of it was just more fucking humans killing other humans they didn’t agree with, couldn’t get along with. That was humanity in a nutshell, when it all came down to it. War. Strife. Conflict. The war of the island was just children doing as the adults did.

The fucking monsters.

They’d been so afraid of some imagined beast in the dark, offering sacrifices and whipping themselves into a murderous frenzy over it, they hadn’t realized the only monsters on the island were themselves. Because humans were always fucking monsters, weren’t they?

...no. Not always. Some people were good. Joseph was good. John was good.

He believed them good because they were his brothers, and they tried to care for one another in their own broken ways. That was more than anyone else he knew could say. But he couldn’t say he’d ever met anyone who instilled in him the faith that humanity had an ounce of redeeming grace on the whole. Some people were good. But humanity? Humanity in their entirety was a mistake of an existence. Not a mistake in the way Old Mad Seed had called Jacob growing up, in the way Old Mad Seed was the mistake. One big, bloody, monstrous mistake.

He should have killed the old man when he’d had the chance and buried the body in the backyard. No one would have missed him, and they could’ve built something of a life out of the ashes of what should have been their home. Could’ve faked Old Mad Seed as being still alive to collect his pension checks and spent the money on actual necessities and real food, instead of alcohol and cheap junk food.

He shouldn’t have listened to Joseph.
Jacob knew that now. He should have just acted. Should have accepted the truth he already knew engraved in his skin, his flesh, his blood and bones: there was no true good or evil in the world, not while humanity still walked the earth.

Not in his reality.

There were only predators, and prey.

There were no saints here in this city, the name a mockery aimed at anyone who’d expect its denizens to be more pious, more charitable, more compassionate. This was no recreation of the city that served as the seat of one of the largest faiths in the world.

It was the farthest thing from any sort of semblance of a holy city, as far as Jacob was concerned.

He was so dead inside some days. Dead to the sounds that meant pain, suffering, death.

Unless the sound came from one of his brothers.

That was why he couldn’t stand the thought of staying on the Owens’ fucking wretched excuse of a farm any longer.

It was George Orwell’s fucking Animal Farm all over again. He knew it, felt it with a teeth-baring, heart-racing certainty that screamed in fury inside his chest. These people didn’t care about them. They’d just wanted free labor, and the government had provided said free labor.

The government hadn’t come to rescue them from Old Mad Seed’s belt lashings and insane drunken beratings. No, it’d come because the situation had finally become problematic enough to require a response—or some fucking politician had figured it was an election year so of course the state services had to step up their numbers so as to look better to the voters. There was no charitable intent, whatever their motivation. And here? The government wouldn’t come for them here, either. The Owens were methodical enough to not make as big a mistake as Old Mad Seed had. The cruel and careless belt lashes from that drunkard’s hand had cut into them all, but that time John had gone to school with scabbed-over welts where a teacher could see, and that had been enough to turn the matter into a scandal.

The Owens wouldn’t be so careless. Not like that.
They were going to work, and work, and work, and work Jacob, Joseph and John to the brink of death, before sending them down the river to the damned glue factory when they were all used up, just like what had happened in the book. Work them and wring them of every drop of blood they were worth, starve them to cut costs while the Owens themselves grew as fat as pigs and discard all three of their skeletons afterwards, ready to move on to the next set of victims. It was already happening—there was no justification for starving them, all of them, but most of all a child as young as John. Jacob and Joseph suffered too, yes, but the hunger didn’t cripple them as readily as their youngest brother. So young, so small.

So weak.

John couldn’t be weak, the world would prey on him, would eat him alive, he had to be strong. He had to grow up. But neither of his younger brothers could grow if they couldn’t at least survive.

There was no survival here, on this God forsaken farm. Only death, slow and certain, he was sure. John would be culled first, if they didn’t do something. Then Joseph, always too-thin behind his taped-up second-hand-stolen sunglasses and now even thinner still, losing more of himself than Jacob had thought possible.

Jacob would never admit to either of his brothers that he was afraid. Afraid that they would die, one by one, and that he’d be left alone in this God awful crapsack world without anyone worth living for.

That was why this existence of theirs in this awful place had to end, before they ended.

“Jacob?” Joseph asked again quietly, concern growing as the silence had stretched on between them.

Jacob hadn’t told Joseph what he’d intended this time. If he had...Joseph would have stopped him. That would be risking Joseph’s own demise along side John’s, if Jacob didn’t go through with this. Jacob couldn’t let that happen. There was no safety in waiting. Not anymore. He’d chosen to act, and he could not afford to falter now. The stakes were too high. They had to survive, they had to get away, and Jacob had to make it happen.

“Take this, Joseph.” He’d said, pushing a wrapped bundle into his brother’s arms.
Joseph furrowed his brow, glancing up again at Jacob questioningly as he slowly pulled the cloth away to reveal—food. Sandwiches, rolls, apples, a jar of leftover beef stew, a third of a pecan pie, a sealed crock of milk, pickled eggs, and a few plastic-wrapped moon pies. It was a veritable cornucopia of food, good food, a larger spread than they’d ever had set before them in their entire lives. Just the sight of it all made Jacob’s mouth water, but he’d wait to eat. He’d wait to eat with Joseph and John, because they mattered. He wouldn’t eat first, wouldn’t put his already assured survival ahead of ensuring theirs alongside his. They were weak. They had to be strong. They had to live. So they had to eat first.

Joseph’s mouth opened slightly in awe, and he looked up at Jacob, eyes visibly wide even in the dark of a half-moon night. “Jacob, where did you get all this?”

“I stole it.” He said easily, picking out a sandwich, an apple, and the crock of milk before stepping over to where John laid passed out dreamlessly—from exhaustion, and hunger. “Don’t worry about it.”

It was true after all. He had stolen it—from their supposed saviors. Breaking the lock quietly had been easy enough to manage, he’d had the practice. Then the kitchen had been his. The sheer amount of food available ranging from dry and fresh, preserved and chilled laid out before his eyes had made him...silent inside, for a moment.

Then there had come the rage.

Why couldn’t—wouldn’t—they feed Jacob and his brothers properly? It was supposed to be their responsibility. There was more than enough that they could afford to feed three kids better than a handful of meager table scraps.

Well.

He’d help himself from their stores then, and damn the rest.

Joseph didn’t question him further, choosing instead to busy himself with digging into one of the sandwiches—chicken and ham with slightly melted swiss cheese and a little mustard, lettuce, onion and tomato, just the way Joseph liked it. Jacob would’ve stacked it even thicker with more chicken, ham and cheese if Joseph wasn’t pickier about the filling to bread ratio. His brothers needed to eat. Still, in lieu of stacking one sandwich with more meat and cheese, he’d sensibly made more sandwiches.
He woke John then, giving their youngest brother’s ankle the same gentle shake as he’d used to rouse Joseph to wakefulness.

John was more difficult to waken, too tired and weak to do more than utter a noise at the first stirrings, before rolling over with a painful slowness and lethargy to look over at Jacob with a bleariness that was apparent even in the relative dark. It made the phantom of fear drift a little closer to loom over Jacob’s heart, worrying about what might happen—what the Owens might do—if this was allowed to continue.

If John was allowed to die.

He wouldn’t let that happen. He wouldn’t let anyone hurt his brothers like this ever again if he could help it. The anger hardened his heart, steeling his resolve for what he intended to do. If there had ever been any doubt about his intended course of action, there was none to be found now.

“John, hey, sit up. I’ve got something for you. Come on, I’ll help,” Jacob murmured quietly while sliding a hand behind the young boy’s shoulder to get him up—he knew John would struggle to do it alone in his present state.

The Owens hadn’t given them enough for the three of them to even scrape by on—it would have been meager portions even if it had just been him and Joseph splitting the miserable “rewards” for their grueling efforts. But that was the point the Owens had been intending to make: If the three wanted more food, they had to earn it. They expected John to be able to keep up with Jacob and Joseph, expected a boy not even eight years old yet to keep up with a seventeen and fifteen year old, respectively.

Nevermind that Jacob had twenty pounds and almost half a foot in height over Joseph—while Jacob’s growth spurt had hit early and fast, Joseph had grown more slowly and steadily as the years had gone by, still boney and gangly with their general youth where Jacob had already begun to broaden out and fill in with muscle. How, Jacob would never know, given that he’d spent most of his days pinching food and candy for his younger siblings. He’d made sure to give Joseph what he could, but Joseph’s growth had remained slow. He couldn’t even give them that nowadays though. Of late, both he and Joseph had been trying to give John more...but the two of them needed to eat if there was to be any food at all for them under the Owens’ iron-clad rule. It was a cycle that would only beget more drawn-out misery. All of it was just a slow, meaningless grind into oblivion without purpose, without reason.

No more though.
His brothers deserved better. They deserved to live.

John made no protest at being woken up, too tired to care more than looking up at Jacob with that exhausted and wrung look on his face. Just this side of too thin, too pinched. Starved. That expression quickly changed to a wide eyed, almost wild sort of hopefulness when Jacob gave him a quarter of the sandwich he’d brought over. John immediately seized upon it, taking a huge bite and just about inhaling it rather than chewing it at all.

“Hey hey, slow down and chew, the food’s not going anywhere, there’s plenty more,” Jacob murmured soothingly, pulling out his latest stolen pocket knife to start slicing off small pieces of apple, pushing the first bit of fruit into John’s hand. “Eat this and chew thoroughly, we don’t want you getting sick, okay?”

“It’s good,” John mumbled, mouth half-full as he bit down on the sandwich again but slower, as Jacob had cautioned him to. Buttered toast, thin-sliced chicken and lettuce and a hearty slice of cheddar cheese—John hated mayonnaise and was picky about tomatoes, but he did like a bit of butter on his sandwiches, and if Jacob was going to raid their false-benefactors’ larder, he was going to get his brothers their favorites as much as possible. That being said, he still needed to help John pace himself to keep John from eating himself sick—Jacob knew how difficult it was, to resist the impulse to just gulp food down when it’d been too long since the last meal, when there wasn’t enough.

He knew how John felt, that gnawing hunger that felt like his stomach was eating away at his guts and his ribcage, that fear-laced need for something, anything, to stop the pain and the incessant fear that chanted in time to his heart—you’re going to die, you’re going to starve. That was why he was trying to give John smaller portions of food a bit at a time, to slow John down enough for his stomach and brain to catch up with the reality that there was food, and there was no need to bolt it all down for fear that it would disappear.

A piece of apple, a sip of milk, a bite of sandwich, Jacob carefully tried to keep John following that pattern, and he could see the adrenaline panic and fear easing a bit as the tension left John’s shoulders. That was when he handed over the other half of the sandwich, the apple slices half-wrapped in a clean cloth napkin, and the milk. John would be okay now.

Joseph padded over to them over the loosely-strewn straw, setting down their little feast before all three of them before taking a seat. Finally, finally, Jacob picked out his own sandwich—mayonnaise, a thick layer of chicken and all the available kinds of cheese, mustard, lettuce and tomato—along with a pickled egg and began eating, satisfied that his brothers had both already begun. There wasn’t any talking as they ate—eating had often been a serious matter to be finished quickly and discreetly back when they’d lived with their old man and their mother, but under the Owens it had taken on a far more persistent urgency.
Only once the main course foods were all gone and they were licking their fingers clean after picking out any remaining crumbs off their shirts, did they turn their attention to the desserts.

“Joseph, there’s pecan pie!” John chirped, looking up—they all knew Joseph loved pecan pie. Jacob and John liked it, but Joseph loved it.

Joseph looked to Jacob then, eyes wide and pleading—he was trying so very hard not to be greedy or gluttonous when it came to his favorite. “Cut it evenly please, Jacob?”

The request was as much Joseph trying not to take more than what he felt was his fair share as it was to ask Jacob not to take less than his fair share.

It was even less fair when John joined in on the puppy eyes aimed at him. John knew what Jacob was like, skipping out on the few treasured goodies they could get their hands on. Their youngest brother, soft-hearted as he was, wanted them all to enjoy those rare little moments when fortune smiled upon them. It was one of the reasons why Jacob still could believe that there must be other good people out there, somewhere, however rare they were.

“Alright, alright, I’ll keep it even,” Jacob said in good humor, just a little moment before the incoming storm of their lives, taking his pocket knife and wiping it clean on one of the cloth napkins before carefully divvying up the chunk of pie into three hearty slices to pass out.

John, already full, was content to take one or two bites and then just nibble on little crumbles from his slice of pie. It’d disappear slowly over the next half hour or so, given time. Joseph in comparison ate one bite after another, trying not to eat too fast so as to draw out the flavor—he’d finish it soon enough though. Jacob smirked and sliced off a bite sized portion to eat, before slicing a second piece off and offering it to Joseph.

Joseph predictably frowned at that, looking longingly at the offered morsel before pouting up at Jacob. “It’s your pie, Jacob. You should be the one to eat it.”

John looked between the two of them, and then waved at Jacob, making grabbing motions at his oldest brother’s pocket knife. “Gimmie for a moment?” He asked. “Please.”

Jacob obligingly handed over the knife to John, knowing that John would keep past cautionary lessons in mind when handling something with a sharp edge. John proceeded with the exaggerated
care of the very young to painstakingly cut off a chunk of his pie, before handing the knife back to a
now-smiling Jacob, and then offering the pie chunk out to Joseph alongside Jacob’s still
outstretched arm.

“Just take the pie, Joseph, my arm’s getting tired,” Jacob prompted.

Joseph looked touched, but also torn. His hesitation lasted another few seconds, but then he looked
at the earnestness in John’s face and Jacob could see the last bit of stubbornness melting away.
“Alright,” Joseph acquiesced, gently taking the offered pieces of pie from each of his brothers’
hands, “but no more than that, the rest is rightly both of yours.”

John beamed, going back to nibbling on his slice with an air of great self-satisfaction.

Jacob just smirked. They all knew that he and John would be sneaking the occasional little piece of
pie to Joseph as they sat together, in what was likely their last moment of peace before the trouble
would start.

He let them linger there, their little family, in a moment of false peace and relative safety—but
then, safety was always relative. There was no true safety. There never would be, Jacob suspected.
But it was late, and the early hours of the morning would be coming on soon. And with those early
hours would come the Owens’ rousing, and they would discover his theft.

He couldn’t linger too long. It was time to go.

Joshua wasn’t quite out of the memory. Not yet. It was still playing over everything within his
awareness, and pressing his palm against the tiled wall almost felt more like background noise
instead of an actual sensation. But he had a moment’s opening to try to at least come back
somewhat to himself and maybe get a move on—he didn’t want to stay in the hallway too long—

He ushered his brothers out, having Joseph hold the still-wrapped moonpies for later while John
continued to nibble on a pecan and sneak the last few pieces of his pie to Joseph. Jacob settled
them down on an old blanket upon the grass across the road, their backs against the fence,
dropping the trash bags that contained all their worldly belongings beside them in a lump. Those
very same trash bags had been what they’d used to cart what little they had from Old Mad Seed’s
house, to the orphanage, and then to the Owens’ farm.

Neither the government nor the Owens had seen the need to replace them, let alone give the
brothers somewhere to live with actual furniture, let alone a chest of drawers to store their possessions in.

—Joshua got up, leaning heavily against the wall for guidance and balance, taking slow and careful steps forward—

“Jacob, what’s going on?” Joseph asked, looking at him with a cautious air of concern. New changes did not set well with Joseph sometimes, and this deviation from the norm had most certainly caught his attention.

“We’re leaving this place. Stay here, alright?” Jacob said, looking Joseph in the eye to emphasize the seriousness of what was more an order than a question.

Joseph held his gaze for a long, long moment of hesitation, and Jacob could see the look in his eyes that usually heralded an argument.

John looked back and forth between Joseph and Jacob, lowering the last chunk of sugary-sweet pie crust and filling away from his mouth to say, “Joseph, are you gonna argue with Jacob again about him doing a thing?”

When John said “a thing,” he meant things that were usually...illegal. But they all knew that was not a word to be said out loud just in case someone overheard. It’d get them all in trouble, no matter who it was.

Joseph’s lips tightened into a thin, threadbare line, and he looked away for a brief moment before squaring his shoulders and looking back up at Jacob. “Yes.”

But Jacob shook his head. “Not this time Joseph.”

“Jacob…”

“We don’t have the time, Joseph. I’ve already committed, there’s no turning back at this point. Just stay safe, the two of you over here, away from the fire, alright?” Jacob spoke over his shoulder as he turned to walk back towards the barn. He was counting on Joseph being torn about leaving John alone, both of them knowing the anxiety their youngest would feel about being without one of the only two people that he loved and that loved him in return nearby. That anxiety was well
founded and not without reason—and it’d been the thought of John that had made Jacob hesitate and consider turning away from his course of action.

But he couldn’t. He couldn’t stand by while John withered away before his very eyes.

Maybe...maybe this way, John and Joseph would be alright. Maybe they’d get out okay. Maybe he could get off easy and come back for them as a legal adult, and be their actual legal guardian. They’d survive at least that long, off the Owens’ farm. If they stayed? Jacob’s heart clenched in fear that it might be only Joseph and himself that made it off the farm alive.

That maybe Jacob would be the only one to get off the farm alive, if he waited.

Jacob would survive, he knew it in his bones. His brothers? He feared for them. He feared for them above all else.

Joshua’s gaze came back into focus, only for a bit he knew, the memories still weighed upon his mind, but he was cognizant enough once more to realize he’d stopped moving, lost in his head again. He made it into one of the bathrooms and managed to dump his glasses, hat, handgun and holster on the sink before wearily trying to slough off his clothes—shirt first, then boots, socks, then belt, pants and boxers all in one fell swoop. Fuck, he’d have to ask Larry if he could take care of drying his boots and cleaning his handgun, there was no way he’d have it in him to do that, not right now, not like this.

He could feel his thoughts starting to sink into the mixed up mire of the exhaustion and the memories again, so he reached in to start the shower, stepping in before the water was even fully hot and leaning with one hand splayed against the wall to keep him steady as he felt the world going out of focus again.

The smell of the gasoline was pungent as hell. Old Mad Seed had always screamed that hell was a place of fire and brimstone, and the books Jacob had delved into in his stolen free time at the public library had painted brimstone as smelling like rotten eggs.

Honestly, he’d always pictured hell as stinking of stale liquor, filth and old blood, the way the house had. He could picture hell smelling of gasoline too, drowning out the fresh cool air smell of the predawn hours. The heavy glug of the jerry can as he tilted and poured the gasoline mixed with the peaceful chirping of crickets in the background. It was almost a shame in a way that the quiet was going to be broken soon. Almost. Jacob would be lying if he said there wasn’t a part of him that was thrilled with the prospect of finally striking back at someone who’d done them so wrong.
The first spare jerry can would be enough for the barn and stables. He’d have to get the second one to get the house and cars setup—the Owens had so much in the way of resources, a backup generator if the power should ever go out during a storm or such and extra gasoline to run it on? What utter, miserly shamelessness they had, that they couldn’t be bothered to properly feed three boys they’d chosen to take in. They didn’t feed their animals well either. Better than the boys, but the Owens still insisted that everyone else needed to work harder to earn their keep. It was a complete load of bullshit. No amount of work would ever satisfy the Owens enough to actually give their animals or their indentured child laborers a reasonable recompense for their efforts. It was so very much like Animal Farm that Jacob half wondered if the Owens might at some point simply turn into pigs.

But pigs could be butchered without being called a murderer. The three of them wouldn’t be so lucky as to have some old fairytale witch curse the Owens and allow the brothers to inherit the farm for a happily-ever-after.

This was reality. There were no happily-ever-afters. Not for them. Not for him.

But maybe they could get away far enough to have a hopeful to-be-continued instead. Maybe his brothers could.

He doused the stables after he’d finished the barn, the few horses inside growing restless and unsettled at the smell. Poor things. They didn’t deserve to die, certainly not burning to death. Jacob left the stall doors open for the animals to get out, giving the old white mare Molly a pat on the shoulder as she made her way out. For all that Jacob had despised the Owens’ demanding regimen and miserly ways, he did like some of the animals. They deserved better. They all deserved better.

That was why Jacob then dumped a couple of bags of feed out in the field nearby for the horses to find—he and his brothers had fed well, there was no reason to burn all the food when there were other hungry mouths to feed.

After pitching the now-empty canister, Jacob went around to the shed out back to get the second jerry can along with a small bucket, hefting the two items with a grunt out to the front yard where the Owens’ car and truck were parked. Unlocking the vehicle doors with the keys he’d nicked on the way out of the house, he poured some of the gasoline into the bucket and splashed it about the interiors, soaking a couple of rags that he then stuffed into the vehicles’ gas tank openings.

Then he looked to the house with his mouth set in a hard line, breathing out through his nose. It was tempting to just prep the house and light it up before the Owens woke...but murder was a much
bigger deal than arsonry.

He would’ve done it if it wouldn’t have traumatized Joseph and John to see that. He didn’t know if he could protect his brothers from seeing something that would add yet another scar to their long list of tallies that life had marked them with. He hadn’t been able to protect them from more terrible experiences before, and he wasn’t sure he could now. He had to try, though.

He put the mostly-full canister around the corner of the house, ditching the bucket and heading back to the barn. He dug out the red plastic zippo he’d swiped from a gas station many months ago, before all this, flicking the flint wheel until a spark took. Holding the flame to the edge of an old newspaper, he waited for the fire to take a strong enough hold for it to sustain itself before he let it fall on the starting trail he’d poured out past the barn doorway. The fire spread to the gasoline trail greedily, and Jacob quickly stepped farther away, closer to the side of the road, near the Owens’ house. He stopped there to wait, watching patiently for the flames to begin climbing up and out of the barn’s interior.

The horses noticed it first, tossing their heads and whinnying as they reared up and ran away, the smell of smoke and ash floating after them on the breeze. He could see the firelight in the windows now. He heard Joseph call out for him, but he didn’t look to where he knew both of his younger brothers still sat. Joseph wouldn’t leave John alone, not like this. Joseph was strong in some ways, but weak in others. He didn’t have what it took to make sure John would survive. Jacob couldn’t steal enough to keep all three of them fed—but he could be strong enough to make this sacrifice for his brothers, in the hopes that they would survive. He could take the risk of braving the courts for what the government would perceive as a crime instead of as justice, because he knew then that then all three of them would survive. They would survive this. Jacob would make sure of that, no matter the cost.

That was when he heard the sound of shouting and footsteps coming down the stairs from inside the house. Elliot Owens came bursting out of the front door, a rifle in hand—not that he would’ve used it in defense of any of them for their own sakes, Jacob almost doubted the man would’ve even bothered to defend his horses except for the fact that the Owens were jealously possessive of their property, no matter the state of it. If anything, the real reason Elliot Owen had his gun out was because he’d been woken up out of a sound sleep in the early hours of the morning. Elliot stopped, gaping in half-awake befuddlement while trying to process the sight of the flames and smoke curling out of the barn now, crawling up the walls and up towards the roof.

The whole gaping mouth look made the man appear more fishlike than usual in Jacob’s opinion.

Finally after a good span of seconds, Elliot found his voice, bellowing over his shoulder while shooting looks at the barn as if to check if it was really indeed real and not just a fire-filled dream. “Allyson! ALLYSON!”
A window on the second story opened and the man’s wife leaned out ill-temperedly to yell, “WHAT —” before stopping short, realizing that the crackling background noise was actually the sound of a fire. The two of them slept like the dead and were slow to really waken in the mornings, being particularly bear-like until after their coffee, as Jacob and his brothers had found out quite unfortunately.

But this time it was in their favor, not the Owens’.

“God blast it woman, STOP GAPING AND CALL THE FIRE DEPARTMENT ALREADY!” Elliot bellowed, though he himself was not doing anything to help the matter. Typical.

“I’M GOING, HOLD YOUR HORSES! AND CHECK ON OUR GOD DAMN HORSES! I CAN HEAR THEM SCREAMING FROM HERE!” Allyson yelled, disappearing back indoors without even thinking to mention that Elliot should go check on the three human children they were supposed to be responsible for. They certainly hadn’t noticed Jacob off to one side of the house yet. If they had they would’ve begun yelling at him to start hurling buckets of water at the fire while Elliot “oversaw” the effort.

Allyson reappeared a short while later. “THE PHONE’S DEAD!”

Jacob permitted himself a small smile at that—he’d cut the phone line long before all of this had begun. He expected Allyson to come out sooner or later to yell and scream at Elliot, and while they were doing that, he could dump the remaining gasoline throughout the bottom floor of the house and set that alight too. Then there’d be the car and truck last—he’d left those in reserve so as to ensure that in the heat of the moment, it looked like an accident that was restricted to just the barn and the attached stable. Not that it being a supposed “accident” would stop the Owens from blaming the Seed boys. It’d never stopped them before.

The heat and the steam were soaking the air around him, muddling the memory of the heat and smoke of the fire—it wasn’t the same but exhaustion made it hard to remember the difference, and to remember that he was Joshua and not someone else, not Jacob, and that this wasn’t something he’d lived through—something he had done. He’d had long enough that he was rallying a bit, trying to pull himself back into full cognizance, reaching to turn the heat of the water down a bit before it put him to sleep, grabbing a handful of shampoo to give his hair and the rest of him enough of a scrub to get the smell of river water out of it, followed by conditioner to keep it from dying out with all of the washes it’d had of late—conditioner was a modern convenience and luxury he was going to miss if the world did end up going out in a nuclear mushroom cloud. He’d have to experiment and dig through the library’s old home remedies for hair care instead, ugh.
He was trying to focus on small mundane details of the here and now to push out the memory of Jacob and the Owens’ farm, to keep it at least as only background noise rather than drowning everything else out. God, but he couldn’t wait to eat and just sleep—he’d have to calm down a bit first though, the knots in his stomach were twisting uncomfortably still from the stress. A corner of his mind was jabbering at him in a reminder of the food he’d left to go to waste in his buried stash out in the Henbane, bringing with it another reminder of bad feelings and one of the reasons why he was stressed, however small in comparison to the grand scheme of things.

“HEY! HEY! WHAT ARE YOU TWO DOING OUT THERE? WHERE THE FUCK IS THAT LAZY GOOD FOR NOTHING BROTHER OF YOURS?” Elliot hollered out upon catching sight of the brothers seated across the road, waving an accusing hand at them to come close.

John shrank away towards Joseph, half-hiding behind him away from Elliot, while Joseph curled an arm before his younger brother protectively, tension radiating from his frame even at a distance.

Joshua started scrubbing faster, trying to get the conditioner out of his hair as fast as was feasible while being thorough.

Jacob tensed, hunching down with his teeth bared silently—he hadn’t considered that Elliot might actually look around enough to see Joseph and John instead of focusing on the burning barn and yelling at Allyson.

“WAS THIS YOUR DOING YOU USELESS BRATS? GET YOUR HIDES OVER HERE AND HELP OR SO HELP ME I’LL TOSS YOU BOTH INTO THE FIRE!” He began to storm towards where the two younger boys sat.

Jacob snarled to himself, reaching for the nearest thing he could find—an old headless axe handle, left leaning near the wood pile waiting for a day of repairs that would never come. It would never have been repaired even if the farm wasn’t in the middle of being burnt to cinders, with how the Owens ran things.

If he didn’t do something Elliot would force Joseph and John to do stupid, dangerous work to try to save the barn despite it already being a lost cause—and he’d had enough of the man’s threats against his brothers. He didn’t care if they were empty or not, there’d been enough harm laid at their feet here at the farm—more than enough.

The courts wouldn’t see it his way. He’d already known that before he had picked up the wooden handle. He moved quickly, following Elliot’s footsteps to close the distance, raising the handle up
Jacob’s brothers weren’t the Owens’ to order around anymore. To threaten, to neglect, to **starve**. He wouldn’t let them. Never again.

Joshua heard the memory of the first crack of wood against bone almost as loudly as if it’d happened nearby. He was out of the shower now, burying his head in a towel to dry his hair off—and if the curtain of soft, fluffy cloth also made him feel a tiny bit safer in reassurance that the memories weren’t real in the here and now, that was all the better. He couldn’t shut out the noise inside of his head, but the gesture was enough to allow him to feel like he could make an effort to do something about it.

Then Joshua remembered when the screaming started, and how Elliot had fallen to the ground, groaning. Allyson had come out then. He patted himself off, staring fastidiously at the floor and trying to breathe slowly and evenly while counting tiles. He wrapped the towel around his middle, gathered his wet clothes into a bundle under one arm along with his shoes and gear, and stuck his glasses on as he headed out the door. He had to move, he had to get out, he had to get somewhere **safe**.

He was safe, Joshua had to remind himself. This was his home base, no one could hurt him here, it was calm, and quiet.

...minus any shit Larry got up to. But Larry was...reasonably safe, and predictable in his own right. That was alright. He was alright.

He got to the laundry room and ditched his wet clothes into the wash, leaving his boots, handgun and holster there with a note for Larry requesting that he take care of drying and cleaning them in return for a fresh pizza at some later date—the other man would see it soon, the laundry room was where they kept the second spare tool set for everyday use, and Larry was always misplacing parts of the first set until Joshua went to find them.

His room wasn’t far away, just further down the hall—

*Jacob spat on Elliot as the man lay groaning on the ground before tossing the wooden handle aside as he walked past a crying, sobbing Allyson who had the sense not to try yelling at him. Good. She’d learned something.*
He grabbed the last canister of gas and walked into the house with it, taking a grim satisfaction as he splashed all over the furniture and walls, the floor, and the base of the stairwell. He dumped the canister there, letting the last of the gasoline pool out on the rug. Moving to the fireplace, he pulled another couple of newspapers out from the kindling pile, walking outside as he set them on fire with his zippo lighter. It was yesterday’s news—and so was the Owens’ farm. He tossed some of the burning pages into the house, not bothering to watch as the fire began to readily spread inside.

The only reason they’d gone inside was for chores. It wasn’t a home. Not for them. The Owens were liars, and traitors, to have betrayed three children’s trust like that.

They were getting their just desserts now.

The rest of the burning pages he took swiftly to the car and truck. He tossed one page after the other into the interiors and held the last of the burning news under the soaked rags, before turning tail and running away. He wasn’t going to go through all this effort to get his brothers out of this place only to never see them again because he’d up and died by accidentally setting himself on fire.

The cars went up even faster than the barn and house had—they had extra fuel in the tanks. Jacob looked at his handiwork, at where Allyson sat sobbing and more or less ignoring her sorry excuse of a husband still groaning beside her. Looking at it all, Jacob concluded that it was enough.

He went back over to where Joseph and John sat, looking up at him silently with wide eyes as he crouched down beside them. “Let’s get those moonpies out now, shall we.” He said casually, taking one of the treats and unwrapping it, the crinkling getting lost in the loud crackling across the road.

“Is this too close?” John asked, glancing at the flames, nose crinkling at the faint wisp of disgusting fumes—they were upwind, so the worst of it wouldn’t reach them. But the area would still smell foul for weeks, maybe months after.

“Maybe. Here, wrap this over your face John, you too Joseph,” Jacob said, handing over a couple of handkerchiefs to his brothers to try to keep some of the smog out. He hadn’t thought about the smoke beyond being upwind of it. It might cause coughing or throat irritation of some sort.

They’d probably get bloodshot eyes...but not as bad as the Owens would be getting, being so damn close to the fire.
...shit was he going to have to drag their sorry asses away from the fire? Allyson was being useless as usual, and Elliot was down for the count, at least for a while.

John obediently wrapped the handkerchief over the bridge of his nose, reaching for the moon pie shortly after. He was undoubtedly still full, but none of them could ever say no to a moon pie. He set to nibbling again, gaze going from the fire, to Jacob, to Joseph, and then back in sequence again.

Joseph was still regarding the fire, expression drawn tight, handkerchief held limply in his hand. “Jacob…” He said, voice low, “what have you done?”

“I did what I had to.” Jacob responded, before biting into his pie. Chocolate, graham cracker and marshmallow. A sweet little reward before he had to go back into the fight, because it was always a fight. Always a cycle. Like a water wheel, some time above to draw air into the lungs, before going back under, again and again and again. It’d been that way with Old Mad Seed’s abuse, it’d been that way with the Owens. It was going to be that way with the court and whatever happened after, so long as they were stuck at the mercy of others. He was certain of that.

But Jacob was strong enough to fight. So long as he had his brothers, because they were worth fighting for. For them, he’d fight the world.

The fire department and the police came a long while afterwards—not because anyone cared about what was happening on the Owens’ farm, but because the giant cloud of smoke was bothering other more distant neighbors. Much as Jacob had expected.

“It was THEM! They started the fire, those ungrateful little throwaways after everything we’ve done for them, taking them in out of the goodness of our hearts!” Allyson had been quick to point the finger of blame at all of them, hysterical and nearly beside herself with self-righteous rage.

Jacob had figured on them doing that. Which was why he was going to confess to the police, and tell them everything. That he was the sole responsible party for what had happened. Reluctantly, of course—the cops wanted to look good, didn’t want to feel like they were being tricked with a sacrificial lamb offering. If he were to play the role of the rebellious but desperately protective and misguided youth, that’d mean spinning the story from a foolish but well-intentioned perspective motivated from fearing for the wellbeing of his younger brothers. Then his brothers would go free, and he would hopefully not get too heavy a sentencing.
That did of course rely on him not getting a hanging judge with a shitty temperament. He didn’t have much faith in fate or God or anyone helping him in that. But hopefully...hopefully there was some mercy in the universe, and he wouldn’t be given more than he could handle, and then they could all be together again.

John clung to the hem of Jacob’s coat, hand balled into a small fist as they watched the authorities and first responders mill about. Joseph sat beside the two of them, tense and silent. Jacob wrapped an arm around John’s shoulders, rubbing the young boy’s arm soothingly. It was as much meant to support John as it was to try to calm Jacob’s own nerves—he was going to prison, that much he was certain. Prison for children, but prison all the same.

“Hey.” When both John and Joseph looked at him, Jacob continued in a low voice meant only for the two of them, “Whatever happens, it’s all going to be alright. We will see each other again someday. Okay? We’ll meet up, and then we’ll take life into our own hands. We’ll make a good life together, just the three of us, away from anyone else who wants to hurt us. We’ll be a good family to each other the way no one else can. We’ll all be okay.”

John looked uncertain. And scared. That wasn’t surprising, all of them were scared right now.

“Do you believe me?” Jacob asked, looking for a confirmation to help shore up his brothers’ beliefs through the act of saying yes, but also to help him believe it too. He did, deep down, believe it. He had to, desperately in a way that sat with the shadow of fear behind it, a fear that ran down the fault line between survival and death. He needed to believe in this.

Joseph led the charge, taking the pressure off of John. “Yes.”

John looked a shade more reassured, and a tiny bit more hopeful now amidst the fear. “Yes. I believe you.”

Jacob nodded, a lump forming in his throat as he pulled John into a hug, bumping his head against the top of his youngest brother’s. “I love you. Don’t ever doubt that, John.”

A pair of too-thin, tiny arms wrapped around Jacob’s shoulders as John hugged him tight, afraid to let go. “I love you too Jacob.” He sounded so scared, it broke Jacob’s heart.

Reaching out one of his arms, Jacob gestured for Joseph to join in the hug. Joseph thawed visibly then, allowing the depths of his own fear to show with how quickly he moved to encircle his two
brothers’ shoulders with a hug of his own.

“Love you Joseph. You’ll be alright.” Jacob said, gently thumping his forehead against Joseph’s.

“Love you too.” Joseph said, voice barely more than a murmur. He looked like he was on the verge of saying more...but refrained.

They had precious little time, it was best not spent fighting.

John was still clutching onto the both of them so fearfully—Jacob stroked his youngest brother’s back in a continued attempt to soothe some of the fear away. He had faith that John would be okay, he was a smart little kid. He’d grow up to be amazing, Jacob was sure of it. Joseph would too, once he’d been given the chance. Once both of them had been given a good chance.

“We’ll meet again...don’t know where, don’t know when...” Jacob began to sing softly, trying to croon it slow and easy to reassure them all, rocking the three of them gently from side to side in time with the melody. “But I know we’ll meet again some sunny day...”

Joseph listened for a few moments as Jacob sang, before joining in as well, trying his best to harmonize with his brother. “Keep smiling through...just like you always do...’till the blue skies drive the dark clouds far away...”

John’s shoulders began to ease just a tiny bit at the old familiar tune, though his grip wasn’t much looser than it was before. Finally, when they got to the final iteration of the chorus, John joined in, the tenor of his voice quietly floating higher, well above both his brothers’. “We’ll meet again, don’t know where, don’t know when...but I know we’ll meet again some sunny day.”

It was the last time the three of them would be together for a very long time. The memories weren’t as pulling after that point in this instance, at least. Joshua took the reprieve to shake himself out of the spacing out he’d found himself doing again—if he hadn’t known it before, all the staring into the distance he was doing now would have been a huge tip off that he was in dire need of rest. He focused on the song, trying to hold onto the emotional weight of it, the good and the bad, to not get lost in his head again as he made his way down to his room and got dressed. He emerged in a t-shirt, sleeping pants, socks and slippers, humming the tune to try to stay focused, trying to not think of the memories that had followed. He tried not to think about the memories from John and Joseph’s perspectives. He didn’t need to relive the same event three different ways, not right now. He’d be here for hours if that happened, and it might still happen no matter what he tried to prevent it with. Time was ticking, and the odds of him avoiding it went down the longer he took to get food and get himself into bed.
Kitchen, kitchen, kitchen. He pulled open the fridge, hoping there were some quick leftovers he could heat up and wolf down—if not he’d have to cook something quick. Ah! Luck was on his side! There was some cold pizza in tupperware. He could warm that up and be done eating without having to clean up any pots or pans.

...after a moment’s hesitation he also grabbed the bag of mixed greens, the carton of grape tomatoes, and some baby carrots. The memory of Jacob putting lettuce and tomato in his brothers’ sandwiches with an eye towards their nutrition as much as possible was too fresh for Joshua to ignore readily.

Fuck he wanted a moon pie right about now too.

The visuals of the Owens’ farm set ablaze threatened to rise up again and repeat—Joshua quickly went back to humming We’ll Meet Again once again, lips drawn in a thin tense line as he slid two pizza slices out onto a plate to pop into the microwave until it was hot enough for the cheese to melt.

Humming the song was helping in this instance, and the smell of warming pizza was also helpful in slowly pushing the ghostly memory of burning, acrid fumes away. Right up until his brain brought up one of the other, more personal times he’d heard that song, the future-dream down in John’s bunker where Hudson had screamed and cried—

Joshua covered his ears instinctively, crouching down to lean against the counter.

No, no, he did not need to chain one set of bad memories to another right now. No.

He counted his heartbeats, trying to shut out any thought of music for the moment. It was alright. He was here, not there. He was waiting to get his food, that was all. Nothing was going to happen here.

He really should stand up and get his salad sorted out. He didn’t though. He couldn’t, not just yet.

The long shrill beep of the microwave was a welcome distraction, and more importantly an entirely undemanding one mentally. He popped the door open to pull out his reheated food, taking a bite from the crust, trying to minimize the possibility of accidentally burning his mouth with molten hot cheese. A mouthful of food did wonders for starting the process of calming him down and making
him focus on the present. That was enough to help him continue. He grabbed a bowl and tossed his salad fixings into it, splashing it with a vinaigrette and then tossing the remaining leftover pizza and vegetables back into the fridge. A jar of water, cloth napkin and a fork, and he was on his way to the pantry and storage rooms, right next to the kitchen.

Situating himself on the cushioned stool, he sat beside a steel shelf of canned goods and a crate of plastic, vacuum-sealed dry goods to count them. There were far more stores than this, some fresher and more perishable, but the bulk of their accumulated inventory was meant to last more than a decade, for several dozen people. It was soothing to know they had enough. Soothing enough to help unwind the last few knots of tension in his stomach more fully as he ate and looked over the cans and packaged goods.

They’d be fine...assuming he could make it from point A to point B and survive this whole wretched Reaping business. They could bring people here, once he was sure of a safe route that wouldn’t lead the cult straight to his door—and once he’d figured out how to explain why he and Larry had a bunker big enough and well stocked enough to house so many people.

While he could perhaps claim it was just doomsday prepping like so many others in the county...he wasn’t sure that wouldn’t come off as too close to cult activities, given his heritage. That might lead to questioning his alliances...which he really didn’t want to have questioned, particularly given his lack of Peggie-murdering thus far. Maybe if he waited longer it’d be fine, later on.

He did wonder if Grace was going to be watching him in the future.

Maybe he was overthinking it though. Maybe they’d all be fine with it and there’d be nothing more than the occasional comment on his appearance regarding that matter.

He was safe. This was fine.

But everything was happening now. The Reaping had begun. He...what was he going to do, ultimately? Could he really talk John and Jacob down from their path? What if he didn’t have that kind of pull, regardless of whether he was crucial to the whole opening seals business? Distract John and Jacob long enough to let people get out before the cult kidnapped or killed them? He didn’t have the manpower to go against the entire Peggie population and be everywhere at once. He could save some people, yes, but...how to convince them to leave? The Resistance would be made up of people who wanted to stay. It was their home.

He wasn’t sure dying was worth one’s home if said home could be retaken later, like, say, in a world where there was no impending nuclear war. In that instance, the escapees could get the army
and government to come fight against the cult. Then they’d have the numbers and the equipment to overwhelm the Project’s stockpiled arsenal. Assuming the seals didn’t get broken...what DID break them, ultimately? Key events of importance, presumably, but how, if it didn’t involve the Heralds’ deaths?

Maybe that was it. Maybe the seals wouldn’t break if the Heralds didn’t die...but if someone else killed them, or an accident happened or such...would it still count?

This was getting back into the God or No God territory of religious and superstitious belief. Either way, his general plan: Try to convince the Heralds to stop doing terrible culty things like kidnapping, torture and murder, or at least distract and slow them down while getting people out of the line of fire and stealing supplies.

That didn’t feel like a plan with a solid win condition, but it was what he had to start with. Hopefully he’d come up with better details along the way, or find reasonable improvisations.

Fat chance of that in this situation, but maybe they’d get lucky.

He hoped the others were all alright—Rae-Rae, Ryan and the others had all been at the Ryes’ place last he’d seen and heard from them, or thereabouts. With any luck Grace and Nick would have managed to get Mary May and the other people in town away from John’s followers. Was Li alright?

What about Whitehorse, Hudson and Pratt?

Fuuuuuuuuuuuck there were a lot of people to keep track of, he was going to forget someone or something, he was sure of it.

Sharky and Hurk (Jr.) would both be alright he was sure. The Peggies and surrounding areas near them inevitably would not be, which...well, was predictable if not great. Hopefully the Peggies wouldn’t be trying too hard to deal with either of them, but, well...yeah. That wasn’t going to end well no matter how it went. Probably with lots of burnt corpses and exploded Peggie bits everywhere.

He really shouldn’t be thinking about that while eating on a bad brain day.
He stuffed the last bite of salad and pizza crust into his mouth, dusting off his hands over his plate with the napkin and swigged down the rest of his water once he was done with his last mouthful. He ditched the dishes in the kitchen sink, pitched the napkin in the wash, and made a beeline right back to the bathroom. He hesitated a bit in the hallway where the mosaic tiles ended and the grey walls began, but tried not to look too closely at his surroundings as he went to finish up his bedtime routines. Flossing, a swish of mouthwash, toothbrushing, a quick bio break and he was out, feeling a small sense of victory at successfully avoiding any further instances of invasive memories. He shut his bedroom door behind him and slid all the locks into place before flicking off the lights. Finally, it was the end of a very, very, very long day. He could leave everything outside, even if it was only for a little while. Here it was only his room he had to concern himself with in the quiet and dark, and his warm and comfortable bed. Leaving his glasses on the nightstand, he wrapped himself up in his blankets and settled into the familiar indent in his mattress. He groaned a little bit at how it actually hurt somewhat to finally, finally be able to rest.

All the scheming and worries about the Reaping he'd have to leave for later when he woke up, for now there was only the bliss of sleep, even with the prospect of whatever dreams awaited him. So long as it wasn’t actually the Bliss, Joshua figured he could manage.

Chapter End Notes

Title of this chapter is from "Young and Menace" by Fall Out Boy. I thought this song fitted both Faith and Joshua very well...or I believe that was my line of thinking, it's been ages since I picked the title song at the beginning of the initial days of writing this chapter. the song that Jacob and the lads are singing is "We'll Meet Again" by Vera Lynn, and is also the tune that John whistles in the canonical Confession scene in-game. One another note, hello! It's been a while! Life happened, and I also was doing a lot of structural building for the AU in terms of note taking and backstory fleshing-out. That took a while, but was necessary. Faith's backstory is important for mechanics and future chapters, and I had to get that and the Project's history of her predecessors all sorted out. Tried to keep all that close to canon, but some stuff I tweaked around in service to this particular story so as to make better sense, much like adjusting the Seed brothers' ages to fit their collective backstory timeline. I also have started up a lil tumblr blog to write about all the writing of this fic and other stuff like that, if you fancy a gander at nerdy learning-as-I-go ramblings, and behind the scenes stuff. Not much there yet but we're working on it.

Here it be: https://ofravensandgenesis.tumblr.com/

Anyway, the two books named in this chapter are "Lord of the Flies" by William Golding, and "Animal Farm" by George Orwell. Why yes Jacob internalized the inner darkness reflected in these and other literary works he's read over the years and it may or may not have influenced his choices later on in life. But that's for another chapter and another time. Thank you for all the comments and views, it's always appreciated when you stop by or drop a line. Have a good one, all you fine sorts!
Perhaps you were born for such a time as this by LittleWolf77

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