

Chapter 12



Sasha

The Lord did not mean for Sasha to be a cleaner. That was her first big lesson as a citizen of the Heavenly Kingdom. She was good enough at it, and she had too much self-respect to complain, but the work felt so unrewarding that she knew it must not be what God wanted for her.

She'd spent her first night in the Kingdom being pampered and provided for by her fellow Sisters in the Faith. They'd fed her, cleaned her, found her fresh clothes and given her all the emotional reward she could have ever wanted. And then the next day Helen had woken her up at seven in the morning to help clean out an old Republic barracks that was being transitioned over to housing for soldiers of the Heavenly Kingdom.

She knew it was honorable work, she knew it was necessary work, and she knew from the issues of *Revelator* she'd read that establishing the Kingdom of Heaven was a job that would not be accomplished easily or without pain. She'd accepted this when she'd made the choice to venture down here. But by the time she'd scrubbed her twelfth toilet of the day Sasha had decided that her mind and her loyalty were better used elsewhere.

Oddly enough, something her father had told her about the corporate world stopped her from whining.

"Never complain, never speak ill of your colleagues, and always ask if there's more work you can do."

It had been his advice to survive and thrive in business. But she took it to heart here, and by the end of her first full day in the Kingdom she'd scrubbed more toilets than any other girl. She hated the work but she also took a perverse sort of pride in it. That brought a little guilt, because she wasn't here to serve her pride. But also, wouldn't the Lord God be happy to see her commitment?

I'll ask Helen about that, Sasha told herself. She'll tell me how much of my pride is justified, and how much isn't.

She didn't see Helen again until the end of that day, when a truck came to gather all the girls up and take them back to the House of Miriam. They all washed up and then sat together around a large oaken table while Helen led them in prayer. She read a chunk of the book of Isaiah and then gave a quick lecture on the value of physical labor ('Each callous on your hands is a kiss from God') before inviting them to tuck in.

The dinner wasn't luxurious by Sasha's standards: just biscuits, a thin brown gravy and a palm-sized slice of beef for each of them. But they had oranges for desert, which was a treat, and Sasha felt more comfortable than she'd ever have believed among her new sisters.

Caroline had fled from Florida, North America's Banana-est Republic. She'd been shot in the arm making her way to the Heavenly Kingdom. She said almost nothing -- Sasha wasn't sure she even spoke English -- but Caroline worked hard. There was an intensity in her eyes that was a little scary and humbling at the same time.

Then there was Susannah, from the Blackstone Nation. Sasha couldn't help but notice she was the only black girl there. Susannah had spent most of their work day singing to herself. She had a beautiful singing voice.

And then there were the three other AmFed girls: Emmeline, Rosie and Anne. They'd all left a few weeks before Sasha had made her own journey. Anne had actually gone to the same middle school as Sasha.

She wasn't great with names, so most of the other girls in her group were still more of a collection of smiling faces than real people at this point. But they'd all been so warm to her. There was a real effort, from all of them, to make regular physical contact. They put hands on each other's shoulders and cheeks. They hugged constantly. Sasha experienced more touching in her first twenty-four hours here than she'd experienced in her last five years in the American Federation. There was something intoxicating about being touched and feeling so cared for.

The only girl she didn't like was Mae. Like Sasha, Mae was within spitting distance of age eighteen. She'd fled from the UCS and she had a gift for letting everyone around her know when they fell short of God's standards. During their work day she'd spent more time policing the other girl's posture than she'd spent scrubbing toilets. When Anne had hitched up her shirt sleeves, it was Mae who'd scolded her for immodesty. When Susannah took off her shoes and socks during their lunch break Mae had yelled that she was "an unfair temptation" to the young soldiers walking by on the street.

Sasha knew it was unfair and definitely unchristian to feel this way, but Mae LOOKED like someone who lived to tell other people what to do. She had the pinched features, squinting eyes and high-pitched voice of a born snitch. Mae kept her hair tied up in a bun so tight and short it looked military. She never smiled and never seemed to relax. And there was something about the frenzied way she'd pray, alone, quietly in the corner throughout the day that made Sasha leery.

She hated that she'd noticed those things. She knew God didn't want her focusing on what other people were doing wrong. *And besides*, she told herself, *what are you really angry about? That she's TOO serious about her faith? Isn't that why you left home?*

"Gluttony is a sin too, you know." Mae said.

Sasha realized with a start that Mae had addressed her. She had been eating her orange and, absent-minded and tired after a long day of labor, she hadn't realized how messy she'd been about peeling it. Her hands and sleeves were covered with the sticky juice. She looked around at the table and noticed that the other girls had been much more careful with their desert.

“Sorry,” Sasha started, “I wasn’t thinking...”

Mae rolled her eyes and started to say something else, but Helen cut her off.

“It’s quite alright dear. None of us is perfect,” she cast a reproachful eye at Mae, “...and we all lose ourselves in thought sometimes. Especially in the wake of great change. The Lord understands.”

She looked out to the rest of the table with a gaze that seemed to take in each of the girls collectively, and individually. Then she spoke.

“We are all here because we recognize the primacy of God’s word on earth. But we are no more perfect, and no more beloved by our Lord, than the enemies we face. Never forget that girls. Our foes are as dear to him as we are. They must be purged when they seek to interfere with God’s will, but we should feel sorrow for such losses. And we should never, ever,” her eyes went to Mae again, “let our fortune in hearing God’s word bleed us of compassion or lead us to arrogance.”

Sasha’s heart swelled at this. She’d never admired a woman more. Helen had a way of imparting wisdom without judgement, of shining a light on the truth without seeming like it was her truth alone. Helen wasn’t a preacher but Sasha had never heard anyone speak the word of God with more conviction.

After dinner they had an hour of free time to read their Bibles, share a few stories of their old lives and drink a single cup of sweet lemon tea. By nine o’clock it was bed time. Sasha was rankled a bit by the fact that she and her fellow young women were being ordered into bed at a set hour. But she was so exhausted by her day of labor that she couldn’t work up much frustration over the mild injustice. Perhaps when she’d had more time to adjust, she’d bring this up to Helen.

She collapsed in her bunk bed certain she’d fall asleep in an instant. Instead she lay awake for the better part of an hour thinking of Alexander. She’d still heard nothing more from him, or about him. She’d asked Helen a couple times today and the older woman had almost seemed angry. Somehow Sasha knew the anger wasn’t towards her, and that was doubly confusing.

“Sasha?”

Anne’s voice broke her reverie. The other girl was situated just below her on the bunk bed. Sasha was surprised to hear her, still awake.

“Yes. Is something the matter?”

“No,” Anne said, “I just couldn’t sleep. I thought maybe you were awake, too.”

“I guess we’re both in the same boat then.” Sasha kept her voice low, more to avoid waking any of the others than out of fear of breaking the rules.

"In more ways than one," Anne said. "I'm waiting for a man I love too."

Sasha's heart beat a little faster. It was like that with everything that made her think of Alexander. Her mind didn't need a great deal of prodding to turn towards him.

"Your love is at the front too?" Sasha asked.

"I think so," Anne said. "I was lucky enough to get to see him, twice. I arrived in Coppell first, back before the Kingdom took Plano. We met once then, and once more after the city fell and they moved us into the House of Miriam."

Jealousy seized Sasha's heart. She tried to replace it with gratitude in the Lord. He'd sent her someone who could understand her pain and frustration. Wasn't that a blessing?

"That must be hard for you," she said, "getting to see him and then being separated." The words came out a bit stilted and cold. She hoped Anne hadn't noticed.

"It is," Anne said, "but it isn't half so rough a place as you're in. I can't imagine how anxious you must be, arriving here and not seeing him."

"He's not the only reason I came," Sasha said, a bit defensively, "but yes. It's hard. I'm...scared. I don't know why I feel so silly admitting that."

"It's certainly not silly," Anne assured her. "But I get it. Everyone here is so focused on gratitude and God's wisdom, it almost makes you feel like a traitor for feeling afraid. Or unhappy." Anne's voice dropped a few decibels, as if she was ashamed of her next words: "I almost feel like a liar when I smile."

"I don't think the Lord wants us to be liars," Sasha said. "But I think being happy, or trying to seem happy, is a sacrifice we make for the Kingdom. It helps keep everyone else around us strong."

"Hmm," Anne said, and then yawned. Her voice sounded heavy with sleep. There must have been something contagious in the sound, because Sasha felt her own eyelids start to droop. "That's a nice way to look at it," Anne said, "I like the way you think, Sasha."

Helen woke all of them up the next morning. She was gentle with it- a hand on each girl's shoulder and a word in each of their ears, but there was no mistaking that she meant Now. So Sasha got up. Her feet hit the floor just as Anne took her first steps forward, towards the dining room. They all filed in, silent and groggy

The girls took their breakfasts in the form of a thick, tasteless protein shake and then they were loaded onto a heavy military-looking bus and driven off to a large red-brick office building. According to the bullet-pocked signs it had once been an administrative building for the corporation that had run most of the Republic's schools.

Sasha swept up bullet casings and shattered glass. She scrubbed toilets and wiped the blood off the walls and tried not to think too hard about how it had gotten there. Conversation wasn't forbidden, but there was a lot of ground to cover and Mae was quick to scold anyone who dawdled. Sasha and Anne both kept moving, but they passed each other in the halls often. Each time, the other girl would favor Sasha with a supportive smile and Sasha would return it.

They broke for lunch a little after noon (stale cheese sandwiches and orange juice), but instead of getting back to work after their meal they were met again by the bus that had taken them there. They were told to file inside. Sasha wound up in between Anne and Susannah in the middle row of the bus. It was hot, the air circulation was bad and the smell of sweat was thick on the bus. But the windows were down and, once the bus got going, the air that blew in felt like heaven.

"Lord God, I've been waiting for this all day," said Susannah. "I'd stay on this thing all night if they'd let me."

"Yeah," Anne said, "this is actually a lot more comfortable than the bunkroom, even when the power's working and the fans are on."

"Does the power go out a lot?" Sasha asked. She felt dumb for even giving voice to the question. But her seatmates didn't treat it like a stupid question.

"Not a lot," Anne said, "but we'll lose an hour or two most days. And it can be out for quite a while when Austin gets a drone through."

"That doesn't happen often," Susannah assured her. "I've been in the Kingdom ten days, and we've only had to take shelter once."

"Twice for me," Anne said, "but I've been here almost three weeks."

"I'm not scared," Sasha assured them, "I'm just curious."

"You should be scared," Susannah said. "It sucks."

It wasn't a long ride, and Sasha was embarrassed at how long it took her to realize the destination: this was the same route they'd taken from the House of Miriam, just in reverse. She and the other girls were being taken downtown. Once she got a good look at the gallows she understood why. There were six people lined up in front of the little stairway that led to the platform. They looked like prisoners.

Susannah looked just as confused as Sasha. But Anne seemed to understand what was going on. She scrunched her face in disgust.

"Oh no," she said, "I hate it when they make us watch this."

The two Martyrs who'd guarded them all day opened the doors and told them to form up outside of the bus. Sasha did as she was told while grabbing as many long looks at the gallows

as she could manage. None of the people who stood out in front of the platform looked like soldiers or robber barons or much of anything at all. They just seemed young and scared.

“Fags,” the Martyr standing next to the driver at the bus door grunted as Sasha stepped past him. He waited until the other girls had all filed off the bus before he stepped around to stand in front of them. Sasha hasn’t paid the man too much attention during the day because, in truth, he scared her. He looked old, over forty at least, and his face was heavy with scars and tattoos. There were faded blue crosses inked on each of his forearms. There wasn’t much skin visible under his armor and helmet, but the skin she could see was tanned red like leather. His eyes were cold and seemed fixed into a permanent squint. When he addressed the group, it was with a voice that sounded like it came to them through a filter of gravel and glass.

“These people,” he said, and spat after the word ‘people’, “are gender traitors.” There were a few gasps from among the crowd. He continued, “It took us a while to crack into the Republic’s old files. But we finally got a list of all the fags who refused to accept their god-given gender. They thought surgery could hide ‘em, but there’s no hiding the truth from the eyes of God or his true servants. And there’s only one fair punishment for someone who turns their back on natural law.”

Sasha’s heart started to pound. She’d known, of course, that Pastor Mike didn’t approve of transgenderism, of gender change surgery, of homosexuality or of anything else that didn’t fit into the neat Biblical lines of what a man and a woman ought to be. But he’d always phrased his objections with such compassion. Queer and trans people weren’t monsters, deserving of death. They were victims of the fallen secular world, same as anyone else. Sasha agreed they needed re-education, but this...

The crowd, perhaps three hundred strong, cheered as the prisoners were led up to the gallows. Sasha’s heart beat like a bass drum. She couldn’t hear anything else. The voices of the crowd, of her sisters, faded behind the beating sound of the blood that coursed through her head. But her eyes continued to work, and she watched in horror as they fit nooses around each victim’s neck.

The young people cried and screamed and begged, but the Martyrs paid them no mind. Some of them chanted in tongues while they prepared the killing machine. Sasha saw the joy in their eyes. She found it revolting. Before long they’d finished their preparations and six people were strung up on the gallows before the brays and cries of the crowd.

Sasha didn’t think it was possible for her heart to beat any faster. But it kept speeding up. She felt light headed and nauseous and a little like she needed to go to the bathroom. Her knees grew weak and she found herself leaning on Anne. The other woman looked almost as scared as Sasha did, but she weathered it better. She put an arm around Sasha, supporting her, and the two of them looked on as the executioner called out and pulled the lever that sent six human beings dropping down to dangle until they were dead.

The snap of their necks was the only thing Sasha heard above the sound of her own pounding heart. She watched them twitch and jerk for a second, two, and then her body grew too light and her legs collapsed beneath her. The world went black.

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She awoke back in the House of Miriam. Her sisters knelt or stood around her. Sasha was gratified to see she wasn't the only one who'd passed out. Anne lay next to her, clearly disoriented, along with two other young women whose names Sasha hadn't quite memorized. Helen sat in between them, wet washcloth in her hand, and stroked their faces.

"There, there, dears. You've had a terrible shock. And there's no shame in your reactions."

"No shame?" Mae spat the words. There was a glow to her face and a manic glint in her eyes. "Ma'am, with all due respect I don't know how these girls can call themselves committed to the Heavenly Kingdom if the sight of divine justice hurts them so much."

Sasha saw anger in Helen's eyes, but the older woman didn't let it carry over into her voice. Instead she fixed Mae with a cool gaze and said in an even tone, "Miss Mae, one can believe in our Lord's justice and still regret the pain that comes with it. That does not signal a lack of devotion. It signals compassion, a trait Jesus Christ had in abundance."

Mae frowned and pursed her lips, but she kept them shut for now. Helen turned back to Sasha and the other girls who had fallen.

"Death is never easy to witness, girls. It should be a horrible thing to witness," she glanced back to Mae, "...and we should all be worried if a day ever comes when we can see such violence without pain in our hearts. But these are dire times. The world has fallen too much for pacifism to bring back the rule of God. And so we must use violence. Do you understand?"

Sasha nodded. She heard the other girls give stuttering, hollow replies. Even the girls who'd managed to stay standing looked shaken. Mae was the only one who wore a smile. They gave her a wide berth the rest of the day.

Whoever was in charge of their schedule paid some deference to the fact that they'd been forced to watch an execution. There was no more cleaning that day. They spent the rest of the daylight hours seated around the common area in the House of Miriam, sewing uniforms. Sasha had never sewn before, but Anne sat next to her and taught her the basics.

Her hands were still shaking when they got to work, but Anne helped her and, eventually, focusing on the meticulous task allowed her blot out the horror. Once she got a good grip on the basics of what was required of her she was able to lose herself in quiet productive flow. She was almost disappointed when Helen called them to dinner.

They ate the same food as the day before. They prayed. And then they had an hour of relatively free time. They couldn't leave the House of Miriam since it was after eight. But they

could talk. Sasha gravitated naturally to Susannah and Anne. The topic of conversation turned at once to the execution.

“Is that what it’s always like?” Susannah asked.

Anne nodded. Her voice shook a little when she said, “I passed out last time too. I thought it’d be easier the second time around. But it really wasn’t...”

“It feels wrong,” Sasha whispered. She glanced over to Mae, who was holding court with a few of the other girls at the other end of the common area. “I’m not saying it’s OK, what those people were doing. But surely they deserved a chance to repent.”

Susannah nodded. “I don’t think Jesus would want us to murder people just for being wrong. It’s one thing to kill an atheist or an apostate who’s attacking you. It’s another thing to just,” her voice caught a bit, “hang people.”

Anne shook her head in an absent sort of way. “Kyle told me it was necessary.”

“Kyle?” Susannah asked.

“My intended,” Anne said. “I watched the first execution with him. When I passed out, he was so sweet. I came to and he was holding me, petting my head.” Anne’s eyes shone with love, and Sasha had to fight hard to keep the jealousy from her own face.

“He explained that the Heavenly Kingdom couldn’t afford to re-educate the fallen. They are too many, and we are too surrounded. If someone is capable of changing, God will know. And He will ensure they get their just reward in Heaven.”

Sasha was not entirely convinced, but she also wasn’t willing to argue with Anne. It felt a little dicey just admitting her continued discomfort with the executions. So she stayed quiet and the talk turned to more comfortable matters; what they expected from the next day’s work, and what sort of lives they’d lead when the fighting was over and they were settled down with the gallant warriors they knew they’d marry. Soon the girls all filed off to their small, snug beds.

After a long day of work and stress the bed felt so good that it made Sasha feel guilty. Alexander was fighting right now. He’d surely seen more death than she had and he didn’t have the option of fainting or crying about it. As she drifted off to sleep again Sasha promised herself that she would never faint or cry out in the face of death again. If this was the way God had ordained his Kingdom must come, she owed it to herself and to her Lord to stand and see it.

The next day they went back to the same battered administrative building as the day before. Sasha scrubbed and swept, ate her lunch, and got right back to work. She forced herself into enthusiasm for the menial labor with the same discipline she’d used when it had been time to study for an exam in a class she hated. The same tactic worked in both high school and the Heavenly Kingdom.

About two hours before the end of their workday Sasha's rhythm was interrupted by the sound of a crash and a scream from one of the girls in the bathroom next door to the room she was in. Sasha dropped her scrub brush and darted over. She was the first one into the room.

It took her a moment to piece together what must have happened. Susannah had been scrubbing a sink that had been badly damaged by shellfire. The sink had collapsed while she scrubbed it and a jagged edge of porcelain had torn open the girl's hand. There was already an enormous amount of blood by the time Sasha arrived. Susannah looked pale. She'd backed up against the wall and was just screaming, wordlessly.

Sasha had taken three semesters of pre-med classes in the last two years. She had a good basic instruction in first aid. She pulled her shirt off over her head and wrapped it around the gash on the other girl's hand. It was the spare shirt she'd brought from home, and it had an antimicrobial weave that should make it relatively safe as a wound dressing. She pulled it tight, wadded the extra fabric up over the wound and applied as much pressure as she could. Susannah kept screaming but the flow of blood from her wound slowed.

"Breath with me," Sasha told Susannah as she stared into the other girl's eyes. "In," she inhaled, "And out," she exhaled. She repeated this several times, until Susannah stopped screaming and started breathing in time with her. Several of the girls had crowded around the entrance to the bathroom at this point. When Sasha glanced up she could see Mae's face in the back of the crowd. She looked disgusted, probably at the fact that Sasha had torn off her shirt.

"Please call for the Martyrs," Sasha asked no one in particular. "Tell them Susannah needs medical attention. I don't think she has any clotting agents in her blood."

No one moved. So Sasha locked eyes with Anne and told her, "Please go now. We shouldn't take any chances with a wound like this."

Anne nodded, broke away from the gawking group and stumbled off to find help. Sasha looked back to Susannah. She coaxed the other girl to sit down against the wall and sat down next to her, applying pressure to her hand the entire time. Sasha's shirt was now soaked through with hot, sticky blood. Her hands were wet too. But she didn't feel squeamish about this. She'd expected to after her reaction to the hangings, but somehow the sight of all this blood actually calmed her. She knew what to do here. It felt good to take effective action.

The Martyrs arrived a minute or so later, with a medic close behind. By that point Susannah's bleeding had stopped entirely. The medic was impressed, and he said so.

"Do you have some kind of training, ma'am? You handled this very well."

"Three semesters of pre-med," she'd answered. "It was only high school pre-med but they made us do a lot of first aid drills."

The medic gave her a significant look and then asked, "What's your name, miss?"

"Sasha Mar-", she started before correcting herself, "Sasha."

Susannah was taken off to whatever served as a hospital for the Heavenly Kingdom while Sasha and the rest of the girls finished their work day. It was uneventful after that, but the other girl's attitudes towards her seemed to have shifted. Anne had given her a big hug, of course. But everyone was more respectful. Several of them came to her to ask minor things, advice on how best to clean a room or clear a pile of rubble. At one point Sasha had divided four girls up into two teams to remove a huge amount of shattered glass. While she'd directed the effort Mae had walked by the room and butted her head in.

"Just because she knows a little first aid doesn't make her a foreman," she sneered.

The other girls didn't pay Mae any mind. They left for the day at the usual time and arrived back at the House of Miriam in the early evening. Helen was waiting for them at the door. Behind her stood an older man in a white lab coat. He had a cross pinned to his lapel and a larger red cross on his armband. As the girls all filed into the building Sasha saw Helen point to her and whisper something to the man. He nodded.

"Miss Sasha?" he called out as she headed to her seat at the dinner table. Sasha peeled off and approached him. Helen stood nearby, distant enough to make it clear this conversation was between her and the man, but close enough that her presence provided a warm kernel of certainty and support.

"Yes?" Sasha asked.

The man had a sharp, narrow jaw and a long nose. There were deep bags under his eyes and his hair was at the greyest end of pepper-grey. He wasn't very large but he used his physicality well. He moved like he was used to controlling the room.

"Sasha, I'm Dr. Brandt. One of our medics was very impressed with your work earlier today on the injured girl."

"Sir, all I did was try to stanch the bleeding. Anyone could have handled that. It didn't require any special knowledge..."

"No," he interrupted her, "it did not. The knowledge of how to stem bleeding is not rare or special. But the willingness to jump in during an emergency, and to get blood on one's own hands, is rather rare. I understand you have some form of medical training?"

"Very little sir. I took three semesters of pre-medical courses in high school. I was thinking about a medical career before I-"

"Yes, well, three semesters of any kind of training almost makes you a doctor here. We're not exactly flooded with qualified medical experts."

Dr. Brandt lacked Helen's gift for interrupting without seeming rude. But he was clearly a busy man. And the fact that he'd offered praise made it hard for Sasha to take offense.

"Miss Helen," he snapped back at the older woman, "I'm putting this one on special duty. Would that be alright?"

"Of course, Dr. Brandt," Helen said. She smiled at Sasha, and there was honest pride in that smile. More pride than she'd ever seen in her mother's eyes. Sasha resisted the urge to tear up in response.

Dr. Brandt turned to Sasha next and asked, "What do you know about the People of the Road?"

She frowned. Post-humans were a popular topic of discussion in her high school. Sasha had seen *Wasteland Warriors* a couple years back and been as enthralled as everyone else. But her school curriculum didn't talk much about them, and definitely downplayed their influence in the rest of the continent. Her father had called them, "A bunch of idiots dancing around the desert, doing drugs and robbing people." She decided to use a variant of that for her answer.

"They're drug-addled pagans, fornicating and spurning the Will of God."

Dr. Brandt smiled. He had such a serious face and such stern features that Sasha was shocked by the honest kindness of that smile.

"I'd say that's basically accurate," he chuckled, "perhaps even a bit charitable. It turns out one of these groups sent some emissaries into Plano just before the city fell. They were on some trade mission. They wound up getting stuck in a pen with a few other prisoners. We didn't even realize who we had until their people contacted us and demanded their release."

Sasha's eyes widened. All she could think of were the grainy video fragments from one section of *Wasteland Warriors*. It was supposedly a recording of an attack on an Aegis Biosystems convoy headed from Milwaukee to Denver. The convoy had been well-armed, but it had been taken apart in a matter of seconds. The assailants moved so fast that the documentarians had needed to slow the video to make them visible as anything but flashes on the screen. *How could something that fast and that deadly be captured?* Dr. Brandt answered her question before she could ask it.

"I'm going to guess you're wondering how we managed to capture three of those Frankenstein abominations."

"Yes sir," Sasha said.

"Well," Dr. Brandt popped the glasses off his face and buffed the lenses on his shirt while he spoke, "most members of any given group aren't quite like that. Oh, they're all pagans or atheists or some other kind of heathen. They have a lot of aesthetic modifications, LED tattoos and body lighting and some sensory upgrades. But few of them have military-style implants."

"I see."

"As you know, cities and civilized nations tend to ban those implants within their borders." Dr. Brandt slid his glasses back into place on his nose. "So the People of the Road have to send their less-modified citizens out to negotiate, etcetera. Which means we've got a bit of a tiger by the tail situation here."

“What do you mean, sir?” Sasha asked.

“Well, the stories about these types are absolutely true. Some of them have hundreds of warriors packed to the gills with nightmare technology. There are individuals who are capable of taking on entire companies of human warfighters. The “tribe” these particular captives hail from, well...their name is quite obscene. ‘The City of Wheels’ would be the most polite variant. They’re as lost as it gets when it comes to the word of God. But they’ve got about six-hundred post-human citizens.”

Sasha thought back to what a dozen of those things had done to that convoy. She tried to imagine the carnage six-hundred of them could unleash upon the Heavenly Kingdom. A shiver ran down her spine.

“Exactly,” Dr. Brandt nodded at her. “Like I said, we’ve got a tiger by the tail. They might not intervene while we have their people. So we’ve got to make sure our captives are well taken care of. That’s where you come in.”

“Me?”

“Two of the captives are women, Sasha. They’ll need to be inspected by someone besides me. We do have some qualified female nurses. But an SDF drone hit one of our troop transports about two hours ago, and I’m afraid they’re both in the thick of that mess. So you’re coming with me to handle this job.”

“I’m proud to do it sir.” She wasn’t sure what else to say. And besides, it was true.

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The first captive sat on a small concrete bench in the back of an eight-by-ten cell. Her hair had been shaved into a mohawk, but the purple hair was deflated and greasy now. There was stubble on the sides of her head. Her face was round, but lean. There were slight laugh lines at the corners of her cheeks and the edges of her eyes. She wore a sleeveless purple-and-black dress that was, by now, filthy. Her arms were covered in a strange series of tattoos: dozens of branching lines that each terminated in a box. They looked almost like circuit diagrams. Sasha quickly realized that each ‘box’ held a little LED screen. Most of the screens were set to a dull red color, but once she stepped into the woman’s cell they flashed bright orange. The woman looked up and snarled at Dr. Brandt.

“The fuck do you want, shitbird?” She looked over to Sasha and then added, “Sorry, shitbirds.”

“Sasha,” Dr. Brandt sighed, kneading the bridge of his nose, “meet Marigold Fulton.”

“Jesus fucking Christ. What are you, six-fuckin’-teen?” Marigold said to Sasha. Then she looked to Dr. Brandt, “That’s fucked up, man.”

Dr. Brandt winced at both curses. Sasha glanced down and saw that his right hand was balled up into a fist and clenched tight.

“Marigold, this is Sasha,” he said through gritted lips. “She’ll be performing your intake exam. We need to make sure you’re uninjured, uninfected, and not hiding any weaponry. I would recommend compliance.”

“Your kind always do,” the woman spat back.

“Sasha. You’ve got this.” Dr. Brandt gave her a curt nod, turned on his heels and headed back out of the cell.

There was an armed guard just outside the cell. As Dr. Brandt had instructed, Sasha pulled a long privacy screen out from the far end of the wall and clasped it to a set of hooks on the other end. The captives were being held in the old Plano jail, which made this one of the rare buildings in the Heavenly Kingdom being used for its intended purpose. Sasha was grateful for the privacy screen. She was also unbearably nervous about what came next.

“I’m going to have to ask you-”

In one smooth motion, Marigold pulled the dress up over her shoulders and off of her body. She wore nothing underneath it. Her pert breasts, her little belly, her pubic mound and its shock of purple hair were suddenly just there.

“You gonna do your job, or are you just gonna stand there and jill off?” Marigold asked.

“I- what? Jill...?”

Marigold gave a harsh laugh.

“It’s synonym for masturbation. Lady masturbation. You don’t do that, do you sugar? I’m gonna guess the Heavenly Kingdom frowns on girls having fun without the help of boys.”

Sasha grimaced. “The Heavenly Kingdom doesn’t frown on women having fun. But it does encourage self-control. Mastur- what you’re talking about, it’s a distraction. It’s worldly.”

Marigold whistled in mock-surprise and said, “Spoken like a lady who truly needs an orgasm.”

“What I need to do is draw some of your blood, and some of your saliva. And, erm...perform a cavity search.”

Marigold’s lips curled up into a catlike smile. She opened her legs. Sasha had seen other women’s vaginas before, but only in textbooks and movies. This was the first time she’d found herself staring directly down the barrel of one, so to speak. She gulped.

“Ah, darlin’, am I your first? Don’t be scared. I got some chrome in me, but I never wound up putting defensive teeth in there. Now, my friend Topaz...”

“Stop. I know what you’re trying to do. Just stop.”

Sasha hadn’t thought the woman’s smile could get any wider, but it did.

“And what am I trying to do, child?”

“You’re trying to- to fluster me. To distract me.”

“Oooooor,” Marigold rolled her eyes as she replied, “I’m bored. You fucks have kept me in one holding area or cell or another for almost a week. I spent three days shitting in the corner of a gym. But at least Rick and Tule were there too.”

The woman’s smile softened. For just a moment she looked troubled, vulnerable.

“You don’t have any idea where my people are, do you?”

Sasha shook her head. She felt guilty for some reason. That was stupid- she hadn’t done anything wrong. But she felt the need to assuage the other woman’s fears.

“I don’t. I’m sure they’re alright, though. We wouldn’t execute them just for being in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

Marigold snorted. “Maybe you wouldn’t, luv. Your friends, though? I’ve seen your gallows. It doesn’t seem like the kind of thing someone builds just for show.”

“We...have a right to enforce our laws. God’s laws.” *What am I doing, defending the Kingdom to someone who’s clearly blind to the Word?* Sasha shook her head. She opened the blood testing kit Dr. Brandt had given her and stepped towards Marigold.

“Look, I’ve got to do this. Just hold still and it’ll be quick.”

It was. The other woman offered no resistance. When Sasha told her to stand, she stood. When Sasha reached a gloved hand up inside her to search for foreign objects, Marigold said nothing. She didn’t even flinch. Instead, she kept her eyes locked on Sasha’s. The other woman barely blinked. In about two minutes, Sasha had finished her examination and collected her samples. She started to step back, but Marigold’s hand shot out whip-fast and grasped her around the wrist.

“Listen.”

Sasha stopped and listened. She wasn’t sure why. It was something about the other woman’s tone. She’d heard the term ‘command voice’ before. Sasha hadn’t understood what the term meant until now. When Marigold spoke again it was in a hushed tone, barely more than a whisper.

“I don’t know what brought you here, but you’re obviously smart. You don’t have those dead zealot eyes,” she jerked her head in the direction of the guard outside. “When I mentioned the gallows you looked fucking ill. I’m going to guess you haven’t been here long. You’re probably having second thoughts. Help me get my people out of here. If we can get back to my city, you’ll be safe. We’ll take you wherever you need to go.”

“I...” Sasha wasn’t sure what to say. She should’ve slapped the other woman, or spit in her eye. But she didn’t.

“Don’t say anything. You’ll be back here. I promise. Think about what I’ve said. Think about where you are. Just fucking THINK.”

She let go. Sasha stepped back. The two women locked eyes for a long moment. And then Marigold grabbed her slip dress off the floor and slid it back down her thin frame. Sasha unclipped the privacy curtain and headed back out into the hallway.

The other woman captive, Tule, was tall and muscular. She had a wide face with cheekbones so sharp they were almost jagged. Her skin was a dusky brown. Her eyes were alert, and moved rapidly between Sasha, Dr. Brandt, and the guard who led them into the room.

“Her name is Tule,” Dr. Brandt said, “and she’s probably going to threaten you. Pay her no mind.” He turned away and left, while the guard stayed behind and kept a close eye on the tall woman.

Sasha was scared to approach Tule at first. The woman’s forearms were corded with muscles, and she had biceps that looked as broad as Sasha’s thighs. But the woman didn’t move an inch, or say a word, the entire time Sasha worked on her. Tule didn’t even blink. She complied to every one of Sasha’s requests without eye contact or any other form of acknowledgement. The woman seemed dead to the world.

Somehow, Tule’s quietness and seeming stupefaction were more uncomfortable than Marigold’s aggressive words. Sasha finished her work in short order. Once the last vial was sealed and her gloves removed, she took a final look at the captive.

“I hope you get to go back to your home soon.” Sasha immediately regretted the words. *This woman is The Enemy. Why would you try to comfort her? She won’t even look at you.*

Tule let out a dull laugh. She had been so silent earlier that it shocked Sasha. The other woman turned her head and stared at Sasha.

“I will return home soon. And fire and blood will come to this place, because you’ve held me here. You’re a dead woman walking. Enjoy the last beats of your heart.”

Sasha didn’t know what to say. What could you say to that? So she took her samples, and left.

....

Doctor Brandt dropped her off outside the House of Miriam and told her he’d send a jeep out tomorrow morning to take her to the hospital. Sasha thanked him and headed inside.

The other girls were already almost finished with dinner when Sasha sat down and joined the group. She gave a quiet smile to Susannah and nodded at the other girl’s bandaged hand. When desert (a banana this time) was over, Miss Helen took Sasha aside while the other girls broke off to read their Bibles and drink their nightly tea.

"I have some news for you,".

"Yes ma'am?" Sasha asked.

"Alexander has been rotated back from the front. And...", that strange look of mingled frustration and anger crossed Helen's face again, "...you'll be able to see him tomorrow. After lunch."

Sasha's heart pounded, an excitement that made her feel guilty and elated at the same time.

"I'm afraid it won't be a long visit," Helen continued. "But you'll have a bit of time with him."

And then Helen sighed again, just a little. Sasha was sure she wasn't supposed to have noticed it. Miss Helen's eyes looked a bit watery. Sasha was so happy, so excited, that her brain glossed over this fact. Instead she gave Miss Helen a hug. It wasn't nearly the first one they'd shared, but this was the first time the older woman had seemed hesitant in returning it. But she did, after a moment, and Sasha's joy-drunk brain wrote over any sense of doubt she ought to have felt.

Sasha buzzed with uncontained energy the rest of the night. Sleep was near impossible. She tossed until the small hours of the morning, turning over her memories of chat conversations she'd had with Alexander. His face felt so clear and real in her memory that she could almost touch it. And tomorrow she'd be able to do just that.

Sasha finally passed out about two hours before Helen came 'round to wake them up. She should have been exhausted. Instead, she found herself out of bed, feet planted firmly on the ground, before her mind was even fully awake. Her subconscious was that eager to start the day.

She rinsed herself with extra care that morning. Mae seemed to notice the added effort she put into primping and called her out for it.

"You're not working at the hospital to snag a doctor," she sneered, "You know that, right?"

Sasha tried to ignore the comment. Susannah, whose hand was still bandaged from her injury the other day, spoke up in her defense.

"There's nothing wrong with being extra clean, Mae. It's probably important for the work she's doing over there. Sasha's dealing with wounds and stuff, she's not scrubbing toilets like you."

Sasha was gratified by how that made Mae's face flush. She flashed Susannah a grateful smile and shuffled out of the washroom as quick as she could manage. She headed outside and took in her first deep gulp of the cool morning air. 'Cool' might have been too strong a word to use. But the fresh air felt good on her skin.

It only took her a few seconds to spot the battered and dirt-specked jeep Dr. Brandt had sent to pick her up. A young man, maybe as young as her, with a weak chin and an acne-pocked face sat behind the wheel. Sasha waved to him, ran up and hopped in.

It wasn't a quick ride to the hospital. Large sections of the road were destroyed, blocked by rubble or jammed with traffic from refugees entering the Heavenly Kingdom. Seeing that had gratified Sasha. *More souls coming to God*, she thought. For the most part she lost herself in thoughts of Alexander until, forty minutes later, the jeep rolled to a creaky stop in front of the Medical City of Plano.

The enormous hospital complex looked badly damaged, and largely abandoned. Many of the windows had been shot out or shattered by large blasts. Several buildings had chunks of wall and roof that had fallen in. But there were lights on in many of the windows, and the hum of generators filled the air of the front courtyard. Dozens of people milled about, filled with purpose, running wires and wheeling patients.

Sasha was excited at the thought that she might get to do some actual work in a functioning emergency room. When she found Dr. Brandt, he quickly disabused her of those notions.

"We're doing alright today. What I need you to do is come in here and help me catalog which medicines have spoiled."

The power had gone out during the fighting for the city, Dr. Brandt explained, and the medical storage room had been without refrigeration for almost two days. He showed her how to check medical vials for signs of spoilage, handed her a clipboard to mark her findings and told her to get to work.

It was a menial, painstaking task and Sasha found herself missing the hell out of cleaning. She hated it, but she devoted herself to the work and, minute by minute, the time passed. Eventually it was time for her meeting with Alexander. Sasha pulled herself away from the rows of vials and jars and blister packs and headed outside, to where she knew the jeep would be waiting.

Her driver that afternoon was a different Martyr, slightly older but still quite young. She was so preoccupied with thoughts of Alexander that she almost forgot to greet the man. He didn't seem to be in a talkative mood either, though, and they rode in silence back to the center of town. Sasha was so focused on the butterflies in her stomach and trying to catch glimpses of her hair and face in the rear-view mirror that she didn't notice the crowds thronging downtown until the jeep rolled to a stop and it was time for her to disembark.

A familiar sense of queasy dread gripped Sasha's guts as she exited the vehicle and looked out over the crowd. They were converged around the gallows once again. Sasha craned her neck, and she was able to see four men in filthy, tattered rags standing before the killing instrument. It took her a second to recognize two of the men as the porters who'd first unloaded her from her crate. An older, bearded Martyr in jet black body armor stood before them. He held a Bible in one hand and a formidable looking handgun in the other. Sasha started to push her

way through the crowd for a better look. She hadn't made it far when the bearded Martyr addressed the crowd.

"These four men were all once employees of the secular abomination that called itself the Republic of Texas," he said in his booming, stentorian voice. "The Heavenly Kingdom offered them mercy, in the form of indentured servitude. All we asked," he scanned his eyes across the crowd. The left corner of his lip curled up into a slight growl, "All we asked for was their honest, obedient labor. And they repaid this mercy by stealing food and supplies meant for the Heavenly Kingdom's brave soldiers."

He lifted his big pistol up into the sky and fired off four shots in quick succession.

"These men stole from God. There is only one proper punishment for such a sin."

He turned back towards the gallows and nodded at a hooded Martyr who stood behind him with a hand on the thick wooden lever that operated the whole grim apparatus. The other man pulled downwards and the four bodies on the scaffold dropped with a sickening chorus of snaps. Sasha felt her stomach turn sour. This time, though, she watched. She didn't take her eyes off the gallows until the last man had ceased his twitching.

"It's not a pleasant sight, is it?"

That voice. Sasha recognized it immediately. It was the voice she'd heard a hundred different times over her deck, hidden up in her room back in the AmFed. It was the voice of the first man she'd ever really loved. It was Alexander.

Sasha turned around and her heart nearly burst at the sight of him. He was tall, broad and muscular in a way that somehow seemed comforting and not scary. His mop of curly brown hair, lopsided smile and round, prominent jaw line were all exactly as she remembered from their dozens of chat sessions. He wore olive green fatigues that looked stained and burned in a few places. His hair was greasy, and there were great big bags under his eyes. But he was here. He was real.

She collapsed into him. Before she realized it she'd started to sob.

"I love you I love you I love you I thought you were dead I love you!"

He hesitated for several long beats before he returned her embrace. But he returned it with gusto. His hands crept down, from her sides to her buttocks. He squeezed her. It was a gesture she'd fantasized about several times in her weaker, more carnal moments. It was not something she'd expected a Godly man like Alexander to do out in public, surrounded by people, in the immediate aftermath of an execution.

Sasha pulled back and coughed in surprise. She didn't say anything though. She didn't want to mar their first meeting with that. And she also remembered something Pastor Mike had written in *Revelator*, that the "bestly nature of a man must be salved by the goodness of women". Alexander had just spent several days up at the front. He must have seen terrible things. It was understandable that his self control would not be at its peak right now.

Still. She didn't like the way he looked her up and down. There was something of the wolf in his eyes. It was not the look she'd dreamed of seeing. But then he spoke.

"Sasha. I'm so proud of you. I didn't know if I'd ever see you here. I wasn't sure if you'd be willing to truly commit yourself to our Lord. But I prayed that you would and now, by the Grace of God, you're here. And you're even more beautiful than you looked online."

Sasha blushed. How could she not?

"Look," he waved a hand towards the gallows, and the bodies, "things are still sort of a mess around here. But I know one cafe nearby is up and running again. I've got enough ration tokens to get us both a cup of coffee. What would you say to that?"

"I'd say yes." She smiled at him. Her earlier reservations dissolved as she took his hand and followed him down the street, past the gallows and the dispersing crowd and towards the cafe. In a minute they were there. It was a small place, one rectangular room with a coffee maker, a half-dozen tables and an outer patio area with another half dozen tables. There was a generator, power and air-conditioning inside, so they sat there. Alexander ordered them two large cups of black coffee. He sat down while he waited for their order and stared into her eyes. She stared back. For a while, that was all they did.

"It's so good to see you," Sasha said, "I've been working at the hospital and I've seen so many wounded men. I couldn't stop thinking I was going to see you there in one of those beds, broken and bleeding..."

He smiled at her. Then he reached his left hand out and sat it on top of hers. Sasha shivered, she couldn't help it. Things stirred inside her. She felt a sudden, powerful urge to possess his body, to hold him and squeeze him and be explored in turn. She clamped her mouth tight and focused on trying not to give all her thoughts away through the blush in her cheeks.

"Sasha," he said, "it brings me such joy to see you here. And don't worry. I know the situation at the lady's barracks is rather primitive. But I'm talking to my commanding officers. As soon as we get married, you'll be a part of my household. We'll be able to live together. We'll build a life and that life will help build the Heavenly Kingdom."

She was stunned for a moment. Sasha began to tear up and all she could do was nod at him. This was like a dream. It was, of course, rather different from her actual dreams, which had involved Alexander and a house but not so many bleeding and dying men, nor a gallows.

Their coffee arrived. Alexander took a sip and she followed suit. He continued.

"I know you're working at the hospital now. I'm sorry about that. I'm sorry you had to spend so much time scrubbing toilets. As soon as I can get you off those duties, I will."

"Oh no!" she interjected, "I love working with Dr. Brandt. It's important, and I want to do my part to help the Kingdom thrive."

Something passed across Alexander's face. It looked like irritation, perhaps at her interruption. But it was gone quickly, and his smile returned.

"That's admirable, Sasha. You're a remarkable young woman. If that's what you want, I'm sure you can continue to help out there until you're with child."

"With...child?" Sasha felt guilty for the horror in her voice. Of course she wanted children. She just didn't want them now. Or particularly soon.

Alexander nodded. "We must be fruitful and multiply so the Heavenly Kingdom can remain and expand." His smile was so warm, so kind. "I know you've read more of Pastor Mike's writing than I have, Sasha. You're a very smart girl. But God made you to bring forth more children. You wouldn't want to delay your purpose, would you?"

Maybe a little, she thought.

"No..." she lied.

"Good," he smiled again. "And don't worry. You won't have to do it alone. Malia already has a child, and Adelaide's two months pregnant. They'll help you, too."

The world stopped. At least it did for Sasha. She could tell people were still moving around her, but Sasha's reality had shrunk to the pounding sound of her heart and a twisting in her gut.

"A-adelaide? And Malia?"

Alexander gritted his teeth. There was something almost practiced in the way he said what came next.

"Adelaide and Malia are my wives. As you will be."

"Wh-? Alexander, you didn't say anything about other wives. You never mentioned them at all. Why are...how can you be telling me all this now?"

His smile turned sad. Or at least it gave the illusion of sadness. Sasha was still too shocked for anger. She felt like a hole had just been knocked in her heart. She knew she should be angry. But she also felt like there must be something missing. Something she didn't understand yet. Alexander was a sweet boy, he wouldn't do this to her.

"Look," he said, "I'm sorry. This is never easy. You understand how important the Heavenly Kingdom is, Sasha. Nothing in the world could matter more. And the Kingdom will not survive without people like you. One of my jobs here is to push young women like you to take the terrible risk of coming here."

"And so you lied?" she croaked, barely able to believe what was happening. "You bore false witness, Alexander. I..."

"I did not lie." His voice hardened and so did his eyes. "I did not tell you about every aspect of my life here. But I did not lie." He sighed, took a sip from his coffee, and continued.

"I'm part of a special unit within the Kingdom, formed on the order of the Pastor himself. He calls us Jacobians. It is our job to seed the next generation of Martyrs. We take personal responsibility for the Kingdom's expansion. Finding you and bringing you here was one part of my work in this great cause. If I'd told you every detail about life here, every single thing, you wouldn't have come. And your soul would have stayed in jeopardy."

He took another deep, arrogant sip of his coffee.

"I'm sorry if this hurts you. But it was for the greater good. We must sometimes do distasteful things to serve God's design."

Sasha's vision went red. She stood and, without thinking, grabbed her now-lukewarm mug of coffee and splashed the whole thing in Alexander's face. He yelled at her and sputtered like a goldfish. But she was already up and heading for the door. She flung it open, walked out into the crowded street and lost herself in the press of the crowd and the boiling waves of her own anger.