



Sasha

“History is a messy thing, class. Even a question as simple as ‘When did the Second American Civil War begin?’ doesn’t have a clear answer. Some scholars say the first shots were fired during the failed Montana secession movement in 2040. Others will name the Dallas water riots of 2041, or the bombing of the Dimon building 6 months later by leftist militants. You can make a good, evidence-based case for any of these.”

Mr. Dane was a good lecturer, with a rich baritone voice and a habit of animating his lectures with vibrant hand gestures. He was Sasha’s favorite teacher and one of her favorite people. Mr. Dane was a heathen, of course, but he was still a sweet man. She appreciated his even-handed perspective and his commitment to the unbiased study of history. It broke her heart that no one else in her Advanced Placement Continental History class seemed to appreciate him.

The other twenty-four students stared ahead with slackened jaws and unfocused eyes. They were all deep in their decks, messaging friends, browsing snapvids or playing whatever game was popular right now. Decks were far too entrenched in modern life for the schools to force them off during class time. Instead, the school filtered the WiFi and forced students to download apps that restricted access during school hours. This had led to a thriving underground trade in apps that countered the school spyware and covertly lifted the blocks.

The district IT team was locked in a perpetual, losing battle to spot and crack these programs. But on a practical level the teachers, like Mr. Dane, just had to accept the intrusion. The students didn’t ignore him entirely. But very few of them gave him their full attention. They didn’t give anything their full attention, really. Most of her peers went through their days half-reading two or three conversations, playing games and scrolling through several social media feeds even when they were out in the world, surrounded by people.

Pastor Mike called it ‘the death of joy’. That was the name of the essay in *Revelator* that had first turned Sasha onto the Heavenly Kingdom. He’d railed against “distraction culture”,

which he said not only robbed mankind of a relationship with God, “But it also robs us of the little moments. The quiet joys of living are drowned by a flood of data. It’s a mosquito bite on the human soul, and the masses have convinced themselves that the abatement of discomfort from scratching this itch is the same as happiness.”

All around her classmates scratched their itches while Mr. Dane lectured. He looked so lonely up there. They all looked lonely.

“So,” Mr. Dane cleared his throat in an attempt to pull at least a few of his students out of their stupor, “as we close this unit I’d like to ask you all a simple question: what should we call the war that split the United States? Your textbook calls it ‘The Second American Civil War’. In the Northwest and the Christian States they call it ‘The Revolution’. By next Monday, I’d like each of you to upload an essay arguing which name is more appropriate. One thousand words, please.”

The bell rang. The other students got up slowly, in twos and threes, and made for the door. Sasha was one of the first up. But Mr. Dane called to her before she reached the exit.

“Ms. Marion, would you mind holding back a moment?”

Sasha stiffened. She glanced, involuntarily, up to one of the government’s propaganda posters on the wall. It showed a young man with a brightly-colored backpack surrounded by burnt-out buildings and rubble. A green rocket hung above him like the Sword of Damocles, an instant away from impact. Next to the young man were the words, ‘Think Again. Step Back.’

“Yes sir?” she asked as she approached his desk.

Mr. Dane fixed her with a kind smile. He looked around forty, although that was no guarantee of anything. His eyes and lips were creased with smile lines though. She liked that about him.

“You seemed a little bit distracted today, Sasha. That’s not uncommon for most of my students,” he gave a slightly forced laugh, “but you’re normally so engaged. I just wanted to make sure everything’s OK.”

Over the last year Sasha had started building up a stockpile of what she called ‘Defensive Smiles’. She had one for when her parents were worried. Another for her (few) friends, and another for the school administrators. The smiles were calculated to reassure everyone that she was still normal Sasha, and she certainly wasn’t planning to escape to the Heavenly Kingdom.

But she’d never worked up a smile for Mr. Dane. She genuinely enjoyed his class, so it hadn’t seemed necessary. She decided to go with her ‘friend smile’ and hope that worked.

“I’m OK. I’m just, y’know,” inspiration hit her, “...the news today is so scary, what’s happening down in Texas. I’m worried.”

Mr. Dane visibly relaxed. "Ah, yes. I can see why you'd be troubled by that. I think it's taken everyone a bit by surprise." He paused and struggled with his words. "...expect it must be somewhat more difficult for you than the rest of the class, being a Christian."

Her smile faltered a bit. She knew she was supposed to act like one of the tame preachers the government trotted out, the men and women who'd claim Christianity was all about peace and love. They'd say that the Lord's truth could co-exist with the "equal truths" of other faiths, and with the secular world of the AmFed. That all felt wrong to her. But a little imitation was worth avoiding suspicion.

"My faith is stronger than a handful of terrorists," she said to Mr. Dane. "There are a lot of Christians in the Secular forces, you know. They'll win in the end, won't they?"

Mr. Dane's smile remained unchanged, but his eyes bored into hers. Sasha was more comfortable with eye contact than most teens but she found this deeply uncomfortable. Invasive, even. After several long seconds he spoke.

"I fear it's going to be a long, bloody fight before that happens. We're very lucky to be insulated from all that madness. You know," he sighed. "An eleventh-grader over at Jefferson High was killed fighting in Dallas yesterday. The news just broke."

Sasha hadn't been aware. *But thank God for him, and his sacrifice*, she thought.

"That's awful," she said. "I can't imagine what his parents must be going through."

"No, you can't." He agreed. And then Mr. Dane broke eye contact. He looked down at the ground, and his voice dropped an octave as he asked, "Did you know I had a son?"

Genuine surprise passed over Sasha's face. "No sir, I didn't."

He shrugged and gave up on his smile. It wasn't much more than a ghost now, anyway.

"I married young. I was a dad at nineteen. And by the time he was nineteen, the whole country was coming apart."

He reached down to his desk and picked up a small, rather battered-looking red button. It had the letters 'rj' printed in lowercase letters across the front. Mr. Dane stared at it. Something twitched, under his left eyelid. He bit his upper lip. He was silent for a long beat. Then he swallowed and looked up at Sasha.

"Do you know what this is?"

"No," she said, reluctant and pretty certain she ought to have known.

"In the years leading up to the revolution there were a lot of different activist movements founded and spread by anonymous radicals. They'd organize flash demonstrations and coordinated direct action campaigns. The pins were one sort of 'ID badge', so when you showed up for a flash demo you could quickly identify your comrades."

He shook his head ruefully.

“It sounds silly now. All I can say is, at the time, it made sense and it felt meaningful. The anonymous voice I listened to was a guy named Red John. He had these videos about history, politics, he explained the whole world and what was wrong with it in a way that just felt right. I started playing his stuff for my boy, Mikey, when he was thirteen or fourteen. I just wanted him to know what was going on. I thought I was doing the right thing.”

Mr. Dane’s eyes looked watery, and heavy with the ghost of old tears. He seemed to have trouble keeping his voice steady.

“Mikey grew up believing hard. And when the fighting broke out he was young and strong, and so very ready to fight for the world he believed we all deserved.”

Mr. Dane set the pin back on the desk with its cover facing down. His eyes were red. “He died in Denver,” Mr. Dane said, and his voice broke a little, “shot through the head when the National Guard pushed into Westminster.”

Sasha put a hand on Mr. Dane’s shoulder. It was an instinctive move, blessedly honest. She silently thanked God for this moment of connection to the educator she so admired. He smiled back at her. “Thank you. I don’t mean for this to be a lecture. I don’t think those tend to work. Just...” He glanced back at the table, “just be careful about putting your faith in charismatic men and their ideas.”

“I will,” she said.

A minute later, as she left the classroom, a notification pip lit up at the top right corner of her vision. She wink-clicked it and saw a message from Brother Andrew.

“Bus stop 23A. 4:30 PM.”

The rest of the day passed normally enough. In the afternoon they had an assembly about the suicide of a classmate. It was the third this year. Principal Hargrave delivered the same platitudes they’d all heard a hundred times. There was a lot of talk about suicide hotlines and chatrooms, of all the counseling services the school had available. Sasha knew none of it would help. Almost twenty percent of teens in the AmFed would attempt suicide. Every year that number ticked up a few tenths of a percent, and the government had no idea how to stop it.

Pastor Mike blamed the rash of suicides on the emptiness of secular life, the spiritual hole at the center of capitalism and the self-worship it fed. Sasha thought he’d hit that right on the money. Even the United Christian States still engaged in global capitalism, and in doing so “fed a dark god in permanent opposition to the Lord Almighty” (Pastor Mike, again). She knew Principal Hargrave’s lectures were pointless, but she sat through the assembly and gave the right smiles to the right people the rest of the day. She focused on her studies as best as she could despite the growing anxiety in her gut.

Two weeks ago she'd read a Pastor Mike article in *Revelator*, "Don't Talk Yourself Out of Heaven". It had clearly been written for the conflicted faithful, just like her.

"I've received messages from hundreds of you who say, 'I'd love to open myself up to martyrdom, but I'm a doctor, or a police officer, or an engineer, and I think I can do more to glorify God where I am right now'. Brothers and sisters, *these are the doubts of the Serpent*. Don't be fooled. No one stays in comfort because they want to bring glory to the almighty.

Our Lord does not speak to us from comfortable places; he spoke to Moses in a desolate desert, from a burning bush. He delivered His greatest sermon atop a mountain. Jehovah wants our souls to be so on fire with devotion that our own lives mean nothing before His flame. The Heavenly Kingdom is that cleansing flame. What a gift that it is here, now, in your lifetime! What a tragedy it would be to miss this chance at salvation."

She recited that passage again and again, throughout what she now knew would be her last day at school. The words steadied her as she waved goodbye to Mr. Dane at the end of the day ("*these are the doubts of the serpent!*"). They calmed her when she looked into her backpack, which held the small 'go-pack' she'd put together that morning. It was just a change of clothes and handful of hygiene items. That seemed woefully inadequate, but anything more would've looked suspicious.

Leaving. I'm leaving.

It was only now, on the cusp of leaving, that Sasha realized how much she was going to miss movie night with her friends, central heating in the winter, reliable Internet access...

Our Lord does not speak to us from comfortable places.

It took her an embarrassing amount of time to find the bus stop. She was scared to use her deck- she'd shut it off as soon as she left school- and she didn't know the city bus system very well. She'd taken buses to school for years but her parent's car had always driven her around the city. She was ashamed of how anxious she felt about riding a city bus. Here she was, on her way to a warzone and possible martyrdom, scared of public transit.

"Be strong and courageous, and do the work," she recited David's advice to Solomon, "Do not be afraid or discouraged, for the Lord God, my God, is with you."

That helped a little. Thinking of Alexander's smile, his green eyes and the strong lines of his jaw, helped more. Sasha didn't like admitting that to herself. It felt too carnal, almost sacreligious. But she knew that what mattered to God were her actions. Even if her flight to Zion wasn't done with a completely pure heart, God would forgive her. Her sacrifice to build the new Jerusalem would outweigh the sinful part of her mind that couldn't stop imagining how Alexander's strong arms would feel when they finally wrapped around her.

She waited at stop 23A. 4:30 came and went. By 4:45 PM, her chest burned with barely restrained panic. She was sure the people passing by all knew her secret plans. A pair of police

officers passed her at one point. One of them, a woman not much older than Sasha, flashed her a smile. For a long time she was convinced this had been a sign, that her comminiques had been intercepted and the police or the FBI were onto her plan. But the police didn't come to stop her. And, after a quarter hour that felt like days, a brown sedan rolled up to the bus stop. Its window peeled down and Sasha locked eyes with a care-worn young man in the back.

"Sasha Marion?" he asked.

"...yes?" she said. "Are you Brother Andrew?"

"As I was with Moses, so will I be with thee."

That was the passphrase Alexander had told her to expect. It was all Sasha could do to stop from bawling right then and there. She got into the car.

The man inside was exactly what she'd have expected of a man in Brother Andrew's profession. He had long, straw-colored hair and a ragged beard. There were deep pockets of exhaustion under his brown eyes, and well-creased smile lines around his lips. He wore a simple black suit with no tie. Everything about the way he looked and the way he dressed spoke of quiet devotion and humble service. Here, finally, was a man of God: not a pressed, preening dandy like the pastor at her father's church. Not a 'hip' young pretender like the Baptist Minister who'd given a speech on "inclusion" at her school last year. Here was a real, road-weary man of the Lord.

"I know how you must feel right now, Sasha," he said. "You're relieved. You never thought you'd make it this far. You didn't know if you'd have the courage to take the final leap of faith. But you have now, child, and your soul is secure."

Sasha melted. The knot of anxiety that been twisting in her guts suddenly untied itself. Her eyesight blurred, and she realized that she'd started to cry. It was all she could do to look over to Brother Andrew and whisper, "Thank you."

Together, they drove to a little white-walled suburban house, maybe five miles away from the only home she'd ever known. The car stopped, but Brother Andrew gestured for her to stay in the vehicle while he stepped out and knocked on the door. Another man, shorter and balding, stepped out. They both hustled back to the car, their eyes darting left and right. As soon as they made it inside the car sped off fast enough that the acceleration pushed Sasha back in her seat.

The new man sat across from her in the autonomous car's second row of bench-seats. He was older, in his fifties if he hadn't taken any JuvEn treatments. He had tired eyes with deep bags beneath them. While Brother Andrew radiated calm self-satisfaction, this man seemed nervous and a little frantic. He clutched a small briefcase with white-knuckled hands. Sasha smiled in an unconscious attempt to calm him. He smiled back. Brother Andrew spoke.

"Ms. Marion, this is Brother Brian. He's going to disable your deck. It's the only way we can get you across the border to our people in the Christian States."

Brother Andrew smiled and put a hand on Brother Brian's shoulder. The other man took this cue to open up his suitcase. He started to assemble something small, silver and intricate. Brother Andrew kept speaking.

"All it'd take is one phone call from your parents or your school and the police could spot your precise position from the GPS unit in your deck. This car is a deadzone, so you're safe inside it. But as soon you exit you'll be back on the map. So we need to remove your deck before that happens."

"Will it hurt?" Sasha remembered how it'd felt when they'd first implanted her deck, like having a new tooth forcibly inserted into her jaw. She'd been four or five at the time. Her head had hurt for days.

Brother Brian didn't look up from his briefcase as he answered her. "Yes. I've got a topical anaesthetic, but nothing stronger. It'll hurt."

Sasha nodded gravely. She had anticipated this. A little pain was a small price to pay to become one of God's elect few. She thought of Paul and Silas, stripped and beaten with clubs on the orders of a heathen magistrate.

God shows his love through salvation. We show ours through sacrifice.

The memory of Pastor Mike's words helped to ease her fears. She'd miss her deck. But Alexander had said there'd be replacements in the Heavenly Kingdom. In another minute Brother Brian had finished assembling the tool. It looked like a cross between a syringe and a handheld shopvac. At Brother Andrew's urging she moved over to sit on the bench seat next to him.

"Now lay across my lap, and angle your temple towards Brother Brian."

A pang of fear flittered across her heart. These were men of God...but they were also men she didn't know, who were both much older and larger than her. She had to fight down the urge to panic and flee. *You're trusting these men to smuggle you across a border, dummy.*

She hesitated for a few sweaty seconds, but eventually Sasha nodded and laid down in Brother Andrew's lap. Her heart beat so loudly she could hear it crashing in her skull like ocean waves. Brother Andrew put his strong hands on her. He tightened his grip. *He's holding me down*, she realized. And although he tried to restrain her in a comforting way, the liquid mass of panic in her chest almost boiled over.

There was a sudden, sharp pain as Brother Brian plunged the needle in through her temple and then a dull, throbbing feeling like a migraine. Sasha felt dizzy, disoriented, and then nauseous in turns. She blacked out for a few seconds. When she came back to herself she realized she'd been vomiting. The floor of the car was coated in the remains of her lunch. Some of it had gotten on Brother Andrew's pants leg.

Brother Brian looked disgusted. But Brother Andrew was all smiles and comfort. “Jesus hears your suffering, sister. He knows what you are giving up in his name. You will reap the dividends of this investment in your soul.”

He helped her up and guided her to the opposite bench, where she laid down and continued to clutch her throbbing head. She drifted off, or passed out, and when she came to the interior of the car had been scrubbed clean, leaving behind only a brown stain and the lingering smell of sick and antiseptic. Sasha guessed an hour or more had passed, although, without her deck, it could have been more. They were in the woods now, driving along a country road.

Brother Andrew explained that they were just a few minutes away from the border, and almost as far as an automobile could take them. Soon they’d stop in the town of Franklin, right on the border of the UCS, and she’d meet the men who would help her on the next stage of her journey,

“The main border stations are blanketed with cameras,” Brother Andrew said. “But we’re right in the thick of the Blue Ridge Mountains here. They can’t watch every inch of ‘em. We have some coyotes here who know where the ‘holes’ are. One of them will spirit you across.”

“Coyotes?” Sasha asked.

“It’s an old term,” he said. “A coyote is someone who helps smuggle people across national borders. Usually the phrase has somewhat...mercenary connotations. But the men we work with are true believers, soldiers in the Army of God. You needn’t fear, Miss Marion.”

A few minutes later they rolled into Franklin. She’d never heard of the place before, but a quick look around told her most of what she needed to know. Most of the buildings were empty. The storefronts were boarded up. The City Hall was in disrepair, and the skeleton of a once-mighty Wal-Mart supercenter dominated the south side of town. There was clear fire damage around its roof and entrances. Twenty or so years ago, when the Civil War had been at its height, Franklin had swollen with refugees. When the war had ended the refugees had gone elsewhere, and the city had been left gutted and exhausted in their absence.

The car stopped outside of a public park. Sasha noticed that the grass was overgrown, and the sidewalks around it were cracked and broken. She shared a quick prayer with Brothers Andrew and Brian, and then they bid her farewell. The car pulled away and Sasha was alone. She’d been told to find a park bench and wait “just a few minutes”. So that’s what she did.

“A few minutes” turned into ten, then fifteen, then twenty. Sasha began to worry again. That was when she really started to miss her deck. Normally she’d have been able to catch up on the latest news from Zion, read one of her favorite issues of Revelator and maybe even touch base with Alexander. Without it, she only had the throbbing pain in her head to keep her occupied. Sasha’s mind wandered to the rolling mountains on the horizon. She’d never spent so much as a night out camping before. The wildest animal she’d ever seen was a squirrel.

*And there are **bears** out there.*

That scared her more than the prospect of being arrested, or even the fear of what might happen to her nearer to the fighting. Dying in a drone strike or from a sniper's bullet would be quick and expected, given where she was going. She'd spent a lot of time thinking about dying from sudden violence. It had acquired a patina of romance in her mind's eye. But dying on some mountain, to a slaving monster from another age?

Sasha shuddered, seized by a chill entirely at odds with the extreme heat of this August day. It was 109, at least. Sasha rooted through her bag and pulled out a small leather-bound bible she'd received as a Christmas gift from her dad two years ago. She opened it at random and found herself in the book of Jonah,

“In my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me. From deep in the realm of the dead I called for help, and you listened to my cry.”

She read on through the rest of Jonah's cries, to the whale vomiting him up onto the shores near Nineveh. The word of God calmed her. She grew so engrossed in her scripture that she was taken completely by surprise when the coyote found her on the park bench.

“Miss Marion?” A man's voice, weathered and gravelly, said from behind her. “You'd serve us both well by putting that book away. This is not a safe place.”

She looked up at the coyote. He was older than she'd expected, in his mid-forties at least. He had a mop of greasy blond hair, a round face, kind blue eyes, and a slight paunch that spoke more to his age than inactivity. He had thick biceps and forearms that bulged with corded muscle. His thighs were large, too. He had the look of a man who spent a lot of time on his feet.

“Mister...?” she asked.

“Jonah,” he said. “You can call me Jonah.”

And again, the knots in her stomach melted away. She rejoiced inside. Over and over her faith had flagged, and over and over the Lord had sent her signs of his love and approval. *That's what trusting in reason gets you, she admonished herself, fear and pain. God is watching out for me.* Her childish fear of bears faded away. Suddenly the world, and her future, felt bright and exciting again. After years of delay she was finally on the doorstep of Zion.

“Jonah, I'm ready to go. You lead the way and I will follow.”

....

It took about an hour for Sasha to decide that she liked camping, and then two more hours to decide that she never wanted to camp ever again. By the time they stopped for the night she'd gouged herself open on half a dozen different tree branches, smashed her left toe into a rock and somehow managed to draw every allergen on the east coast into her nose. The headaches from her improvised surgery and her throbbing sinuses warred for dominance. She couldn't sleep, food had no taste, and her hands were too grubby and, generally, snotty, to allow her to read her Bible.

Jonah was not as talkative as Brother Andrew. He'd given her a brief run-down of things to avoid out in the Blue Ridge Mountains. He told her how to recognize Timber Rattlers, Diamondbacks and Copperheads, although for some reason she had much more trouble retaining that information than she'd had memorizing the Pythagorean Theorem, or the date and importance of the Battle of Hastings. She was supposed to watch for pointy heads, she knew that. But every time a snake slithered past her, it moved way way too fast for her to tell the shape of its head.

Other than that quick lecture and a few admonishments for her to "Step lightly", Jonah hadn't said much. He'd given her food, protein bars and nuts mostly. He'd been kind enough to let her snuggle with the heated blanket he'd brought along. She knew she'd gotten snot on it but he never complained.

When they settled into camp on the second night Sasha was surprised to see her coyote start to gather wood and build a fire. He laughed when he saw the dumbfounded look on Sasha's face. He pulled out a small yellow bottle of lighter fluid, squirted it onto the wood, and then lit the edge of it with his lighter. The fire leapt to life, burning away at the pine needles until they caught the smaller sticks and limbs stacked 'round in a small box. Next, he pulled two silver pouches out of his backpack and handed both to her. The labels informed her that one contained Chicken and Dumplings and the other Macaroni and Cheese. Her mouth was watering before the first 'and'.

"Tonight, Miss Marion, you get a fire and a hot meal. We're over the line."

And that was how Sasha learned she'd crossed the border into the United Christian States. She had successfully fled her country, and the secular rule of law entirely. The UCS wasn't a true Godly state, not by her standards. Its multid denominational acceptance was a denial of the harsh truth of God's love. Not everyone who called themselves a Christian truly lived in such a way as to earn God's gift of salvation. But just being in a country that acknowledged the primacy of God Almighty in their law and public policy was enough. For now.

There's no abortion here, she thought with awe. No atheists on television mocking the Lord. No callow acceptance of premarital sex. She felt a thrill at being in a place that was so much closer to her conception of "right". It didn't even matter that she was still stuck in the woods.

"Jonah?" she asked, "Do you live here?"

"Most of the time, yes." He had a quiet, soulful voice that made him seem even older than he looked.

"What made you decide to start smuggling people out of the AmFed?"

He stared into the treeline as his hands stuffed thin sticks into the base of the growing fire. Sasha watched his jaw clench and unclench, as if he was mentally rehearsing his response before he said it out loud.

"I was a United States Army Ranger once. I've been a Christian my whole life, though. Southern Baptist. I grew up in a country just as lost to sin and vice as yours is. And when the fighting started I saw an opportunity to bring my nation back to its Godly roots."

Hands emptied, Jonah rooted around in his bag and pulled out a kettle. He filled it up with water from a heavy fabric bag and placed it on a flat rock on the edge of the fire. Then he stood up, gestured for her to follow, and walked over to a nearby copse of trees.

"I joined a local militia in Marietta, near Atlanta," he said. "Most of us were vets, like me, and either Baptist or Pentecostal." He crouched down next to a tree that had been cracked in half by lightning. It was dead, and very dry. The ground around it was littered with tree limbs and thick slabs of bark. He started gathering up some of the larger pieces,

"C'mon, get down here and help. Some of these are a little damp, but we'll stick 'em around the edges to dry out. Most important thing right now is to get some middlin' sized logs in there, so we can build up a little bed of coals."

Sasha wiped a runnel of snot from her face and knelt down to help. Jonah continued his story while they filled their arms.

"Anyway, things heated up. The Army started calling in their deep reserves, guys like me who'd been out for daggum near a decade. This was after the feds nuked Dallas, so goin' active duty again didn't sound good to anyone."

He lifted away a fallen limb, and revealed a massive log, roughly the size of Sasha's torso. Jonah shifted everything he'd gathered over to his right arm and then hefted the log with one hand. He nodded at Sasha's much smaller pile. "We prolly got enough," he said.

They headed back to the campsite. She could see Jonah was doing that twitchy jaw thing again, thinking carefully about every word.

"I grew up real patriotic, y'understand? I loved my country, fought for it down south. But I also grew up with a Confederate flag on the back of my dad's truck. I wasn't on board with those Marxists who started the civil war. So when Governor Galen had his referendum on secession, well, that felt right. I was on board with the UCS back before it was even born."

They sat around the fire again. Jonah started to add in larger branches, He slowly built the fire in a u-shape around the flat stone.

"Now I was never a fanatic. Went to church most Sundays, but I had Jew neighbors. There were a couple Muslims in my unit, good guys. I wasn't real political, y'know? But Pastor Elgins gave a speech, the only time I saw him in person, he said diversity wasn't making us strong anymore, 'A melting pot's all well and good, but the quality of the soup depends on the recipe.' That made sense to me."

He sat back, popped the kettle onto the rock, looked over to Sasha.

“The idea was, a Christian ‘recipe’ would make for a stronger nation. But the UCS wound up being a daggum prosperity gospel pile’a’nonsense. Better than the AmFed, sure. Maybe we got less queer politicians, less rich jews running things, but it’s still corrupt here.”

Sasha really wasn’t sure how to handle this...disclosure. She’d run into similar attitudes among believers online; uncomfortable references to Jewish, gay, or gay Jewish conspiracies. That sort of nonsense had always gotten on her nerves, but she’d written its purveyors off as edgelords and trolls. Part of her thought they might be CIA plants, hell bent on making the Kingdom look bad. But she knew they didn’t speak for the actual heart of the movement.

Sasha wanted to speak up, but she held her tongue. The fact that Jonah had been nothing but kind and respectful to her didn’t change the fact that he was twice her size. Who knew what he might do if he got agitated? Sasha fought for calm and recalled a specific passage from *Revelator*, in one of their guides for young women emigrating to the Kingdom.

“Know, daughters, that our Lord made your brothers and husbands both strong of body and quick to anger. It is your job to soothe, not incite. And if his wrath falls upon you in a sudden burst, remember the forgiveness and patience of our Lord. Let His example guide your reactions.”

So she smiled at Jonah and said, “Tonight, I’m happy enough to be in a Godly land.”

He smiled back. Sasha hoped God was proud of her for being meek as Mary. When she thought about it that way, the rest of the night was surprisingly tolerable. The food wasn’t “good” by her normal standards, but it was hot and savory and after days of protein bars it was exactly what her suffering stomach needed.

Sasha wasn’t aware of when she drifted off to sleep.

Jonah woke her up the next morning, not long after the crack of dawn. He handed her a box of wet napkins and walked off into the woods for a few minutes while she cleaned herself off as much as possible. When she was done, he lead her down the mountain and into a small town on the border. It was Sasha’s first real look at life in the UCS, and it did not disappoint.

In the twenty minutes or so they were outside she saw nine churches. There were crosses on every house, in a dizzying variety. She saw Bible quotes printed on windows of shops and cafes, and the strangers who passed them in the street all flashed warm smiles. A few offered her blessings. Sasha had never seen such public display of religion. She floated through those first few minutes on a cloud of giddiness unlike anything she’d ever known. The architecture and the environment were similar to what she’d grown up with. But everying else seemed alien in the most exciting way possible. Sasha felt so light she could almost feel the Holy Spirit lift her up. Her gleeful reverie only ended when Jonah lead her up to the door of an unassuming brown stone house.

They were taken in by another man, whom Jonah introduced as Saul. Saul looked a little younger and a lot less weathered than Jonah. He had the thin arms and stooped posture of a

lifelong scholar, and his conservative button-up white shirt made him look more like a youth pastor than a people smuggler.

“Welcome, sister.” He smiled, but his voice sounded more haggard than warm. “You’ll want to get inside, please. There’s no sense tempting the law.”

Saul’s house was packed to the rafters with toilet paper, jugs of water, bins of freeze-dried food and bags upon bags of clothing. The house had almost no furniture, and no decorations aside from a large wooden cross above the hearth. There were a couple of stools arranged around a crate on the ground, which seemed to serve as an improvised coffee table. Saul sat them down, left for a moment, and came back with a hot french press filled with coffee.

“I’d suggest drinking your fill. It’s hard to come by in the Kingdom right now. Most things are, I’m afraid.”

“I’m not scared of hardship!” she said, a little too loud. *You sounded like a little kid. Keep your stupid mouth shut or they’ll think you can’t handle it.* Saul was conspicuously silent, but Jonah spoke up,

“She handled herself well out in the woods,” he said. “Not bad, for a city girl. Didn’t have a lot of woodcraft but did have an open heart. Y’took to it well, ma’am.”

Saul chuckled as he began to pour and hand out cups of coffee. First to her, and then to Jonah. Sasha wasn’t entirely sure why, but she waited until both men had taken their first sips to take hers. She didn’t know much about coffee, but she was pretty sure this wasn’t the beverage at its best.

“Would you like to pray with us, Ms. Marion?” Saul asked.

“Uh- of course.”

He extended his hands out on either side. So did Jonah. Sasha took Saul’s left and Jonah’s right.

“Heavenly father,” Saul began, “bless this young woman who comes to you with a full heart from a land of sin and shirk. She’s given up all pretense of control and yielded herself fully to your grace, Lord. Please guide her in this next journey. We pray that she makes it safely to your Kingdom and into the arms of her husband-to-be,” Sasha almost peed. *Where the did he hear that?*

She and Alexander hadn’t even met yet. There’d been no proposal. Was he just speaking in the general hope that she’d get married, or had Alexander told him something?

“-May she obey him as she does you, Heavenly Father, and may you quicken her womb like Rachel, so that she delivers a new Joseph to our cause.”

That didn’t sit well, either. Sasha wanted children very badly. She knew they were in her future. But not now. Certainly not soon enough that’d she’d be praying for them already. She

was grateful that they had their heads bowed in prayer; if any of this had come up in conversation first she was sure she'd have reacted in obvious shock. But Sasha calmed herself, thought of her duty to God, and centered her mind just as the prayer ended.

"And may I say, m'lady, it's a brave thing you're doing," Saul said as he reached for his cup and took another sip. "Even here, in 'God's country', not many are willing to answer the call. Oh, sure, they'll all tell you it's the drone strikes that scare them- 'I can do more good by working my job and sending money!' as if the Lord asked Abraham to sacrifice a bag of gold in His name."

Saul kept talking, but Sasha's attention drifted. The spot on her head where the deck had been itched, all of a sudden. She scratched it, and for the second time she found herself truly missing the gadget. If she had her deck she could call Alexander and find out what was going on. But instead she just squirmed a little in her chair and hoped the men didn't notice how uncomfortable she'd become.

"Miss Marion, you alright?" Jonah had noticed. Of course he had. Sasha cursed herself and then cursed herself again for cursing.

"Yes, sorry. I'm kind of tired, even with the coffee. And I'm, um, worried about my friend in the Kingdom," She definitely stressed the word "friend" too much, "-do you think I'll be able to find a deck once I'm there? I've heard a lot of different th-"

"Ma'am," that was Saul, and his voice had no more feigned mirth, "You're about to be smuggled illegally across a heavily fortified border. There are all sorts of worldly goods in the Heavenly Kingdom. We're not paupers or savages. But as to whether you'll get a deck, well that rather depends on what our Lord wants for you."

Sasha lowered her head a little in submission. This wasn't the time to press further. Maybe that time would never come. *You knew there'd be sacrifices*, she reminded herself.

"How are you going to smuggle me across the border?" She asked.

Saul finished his coffee and set his mug down on the makeshift table. "I'll show you," he said.

He led her past the living room and into a spacious and very chilly garage. There a trio of workers with facemasks were busy sealing up large crates of unfinished wood. She couldn't quite make out the words stamped on the sides, but the blocky font looked military.

"There was a time when it was easy enough to sneak the faithful across on foot," Saul explained. "But international concerns have forced the government to take a rather hard line. I'm afraid this is the best way to get anyone across the border."

"Wait," Sasha's gut went sour. She felt the acid in her stomach churn in a greasy boil, "are you trying to tell me I'm going to be nailed inside a crate?"

Saul's face turned. There was no pretense anymore; he was disgusted with her. Sasha didn't really know why. All she'd done was ask questions. But then Jonah was there, with a hand on Saul's shoulder and a calm voice in her ear,

"Think of this as a blessing," said Jonah, "Most people never test the 'blind' part of blind faith."

He was right, darn it. And there was something freeing in the idea of just giving herself up to Providence. She'd done everything God had asked of her. Now he would either deliver her to Zion, or the arms of the law. Either way, she'd done everything she could to obey the call of her faith. All the little sins of her life, the cursing and the anger and those dark, gnawing desires she still struggled to tamp down, those would all be forgiven. She was truly giving herself to Christ now, so nothing else mattered.

"You're right," she said, "I'm sorry I questioned it. I'll do whatever it takes to reach the Heavenly Kingdom."

She took another hard look at the cramped wooden box and the piles of aid supplies surrounding it. How was she going to fit in there?

"Whatever it takes."