

Chapter 21



Sasha.

Alexander hadn't seen it coming. He hadn't expected her at all. The sound of his furious scream was the most beautiful thing Sasha had ever heard. She hit him again and again and he fell back, and then down to the ground. Blood streamed from his nose and a gash above his brow. His eyes looked unfocused. His lip was split. He tried to scream, or cry out, or beg her but she didn't give him the time to say one damn word.

Instead she hit him again. And again. And again. She didn't make the conscious choice to dive down on top of him and, in fact, Sasha was rather surprised to find herself straddling the prone, broken boy soldier. But once she was there she kept hitting him until she felt his skull give away and the helmet hit something soft, squishy and hot that lay beyond.

She sat back and, for what seemed like a year, just stared at the helmet embedded in Alexander's ruined face. Blood pulsed out from around the edges where it met the skin. The way the blood bubbled up looked just a bit like the water at one of the fountains outside the hospital her mother ran. For some reason that similarity did more to raise her hackles than the act of killing.

Her ears still rang, and so it was easy to lose herself in contemplation of Alexander's body. Her mind turned to the book of John, and the words of her Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ:

“Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother's were righteous.”

Had Alexander's actions truly been righteous? Sasha knew, if she searched the Bible, she could find scriptural justifications for everything Alexander had done. That's why she'd come out here in the first place, wasn't it? The Heavenly Kingdom was finally going back to the letter of the Bible, the word of God. Only now that she'd seen what that looked like Sasha had found she could not abide it.

Am I still a Christian? She couldn't say. Her faith had been such a part of her identity. It had been everything. And now it felt like a lie. *What am I if not a righteous servant of the Lord? Where do I go from here?*

“Hey, Sash'? Little problem here.”

Roland's voice jerked her out of her contemplation. She looked back at the man and her mind recoiled in horror. His skin had been shredded by gunfire; it hung in pale tatters down his face and arms. His clothing had been largely shot away, and the rags that remained were so drenched in blood that they clung to him. He looked almost as if he was clad in a single giant

scab. One of his eyes was unfocused, dislocated, and something had happened to his left arm. It looked as if an enormous straight razor had burst out of the forearm.

“Where did you get that?” She asked. Sasha was surprised, and a bit disturbed, by her curiosity. Roland seemed surprised too.

“This?” He looked at the blade. “I really don’t know. I’d sort of forgotten it was in there.” He lifted his arm, and its blood-soaked blade, up, and looked at it like a small child opening a prized gift on Christmas morning. Then he flicked his arm down, towards the ground, and the blade slid back into the meat of his forearm with a wet thwack.

“Look,” he said, “we’ve got more pressing shit to deal with right now. You hear all those sirens?”

She actually couldn’t. Her hearing had begun to recover from the gunfight, but Roland was just barely audible. A loud tinnitus hum still rang through her ears. Sasha was pretty sure she’d suffered permanent damage.

“I can’t hear much right now,” she said, “the gunfire, you know.”

“Oh,” He frowned. “I forgot that can happen to you folks. Well, ah, there’s a shitload of cops or martyrs or militia, whatever, a bunch of them are coming. Probably two or three hundred. They got tanks and drones and shit.”

“God almighty...” Sasha felt fear rise up in her heart again.

“Yeah, listen, God’s not really the dude to worry about right now. Manny’s all fucked up. I stopped his bleeding, but you’re going to need to get him out of here.”

Manny! She’d forgotten all about him. Sasha realized with a start that she’d blotted the rest of the room from her mind. She looked around and took it all in. Manny was still lying where she’d left him, nursing a gunshot wound to the belly. He was pale, sweaty and he looked to be in terrible pain. But he was conscious and alive. That was more than she could say for Marigold. The poor woman had been shredded by shotgun fire. Sasha couldn’t bring herself to look too closely at the shattered, steaming remains. But Marigold’s friends were alive.

The young man, Rick, was unconscious and drenched in blood. But most of that blood didn’t seem to be his own. His head was in Tule’s lap. She’d been wounded in the buttocks, and bled quite a lot, but the wound seemed to have clotted. There were tears, and a haunted, pained look in her eyes.

“Oh my God,” Sasha said once her mind started to process the visual stimuli, “Oh Lord in Heaven no, no, no...” That poor woman. That unborn child. *How could this happen? How could this BE?*

“SASHA!” Roland shouted, “This is a very bad time for you to have emotions. Try killing those for a little while.”

“How...”

“Just think about the fact that everyone but me will die if you don’t get your shit together. And then get your shit together.”

Her initial action was anger and frustration. *Is he that disconnected from humanity? Does he think people can just turn their empathy off?* But then she stopped herself, listened to him, and tried. She imagined herself putting on a heavy jacket, something that blocked out pain and horror rather than the cold. It worked.

“OK,” she said, “What do I need to do?”

“You need to take Manny. And, ah, whats-her-name. And whats-his-face.”

“Tule. And Rick.”

“Right, take the not-dead people, run down and out the back door and find me a car, then you need to-”

“A car?”

He stopped sifting through the dead men’s firearms to roll his eyes at her. “Yes, a car. I’m not going to carry all you lame-bloods out of here on my fucking shoulders. We’ll need a getaway vehicle.”

“I can’t drive,” she said, “all the cars in the AmFed are autonomous...”

He shrugged. “You’ll figure it out.”

Manny moaned just then, almost as if it was in response to Roland’s suggestion. Sasha knew it was more likely she’d just been too focused on the big post-human to notice Manny’s pained moans the whole time.

“Can he drive?” Sasha asked.

“Sure!” Roland said with sudden cheer. “He’s only lost, what, two quarts of blood? I gave him a little of mine. I’m sure he’ll be right as rain soon.”

Manny moaned again, hand at his blood-soaked belly. He didn’t appear to be bleeding still, but he was pale and his face showed agony too obvious to ignore. Sasha doubted he’d be capable of driving a car in the immediate future.

“I can drive,” Tule said in a cracked, broken-sounding voice.

“Right!” Roland said, “Well that’s lovely. Get your asses up and get moving. You’ve got about two minutes before shit and fan start their lovely dance.”

The post-human’s good humor was incongruous in this blood-soaked room, addressed to two people who’d lost a friend today. He grabbed one of the guard’s pistols, which he’d shoved in his waistband, and handed it to Sasha.

“Safety’s off,” he said cheerily, “so once you pull the trigger, stuff’ll happen.”

Sasha took the gun, then went over to help Manny up. Tule did the same thing with her wounded friend. Neither Manny or Rick were in great shape. But Manny, at least, seemed capable of standing under his own power. Once Sasha got him to his feet he stayed there. She looked him in the eye and, while he seemed sort of dazed and glassy, his pupils fixed on hers and he nodded.

"We have to go," she said.

"Se trata de tiempo de mierda," he muttered.

"What?" Sasha asked.

"I said it's about fucking time.

"Just follow me," she said with more confidence than she felt, "I'll take care of everything."

"Oh fuck that," Manny said. He put a hand on her shoulder and moved as if to push in front of her and shield her with his body. Then he grabbed his side, groaned, and staggered back.

"...alright, yeah. You lead the way."

Men.

Tule was up now. She had an arm around her friend and, together, they moved almost as fast as a single elderly person with bad hips. Manny was not much more mobile. Sasha looked back at Roland.

"Where should we meet you?"

"The next street behind this building is called Alma. Take it and go left until you hit a road named Cross Bend. I should be there by the time you arrive."

"What if we can't find a-

He cut her off: "Not finding a car is not an option. Talking more is not an option. I have to go kill people; you find something with wheels and get Tule in the driver's seat."

Sasha started to say something, but the sirens had drawn very close indeed. She heard several shouts from outside the front of the building. Roland cursed. He'd already gathered up two of the rifles and slung them across his back. He had a large pistol in his left hand. At the sound of the shouting he brought his right hand up to his belly and dug it deep inside his skin. Sasha watched in horror as he tore a heavy, blood-caked weapon out of his gut.

Roland walked up to the front window of the room and fired the weapon once, twice, three times. Its report was deep and bass-y, like the sound of a heavy drum being struck. There was a brief island of quiet, followed by a trio of explosions that rattled the walls of the jail.

“Look,” Roland said as he glanced back to her, “I’ve got to go be a distraction. Find the car. Get to Cross Bend and Alma. I’ll be there innn...” He glanced out the window again and shrugged, “...ten, maybe eleven minutes.”

“Ok, should-”, Sasha started to ask.

“Talking time is done,” Tule’s flat voice interrupted, “He moves. We move. Now.”

She pulled her friend towards the door. There would have been something almost comical about the agonizing slowness with which they actually moved. But the gesture had its intended effect. Sasha took Manny by the hand. She let Tule lead the way to the door, but once they were in the hallway the young woman had no idea where to go. Sasha took the lead then and guided her new comrades towards a flashing red Exit sign she knew led to a rear stairwell.

For a brief, passing second she’d been worried that they might encounter other guards or jailers during their flight. That concern proved groundless. Gunfire had torn through the walls of the examination room and ripped apart the interior of the jail. She saw a few gouts of blood by the walls, and one sinister looking pool of it underneath a desk. It all drove an important lesson home for Sasha: bullets don’t stop when they miss.

The stairwell was as deserted as the rest of the jail. They hobbled down it as quickly as three wounded people could manage. Sasha stayed in the back, under the instinctive assumption that it’d be best for morale if she didn’t rush ahead. Their progress down the stairs was painfully slow, almost every step punctuated by the sound of gunfire out on the street below.

It sounded like a full-scale war had broken out there. There was a lot of screaming. Sasha tried not to think too much about which of the nice young Martyrs she’d met in the square were now dying by Roland’s hand. *What about Anne? What about Susannah? You’re abandoning them.* Sasha shook the thoughts clear from her head. There’d be time for self-loathing later.

Tule and Rick reached the bottom floor first. They leaned back against the wall together and caught their breath. Rick was as white as a sheet and looked like he could still barely stand.

Tule was doing better but not by a wide margin. When she and Manny hit the bottom floor he went straight for the exit door. He clearly intended to be the first out, in case anyone had a weapon trained on the door.

Sasha stopped him. That wasn’t hard because he was only a little more stable than Tule. She pushed him back, put a hand on the door and then drew the pistol Roland had given her. She fixed Manny with what she hoped was a firm, fearless look.

“You’re in no state to be heroic.”

He looked as if he wanted to fight her. But then he looked down to the shaking hand he had pressed onto the sopping wound in his side.

“Yeah, alright. You’re down to do the hero stuff, then?”

She nodded.

“Well then, be my guest.”

Sasha didn't know how to use a gun. The AmFed banned almost all private firearm ownership. Her grandfather had owned a couple of bolt-action hunting rifles and he'd let Sasha hold them a few times. That was as close as she'd gotten to firearms training. She'd never actually shot the darn things; once he'd died her father had sold the guns rather than deal with the hassle (and expense) of a license.

So she burst out onto the street with the pistol held out high in front of her, like she'd seen in movies. It took her a few seconds to realize, sheepishly, that this behavior was more likely to get her gunned down than aid in her defense. Thankfully there'd been no Martyrs watching the rear exit. Sasha waved for the others to follow her out and stashed the pistol under her shirt.

For a few minutes they'd ran or, rather, hobbled in what seemed like the right direction. The city still rang with the sound of sirens, gunfire and the occasional concussive blast, but it seemed to be moving away from them. Plano wasn't exactly crowded but there were enough people out on the street to notice the fresh wounds on Tule, Rick and Manny. No one approached them though. Sasha wasn't sure if they passed unnoticed, but they were able to pass through the city without incident.

Fear and the flight reflex were enough to carry them a few blocks in relative haste. Once they were out of sight of the jail Rick put up a hand as he slumped back against the wall. Tule continued to hold him up. She was pale, sweaty and pained-looking. Ryan shook and shuddered. His eyes were unfocused and he was clearly in shock.

“He needs to rest,” Tule said.

Manny stopped next to them and leaned against the wall as well. He nodded at Tule and then looked back to Sasha.

“Yeah, ditto. I might prefer to lay down and die at this point.”

“We need to find a car anyway,” Tule said as she helped lower Rick down to sit against the wall, “If I carry him for much longer I'm going to drop.”

Sasha realized everyone was looking at her.

“Is that...my job?”

Manny looked mortified. Tule looked angry. Rick, bless him, was too deep in shock to react.

“Yes,” Tule said in a toneless voice that somehow still implied deep disappointment.

“OK then,” Sasha said. “When I find the car, I assume you'll know how to hotwire it?”

Tule laughed. It wasn't a nice laugh.

"If you're hiding a real nice deck somewhere in that silly head of yours, or you find a car that's older than my dad, maybe. Otherwise we're going to need something with keys in it."

"What- so I'm supposed to just carjack someone?"

Tule stared dead-eyed at her. Manny gave a pained, helpful smile.

"I mean, you've got a gun..." he said.

Sasha felt the heat rise in her again. *Why not? I've given up every other principle I have today. I might as well commit armed robbery.* The guilt stung her guts, but not as badly as it should have. Perhaps she was still numb from watching Dr. Brandt and Marigold die. *Or maybe it's because I killed Alexander. Maybe I'm evil now, and this is what that feels like.*

There was no time to mull the possibilities. Sasha left Manny and the others to catch their breath and darted down an alley, towards a larger street that sounded like it might have traffic. She passed two parked cars and looked inside with the vain hope that, just maybe, someone might have left their keys behind.

It was to no avail. Sasha soon found herself on the cracked and shell-pocked asphalt of Alma Road. The buildings on either side of this stretch of street had taken significant damage during the Heavenly Kingdom's birth pains. There were no people out on the sidewalks, or visible in the windows. Anyone alive had probably hunkered down to avoid the shooting. There was still traffic on the road though. Three trucks and a dented, fume-spewing white Sedan shot by her at the speed of wartime traffic.

Sasha drew her gun, looked at it, and then hurriedly stashed it inside her blouse again when she realized how dumb that had been. *Godly women do not carry guns.* A series of four loud booms sounded in the distance. Sasha didn't know enough about weaponry to guess what those had been, but she knew they had something to do with Roland. *People are dying so I can find us a car and get everyone to safety.*

She started walking down the street, face pointed towards oncoming traffic, hands waving above her head in the international gesture for 'Oh God, please help me!' Two more cars zoomed past without even slowing to check on her. It was odd how that shocked her after everything else she'd seen in the Heavenly Kingdom. 'The faithful protect and support each other', Pastor Mike had claimed. But not, it seemed, when a half-human monster was on a rampage through their city.

That helped to abate her guilt at least. Or it did right up until the moment a familiar janky brown truck rumbled to a stop next to her.

"S'cuse me, ma'am, do you need..." She turned around and the man's face lit up in surprise, "Miss Sasha?"

It was Darryl, the kindly old foreman who'd driven her to the House of Miriam on her first day in the Kingdom. Was that really only days ago? It seemed like years. Sasha felt like an old woman, even though she was just on the edge of 18.

“Are you hurt?” He slammed the car into park and opened his door, “One sec’, I got a first aid kit in the back. Where’d you get hit?”

Sasha looked down at her chest and realized she looked like she’d been badly injured. The blood wasn’t hers, of course, but Darryl couldn’t have known that. He thought she was hurt, and he was trying to help. *Am I really going to rob a Good Samaritan?*

She was. Sasha waited until Darryl had closed the door, grabbed his medical kit and turned towards her. Then she drew her pistol and leveled it at his weathered, grease-stained and now thoroughly surprised face.

“Wha-”

“I need your truck,” she said.

Darryl dropped the medical kit and put both his palms out.

“Whoa now girl, alright. Why don’t you just put that gun down? Darryl ain’t gonna hurt you. I’ll take you anywhere you need to go. Let’s just be real calm, real slow about all this. Did somebody hurt y-”

“I need your truck.”

It was so hard to keep her voice even. So hard to do this cruel thing to a man who’d only been kind to her. Sasha could feel white hot tears stream down her face. I must look like a crazy person, she thought. Maybe that will help.

“Now Miss Sasha,” Darryl said. “I’m a guess you don’t know how to drive a truck. Mine ain’t autonomous. It’s old, stick shift. Please, why don’t you let me take you where you need to go...”

Sasha’s mind raced. It was the same species of nervousness that had always gripped her during major exams and college admissions essays. She ran through and discarded a dozen different courses of action in her head. *What if he won’t give me the keys? What if he takes another step forward? What if-*

He moved. It started with a single glance. Darryl’s eyes darted toward’s the driver’s-side door of his truck. She almost didn’t catch it. But for some reason, the gesture rose goose pimples on the back of her neck and forearms.

“I need your truck.”

Her voice was cold, strong, firm. Darryl nodded at her. His body posture stayed the same. But his eyes changed. There was something hard and haunted in them now.

“Alright Miss Sasha, I’m just gonna reach in here for my keys...”

He took a step back and moved towards the door. The bottom fell out of Sasha's gut, and she screamed at him to stop.

"DON'T MAKE ANOTHER MOVE!"

He dove for the door, pulled it open and reached a hand down beside the driver's seat. Sasha saw a flash of metal in his hand and she opened fire. She wasn't sure how many times she pulled the trigger but soon the gun was empty. Sasha watched as Darryl stumbled back into the truck and then slid to the ground. Most of her shots had gone wide, very wide. She'd shattered two of the truck's windows and put four or five rounds into the vehicle's body. But at least one had hit Darryl right in his throat. A kill shot.

He slumped to the ground, gagged on blood and jerked like an electrified marionette. Part of her wanted to run to him, to hold him while he died and say she was sorry. Then she saw the gun at his feet. It didn't dissipate her guilt, after all she'd drawn on him first, but at least at least she hadn't shot and killed an unarmed man. She'd killed an armed man.

An armed man who only ever helped me.

Sasha slumped against the hood of the truck and lost herself in a storm of sobs. She didn't realize she'd dropped her gun until it hit the asphalt with a dull clank. She couldn't control her hands or her breathing. Her frantic sobbing had robbed all the air from her lungs. Her legs weakened and she started to stumble to the ground when a pair of warm, semi-strong arms caught her from behind.

"Hey, hey. It's alright. It's alright.

Manny.

"It's OK. You're going to be OK."

Her world went black for a little while. Sasha felt Manny lift her up, heard the sound of the truck's engine rumble back to life. But she couldn't see, and she couldn't move, and she couldn't stop crying. Time lost any sort of meaning. When she came back to herself they were in motion. Manny sat next to her, and Rick next to him. Tule drove. Sasha's eyes were drawn to Manny. He held Darryl's pistol in his left hand. She couldn't help but stare at the four spots of dried blood on the silver slide.

"Are you alright, Sasha?" Manny asked. His question passed through her ears without hitting her mind.

Sasha couldn't stop staring at Darryl's blood. I did that. I ended him. She'd ended two men today. She felt no guilt about Alexander, but that was almost more disturbing. It seemed impossible that she'd been a pampered suburban girl less than a month ago. Now she was a murderer. *Whoever sheds human blood, by humans shall their blood be shed.* Sasha felt as if a thick cloud of doom had fallen on her shoulders.

The truck veered off to the right and slammed to a sudden stop. Sasha was flung forward onto the back of Tule's seat. A trio of vehicles zoomed past them, speeding in the

opposite direction like several bats fleeing the same hell. Sasha realized, with a moment's focus, that there was an awful lot of traffic heading away from them as fast as possible.

"Cunt!" Tule cursed and fought with the stick shift. The truck lurched forward again and made it back onto the road for a few seconds. Then another speeding car roared into the oncoming lane and she was forced to veer off to the shoulder again.

The sounds of gunfire grew louder. Sasha heard the thrum of helicopter blades too, a second before one buzzed right over their heads. It looked like a military vehicle, painted matte black and laden with weapons. Sasha watched as it zoomed ahead and rose up over a pair of high-rise apartment buildings near the horizon line. There was a loud 'krump' sound and black smoke billowed from the side of the craft. It spun around drunkenly in the air for one very long second before slamming into the roof of one of the high-rises.

The resultant blast rocked the truck. Tule veered left and right around a pothole and another speeding truck, respectively. Her knuckles were white; her jaw was clenched. Sasha could see Tule's eyes in the rearview mirror. She looked terrified and angry at the same time. Rick moaned in pain with every shake and jostle. Manny closed his eyes, shook his head and muttered something low under his breath.

"Are we close?" Sasha asked Manny. He squinted and looked out at the road for a second.

"I mean," he shrugged, "-yeah? Probably? I'm going to guess Roland's close to the explosions. And also causing them."

Smoke now dominated the horizon, which grew less horizon-y and more imminent with each passing second. In spite of all that Sasha's eyes kept being drawn back to the gun in Manny's hand and the dry red-brown stains on the slide. That was a good man's blood, she thought. How did it come to this?

"Hey. Jesus girl."

It was Tule. Sasha looked up to the rearview mirror and locked eyes with the other woman.

"Buck the fuck up, chica," Tule said. For the first time, Sasha heard real anger and not just cold indifference in her voice. The other woman continued.

"My best friend was just shot to pieces. My lover is bleeding out. And you're all fucked up because you gunned down some Christofascist shitfuck. Suck your heart into your guts. I don't know where you came from, girl, but you're in a hard-ass part of the world now. It's time to fortify."

Fortify.

Sasha held onto that word like a life preserver. Fortify. Survive. Then you can lose your head in tears and shame.

“OK,” she nodded. She started to apologize but was interrupted when the truck screeched to another sudden halt and threw everyone forward. Sasha’s head hit the front seat again and her world dissolved into stars.

“SHIT!” Tule cried. Something rammed the rear of the truck. Sasha lost all orientation to reality. When her head and eyes cleared, the first thing she saw was Tule, nursing a broken nose. Blood poured down the other woman’s face. Manny seemed intact. Sasha looked behind them and saw a small sedan had dashed itself against the bed of their truck. It must have been following right behind when Tule hit the brakes. Sasha swung her eyes front to see why they’d stopped.

She saw Roland.

He stood maybe ten feet in front of the truck’s hood. That arm-razor of his was extended again, but the blade was cracked and half shattered. His other hand held some sort of large black assault rifle he hadn’t been carrying in the jail. The pistol-grip grenade launcher he’d been carrying was still with him, but he’d holstered it in an open hole in his belly.

The left side of his cheek had been ripped away. Most of his hair was burnt off and Sasha made out at least one clear bullet hole in his forehead. There might have been more: all the caked-on blood and gore made it hard to discern. His clothing had mostly been shot, burned or torn away. The dominant colors on his body were red and black, with a few horrible spots of white where bone shone through in the open air.

The city behind him was all smoke and fire. Emergency lights from several vehicles blinked madly in the miasma, but there were no Martyrs or emergency workers visible. At least, none that were standing. Sasha saw several terribly still bodies lying among the piles of rubble. Roland staggered towards the truck and flung the passenger’s side door open. He slumped into the seat, bringing with him an overpowering stink of blood and fire. He leaned back in his seat and took three long breaths. And then he spoke.

“The way ahead’s pretty clear,” he said. “But you might want to hang a right and then take a left. Avoid the traffic.”

Tule nodded, and the truck jerked forward again.

The drive out was so easy it scared Sasha. In fact, it seemed to scare everyone but Roland. Manny’s knuckles grew whiter and whiter as they navigated their way out of the old Metroplex. Tule’s expression didn’t change, but her body shook with nervous energy and her jaw was set so tight that the veins on her neck bulged from the strain. It was a mercy that Rick was unconscious by that point.

Convoys of military vehicles rolled past them, sometimes escorting ambulances and other emergency vehicles, sometimes bringing more soldiers to the chunk of the city Roland had devastated. Sasha’s heart leapt up into her throat every single time but, somehow, no one stopped their truck.

Roland assured them all that it would be fine (“I kicked their asses so hard it’ll take ‘em an hour to find their cheeks.”) His only discomfort came once they left the zone of active danger. He seemed to deflate then.

After a half hour on the road his wounds had mostly healed. The new skin that grew back underneath seemed weirdly dark, compared to the skin above it. Roland scratched at it in irritation and then, as casually as if he’d been tossing an apple core, he ripped off his face in one smooth motion and tossed the bloody skin out the window.

“Jesus dude,” Manny said, disgusted, “could you have waited until we weren’t all in the car?”

Sasha stared in shock. Her hands started to tremble and she felt the urge to vomit. But she fought it down, and forced her stomach to an uneasy calm. You’ve seen worse than this now, and that was true. She looked back at Roland and forced herself to take in his new face, which she guessed was really his old face. Neither iteration of him had been exactly handsome.

She watched, in queasy fascination, as he picked the rest of the white skin from his hands and tossed it out the window. When he’d finished he glanced up at Sasha.

“What?” He asked. “Please tell me you’re not racist. This’d be a very bad time for you to be racist.”

“She’s not racist dude,” Manny said. “You just ripped your skin off. That freaks people out.”

“Oh,” said Roland, “right. Sorry.”

“It’s OK,” she said, “this is just my first time seeing someone rip off their own skin.”

“First,” Roland grunted, “but probably not last.”

Sasha didn’t have the guts to question him. So she kept quiet for the rest of the ride. So did most of the other passengers. For a long time the only sounds inside the truck were Rick’s unconscious moans and Roland’s occasional directions to Tule. He lead them through underpopulated neighborhoods and around checkpoints, past blackened buildings and wrecks of military vehicles destroyed during the Heavenly Kingdom’s first great advance. Sasha was surprised at the emptiness of most of the city. She began to understand why Manny called this place ciudad de muerta.

It took them two hours to escape the city sprawl and finally make their way out onto open plains. They avoided the main highway that linked Dallas to Waco, and instead spider-webbed their way across a series of farm roads. Every few minutes they’d roll past the bones of a rural town. Every town out here seemed abandoned, as dead and dry as the acres of yellow grass that swallowed them up.

A little before dark they rolled over a decrepit bridge across a dry river bed. A bullet-riddled sign identified this area as ‘Basque County’. Roland put a hand on Manny’s shoulder and pointed towards a big metal barn on the horizon.

“Take us up there. We should probably stop for the night.”

“What?” Tule spoke up. “Why? We could be at Rolling Fuck in an hour.”

Roland shook his head. “We got two routes back to the city. Either we find the main highway and deal with Kingdom patrols or we keep riding these country roads. That’ll take at least another two or three hours, and a lot of time off-road. In the dark. There’s no better recipe for cracking an axle or blowing a tire.”

Tule fumed. But she rolled the truck up and through a gap in what had once been the fence line of a farm. There were a lot of farm houses around them, stretched out across acres and acres of fields and pecan orchards. They all looked abandoned; devoid of light, half-reclaimed by vegetation. The barn Roland led them to was just as empty. There were large holes in the sheet metal roof and chunks of the metal walls had been peeled away for scrap metal. The underlying structure had been built from metal girders though. It seemed solid.

They got out of the truck. Roland helped Tule carry her lover across the last few yards of field and into the old barn. The innards of the building were dusty. Rusted tools hung from the wall and boxes of assorted goods littered the floor. Some of them had been ripped open by scavengers but most looked like they’d sat unmolested since the property had been abandoned. Manny found an old couch inside. Roland and Tule helped Rick onto it. Then Roland walked off into the middle of the barn and started to root around in boxes. He came back a minute later with a load of canned goods in one arm and a handle of brown liquor in the other. He set the whole lot down on the ground next to the couch, held up a can labeled ‘WATER’ in big red letters and then punched his finger through the top of the can. He handed it to Tule and she helped Rick drink. He was semi-conscious now. Sasha thought there might be a bit more color in his cheeks.

Roland opened three more cans, one of water and two filled with some sort of gloopy beef stew. He ripped the aluminum tops open with his bare fingers and then passed them around. Sasha was still too deep in the throes of depression and adrenaline dumpage to have any kind of appetite. The brown-grey color of the stew didn’t help with that. But Manny insisted she take a gulp and, as soon as the food hit her tongue, Sasha realized she was starving. She took two more deep gulps of the salty, mushy mass before passing it along to Tule.

The crew ate and rehydrated without conversation, although not in silence. The sounds of gulping and lip-smacking filled the barn for a few minutes. Roland didn’t join in the eating. Instead, he popped open the liquor bottle and drained it dry over the course of about ninety seconds. The big man closed his eyes, a smile crept up onto his features, and he gave a deep contented sigh. When the food was almost gone he stood up and staggered back into the piles of gear to grab two more bottles. These ones were filled with an off-yellow liquid. He sat one down in between Manny and Sasha and immediately began to guzzle the second.

Manny glanced at Sasha, then at Tule, then down at the bottle. He popped the top and took a belt. Then he offered it to Sasha. If there ever was a time to dive into drinking, it’s the day I killed two people. Sasha took the bottle and stared at it for a second. The label said ‘Talisker’, and identified it as a product of Scotland. The bottle itself was covered in dust.

“Hey Roland,” she asked, suddenly curious. “Did you know this place would have food and water? And alcohol?”

Roland paused draining his second bottle and fixed Sasha with his strange blue eyes. He looked tired for the first time since she'd met him. Sasha wasn't sure if that was due to the rampage he'd just carried out or her question.

"I've been here before," he half-mumbled. "Years ago. Back before this whole chunk of dirt was as much of a shithole as it is now."

"Wait, did you used to live here?" Manny asked.

"I don't know," Roland shrugged.

"What do you mean you don't know?" Sasha asked. "You clearly know this farm."

He shrugged and gave a vague wave with his free hand.

"I have memories of this place. Bright lights at night, people dancing, drugs and wine and people and songs. I have memories of packing supplies into boxes. Burying ammunition." He nodded towards the still-locked front door of the barn, "I remember locking that thing up. But I don't remember why, exactly. I might have lived here. It might have belonged to a friend. Either way, I feel like the last time I was here was back before the Revolution."

"His mind is fulla holes," Manny explained. "Something happened to him a few years back. He remembers pieces of who he is, what he's done. But not everything."

Tule kicked Sasha gently in the hip. She gestured to the bottle of whiskey.

"If you're not drinking pass the bottle. Some of us have grieving to do."

On impulse, Sasha took a pull from the bottle. She started to hand it over to Tule, but then the taste hit her and she gagged. It was like someone had lit a fire in her throat, one that tasted of burning peat. She coughed and hacked for several seconds while Tule and Roland laughed. Once she'd regained her breath, Sasha finally handed off the bottle.

"You'll get better at it," the woman said. Her lips twisted up into what might have been a real smile. "Whiskey's an acquired taste, like cigars. And anarchy."

Tule took a very deep pull and sighed in satisfaction. She handed the bottle off to Manny, and started gently petting Rick's face. The wounded man was asleep, but he seemed much healthier than he had been a half hour earlier.

"How are you doing, Sasha?" Manny asked. His eyes met hers, and Sasha saw deep concern in his gaze.

"I'm...fine," she said, not really meaning it.

"She's all fucked up over the guy she killed for the truck." Tule grunted. "You shouldn't be. Fucker picked the wrong side."

“So did I,” Sasha tried to keep the anger out of her voice. “At first. Darryl was a good man. He didn’t deserve to die.”

“Neither did Marigold,” said Tule.

“Neither did Major Peron,” Manny added in a quiet voice, “They hung him on the day you and I met.”

“The whole world’s full of good, dead people,” said Tule. “My advice? Don’t cry over someone you shot in self-defense. That’s a karmic freebie.”

“The guy had a gun,” Manny added, “it seems like you just did what you had to do.”

Roland was quiet through all this. He kept drinking, but his pace had slowed. His face took on a dark cast and he slumped down into his chair. He seemed to collapse in on himself a little.

“Look, chica,” Tule said. There was a slight drunken slur to her words now. “I know I gave you a hard time, and it was dumb-as-fuck a’you to move to this ‘Kingdom’. But I give you credit for breaking free, and for helping us escape. You might be a little dumb. But you aren’t bad people in my book. Don’t beat yourself up over doing what you had to do.”

There was quiet for a little while. Manny passed the bottle to Sasha. She took another gulp and managed to hold it down this time. Tule nodded in approval when Sasha passed the whiskey on. Sasha found her eyes drawn, once more, to Darryl’s gun. It was tucked into Tule’s waistband.

Roland cleared his throat and gave a loud, phlegmy cough. Sasha looked back at him.

“You didn’t ask me for an opinion,” he said, “but since everyone else is weighin’ in I might as well: There ain’t nothing wrong with feeling bad about murder. Even justified murder. But personally, I don’t think that’s what’s fucking you up.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

He drained the last of the whiskey bottle and tossed it off into the darkness. It landed with a clank.

“I got real good senses, y’know. I can’t turn ‘em off. So I heard your heart rate. I smelled the neurotransmitters running through your synapses. I can taste the guilt wafting off you. But that’s not the only thing I taste.”

He locked his unsteady eyes on hers. Sasha stared into the cold blue of his pupils. A chill ran down her spine. Sweat beaded on the back of her neck. When he spoke next, his voice was barely above a whisper.

“Back at the jail, when you crushed that guy’s skull with a helmet. You enjoyed yourself. You liked it.”

Sasha broke his gaze. She stared down at her lap and struggled to find a reply. But there was nothing else for her to say. Roland was right.