

IRON KILLS THE STARS: THE COMMUNE OF ETERNAL LIGHT

By

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Abstract

This project is the opening chapters of a novel in which two brothers, Txanton and Riddley, are split from each other in post-apocalyptic Kansas. The Commune of Eternal Light has been their family's peaceful home for more than a hundred years but is crushed by a fascist army that considers killing the only way to survive in civilization's aftermath. In this destruction, Txanton sees his father's murder, while Riddley watches his mother's death. After the separation, Txanton, along with several other boys from the Commune, becomes part of the very army that destroyed his family, and he is visited by the ghost of his great-great grandfather who begins telling his personal story along with the tale of the downfall of the world. Riddley, meanwhile, wanders a picaresque path in which he sees cannibals, zombies, witches, a cowboy, and other ghosts. Both boys struggle with the brutality of the wasteland they are thrust into and try to cope with the memories of their peaceful home and the deaths of their family and friends. Told in chapters that jump back-and-forth between the two brothers, the novel parallels their challenges in a close third-person narrative.

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Dedication

Dedicated to my father, Michael E. Powell

“History is what hurts...”

–Fredric Jameson

Chapter 1

Guns. They had guns.

A soldier lifted his handgun. It rose and cocked and fired. The eruption blew away their father’s head: bone and brain cascaded off. Another soldier was pulling on Txanton, who was holding on to Riddley, his younger brother. Txanton held tight as he watched his father fall back in a burst of liquid sunfire. Then he saw the skull etched in the brittle wood above the shack’s door, etched by his brother some time before all of this. Foresight. Like their great-great grandfather.

The sun spilled the day’s last beams between the dark crags of the mountain wall as more shots rang out. Loud pops careened around the canyon. The gunpowder burnt his nose. Screams came from somewhere, everywhere. Txanton pushed his brother into their family’s shack. Riddley’s eyes were closed. Riddley did not see their father die. Txanton watched Riddley fall back and saw his face disappear into the darkness of the door.

"Fuckers!" Txanton started to shout, but the soldier pulling Txanton cracked his head with a short club. A muffled dazzle spiked his senses. The meridian of light, the separation of the dark rocks and orange light of dusk, flipped upside down. From the ground, he watched the swaddled face of the soldier with the gun. The sun’s light reflected in the man’s uni-goggle and bounced into Txanton’s watery eyes. In that moment, all was light.

From the dirt, he heard the soldier's boots. "He's good. Take'em," the man said, and his great goggled eye moved into the shack. Txanton's vision jolted, his world shook itself raw, and he was dragged over the dusty street of his once protected commune.

It all happened as his great -great grandfather's ghost told him it would three days before. The ghost had told him how he had seen similar things in past lives: sacked towns, corpses in the air hung and mutilated. In the distance, he heard a soldier shout, "Stop! Stop!" Txanton's family were the guardians of the Commune. They had failed in some way. He had failed. This was his fault. His own fault, and here he was.

A young girl ran by shrieking as an arrow followed. It cut the target down to an inanimate crumple of disjointed limbs—pale arms and legs askew in the sickening ball of her dress. "Got her!" shouted a soldier. It was Suzla, a close friend of his brother's. Now she lay dead before him. Incomprehensible. They were taking Txanton somewhere. Where? Other families were dying around him. Why hadn't he killed that scout when he could have? This was his fault. Now, he lay spared, no arrow in him, no bullet. They would enslave him. He'd heard of such things before—but Riddley, he had a chance if he hid...but their mother. What would become of her? The same as his father? Worse? His head kept its painful pulse.

The Minister of Education at The Commune of Eternal Light slid into Txanton's view. He yelled, "No" over and over again. His anguish showed—something new to Txanton, such a face of pain. Txanton's head still whirled from his blow. This was all his fault. Now, he would be spared, but the minister would not. The minister's screams and cries fixated him, but the face was wrong, twirling up into the sky somehow—it was an inky imprint, a blurry vision that swirled off somewhere else. Txanton's head hurt so much. He had to stop this. He mumbled in an attempt to say something, but it was useless. The face swayed in front of him with its tears and

rage and pain. Txanton felt this too, felt it on the inside. Everything they protected against and worked for, the minister seemed to be saying. Was he saying it? The last of the Communes had slid from the heights into the mire, the end of humanity. Txanton threw up, heaving.

"Shut the fuck up!" the soldier dragging him barked.

The minister, a man who preached working and sharing, bellowed his anguish. On his knees, he screeched and rejected all he saw, while a fat soldier held aloft a bent blade in the cooling sky and waited. The fat soldier with his dirty bald head and cracked sunglasses nodded patiently for the minister to acknowledge and bless this finality. The scene dragged away as the blade fell. The minister's eyes connected with Txanton's at the last second and bulged to communicate the darkness that fell with the sun. Goodbye, Txanton thought.

The Shared House stood disheveled as it came into view. Its boards were stained with blood, the shutters torn down. Soldiers carried the dead of the Commune through the broken doorway. They left again that way with nothing to weigh them down. The Shared House, a place inhabited by the comrades for so long. Now, it was their tomb. It had all truly fallen. Txanton thought of the map stored away in the house's attic, the map that showed the other Communes that emerged from a different world long ago. All now doomed to the past. The Commune had been protected for so long within this geographic fortress of rock ledges and jagged mountainous terrain, a flat valley with the Shared House in the middle—a house from before the fall. All now doomed.

He had been dragged next to a line of boys. Ten or more tied together, huddled on the ground. He recognized one of them as Jorna. The skinny soldier stopped pulling Txanton and dropped his ankle. The soldier was not much older than Txanton. The boy soldier barked, "Get up." Txanton did and thought that this was what would become of himself. This soldier. His *own*

foresight knew that. He was clubbed back down behind the trail of boys. Pain overwhelmed him. He held his head and thought he was bleeding to death, but he felt no blood. He was tied by the neck and looked up to see that all the captives he was attached to were boys and young men like him. The club sparked him again into a huddle of limbs. Pain and dizziness throbbed in him. He felt out of time and out of body for a moment.

The last moments were here. He knew they would take him away. Hadn't he heard such stories whispered jokingly, fearfully, many times before? The rope was tight around his neck, and he felt like he was choking. He could taste the vomit still in his mouth.

A wretched wailing pierced the commotion. His commotion. The commotion of his mind. This dream of commotion. Yes, it was just that, a dream of ending. No, it was real. Old Maddy. He heard her. The oldest woman in town. She told stories about the world as it was. *What was, what was!* That proud song now chimed in his brain. The rope seemed to make his head fill with blood, or maybe the absence of it. His father's head exploded over and over in his mind. The world of the past, Old Maddy's world, seemed farther away than any horizon. The pain pulsed, and he felt sick and confused, his stomach turning. He fought to keep from throwing up again. This wasn't right. Wasn't right. What a world she told of, Old Maddy, a world with towers and flight. *The Commune of Eternal Light are we, are we!* A shot was fired and her cries stopped. Heavy laughter started somewhere.

And the laughter dissolved into the crackles of fire. Voices rose. Soldiers yelled from all around the Commune. The smoke, heavy in the air, filled Txanton's nostrils like mud. He had to tilt forward because of the neck-rope, and from here he could see from the side of his eyes that the Shared House was on fire. The tree, he thought. It was the Commune's only vegetation—*his* only vegetation. He shook. Maybe they did not know about it. Maybe they wouldn't find it in its

recess in the rock wall behind the shacks, rocks that allowed the Communers to repulse wanderers and warriors and wastes for so long, allowed them to hide when large troop movements were spotted from its walls. The rocks protected the tree. But these men had guns.

The valley was dark, with only the sky palely lit above them. A soldier appeared, silhouetted in front of the blaze of the Shared House, holding aloft the tree, the Cotoneaster, atop his head. The soldier shouted in triumph, while its thin branches shot out above him as if he wore a strange hat for this bizarre ritual. The branches sagged with their poisonous red berries. The soldier with the gun walked up, hands tugging at his pants, situating his belt, and the fire bounced from his goggled eye as he studied the tree. Then, he pointed at the blaze and turned. The tree flew up, spiraling in the air, to be scorched into tendrils of flame.

Txanton screamed, struggling to stand, wanting to fight, to kill and die, and then to his knees, and then nothing.

Chapter 2

In the shack, Riddley fell backwards into his mother's arms. She shoved him behind the partition of rusty, corrugated iron that separated the room in two. He saw her face, worried and lined, as she put her finger over her mouth and said, "Sh."

Riddley bumped his leg into his parents' mattress of woven black vines, while he moved to look through a hole in the partition. His mother turned and faced a figure in the doorway. It was a man. His head was shrouded with goggles silver and dark, and he stood there blocking the light from outside. Then, it happened. Riddley seemed to leave, to go up into the ceiling to watch it all from elsewhere. From this place, Riddley saw where she looked into the soldier's un-goggled eye and spasmed, where she was caught by the figure, where she was knocked with a clack to the floor, where the man descended and smothered her in the swaddles of his pants as a silver star glinted in his great goggled eye along with the movement of his chest, where his bare white skin showed from the top of his legs, where their bodies jolted on the floor of Riddley's home, where his mother's mouth was muffled, where she gasped aloud, where her chest stopped—extinguished, where the figure rose over her broken body to gaze down at her, where the darkness of her shadow reflected in the man's goggled eye as he began situating his pants and turned and left the shack's air heavy and cataclysmic behind him.

Then, Riddley came back. Lost in such things, he touched his body—arm and stomach. The room eddied around him and grew large and then shrank small like some great monstrous diaphragm that breathed into another world. Where did he go? Did he go somewhere? The sunlight vanished. In the darkness, he crawled out beside his mother's face. It was cold and solid. The eyes flickered with a faraway light, and he saw in them something beyond, moving quickly into evaporation. She was gone. An odd silence took to his insides.

From outside, Old Maddy screamed, and Riddley got to his feet. He tried to ignore the shapes of horrible things he began to see in the darkness. They were shadows from the other side—visions. He went to the door. The Shared House was on fire. Suzla's body lay with an arrow flagged out of its back before the blaze. She had been so good...so composed. His jaw clenched, and his head trembled. No, too much was happening. The beloved were dead, and he alive. The silence within him stirred and began to break. Here he was, here he looked at the face of Death. The dead were here. His father's body lay before him, the head incomplete. Where was the rest of it? Where were the missing pieces? Then, he saw them. His eyes reeled and frayed the edges of his sight.

The shapes of such things had lain in his mind in the moments before sleep—runes and ancient iconography that hinted that he would be here at this moment to watch the fall of his home, the last of the Communes that anyone knew of, and he somehow had known he would watch those around him join the dead. Wasn't it the minister who had told him, with his grim reprimanding face, that after the world changed, those left were split between the Fascists and the Communers? The breaking inside him continued with its splinters, the shards that stuck in his chest and guts. Since then, the minister had explained, slapping Riddley's hand at wrong answers during their lessons, that the Communes had died out, and the Fascists had sprung up powerful from the aftermath. Why think this at the here-and-now's end? He looked to the skull that he'd carved with a knife some time ago in the doorframe. Damn the minister.

He had to leave, as his dad had told him to do if this ever happened, to follow the plan of escape, to go up into the hills, the ridge that walled the commune.

Someone was coming, and they shouted in triumph. Riddley bolted around the shack in the opposite direction. His mom, Suzla, his dad, everyone was dead. When the screamer was

gone, he ran to the hidden trail, a rocky thing that snaked its way up the slope of the mountainous wall formation, through the bones of old and out of the smoke-filled valley. Hopefully, no one had found it, no one was there in wait, to cut him down in the violence of twilight. But it was clear. He crouched at the top and looked down over the Commune—the Shared House burning. He thought of a book they had there, *The Cosmos*, a book about space and the stars. This is how stars die, arrows and iron swords—guns. Tears brimmed in his eyes, and he turned away to look at his future. To the east, as in answer to his thoughts, the intensely bright star that had appeared a week ago hung above him. In the plains below, all lay dead. Sharp broken boulders and prickly hills rolled on before the dimming sky, and on the horizon, a black river trailed away. He descended the synthetic rope and lowered himself into the wasteland.

Chapter 3

Txanton and the other boys marched barefoot and naked, trailing blood on the chapped ground. The fat soldier's whip brought all but one to the compound. Lyzor, the minister's son, now lay dead in the middle of the trail. He had always been weakly. His body lay mutilated under the hot sun for whatever strange beasts that scrounged about the crevices of that land. Txanton remembered his pale face at the upstairs window of the Shared House as the boys tried to coax him out to play games.

A conversation took place between the fat guard and another over whether his body should be brought to camp and eaten, but because Lyzor was so small and scrawny, this was voted down. Not worth the effort, they decided. Txanton, worn and haggard, listened as if this were all normal. His feet burned in pain. They had all been stripped of clothes and shoes, and the sun blistered all parts of Txanton's naked body, a body so heavy. He had to keep walking, and he thought this over and over again till all thinking jumbled about meaninglessly. The pain of the physical and the mental became all he knew. Then, he descended a slope towards a group of buildings—a compound.

It stood surrounded by a dilapidated and rusty linked fence that had been patched with scraps and boulders. Sharp objects jutted out at the top of the fence. As Txanton marched in with the others, the watchmen peered at them with surly looks. Inside stood a large building surrounded by various other small structures. They marched past the shabby rectangular main building of crumbled concrete. Exposed rebar stuck from it like bones and streaked the place with crimson rust. Around the back, they came to a metal shack.

Txanton and the eight other Commune boys waited as the thin corroded doors were opened, and a rotten smell familiar to the wasteland peaked in their nostrils. The fat soldier

intensified his whipping and struck Txanton with sharp tentacles of pain that drove him in with the others onto the stacked purple bloated bodies. Wastes. They had been gutted, their dark entrails swollen and reeking. Blackish bile covered their bruised translucent-white skin and whatever rags still lay about their misshapen frames.

The doors shut. He could not stand, nor could anyone, and his limbs became entwined in the bodies. He seemed to sink as if in mire, crushed between the walls, the wastes, and others. It was hard to see at first, but then his eyes adjusted to the pinholes of sun that came through. He could see the burst sockets of the dead skulls peering at him from between the limbs and folds of skin. The other boys' fright-filled looks also glared back at him. Azel and Piertre held each other and shook. They were crushed between the wastes, crushed between things claimed by a sickness that had been released long ago, that had been in this land as long as anyone in the Commune seemed to know, a sickness that bloated people and left them fevered, stupid. Things that meandered through the wasteland and vomited until they slowed more and more and ultimately shut down altogether, the gut so inflated it popped, and their moans became a horrifying clatter. Two boys began to whimper. Someone else cried loudly.

Txanton remained quiet and tried not to think of the sticky and crusty fluids and flesh that he was buried in, tried not to think of a fate of bloating into oblivion. Impossible. Was this his fate? Horrid sickness? Not death, fist to fist? Or death on the battlefield? Like the stories he had read in *The Zone of Sudden Death*. Those tales of commandos that had inspired him, a life of soldiering in another time. Metal and destruction. Proud men clashing. He read them nightly at the Commune. Read to Riddley who never seemed to grasp any meaning beyond the soldiers' deaths in the tales, always full of questions, questions about the nature of war, about the uniforms of the men.

But the Commune *had* ended—and Txanton was still alive. He thought back to the scraggly tree that had for so long represented The Commune of Eternal Light. Of the celebration, when its white flowers bloomed to signal the start of the rainy season. Of the Shared House. The minister in front of the group in his hooded robe, smiling, talking about a time when the world was green and vibrant. And Txanton foolishly believed it could be again. Of watching the wastes from the mountain wall. Of watching for raiders. Of watching for wild beasts and strange dogs. Of killing people when necessary. He loved the order of these things. His father taught him the ways of the guard and passed down the family tradition. His father strong, high on the wall, looking out into the night. The tree in its recess. Of dreaming of trees everywhere. The small branches with tough green leaves and red poisonous berries. The water from the old pump made the Commune a paradise when compared to the towns in the wasteland he had heard about from the scavenger teams. Water he could have whenever he wanted it. This water, he wanted now.

The combination of hunger, thirst, and repulsion became the worst. He had to say something to break it. Alaztis and Zillan, brothers—twins, began paranoid rants: how they could feel the fever; how they felt their intestines bulging.

Txanton tried to chime in, to calm them down with a soothing voice, “No, it’s fine. Stop. It’s fine. Just think of elsewhere. Of elsewhere.” But his voice was lost in the fear of the others.

Except Jorna had heard him. “No, Txanton. No. No. You’re wrong, Txanton. Wrong. Not fine. This is not fine. This is not fine.”

Azel screamed repeatedly, and Piertre kept up his sobs. Txanton looked from boy to boy in their miseries. Each twisted amongst the sticky bodies as if they tried not to drown in this river of death.

“Shut the fuck up! Shut the fuck up!” Alaztis yelled over and over again, and he threw about an arm to try and strike his brother.

“It’s in me. I feel it squirming. I’m sick. It’s in me,” Zillan kept up.

“It’s fine. It’s fine,” Txanton realized he had been saying this the whole time and stopped.

Then, two of the boys—Vixer and Tibbon—began puking purplish bile. Everyone’s complaints stopped. The two moaned and moaned, babbling strange words and phrases for a few hours. Then, they were silent, except for the occasional splash and animal noise of retching.

The door opened, and Txanton was dragged out by the skinny younger soldier. "Congratulations!" the fat soldier said. "You're immune." Txanton took one last look at Vixer and Tibbon, old friends and neighbors, as the doors shut on them, to entomb them in the foul mess of exploded corpses.

The survivors follow their captors, Txanton thought as he was led to a row of cages made of scrap metal and bristly steel cable. The cages hung from steel posts. With a crack on the head, a boy was felled. "In ya go!" the fat soldier bawled, as the skinny soldier stuffed the boy into the cage. The process was repeated. Txanton held his hands to his head. But they cracked his knee. The pain brought him down with a shout, and Txanton found himself in a tight uncomfortable box. The cages were lifted into the air, hung from the steel posts to swing slightly in the wind. The mesh gate allowed Txanton a look at the dusk, a clear sky purpling to orange that silhouetted the raggedy fence. His knee swelled stiffly. The temperature began to drop, and it became colder than it was with the wastes in the shed.

Chapter 4

Riddley shivered between two boulders as the stars broke out of the blue-black sky like demons peering down through the vastness. He closed his eyes, and in his skull flashes of the things he had seen for many moon cycles materialized. Strange visions peppered the inside of his mind, visions which may exist in the real world—but he couldn't tell. Did they? In those last days, shadows had drifted about The Commune of Eternal Light. Specters of the past that lilted by and crowded in the corners of his family's shack. They hid in the blue flames of the Shared House's hearth. Not visions but reality, Riddley thought, the reality of the other world. A ghost world. Could he really see into that world? Could he? Calling out to him, they urged—the ghosts. They tried to make contact by communicating their pitiful tales of what had come before. The dead liked to talk about the dead.

He woke extremely thirsty. He had walked a great distance, up a long slope and into an area where petrified ashy tree stumps spoke much of the land's agony. They stood as coarse and gritty knives stabbed about the Earth, amongst the brown rocks. As he walked, the stumps began to get smaller. Occasionally, he made great pains to avoid a waste that stumbled by with its suffering. The sickness, that was the last thing he needed. To cross over to the other side, by bumbling and bloating over this landscape, no thanks. This last waste he had seen through the landscape's haze. That wretch had been, luckily, far away. The next one might be his pillow. Wake up with one on top of him. He felt sick at such a thought.

New fears: earlier he had heard a dog barking in the distance. There was no answer, gratefully. Vicious things, dogs. So he had always heard, from the stories of the scavengers. The Outer family led by Maltis. Dead now, that family. Riddley felt sure of their deaths. He knew

them as dead now. They had always talked of the strange creatures of the wasteland, but dogs, they feared them the most.

Sleep finally came with fragments of things, lives before, images of great machines lumbering with fire for hands and blood for spit that twirled and smoked and defied the people to drink deep. Faces rushed by like the backbone of the night in a dream of vapors.

He awoke, face stinging. His eyes burned and watered. He shut them tight, as the deafening howl of wind screamed around him, twisting him in a lost tongue. It was a sandstorm. He turned away and made himself small with his back to the rock. He pulled up his Commune hood and covered his face. A rumble, like thunder, shook the ground, and he imagined lightning cleaving the sky above his old home. He remembered his dad talked of the electricity of the sky in the safety of the Commune during the rainy season. The mountain walls kept the sandstorms out in the dry season and allowed them to collect water into the well when it ended. Dust storms would roll in, only to make music amongst the stones and clinking on the metal shanties. The clouds raged above like a roof that rolled and reeled. All this provided a glimpse, to Riddley, of the hatred that this world stored. Here he was, fifteen years in this land and on his own.

His hands hurt, so he tried to hide them in his sleeves without letting go of the hood that protected his face. He had no eye protection. He must find something that would work. Too bright during the daytime. He could go blind like his dad had warned him of, warned him that if he ever found himself in the wasteland to protect his eyes. He could die soon. Without water, how long did he have? Five? Three days? Without water, he would die. He had heard stories from the older men—his dad had talked about such things, but he never listened well enough. Always absorbed in his own thoughts. He only tuned in when death was mentioned. Why? Who

knew? Not like Txanton, who listened to the babble of the elders. Riddley liked to talk with the girls more. Suzla especially, because of her calm presence. Her face of patient waiting. Her slow deliberateness in everything she did. *Everything* she did. She calculated...the world. Not like Txanton, who always thought of advantage, of propriety. No, something else. Something else...dead now within him. His body sighed and quivered. His mother broken. His father burst. No, must not think like this. His parents' spirits spiraled out before him, then zipped away. He dazed in a trance, some kind of sleep.

As he came to, the sandstorm still slapped about him, and the first thing he thought about was how he used to etch symbols to pass the time, doodled visions from his head about the surfaces of the Commune. Odd, Txanton would say, challenging Riddley to say something in defense. Always challenging: to a rock climb, to a throwing game, and always winning. Three years his elder, of course Txanton won. Always reading from his book of combat stories. Riddley, by his side, thumbing through the book of stars, *The Cosmos* book he had smuggled from the Shared House and would return before anyone noticed it missing. Sometimes, Riddley would ask Txanton to read one of his war stories aloud, and he listened as his brother described a fantastic world of warfare where waves of men in different colored shirts clashed in machines with explosions—Txanton's voice would become more and more excited as he read, but the story became replaced in Riddley's eyes by rows and rows of white crosses that followed the armies wherever they went. White crosses that followed them and surpassed them in number, crosses to be laid about the land in the armies' wake.

Above Txanton's bed, Riddley etched a cross and chalked it in white. Txanton seemed pissed at first, not talking to Riddley, but soon enough all was forgiven. People never stayed mad

too long in the Commune. Always satisfied with the edible lichen, mushrooms, lumpy potatoes, strange and flavorful roots, and other oddities that the scavenging crew would find. In a community of around fifty, they did well, stayed healthy. Riddley felt his belly grumble at the thought of such pleasures.

The dust began to settle as the wind soothed its calling. He got up from the protective rocks with the morning, and everything seemed different, rearranged as if the stones had rolled in the wind to cut bizarre designs behind them. He reoriented himself and worked his way towards the black river he had seen from the Commune's mountain wall. The river must now sit beneath the rising sun that arched down on him. As he walked, he stopped to rest periodically throughout the day beneath large boulders, the breakup of the earth. On one stop, he slept awhile, letting the sun pass its zenith and lower. Must not burn up in this heat. Must travel more by night. Like a wraith among wraiths. Travel with the night things, become a night thing himself.

He began again to move. The sand crunched and rolled under his worn sandals. And it was late in the day when he saw someone else on the horizon. Someone became a few. Looking to his right, he found a cave-like crevice and burrowed himself in.

They came running in like meteors down the gravel wash. Closer, Riddley saw long dirty hair curled with grease. Tattered clothes lay open to display crude tattoos, black marks slashed like open wounds with no eye towards design. Strings of blackened ears were wrapped about their necks, and their eyes told much of the ill-cold land Riddley had entered. Entrails hung like rags from their shoulders, sticky and congealed. The horrid smell of decay wafted in the wind, a decay of body and mind. They stopped a ways from Riddley, building a small fire, raking the coals, and taking from a great canvas bag a small leg of a child. They roasted it, crackling over

the flames, then tore it and divided the strips amongst themselves. They grunted and pointed and gestured their anger at one another and the land as they ate. One word responses and monosyllables strung together in a crazed babble as they feasted with a growing inertia.

It was then that Riddley felt it so strongly: the images of the dead. They screamed amongst these figures. He saw them arise about their campfire. Shadows that moved before his eyes, and these shadows encroached upon the men gathered around the fire, larger and darker than the cannibals' own dark casts upon the ground. The misty shadows moved regardless of the slanting sun, and Riddley wondered at himself. Was this madness? Madness taking him— carrying him away with the setting sun, the coming night.

One of the men sniffed the air. Riddley prickled. He was downwind, and he should be fine, should be fine. The man took two bowlegged steps towards Riddley and looked about with a sick face of confusion, nostrils flaring wide. Riddley didn't know what to do. Where to go? The faces of the dead flashed beneath his eyes. Horrid faces of decayed flesh. Were they the dead in the cannibals' bellies? Were these victims? The dead that shadowed around them? The very same souls that had met their fate at these men's hands? The man took another step. Riddley tensed his muscles, ready to run. To run, where?

Then, the man sniffed again and burped. He turned and looked at another cannibal who held a great sack. From it, that man pulled equipment out and sorted through it, discarding items into a strange pyramid of junk: metal boxes and cylindrical things. Strange objects mixed with bones. At this pile, the shadows seemed to stir excitedly, gathering a green phosphorescence. That was new, this green color. Were they revealing themselves to Riddley? But the cannibals were on the move again, trotting off proud and satiated with their decaying flesh and horrid

trinkets slapping. Riddley watched the shadows, now turning to green phantoms, follow the cannibals, shadows full of anger and tormented glee.

They're getting stronger, he thought. These visions of the dead, swirling phantoms that visited his mind so often, so distinctly. Real spirits becoming tangible. Watching his mother die loosened this madness. He knew it did. But maybe it was not madness, just a form of seeing. What is madness but that? Like what his mother told him of their great-great grandfather Flyer. A man a little mad with his one eye. Seeing and saying odd things... No, now the steam of the great engine would grind him up. Maybe, he was sliding over into death, becoming one with this awful landscape. Maybe he had found a door, would slide through, and would never come back. Would that be bad? No, he couldn't think that way. The cannibals receded far into the distance where the sun's orb began to touch the ground, enlarging their figures in a grotesque display of heat and light. He'd stay there awhile, just to be safe.

He thought of his mother's body, ravished and broken in his family's shack. The piercing shot he heard as he saw his father's face, from behind closed eyes, burst forth from its earthly shell and became something else, some blue flame. His father's spirit? And Txanton had pushed him away to make him watch what would become of their mother. Always the hero.

He crawled out among the darkened stones as the sky flushed again with winking lights. He was glad that the rainy season was over and stood a long ways off. He made his way over to the pile of discarded machinery and equipment, and he gave a wide berth to the fire pit. Most of the objects seemed useless and obscure. Archaic things of another time. A box with keys and letters. When a key was struck, an arm raised and clacked on a black cylinder. Another object was like a looking glass with knobs and cranks and a large lens. It said "Nikon" in big letters and had various numbers. He tested the buttons with no results. Finally, he pulled up on a crank.

Pulled harder and the back opened up. Inside was a strand of dark brown material with pinholes on each side. It was a long strip that Riddley pulled from a yellow casing that said “Kodak 400.” He ripped the brown strip from the casing and wound it about his head over his eyes, but it was opaque. Damn. He looked through more of the objects. Then, he saw a canister. He opened it and found another strip, like the first. But this one had designs on it. When he wound it around his head, he could see through. Eye protection at last. Kodak goggles. Now, he needed to find water.

He began to move again. He left the discarded junk and bones behind. The Txanton inside him told him to keep going. Reminded him to speak properly. Told him that everything taught at the Shared House was taught for a reason. That the minister was a good man to be listened to, not fought with. Shit to those reasons. Txanton had left him. Riddley would find his own reasons.

Chapter 5

Txanton's cage swung gently day and night. During the day, the metal of the box cooked his skin. It froze at night, ripping flesh when he tried to move. Txanton and the other boys from the Commune faced the back of the compound, and all day he stared through his small viewing window at the waves of heat that danced far on the horizon. At night, a spectral neon dust sparkled above the far-off ground, radioactive leftovers that made the skyline brilliant. Occasionally, the fat soldier's face would appear in a flash. "Ah, my little pets." A grimace, dirty and fanged. "We will work you yet, won't we?"

One of the boys groaned more and more loudly throughout the day. Then, he stopped. Txanton thought it was Piertre. He didn't want to lose anyone else. Enough Communers had died. He called out to him, "Don't crack, Piertre. Don't crack up."

One of the other boys asked, "Are you sick, Piertre? Did the waste sickness get you? Are you sick?" It was Azel, Piertre's good friend. But there was no answer.

The fat soldier made his rounds, his face a mask of snarling waddled tissue. He ripped Piertre's body out of his cage and cracked his skull open with a stone, holding aloft the bloody rock like an offering to some demigod. Azel screamed and screamed. Lumps of matter bubbled from Piertre's head onto the ground as the day heated. The fat soldier receded, and the skinny dirty soldier later appeared and pulled Piertre's body out of sight. Azel's cries turned into sobs. Then, the night came on.

"Well, here ya are," said the ethereal head that had materialized on the other side of the wire mesh door. It was his great-great grandfather's ghost. A man he never knew in life. A man who had been a leader of the night guard as Txanton's grandfather and father were, as Txanton

would have been. Ah, these ghost visits. Visits Txanton never told anyone of. Visits he didn't quite want to believe in. But here the ghost was, wearing an eye patch. Its face wrinkled and scarred. A translucent blue-green with a jaunty smile, as it always appeared. "I told ya you'd be here."

"It's my fault," Txanton said. "I didn't kill the scout." He had not thought of it until now. But the knowledge came back and with it, the guilt—like a stone.

"What's that?" the ghost asked.

"That day. I had the crossbow at the entrance. And one of their scouts turned the corner in the rocks. I told 'em to 'Halt!' and aimed my bow at him. He just stood there, just looked at me. Then, he left, back around the corner to bring on the rest of 'em," Txanton said.

The ghost pondered this. Its face grew thoughtful. Then it shrugged. "Hm, well, scout don't matter. The reckoning just keeps on comin'. We found that ground and made that Commune, ya know? Long ago. Them intellectuals and us workers. Them dark days, indeed. Imagine that place sittin' there with uh undestroyed house, a well that worked, and—"

"And the tree," Txanton said. The ghost hunched and squinted its one good eye at him.

"Hush, boy. I told you before. That ain't no tree. It twas only a scraggly bush. "

A pause as the ghost stared at him as if he were some dead dog. Txanton wanted to crawl out the other end of the cage, crawl out and just run away into the dark. He listened for the other Communers. Azel no longer sobbed. He could hear nothing but a slight wind and the squeaks of the cords that held the cages. "Is Riddley okay?" Txanton asked.

"Yeah, yeah. He's fine. Are you gonna listen? Huh? Are you gonna listen to how this all came about?... Okay, then. Well, where to begin? Hm, well, I used to be a bike mechanic. I know that don't mean nothin' to ya, but I did. I was young—handsome and unscarred. Riding free on

those bikes—they had wheels, you see, and they went pretty damn fast. Called ‘em crotchrockets back then. Felt like I was flying. A matter of fact, hell, that’s how we got our last name. One of them clever chaps suggested creating new names in order to start over, when the Commune came about. That’s why you’re called Txanton Flyer. Silly I know, but you get it.

“Yes, rough times in the beginning. Oil and gas going up. People in cities pushing for more public transportation. Everyone preachin’ electric, electric motorbikes, and such. It never did get to be the same, racin’ like we used to. Ridin’ the streets at night. Neon lights in oil-slicked puddles. Ah, fuck it all. What a past it was.

“But that wasn’t the damned of it. I’m busting my hump, fixin’ wrecked bikes, soupin’ up bikes, racin’ bikes on the side, you name it, when the city proposes to start turning our waste back into drinkin’ water. Says they been doin’ it elsewhere for years. And, yeah, I had heard about it. The West Coast been doing it. Arizona. New Mexico. Ah, them rich boys loved it. Absolutely tickled. They had been grabbin’ up the last of the water for years. So, when the city big wigs proposed that idea, and started doing it, things got pretty strange. Water stations showed up everywhere. Ten dollars a gallon and risin’. Many of us were too poor to know the difference. I just toughened up and drank the shit-juice—that’s what we called it back then. My bros and I. Hard dudes they were. The juice was kinda chemically tastin’, but no bigs. Well, that’s when it began. Felt jittery all the time, probably all the caffeine they didn’t remove. I started, ‘round then, going to the meetings. Then, my neighbor went nuts with a hacksaw on his family. Two twin girls. Gruesome stuff. It happened other places throughout the city. All the online papers and blogs were blamin’ the water plants, sayin’ they weren’t treatin’ the chemicals everyone was pissin’ out from their pills. That’s when that Boone boy, son of a billionaire for sure, started

going from city to city and privatizin' the water and raising the rates. Apparently, he had been selling much of our water to China, in bottle form, for years. Or his daddy had, at least.

“Well, hell, we took to the streets because of that. Screamin' and hollerin'. Water Rights or Water Riots. And then come those corporate police tear-gasin' us and shootin' out eyes with rubber bullets. That's how I lost mine. Yup. It's amazing your grandma ever took to me. Not much choice, I guess, in the 'pocalypse.” The ghost laughed heartily, his face shaking like smoke. Yeah, you're in good spirits old man, Txanton thought, with your captive audience.

“Yup,” the ghost continued, “Couldn't ever ride the bikes the same again. Not that that much mattered in the way things played out. Yessir, they hit me with one of their pocket heat-rays that lit your skin on fire, but you're not really burning or hurt at all. It just felt like it. And I was on the ground, feelin' a whole body Indian-burn, and that po-po come up to me, but I sweep-kicked him to the ground, you see. I was pretty big and agile back then, went to the gym, did 'roids for a bit and was all in to that octagonal fightin', MMA we called it. Well, I dropped him and took his own nightstick to him, messed up his face a bit. We were all about stickin' it to the man back then. And that's when I went and took a rubber bullet to the eye. Luckily, one of them comrades, who was recording everything to put on the net, grabbed me and got me out of there.

“I was pretty damn thirsty when all said and done. It's a miracle we found that working and un-poisoned well, the one at the Commune of the Eternal Light. Good we found it when we did. Well, that's done. You stay on the lookout for good water, you hear, because the water you will be getting will be foul for a while.”

“I will, Grandpa. I will,” Txanton said.

His great-great grandfather's ghost vaporized, misted away to be replaced by the fat soldier. A blade was on his shoulder, and he took the time for one last grimace into Txanton's

cage before he swung it. Steel on steel sounded. Then, the rush of gravity brought Txanton to the fat soldier's boots with a crash of metal and the painful clatter of worn bones.

“You made it, ya fucks. Not so weak, are we? You wait ‘til your coronation,” he said.

The skinny soldier dragged Txanton out and positioned him to stand. His legs almost too weak. How long had it been? Evening again. The time had worn him considerably. He fell to his knees and looked at his fellow comrades, despicable stained creatures. Then, he was given a drink. With long gulps, choking on it in his eagerness, he drank all—oily, dirty, and refreshing.

Chapter 6

Riddley woke to a horrid retching sound and turned to see a naked bloated thing, all folds and lumpy growths. It vomited a heavy purple bile. A waste. It fell to one knee and groped blindly at the air, arms rigidly outstretched, while it moaned slightly. It got back to its feet and headed towards Riddley's resting spot. Riddley could outrun it easily. Gotta move somewhere, maybe climb? Get up above it and watch it go by.

Around some boulders, there came an old woman, ugly, with clouded eyes, wearing muddy frayed robes. Fearlessly, she walked up to the thing with an eerie look of concern. It bumbled forth, and she followed the waste with one hand outstretched, head to the sky. It vomited another chunky stream that seemed to cave in its swollen stomach and bring it back to its knees. A jagged utensil flashed and tore into the thing's gut. Riddley flinched at the woman's suddenness but did not look elsewhere. The waste let out a deflated moan and then stayed still. She kneeled down and continued to cut.

"What are you doin' that for?" Riddley asked, startling the old woman for a second.

"Hmph, got tah get the innards," she said and eyed him. She held up the thing's enlarged purplish intestines and coiled them into the bowl formed by the messy robes that draped between her legs.

"But what do ya want with 'em?" Riddley cocked his head sideways and watched a white curdle of foam emerge from the hole in the waste's abdomen.

"For seein', simple. Yous can tell the ways of thin's. When you op' 'em up and string 'em about, they tell yous thin's."

"What kind of things? Do they tell ya 'bout the future?"

"Simple. The futures, the pasts, the nows. They tell you about the recesses you don't understand, the recesses of yourself, of others. They twist a door all about this fabric of thin's and you weave in an' through."

"What do ya wanna do that for?"

"For seein', simple."

She took the gathering of entrails in her robes and wrapped the oozing guts in the folds of her garment and went back amongst the boulders. Riddley followed spellbound by the oddity of such a woman, her frayed gray hair, the wrinkles and crazy face. Yet, she seemed benign—and somehow knowing. What would anyone want with a waste's entrails? He followed through a maze of rocks and onto a barren plain scattered with jagged foundations of old homes, timber and iron stuck upwards in tents of debris. He watched her vein-streaked legs with interest. Much of them showed, almost all, because her robes were being used to carry the intestines. He felt his groin peak. Was he attracted because of how close she was to death? Morbid thoughts. Txanton would have scolded him at such a strange, perverse confession. He trailed her to another clump of rocks, and the old woman seemed perturbed by his presence. She repeatedly looked over her shoulder with a crazy glare and clouded eyes. But her face changed, and she fell back alongside and looked at him in a way that stopped his breath. It aroused him in an odd way. What was it? "There's much tah see in the futures," she said. "I foreseen the fall of the tower."

Riddley waited, with a shivering impatience, but she only stared and kept walking. And Riddley was lost in sudden memories: he saw his father standing on the mountain wall at dusk. His mother's face arose in the distance, working over the firelight, some chore of mending clothes, of grinding meal. Then, the hag replaced the image of his mother, grotesquely decorated in her slack coarse skin. His core lit up; his chest tightened. He was losing his mother's face.

“What tower fell?” he asked and jogged to catch up to her, his sandals slapping the dusty ground.

“The water tower of Rural Water District #3, simple. Them soldiers bruted it over. They sees the boy dancin’ inside the tower...Tuck, the boy Tuck. He’s hidin’ in the tower. Drunk mother. He’s hidin’ with that trav’ler and theys seekin’. The Legion. Theys seekin’. They came in their hats and cloaks. Knockin’ in Ank’s post—tradin’ post. Bruted over that there tower af they pult the boy down, floodt the shanties.”

“Is it far—this tower?”

“I seens it goin’s to happen. Foreshadders. From the entrails, simple,” she said as she pointed a knobby finger at the long snaky intestine swaddled in her robe.

“Is it far?”

“Not fars. But I’d stay away from that there hill now. That boy’s mem’ries be haunting the place.”

“Who?”

“Tuck, simple. Listen. He ain’t been the sames since the soldiers blastet that trav’ler in the noggin.”

“Who? What trav’ler? Why’d that happen?”

“The entrails, simple. That what happent.”

Riddley looked at the ground. The hag presented all kinds of complications, like Old Maddy in the Commune. Txanton always used to ask her for stories of the past. Riddley saw horrible things in those stories. Black pools of fire and skeletons that rubbed together in pits as the stars fell in concussions and shattered casings of flesh with the stone faces of screams. Txanton heard her talks differently, heard the great doings of man, of man collectivized. Riddley

tried to ask questions, questions about what happened to these men, about all the dead that gathered, and Old Maddy had smacked him smart. It stung his fingers, that hard switch whipping through the air and whacking his hands to tear up his eyes.

The hag had a camp set. A small lean-to sat near a pitiful stack of deadwood. A vortex of blue-green flame hummed and crackled in the fire pit. The rocks and ground were besplattered with her sacrifices, waste corpses, and Riddley yearned to understand the mystical operations at work. What rites did she perform here in this camp? Could they explain his visions? Explain the runes he felt compelled to replicate with a hand that seemed not his own? Could she explain the shadows of the dead—the army of malevolent souls that accompanied those cannibals with their green phosphorescence, that marched beside those beastly men as if they were possessing them and, at the same time, were themselves possessed by their doings. His thoughts lilted and floated in the sky with the acrid smoke of the fire. He felt unlike himself, as if someone else were himself. But that didn't make sense.

For the first time, Riddley needed to understand such things. The sensations tingled him electric with each thought, and they distracted him from the hag's ceremonies as she strung up the entrails of the waste on her rig of poles that sat above the flame. Riddley sat and struggled to regain focus—to re-envision the hag's words. To re-envision how her head shook with her fried hair as she talked of the tower. He thought of the seeing. What did she mean? The seeing throughout time? The seeing throughout space? Something else? The insides of the entrails began to bubble with a horrible plopping and a rank smell. It was uriney and foul. He gagged a bit and held his nose. Smoke and a curdled white froth escaped the fleshy encasement as the hag took a tin cup out of her stack of battered instruments piled by her lean-to. The boulders loomed high, lit by the flame as the sky began to darken. They loomed like the monsters Riddley used to

envision in his day-dreams as a child. A thin warble started. It bounced about the encampment—a shuddering that made Riddley cringe until he realized it came from the hag’s throat. And she stared at him as she warbled her noise. What had those eyes seen? He wondered...she had seen nothing of the peace of the Commune. Of the beauty of Suzla. The ridiculousness of the minister. Were her parents as regimented as his own in their day? Did they also look after her—teach her? Did her mother nurse her at her teat? A flash constricted his vision. It contorted and fringed his sight with red. The silver star of the goggled eye glinted in his mind, tearing his mother in two, as Riddley rocked back and forth and watched her dissolve. He gripped his fist and worked his jaw, and he was biting—biting into the earth. How could he? How could Txanton have left him? Why didn’t he stay? The death’s head above. The glinting eye below. Why didn’t Txanton go in that shack? A tomb—a tomb! Txanton caused this. No, no...it was the army raiders. They caused the end, not Txanton. Where was he now? Dead—no, Riddley knew that was not true. The warble intensified into a shivering howl that pitched forth into the gathering darkness, and the blackness of the night seemed to build a wall against the edges of the blue-green flame. The noise gathered about the rocks and expanded its pitch. It rose in a rhythmic pulse that cascaded with the hag’s erratic motions. She threw back her head and shifted foot-to-foot about the fire’s beating drum, and she screamed, and the intestines boiled, and his father was dead—his head splattered about his family’s threshold and his mother raped and soiled by an enemy, and here he lay coiled on the ground, halfway in this world—

“Drink,” called the hag, as she scooped up the runoff of the waste’s insides which appeared to be a blackish thick liquid.

“Is—is it safe?” Riddley asked.

“It is or it isn’t,” the hag said and thrust the cup at him. She stood over him as he lay on the ground.

“Will I get the sickness?”

“You will or you won’t, simple,” and she thrust it at him again, but he did not reach up for it, trembling in the dirt, afraid of the smell, angry at the stones that held him.

“Simple!” she accused him, and quickly she drank the froth from the top of the cup. She shuddered and eyed him some more with her arm extended. And he felt something again aroused inside him. And it seemed her irises spun like whirlpools in her eyes. Something would happen tonight. He knew.

So he drank.

The last spreading rays of purple wavered in the wispy sky, and the scarred and jagged rocks immense above him framed the hag’s smiling crone face. Riddley unwrapped the strip of translucent brown material from his eyes, the curled Kodak goggles. The world lit up with colors so very bold. Riddley felt unsure. What to feel? He seemed aware that this unsureness had tunneled in him for some time.

"All that has been, has been. All that will be, will be. The Commune of the Eternal Light, shall be, shall be," he sang aloud with a chuckle. Such a childish song of his youth. The minister teaching it to him, to them all. Such a lost paradise, his youth. Txanton’s paradise, perhaps, more than his own. He liked this. This felt right. Right now. This feeling. “What was, what was! What shall we be, we be? The Commune of Eternal Light are we, are we!” he sang.

The old hag looked at him with lecherous eyes. To his surprise, his genitals responded. Thoughts rushed: what was she seeing in him? What does she see in this world? A skinny dust-

covered boy. Could she see what he saw? Could she see the dead in their movements across the cobbled remains of these shadow-planes? Eloquent. Txanton would commend.

Words flowed through his mind and ribboned like the spools of his goggles, spools of his giggles. The runes of the past appeared to him. Their shapes spiraling out into the future, symbols that collided through the panes of time, one after another, they collided through frames which were moments, individual moments, societal moments, moments of good, of evil, of peace and war; the runes crashed through these frames which showed the world built and torn apart into a decayed mass—invisible, except to him. And they stood large above him now, written in the rocks, and they glared from the sky like neon flamethrowers entering his eyes, his mind, bright amongst the backbone of the night—flaming like those firestarters in Txanton’s book that set men ablaze, and Riddley himself felt lit. Erect.

The hag stood up and removed her dirty frayed garments. There came an old woman, ugly, with clouded eyes, wearing muddy frayed robes. That had happened earlier, yes. Riddley tried to look away, but her sunken frame stood bowlegged in the firelight, folds of garish flesh hung heavy as if on a rack with shriveled swinging breasts and curled white hair between her legs. Her jaw again began the warble. There came an old woman, ugly, with clouded eyes. Something did not feel right. There came an old woman. The brain reeling. Moments clouded and repeated.

Then, extreme consciousness of his vision: it felt like he was sucked back inside himself, and the window of his sight became smaller—beside this window there were other windows, side-by-side, up-and-down, and these windows spread out to infinity, and his, directly in front of him, was the only window in the here and now of it. In this frame, the hag's body began to wither and shake, as it convulsed in the blue-green light, and what he thought was simply a hideous

penumbra caused by the fire on her body became clear: they were inky blots written upon the text of her skin, and Riddley read on that gross surface hideous worms, inky worms of some familiar but vague origin that he could only feel, in the black hole of his body—knowledge of the horror they contained struck him in the glinting silver star that hung atop his mother.

He swirled upside down, inside a ball around and around a body that tumbled in one place in space. He became harder. Enlarged. Swollen. No. He tried to scream out, but his mouth could only fit into a frozen O. The hag's voice crescendoed into a howl that filled the wasteland of his mind as one rune appeared in the sky to dominate the others; it looked like an eye, large and big. Θ . It looked down upon him as he looked up at the sky—looked up at it. Looked through and through. The runes of the past, spiraling into the future.

Underneath this eye, the hag shifted sideways onto one foot and sideways to another, coming closer to him as the inky worms on her body began to move and crawl and slither over that page of wrinkles and moles. Screaming their own sound, they moved faster and faster as she approached. He again thought of Suzla and tried to channel his mind to her calmness. For she was always full of calm—her lovely melodic voice, each part of a word flowed into another on her tongue, and when she turned to him, long ago it seemed, and told him she welcomed death, welcomed death, she refused to fear it, no fear, he had felt glad.

The worms, as if by such thoughts, incited themselves off the hag's body. They flung off into the surrounding night one by one and contorted into giant phantoms that whistled into the dark air, like rockets in Txanton's tales. He watched them go with wonder. His fingers stopped clutching at the horror of such things, and they let go of the dirt to lift themselves upwards. And he knew then: it was the dead he could see. It was them and them always. For they cover the land like a cloak. He smiled at this revelation, and the eye of the rune, above him huge and glowing in

the sky, was his eye, or an eye he shared in order to look upon that other land—an eye that showed the land in which dwelled phantasmal masses. Looked through and through.

The hag smiled wickedly at his smile and beset him, reaching down to touch him. He shuddered with an intensity of stimulation. He looked out into the wasteland. Between the boulders he could see them, ghastly things that glowed with the ethereal color of the rune in the sky as they marched over the land—marched to this spot, to gather about this flame, and they *saw* him. For the first time that he knew of, they *saw* him, and he saw them, most clearly, as they gathered about the rocks, on the liminal edge of the flame, of the world. The hag bestrode the top of him and took him inside her, squatting, and he thought of the waste's intestines coiling in the bowl of robes between her legs as she flung about her coarse strands of hair—she cackled, riding above him, and he saw more and more ghosts gather on top of each other, climbing the rocks, to watch his becoming a man, and he knew he was not mad, that his brother's taunts and reprimands about his strange behavior and his stranger obsessions were misplaced.

And among the ghost's visages, he searched for his mother, his father. The hag rode him faster as he scanned the rotted heads and skulls, the faces missing jaws and noses and other adornments, the strange half-eaten faces wearing stranger adornments, and with awful fiendish grins, they smiled down on him, wide and toothy, reveling in this moment, in Riddley's becoming a man, and only one of them was familiar at all, one face with a blank, almost sad look, unlike the others, a girl with bloody clothes, a dusty Commune hood, a girl with an arrow in her back.

Chapter 7

Inside the compound's main building, Txanton's nose fought the awful built-up smell of excrement. It was like an evil thing, some monster hunched in the corner, large, too large to stand in such a small space. A fire pit burned orange-red in the center of the dim room between two concrete pillars. From it, a dense smoke filled the air, unable to escape fast enough through the hole in the roof. It stung Txanton's eyes, and the smell of char was in the air, mingling with the smell of shit. He sought the faces of his fellow sufferers. Their own eyes, red-rimmed and edged with the wetness of fear, peered through the haze. Azel, the smallest of them, had been chattering since the cages, and he was shaking now. The wastes had got to him. He moaned like they did since Piertre's death. Friends before the cage, but separated eternally after Piertre's head was crushed by the rock. "Crack. Crack," Azel repeated after they had been released, or he'd just moan. The Communers had slept outside by the fence in the night's cold for the last few days, glad to be free of the confines of the cages, but cold all the same. Txanton wanted to talk to Azel, but what could he say? Any of them might crack, crack next. Outside, they had cut each boy's hair off, and now inside the concrete building their heads gleamed oddly in the firelight.

But, this stood as a joyous day, the day of their *coronation from wastepuke to Skullfist soldier, the only real army and controller of the wasteland, you shits*. The fat soldier had bellowed this throughout the night at them. Drunk on something, his red bald head bobbed about and repeated the statement in slurred variations.

Outside, the wind howled and picked up. Sand fell through the cracks of the building with the pitter-patter of rain. The dust storm began its fury. They had felt it coming throughout the day while they were told to sit and do nothing. Txanton had tried to be elsewhere, to clear his mind. The sand stung his cheek as his great-great grandfather's story filtered into his mind. Only

Jorna had dared to speak. "What will we do?" He had spoken to Txanton directly but loud enough for all the boys to hear. Txanton did not respond. He eyed the dirty skinny soldier who guarded them, one of the many soldiers with their frayed remnants of clothes dyed black and red. *What will we do?* Jorna thought Txanton should know the answer, that he should have all the answers. We do what we have to do. Txanton wondered about that now: We follow along. We survive. We are the last members of the Commune whose hearts still beat. We live. That's what we do. Is that what Jorna wanted to hear? Probably not.

They approached the fire, and Txanton thought of the Korea from his book of combat stories, *In the Zone of Sudden Death*. This "coronation" was like joining the ranks of the Koreans, wasn't it? Like deserting. But, no, the book had described them as Communist. So was he deserting to the side of the Americans then? The stories were told from their side of things, and he had, when he was younger, rooted for them, since that was what the wasteland used to be: America. But...Communist or American? Who was what? Was this a good day or bad? Then, the burst of his father's head, an explosion in the sky of his mind, reminded him, a memory that jolted his body and made fists of his hands. Now, he joined *his* ranks, the invading army of the soldier with the gun.

Before the fire, that man stood. He was of medium height and taut. His dirty ripped canvas rags hung about him, a faded black and red. The uni-goggle hung from his freshly shaven chin and flashed back the fire's reflection. His shaved head was an imperfect curve like plates of metal joined together. Jorna had wanted to know what to do? What to do? Join him? The man who had killed his father, who stood rigid and watched the boys intensely. His gun-barrel eyes gauged each boy as they filed in. Txanton felt that gaze as he passed. And there were other

soldiers, outlines who sat cross-legged in the shadowy areas farthest from the fire. It was hard to tell how many there were. Only faint impressions of rugged and dirty faces could be seen.

The Communers were instructed to sit between the concrete pillars that held a low, shattered roof. Txanton sat. The soldier-with-a-gun's air of knowing held Txanton, and he thought of the minister of the Commune and the Shared House with its fire and its chants, of a childhood gone, of things ripped from his hands, and he looked down to his hands, and he thought of the scout and of those hands' inaction, and he thought of the minister's bulged eyes, and he pictured those hands holding aloft a bent blade and dropping it, the heft of the thing, into the back of the minister's long neck between the bumps of vertebrae, cleaving through muscle and spinal cord, the feel of the thing, then the give of the thing as the head fell with a dull thud to the ground to roll in the ancient dust now trampled in the storm of its conquerors. The Commune of Eternal Light was dead. What do we do?

The fire had died down to a familiar blue-green, and the soldier with the gun spoke: "I am your commanding officer now, so listen up. You will call me Tartain, and do all I say. This is no ragtag village community. You will learn your place within the only army of the wasteland. And with your blood, we will reclaim it all. All there is, is ours. Domni, prepare them." Tartain waved his hand and turned away.

The fat soldier, Domni, smiled and removed a blade from the flames with a hiss of steam. The fire popped and sparked an arc across the slabs of broken floor. The coronation had begun. Nothing to be done now. Domni took the blade to Jorna and pressed it to the boy's forehead and cut in. His flabby face smiled wildly. A long gash bent across Jorna's head, and blood welled forth down over his eyes. Jorna started to reach up, to touch the wound, and Domni slapped him

hard enough to knock him over. Jorna struggled back up and sat with tearful eyes. Domni moved to cut Alaztis's forehead. Tartain watched each cut closely.

Txanton was next. He was in the middle of the five boys. Domni scooped Txanton's head into his hand, and Txanton was forced to look into that fat demon's visage. The smile widened sickly, teeth blackened and sharp. There was a pale area of skin about his narrow eyes that outlined where his sunglasses usually rested. The blade came into view, so close it was too blurry to look at. It pressed into Txanton's forehead and scraped against his skullplate, singing into his mind and down his spine. His hands tightened. His muscles up and down his arms constricted haphazardly. He realized his toes were wiggling as they tried to get away from his feet.

Their new commander, Tartain, looked somewhere above Txanton as he began to recite, "What are the ideas of man? What are the ages of man? Wood? Stone? Bronze...Iron...Gun—and Nuke, now Death."

Domni chuckled as he cut into Zillan's head. He moved down the line to grab the last boy, Azel. At this, Azel screamed, and Domni slapped him with the backside of his hand. The boy fell and then only whimpered softly.

"Get up," Domni said. Azel did, wiping away his tears.

Tartain continued, "This is the idea of man now: Death. The age of man now forever onwards. Your age. Written in the Skullfist's heart is the saying, 'Songs of violence, musical notations on the score of time—shatter the flute and flay the piper. Sing ribbons to arc in the sun's heat, blood to fall and crust upon the land.' This is your song now. Your marching tune to take to others. Lap their blood and taste the iron...the gun...the nuke—taste death."

Blood welled over Txanton's face, and it seemed like something else, like some other thing. Why could he not act? Like with the scout, inaction, and now he sat there again doing

nothing. Just jump up and grab a fire log; push it into Domni's face; blind him and relish the smell of his ugly burnt flesh. This Txanton would enjoy, but still he sat

Tartain stepped around the fire and grabbed Jorna's wound with his large hand. Then, Txanton could take Domni's sword and slit Tartain's throat—the man-who-killed-his-father's blood spraying onto the other Communers, onto that man's own soldiers. That would be a coronation. The Communers would rise up. Would take the compound. They would be the ones to rule the wasteland.

Tartain was now in front of him, and Txanton felt the imprint of the hand burn on his skull. At first, he riled at the touch and his skin twitched. But slowly, he felt a give in him, a sag of something. He looked at the man before him, his leader now, and not anger but something else stirred inside himself. Tartain's face moved. Uprturned dark shadows flickered in his sunken eye-sockets. Sockets divided by a sharp nose and contained pure black irises. Who was this man?

Tartain let go of Txanton's head and continued, "As you will gut your fellow man, you will feel the world recede about you, expelled like dog's skin. You shall be born anew, standing stronger, amongst your dead enemy's expelled shit and seeping piss, to claim your weapon."

After Azel, Tartain pulled out a blade from a pouch and held it aloft as he walked to the other side of the fire. He held the weapon like an offering to the boys and nodded. Txanton knew his body could do nothing at this time. It would stay inactive, in wait. He would follow the coronation. Tartain took something and threw it into the fire pit, and it strengthened, burning orange and red as when they first entered the building, and its twisting light reflected off of the bent blade. Txanton noticed the oddness of the blade for the first time. Instead of curving backward like an arc, the blade bent forward like a triangular hook. It was the same blade the fat soldier used to behead the minister, and it would be Txanton's blade now.

Tartain gave the blade he held to Jorna and another from the pouch to Alaztis. He continued, "Mass your dominion, work your slaves, the slaves of our land to load the delight of your desire, as their starved eyes stand helplessly in witness to your doings, you will be stronger. But remember my eye as well, for if you die out in this place, in our wasteland, you will be absorbed into me. Into Skullfist."

Txanton received a blade and weighed it in his hand. He felt dizzy. Whether it was his burning wound, his brand, or the smoke, he did not know. Turning the blade in the light as the storm outside raged with a thunderous bawling, he felt the compound building spin about with the pitter-patter of sand and wind that seeped through and disturbed the dying fire. It seemed everything turned about the blade in his palm, a vortex that rushed to blur into a whirlpool of fire and faces. The minister's head was gone, replaced by Tartain's, bald and eloquent in its violent cast, and Txanton was captivated to look upon him with one eye open, and one eye shut with the sticky coagulation of his own blood. His same blood mingled with the other boys' now on Tartain's hand. It was the blood of The Commune of Eternal Light. At least they were not wastes. Their skulls were branded, not crushed. And their blood lived on, though their home was now dead. He must remember that, about their blood. *What do we do?* Wait. Carry the blood of the Commune within them and wait. The pain of his forehead cried to him, the touch of the terrible, the creature hunched in the corner, the smell of excrement he realized he could no longer smell. Horror, that was the creature's name. Where was this creature now but inside his own self?

"You are now Skullfist. We are vast and powerful. We are the wasteland. We speak of our age—the age of death, the last and reigning age of man. And you are our purveyors now. Domni is your Sarge. You will take his orders or you will die, and if so, he will eat you. You will learn to crush our enemies. They are those that are not us. Welcome to us."

Txanton looked over to Jorna and Alaztis, as their eyes looked back to him, confused and afraid. Crimson hands perched and crusted above these eyes. A red-welted hand rose on Jorna's cheek. Txanton turned to Zillan and Azel. The same. He felt them looking to him, and he gazed up at Tartain and Domni as they stood on the opposite side of the fire. If only he could tell the boys: *We will wait. We will follow the coronation and wait.*

Tartain again threw something on to the fire to rekindle the angry-colored blaze, and Txanton's head whirled with another sting, with poisonous thoughts of Skullfist. Of killing, of amassing a heap of dead, of turning everything that lived into the dead, a revenge for all that had been visited on him. Fuck you, world. Fuck you, Tartain.

Was this the road he would now walk? Let himself loose upon this land in a terrible guise. To kill and maim? To cut down the innocent? Children becoming the fodder of his violent purpose, of the fiery revenge in his chest? What was his destination if the Communers were to wait and become Skullfist? Domni stepped forward and gestured for them to stand. Txanton did, and the other boys followed. Txanton felt their fear. Their bond now forged itself truly for perhaps the first time in his life. Never had they looked to him like this before. He thought of Riddley and the skull his brother etched upon the door. He thought of the white cross upon his bed. He remembered when he had laughed at the three Xs Riddley had carved above their parents' bed. He had not known what else to do but laugh, and now they were dead.

Domni held aloft his blade. Txanton matched it by raising his own in the air, and the others followed. Txanton felt the clack of the blade against many as they rose and glowed above the red flames, and a Hurrah went up, and more clacks came from others in the compound, the filthy shapes of soldiers who came from the dark walls and sent up a rhythm of Hurrahs that strengthened the monster here against the dust-howl outside, and they all repeated it louder and

louder while decayed teeth and bald heads shouted shouts beaconing out into the nightstorm, all
in the name of Skullfist.

Chapter 8

Riddley felt rough as he approached the fallen water tower that lay on a high hill and overlooked dead lands and dead trees and one other dilapidated structure. From this hill, the black river seemed farther than ever as it strung down from the north and curved, wiggling on towards the western horizon. But he was no closer to the river than when he had left the commune. Maybe he wandered off course somehow, or maybe the river went on and moved, slithering away from him as he had walked. The land had changed on him, as well. The brown rocks had turned to a gray gravel wash between ashy stumps of old dead trees that the plains clumped together thickly from here to the river. Above, the impassive sun lay hidden behind dark clouds.

What little water he pilfered from the hag had left his insides roiling, and it caused him to have to stop suddenly. He lifted his robe about his knees and squatted. After a second or two of straining, he shat harshly and noisily. He stood and took heavy breaths, a bit stunned by what had just happened, by how awful his body felt inside. Great, he would be even more dehydrated because of this. But he was a man now, a man full of guilt, but a man regardless. He began walking again.

Guilt had ebbed and flowed repeatedly through him since he first woke. Now, as he approached the sideways tower, it eased out of him again. No guilt, none for what he had done with that old woman, not at this moment anyhow. But the dead had seen him, and he had for the first time fully seen them. Think of that. That should keep away any guilt, as long as he didn't think of seeing *her*.

No, no, think of the dead. Were they now aware of his presence? Would they visit upon him? Greet him suddenly like passing someone on the path from the Shared House to the well

and giving a "Day-ya" greeting and a look of acknowledgment and then moving on. The ghosts had done that to him around the hag's fire, had seen him, acknowledged him. Or maybe he'd just feel a chill, like when the Communers chanted and the minister said, *To you comrades*, and they said, *To you comrade*, and Riddley felt odd, and Txanton made fun of him. Comrades? The ghosts? Bizarre new comrades to have, for sure.

But where did they go? In the cloudy morning, the rune and the ring of spirits were gone, and once again only shadows moved in the corners of his vision across the stubbled plains of the wasteland. He reached the busted bulb of the water tower and grabbed hold of a rusted metal rung of what must have been the railing for a platform that once rounded the bulb's base. If he climbed it, he could see inside of it, hopefully find water, quench his thirst, and make his insides feel better.

He wondered whether the awful fluid from the waste's intestine made him feel this way. What if that fluid had created those visions? What if there were no ghosts at all? Maybe she didn't even take him to manhood. He simply fell asleep by that fire, and the hag had only slept by him for warmth in the cold of the night. Then, why did they wake naked, if for warmth? Their hoods and rags atop as blankets. No, warmth did not explain the soreness of his genitals. His bowels groaned again, and like the guilt he tried to ignore it.

He was a man now because of the hag, and that wasn't so bad, was it? He smiled.

He climbed the railing hand over hand. As he did so, his sandals fell off and slapped the ground below one after another. After being about two men off the ground, he climbed into the tipped tower's bowl by entering the large gash. It looked as if some ancient break had done away with part of the top and side of the bulb, and this left it split open towards the sky like a wound.

Inside, a darkness dwelled. A dim landing of corrugated metal ringed the inside of the walls. However, since the tower was on its side, the landing fell below him and back around like a fence. He removed his Kodak goggles, put them in his pocket, and began climbing down into the dark. At the bottom, he was able to walk, the metal cool on his naked feet, and he jumped over the landing, pushing himself over with his hands. It was like entering some dark arch or forbidden doorway. This was manhood, these risks and obstacles and mysterious journeys. Yet manhood without Suzla was something he had never foreseen. No, he didn't want to think of this, of her, of how she had been there, had stood in the ring of spirits and watched him, watched him become a man.

Yet, her face had been there, ghostly in the night, stark and stern.

He realized he had frozen there, staring into the darkness of the tower, still holding the landing with trembling fists. Guilt again. His insides twinged. He walked to the other end of the fallen tower's bowl, looking for any sign of water. It had been a long time since the rainy season, but maybe...maybe.


I welcome death, she said long ago. I refuse to fear it.

A pang in his guts—stronger with the renewal of guilt. He reached down in the darkness and felt water, heard it splutter. The faces of the dead from the night before orbited his mind, a rotation of grisly skulls and rotted corpses reeling about in their blue-green hue, like the flames from dead logs. Fires of the dead world circled in his brain, and Suzla's flame cast itself out in front, larger than them all. Damn this dark. He looked up at the hole in the tower above him to see only a rift of gray clouds moving by.

Bending back down, he collected a little of the remaining water. He scooped it from the rounded bottom with cupped hands, and a horrid fear swept over him. He broke apart his hands,

letting the water fell through. More guilt from Suzla, it must be that which could cause such fear. Maybe, the pain of manhood was this: fear. And a man he was now. He looked up. The clouds continued their pace.

He bent back down, retrieved more water, and brought it to his lips—acid and sour. He immediately spit it out, and as he did so the bowl lit up, while the spray of water transformed into sparks. Before him, blue and green dust sparkled, an electric fire. It grew all around him, and facing him, a boy stood. A man joined him. The boy's face formed with fear, deep fear and disgust that resonated in Riddley, and he thought of the silver star glinting above his mother. These two figures crackled large in front of him, a shimmering accumulation of green particles that swarmed and maintained the figures' shapes. In the boy's eyes, a knowing, a knowing of something sinister. The man stood searching for some answer to some question, and a voice echoed and bounced about the shell of the tower, "What did you see?" And Riddley did not know who asked the question or for whom it was addressed. It must have been from a conversation in the past, and somehow he knew the boy and the man were not dead. He could sense it. But the unnerving horror of this vision shuddered through him, and as it did, the vision faded and left him again in darkness.

A symbol pressed in to his mind's sight, intricate and odd:  Another rune.

He climbed the inner rungs to get out of the tower and went back down the ladder, while his gut quaked again. He put his sandals back on and found a piece of the black chalky wood that would serve just as well as kindling. With this, he scribbled the new rune on the tower beneath the "Rur" and "Dis" that he knew, from his talk with the hag, stood for *Rural Water District #3*, a

place of some horror. When he finished scrawling, he surveyed his work. It stood large, as big as the tower's "R."

Then, his gut bulged and rumbled with pressure. He had to shit again. It *must* have been the wastejuice that hag had given him, unforgiving for the insides. He looked about for a good spot. On the hillside, a conglomeration of the remains of shanties popped up amongst scrap metal and deadwood that littered the grounds. People used to be here not very long ago. In fact, so much of the wasteland called out to him in this way, called out to him and spoke of some terrible past lost. As if old friends, they would sit down, he and the land, and talk about all that was now long gone. But maybe it wasn't the land, maybe it was something else. Well, it all come around, the past. What was done here was done everywhere. The air grew stiff with his thoughts, and he wondered if the ghosts about him agreed. Another shudder down below, and he gave up hope to locate a good spot where he could relieve himself. He squatted right there and shat heavily.

When done, he rose weak-legged and once more surveyed his rune on the side of the tower. It should be even larger, but he did not know why he felt this way. What did the rune mean? Somehow, he knew; somehow the act of scrawling it had told him that it meant that things were unsafe for the body. Was the water poisoned, and if so how and when did it become so? Did it poison this village, or had they poisoned it? And how did the hag fit in to all this? She had probably caused his gut problems with the water she gave him. It must have come from here. But the hag had drunk it fine. Again he felt his insides gurgle, and his body prickled in itchy discomfort with relentless shame and guilt.

But what should he feel bad about? The hag? Lying with her, with her on top of him, withered and manic... Or did he simply feel something else, someone else's discomfort? Someone else's taintedness? Maybe it was the boy in the bowl's disgust he felt, his fear. Either

way, he knew he should feel good about himself. He could view beyond this material realm, into another realm. He had lived to see the spirit world, to look through the fabric of a barren land and find its backdrop and record it as such in his own mind. Like he had just done with this ancient rune, he had seen something and made record of it. He realized he had been doing this all his life, developing this talent. He pierced through the visible and record all of reality for what it was, for what others could not see. Hah, Txanton could only glimpse the outer shell of things, and Riddley could see what was actually there, what was beyond there: the world of the dead. All this left him with a sense of awe, a sense of accomplishment with himself, and he stared at the symbol he created on the tower.

After a while, he managed his way down the scarred and hardened slope of the hill toward the only other prominent structure, a half-felled building with the charred marks of fire damage. The hag had spoken of an army: The League? The Legion. They had been here. They had destroyed this place, the-boy-in-the-tower's home, and the hag's home as well. Riddley searched inside himself, but no new signs were forthcoming. He could find out nothing else about the boy. Only that the boy was afraid and disgusted and had lived here. When he searched inside himself for any understanding of the Commune's destructors, feeling inside his mind and projecting it out into the land, he only saw the death's head staring back at him, as he had seen for days before—months before—the Commune fell.

He approached the half-felled building and noted the sheet metal covering window holes. The metal pieces were scratched and broken in parts. Bits of the concrete awning had crumbled and fallen which created a rocky mound that could be climbed to the roof at one's peril. There

must be someone or some ones in there. He felt that there had to be. Where did these feelings come from, this new cognition? He didn't know, only felt more aware. This was manhood.

He walked around the broken chunks and found a door underneath the rubble, an opening three-fourths the size of a normal doorway. Letters lay at his feet, an "A" and a "p," red, scratched, and weathered. The top of a green "k" stuck out of some bricks. In the darkness of the door, he could see a sign of a pale green apple of old, the same size as the letters, which leaned against broken masonry. Riddley crouched and peered into the dark aperture. What did these letters and objects mean? He searched his memory for such things.

Riddley never studied reading very well. This was what the minister had taught, and he led the kids in education by forcing selections of reading from the *Marx Primer*. *History is not one of one's choosing*, the minister would pronounce often during a lesson. That's for sure. They had one copy of the worn book, so Riddley found it easy to shirk this *privilege* of reading. He just let others have their chance quicker, that's all. Others like Txanton, who practically hogged all of the few books in the Shared House, such as that combat book he read over and over. Riddley never found books with lots of words interesting—except his star picture book, *The Cosmos*, of course, but that was different, not learning but something else entirely. And he wouldn't tell Suzla about that book, never. She, who only pretended to like reading, pretended with a fabricated diligence when she was truly ambivalent. Or maybe she really hated it. Either way, she *put in her time*, as she would say, and answered the minister's questions appropriately and artfully. Hah, and the book's cover was torn. It had "arx Primer" on the front as the title. They all knew the real name but called him Arx anyways to make Txanton and the minister mad.

He thought he heard something from within the darkness, and he reached to take off his strip of Kodak eyewear, but realized he'd already removed it.

"Hello?" Riddley asked, crouched by the cascading concrete. He thought he heard a scuttle but was unsure. "Hello?"

"Quiet, we don't know—" someone said within, and more mumbles followed.

"The ol' hag sent me this ways. Said there was water," Riddley shouted.

"Her! Good for nothin'. Lorna! Whatever, wat you find, it be in that tipped tower out yonder," the voice answered.

"Nope, that's contaminated," Riddley said.

"Contaminatins? It is, is it? How you gone and know'd that?" the same voice replied.

"I just do," Riddley said.

A groan came from inside, followed by hoarse whispers. Riddley listened for some sound that might alarm him, that might speak of danger, but only heard, "Okay? How's you know that's he's okay?" Then, more mumbles. They sounded worried themselves. At least, the person who he could hear did.

"Hey yous!" the voice called again.

"Yeah?" Riddley answered.

"You should probably walk it on in heres. We gots some freshen water 'ere," it called back, more friendly this time.

"How do I know that? How do I know that it's safe?"

No one answered for a bit. Then, the voice said, "I guess'n you just haft tah walk it on in and see."

Riddley got up from his crouch and cautiously walked past the apple sign, into the crumbling hole that was the entrance. Taking small steps into this dark, he waited for his eyes to acclimate as he watched the strips of light piercing the rickety building become stronger beams

that materialized a jumbled scene of goods and refuse. A girthy waddle of a man seemed to appear out of the darkness in front of him. The man sat behind a table covered in junk, and he seemed only to have a tuft of hair on the top of his head—his malformed head, which became a troubled arrangement of features that acted as a face while Riddley's eyes continued their adjustment. The man sat on a chair next to yet another table, and it became clear that on that table lay an outstretched figure who was bundled in greasy and worn fabrics. The man lying under the fabrics slowly raised his head to look at Riddley. Riddley's eyes seemed almost normal now, and he saw the lying down man's long dark hair covered a weary and scarred face. But somehow, for as worn as it was, it was a face that looked young, not old. And dimly, a green glow seemed to surround the man's head, but Riddley knew better than to call this to anyone's attention. The man lying down lifted a satchel and tossed it to Riddley.

"Now don't yous go drinkin' all that there water now," the girthy man said.

"It's alright," the man lying down said.

"Damn it. With the tower gones and no good, we ain't got nothin' but that there bit o' water," said the girthy man.

"It's alright," said the man lying down.

As Riddley drank the crisp water, other figures shuffled or smacked their lips. When Riddley finished, he saw that the small section of the building, the section that remained unburied in rubble, was populated by gaunt and shrunken figures huddled amongst dirty cloths and disheveled equipment in a hazy dust. They leaned heavily against whatever they could, and some seemed half buried, as they lazily moved their heads in the dim light or chewed at their jaws with staring vacancy.

"Name's Ank," the girthy man said, "and this 'ere's my tradin' store ya's in. Need ye any wares?... Nah, I doubts it, eh? A youth runnin' wild. Comin' to beg away our water, that's it!" and he threw his arms about with emphasis.

"What happened to the tower?" Riddley asked. Some of the men sighed and swung their heads.

Ank put up his hands. "Ah, them damn soldiers, they's done it! They here after this 'ere man, and he won't say whys! But he's a friend of ours, guarantee ya that. Good friends now. Yep, they come 'ere lookin' for 'im an' beat me half to death, yous see, and theys shoots him in the 'ead! Whatcha think of that?" and he ended with his head in his chest and his eyebrows high.

Riddley looked at the man lying down. He stared hard back at Riddley. With sharp pondering eyes, the man seemed to weigh all he saw. Shot in the head, a green-glowing head, and yet he survived. Riddley's own father's head splayed out to bleed on the ground, as he had last seen him there on the ground of the Commune. His father's head was like the tower, both were incomplete. Horror and its contamination bled into Riddley like the hag's wastebrew. But...no bad vibes from this man. The man lying down nodded at him.

"I'm Riddley," he said to the man.

Ank said, "They knocket over that there tower and destroyed the shanty town on the hill, botherin' the women away, kidnappin' the young. They took that boy Tuck!" And he shot his finger to the roof.

"Have you seen Tuck?" The prostrate figure asked in a far-off voice. Riddley thought of what the hag had said. She mentioned Tuck, a boy. Then, he thought of the boy in the tower, an electric outline of his fear, his knowing, a lightning image. That was Tuck; he felt sure. The hag had called him the boy in the tower, he remembered now. This man, this wounded man, he was

the one in the tower who asked the question. This man was the other electric outline that stood in and asked, *What did you see?* And a bullet had actually entered the man's brain. Was it still there? A seed of something inside him. Like the tree Txanton wanted to multiply. Seeds across the wasteland. But another seed, the kind of seed that killed Riddley's father. What does it grow if it stays there? Is that what Tuck was afraid of? *I welcome death*—Suzla had said— *I refuse to fear it*. No, something else, something to do with the water, the contamination, but he could not understand it. The man's look questioned Riddley.

"Maybe," Riddley answered.

"Yous saw the army then? Them damn longcoats stole my own boy years 'go. Lad's prob'bly dead by nows. Dead and rottin' somewheres. And here I'm rottin'. And that poor boy Tuck, that poor lad," Ank sobbed with his head in his hands.

"Calm down, Ank, it alright," came a voice of one of the derelicts perched by a stack of sacking.

"Quiet, Farling. You didn't lose your boy. For yous never had'n. You never had that chance being that you're as impotent and sterile as they come!" And Ank's finger pointed at the man, at a derelict who just stared to his hands and made a hacking, angry guttural noise while he worked his jaw. A few others laughed. "Me, I hads to say good-dah to 'im. To my boy. Now Tuck's gone and we's all got tah say good-dah to him, too. He always driftin' 'bout the shop and mes yellin' at him 'bouts his old lady owin' mes money. But I thought of him as a son, I did, truly."

"He mighta been just that," choked another, and chuckles began.

"Yeah, I'll admits it, I will, I will. He mighta been. He mighta been any yours heres."

"Cept Farly!" guffawed the same person, and a large round of hocking laughter went up.

Riddley looked at Farley. The man kept moving his gums, working his jaw and making his loud guttural hacks. He said nothing, and he did nothing while half stuck in his sacking. Riddley felt sorry for the man—a withered shell who waited to dry and break open. Txanton would have felt contempt. Or Riddley could feel contempt for the man, emanating from the Txanton inside himself. He could hear Txanton telling him late at night, a few words before bed, how he felt about a man like that. *Useless. Useless if he does not contribute.* The men still laughed, carrying out their fun.

"Alright, alright," Ank said. And Riddley looked back, and the prostrate figure still stared at him with the same keen interest.

"Now, these are truly the last days of The Rural Water District #3!" lamented Ank.

"Nah, that ain't true, Ank, it can't be, can it?" Said another voice.

"Yup, yup, tis!" Ank said.

"I'm Cornelius," the prostrate figure finally said to Riddley.

"It is, it is. Nobody'll be coming through, up on our hill for water. No one good for that matter. If it ain't them soldiers, it's someones worse now on out. Hey, just sit still, Corny. Sit still. You know you ain't no goods yet!" Ank said as Cornelius sat up and struggled to pull the pile of blankets off himself. His body moved as if unfamiliar to him, motions too fast then too slow. Limbs akimbo he stretched his back, and they listened to the clacks of his spinal cord popping. Then, he threw his feet off of the table and bumbled momentarily like a waste, almost tipping over. He faced Riddley with his green-glowing head. It seemed to glow fainter now than it had at first, an odd sign.

"I should be gettin' on, I suppose," Cornelius said. His words remained in the air.

"Gettin' on?" Ank finally said. "Yous only been down for two months. That bullet still up 'ere, ya know. Besides, if it wasn't for yous comin' around, we'd had no water." The rest of the men murmured their concordance.

"Yeah, well, if The Legion hear tell of my gettin' better, you'll have more trouble on your hands. They'll be back through, don't forget. They're expanding the circle, and this'll be the middle ring, not the outer ring any longer. If you follow their orders, they won't hurt you too bad. They *will* make you work, though." The men at their posts grumbled. "They'll make you work, but they'll feed you, bring animals to eat and care for. Things'll change. It won't be too bad for you fellows—or your store Ank, if you play your cards right."

"Well, al'ight, al'ight, if yous say so. Talkin' all fancy at me. We've had trouble in the past and will in the futures, yous see, yas sees that. With yous healthy, if yous are healthy, why don't yas stay an' protect us?" Ank asked with his palms up.

"Nope. I wouldn't be good for that business. They took me pretty easy the last time, didn't they? Had to slit one's throat, but I shouldn't have. It didn't matter. Just another dead man." He paused and looked down. "And they pulled me from my hiding spot in the tower and shot me in front of that boy. But I told you that, Ank. Not you though." He looked at Riddley and winked friendly like. "I'm no protector. Just a traveler. So, I best wander off somewhere," Cornelius said while still looking at Riddley.

"Where ya going?" Riddley asked.

The man slowly stood, tiredly, while everyone watched. He wore a long brown duster coat. He put on his head a large brimmed hat. Under the duster, he wore a deep green pair of pants and sweater that looked worn and dirty. Standing there, he seemed capable. Riddley thought of his own father looking out from his post into the wastelands, rigid against the skyline.

He thought of his own knowing of things now. He felt Cornelius's knowing, somehow akin to the hag's...

"I don't know, kid," he said. "Where're you going?"