

## Chapter 1:

David saw the story on the evening news, seven hours after it had gone viral, like a sucker.

It centered on a sixteen-year-old from Dixon, IL. According to the residents, Jeremy Franklin, over a span of 4 years, managed to turn a town of 6,000 into Whoville. The internet, as always, disagreed with itself over whether this was a beautiful, heartwarming human interest piece, or if it was terrifying conformist dystopia-porn. Either way, how Jeremy did it was the day's news.

Jeremy had a talent for match-making was as close as anyone would say for sure. Even supporters agreed that it *was* weird for an entire town to get along.

No one didn't like each other? Even in traffic? When that guy - you know that guy - is looking down at his phone instead of paying attention to the light turning green and I'll be goddamned if that's not generous, you know? No one is honking their horn screaming "Pay attention to the road!" No bar fights? No *\*whispers\** racism?

To which the entire town of Dixon would reply, "Nope."

Jeremy made riveting small talk. He turned talking about the weather into a therapy session. He knew your heart if you spoke of congested roads. Along the way, Jeremy divined your needs.

When the conversation had run its course, when both parties expelled that little sigh, Jeremy found a way to fill the need.

An early example:

- Mary, I'm sorry about what happened to your car. I don't know what it is with this town, but everyone's cars are breaking down at the same time.
- It's the potholes, Jeremy; there are so many potholes. I've called 311 and 411 and 911 and every number that ends in two ones. No one so much has come out to look at these

roads. I'll tell you why, Jeremy, and I would say this to the mayor's face, but they don't care because my neighborhood isn't the nice part. And you know what that means, and they damn well know what it means, pardon me.

- Mary, that is tough, that is tough. Maybe there are some less helpful people keeping the helpers from helping, if you know what I mean. I know there are some helpers, looking for a way to help.
- That's very naive, Jeremy, but you are a nice kid. You'll learn.
- Do you like true crime? Have you seen the documentaries? They talk about the bad guys, but they're really about the helpers. All the people doing the good work. The docs wouldn't exist without the helpers, Mary.
- Oh, I love it! Serial killers are my favorite...genre. Obviously... it's hard to talk about liking true crime without sounding like you're about to do some crime, isn't it?
- It is, but I know a place where you'll be free to talk about serial killers like a fangirl. Believe this or not, Terry Brightman has a book club - I think he calls it a discussion group - that is dedicated to just that. Give me your number, I'll text Terry right now... oh don't worry, he's not weird at all - well, he's weird like you're weird, Mary, but that's grand - and you'll get to meet Darren! He has bees!
- Oh, I'm sorry Jeremy, but I couldn't-
- -I think you will be just-
- -I don't really like-
- -Audiobooks! Spark's very own Notes!-
- -Jeremy, I-

- -Terry just texted me a picture of her and her boardgaming club holding up a sign that says How Do You Solve A Problem Like Mary(ia)? With Friendship! Take a look.
- Oh... ok...
- They're not great at signs. But they are loving people who want to talk about mass murder. And I think you are a loving person that wants to talk about mass murder - probably not commit mass murder - and that's why I love you, Mary. Terry says they're meeting in 20, so head on over whenever you're ready.

Mary joined the club, and everyone loved her. Terry worked in the local government. A few days later, no potholes. Mary thanked Terry, Jeremy, and Darren - for the honey - Jeremy, of course, thanked Terry and Mary, but also thanked Karen, from the department of transportation as well as the comptroller, and then the entire city council, one-by-one. Jeremy convinced Mary's entire neighborhood to line up across from the entire relevant institutions and then high-five like fifth-grade baseball players. To most, it was weird, silly, and more than a little embarrassing, until Jeremy revealed he had convinced Jimmy - of Jimmy's - to provide an open bar. The open bar made it much easier to appreciate the juvenile gesture.

By the end of the gratitude-fest, the neighborhood and its government agreed to get together once a week for drinks. And they did.

The pattern repeated itself. As Jeremy's circle of friends expanded, more tangential acquaintances came into contact with him. Social behavior spread from person to person like a plague. Barbecues, potlucks, block parties - the streets were rampant with bounce houses - dance parties, costume parties, birthday parties, key parties, and even backyard wrestling took off. In short, the town of Dixon, IL was casually dating the town of Dixon, IL.

Jeremy had refused an interview; if the town wanted to talk about him, they could, but he wasn't interested. "Look around," he said when asked why, "what is there to say? People like each other. It's not hard to explain."

Months later, Jeremy would say that to David directly. David laughed unabated for the length of an Eagles song.

Now, though, he absorbed the details they gave: he had started when he was twelve, he was a talented saxophone player, he had done well as Yente in the highschool production of Fiddler on the Roof, he was a Virgo, he loved cars.

Interesting kid, David thought to himself. When a picture of Jeremy flashed onto the screen, David's jaw fell.

It was Jeremy recurring in David's dreams. He didn't appreciate finding out Jeremy was so young. Jeremy Franklin had a lot of work to do.

## Chapter 2:

Jeremy dropped out of high school at sixteen after meeting an excited and persuasive thirty-eight-year-old man at a house party. There, David, said man, laid out his plan for Jeremy's life.

Together, they would open an auto repair shop called D&J's Automotive Repair Shop.

David had taken up eccentric-millionaire-ing as a hobby. He won fifteen million dollars in the Florida lottery at twenty-two. He took the lump sum he was advised against by any number of internet blogs and casual conversations with coworkers and immediately left. (Headline: Florida Man Escapes With Our Money).

He gave three quarters of the money to his family and friends and, if he had some in his pocket, anyone who asked. The rest he invested in cryptocurrency. Ten years later, when the numbers on his phone representing money were incomprehensible, he cashed out. Ten years were spent investing and reinvesting, making money and then some more. Not that he was so dedicated to the work, more that he was anxious, always anxious. He wanted to keep the money. It felt like his money. He needed to *protect* it.

Then he had a dream.

He decided to become an eccentric while he waited for the dream to come true. He found it far more pleasurable. When the story of Jeremy and Dixon, IL broke, David knew it was time to go. Jeremy's parents were outraged when they met with David. Summoning the full force of their biologically granted fury, Timothy and Marie Franklin drove, with Jeremy in the backseat, to David's modest house. Jeremy described David to them as a man with an untold amount of money, so they were disarmed by his lower-middle-class home, just outside of Dixon, IL (where

Reagan grew up, ya know). Their righteous anger was quenched by the unexpected sight and they struggled to reignite it.

Marie angrily, yet somehow also, in the way of the Midwest, politely rang the doorbell. Timothy knocked with abandon. David answered the door wearing a three-piece wool suit, plaid, with a white undershirt, red tie, and a tasteful blue pocket square. He purchased it at full price while it was on-sale. With some guesswork on his measurements - he insisted he was a medium - he ordered overnight delivery and the next morning it was there. He put it on immediately, and, while admiring the suit's complete lack of comfort, because he was not a medium, saw his paunch protrude out above his waist. That, of course, was when the Franklins rang his doorbell - a looped recording of "A nuclear era / but I have no fear" from The Clash's London Calling. It frustrated him to answer the door in this suit. It was too early for him to feel eccentric, and he was annoyed by his lack of control.

Timothy and Marie, both expecting eccentricity, greeted him unfazed.

- Hi, David? Yes. May we please talk with you regarding our son?
- Of! Course! You! May!

His tone was playful and, naturally, a little eccentric. The Franklins met this with polite, pursed lips.

- Hi, yes, uhmm... well. Jeremy told us that you convinced him to drop out of high school and work for you-
- -Sorry to interject, I hate to be rude, but you are mistaken on that point. I have convinced him to become my partner. My equal partner.
- What? No. He's Six. Teen.

Were you listening, you could hear the conspicuous absence of the word “Fucking” between Six and Teen.

- He doesn't have any money to put up. He doesn't have experience running a business.  
For lands' sakes, he's never fixed anything!
- Please, come in. Would you like something to drink? Water? What time, year, and day is it? Whiskey?
- Water.
- Water, thank you for offering.
- Please, find the couch and have a seat on it. Good luck!

The front door led to a narrow hallway, almost the full length of the house. It felt, but was not, bigger on the inside. At the end of the hallway, on either side, were arched entryways. The left room was an open kitchen, the square footage of one half of the house was dedicated entirely to the kitchen. It was filled with gadgets ranging from As-Seen-On-TV to Michelin restaurant caliber tools. He had slicers, dicers, blenders, pots and pans, waffle makers - both Belgian and non- - pancake mixers, griddles, apple cutters, tortilla holders, Japanese-forged knives, Japanese-forged knife sharpeners, an industrial grade dishwasher - capable of washing all of David's many dishes in less than four minutes - and a full quarter was devoted to a wood-fire pizza grill. These items were piled about without regard and he had no intention of cleaning, nor, in fact, setting foot in the kitchen ever again.

After one glance, Timothy, Marie, and Franklin silently agreed that this was a good idea

They went across the hall and were met by as organized a living space as the kitchen was not.

Jeremy exclaimed:

- This is some Will-Wonka-shit.
- Yes! Thank you Jeremy, I can assure you, it is not a coincidence. I had to ask for it.
- Well... uh... I mean... Yea. David, this is awesome. One question: do the snozberries taste-
- Not anymore, I'm afraid. The snozberries did for the first day or so, but walls are an inefficient delivery system for tastes.

Timothy and Marie were finally taken by surprise, giving David a small sense of satisfaction.

The room was centered around a massive, stained, broken chocolate fountain. The wallpaper, of course, was a perfect recreation of the wallpaper from Charlie and the Chocolate Factory - not the remake. There were six couches, all cut in half like Wonka's office. A TV was cut in half as well; it did not function well as a TV. The makers of this particular TV, a boutique custom electronics shop - the subject of the reality TV show "Did You Want That To Work?" - were proud that it did *function*. Only one half of the picture was visible, but it *did* function. The carpet was indistinguishable from hardwood flooring and the optical illusion was disquieting. The room was unbearably bright: the colors, the lights - replica gas-light's from an 1800s London townhouse - and David's ignoble smile.

A few offers of food later, everyone chose their half-seats and the negotiations began.

- I will not allow my son to work for you.
- I really think you should. Jeremy is destined for great things. His humility and natural grace are a perfect fit for our business, which, I should remind you, is a business we are equal partners in. He is, to be honest with you, Tim and Marie - can I call you Tim? - anyways, he's very perspicacious. He has a destiny, Marie and Tim.



David, as part of his preparation to become an eccentric millionaire, had spent time scouring the dictionary, looking for words that, just by using them - correctly or no - suggest eccentricity.

- I promise, we know he's very perspicacious-

They did not.

- -We raised him!

Marie spoke, asking the only question, raising the only concern she had. She personally thought this was an opportunity for Jeremy and maybe even a good idea. They didn't have money for college, maybe college wasn't for him anyways. His was not a particularly memorable education career.

- Is this a sex thing? That is a crime and we call the cops here. This isn't Texas.
- No, no, no, no, no, noooooo my dear. No. He's not my type.
- Mmmhmmm....
- Let me tell you my story. Maybe that will clear things up.
- Do you have to? Could you just...you know... give us this one? Bail on your whole plan and we will take you to dinner in return. Let us win here.
- No. Anywhatsit. When I was fifteen, I had dreams. I'm not gonna go all the way and say these were prophetic dreams-

The Franklin parents both rolled their eyes. Jeremy leaned in, making sure to hear every word.

- -but by taking the steps laid out in the dream, I won the lottery. I took that money and invested it in cryptocurrency. That money is now simply stupid. How stupid? Let me tell you. In two weeks I will have this room redone to look like the Double Deuce from Roadhouse. Two weeks after that, I will have it redone to look like Cell Block Four from

the movie CB4. I will redo this house every two weeks for the rest of my life, without ever considering the cost. I am here now because I had a dream with Jeremy in it, though I didn't know it at the time. The next day, I saw Jeremy on TV. I followed him to a high-school party - which, I know that sounds weird and I have no rebuttal for that, It is weird - and there I told him of my plan. Now I am telling you. I wish you could see my nightmare. Something that will change the world forever is around the corner. So much rubble, so much carnage. But there was a place unaffected, with paintings of your son everywhere, looking very important. Here's my pitch to you. I may be wrong - it was a dream and that sounds stupid - but if I'm wrong, your son has his own business at sixteen, with an obscenely wealthy benefactor who has nothing but frivolities to spend his money on and that will certainly extend to his family as well...no harm, no foul. If, however, my dreams are once again giving me good advice, I think everyone will be in a lot of trouble and Jeremy will have a large part to play in the future. My advice is to hedge your bets. Either way, Jeremy is going to live a cool fucking life. Wager that Pascal, Franklins.

- That's what he told me, Dad, and I'm convinced. He's really convincing.
- You mean he's a nut!

David pulled his phone from his pocket, hit play, and Frontier Psychiatrist by The Avalanches played. "He's a nut / He's crazy in the coconut"

- Hold on, you followed Jeremy to a high school party? Who *are* you?
- I'm David. And I want your son.

Chapter 3:

The question was asked in '08 - Is America ready for a black president? - and it was answered for eight years with a resounding "No." That is why it was an earth-shaking surprise when Evelyn Weiman, a black Republican from Minnesota, became the President of the United States immediately following the first black president.

It was without question; America was nowhere near ready for her.

Chapter 4:

Two weeks after Evelyn's election, the various patriot groups and loosely affiliated militias agreed that the new civil war - i.e., the old civil war - needed to go hot. They did not, however, agree on who was to set it ablaze. Given their druthers, they would all prefer to go second.

There were half-hearted attacks, insurgent bombings, but mostly incompetent occupations. The overarching plan - the one that would overthrow the illegitimate government and restore power to the hands of the people/create a theocracy - could only succeed with the military on their side. So far, though they'd received some overtures, it wasn't looking likely.

Townships from Eastern Washington to Central Texas to every square inch of South Carolina proudly backed sheriffs, declaring them the highest law, by some unknown clause in the Constitution, or maybe the Declaration of Independence, no one knew.

It came as a surprise to most, just how many sheriffs believed that sheriffs were the ultimate arbiter of Justice. Standoffs between Sheriffs and any representation of the Federal Government - mainly Post Offices in small towns - erupted from the cracks in the Union.

In Rawlins, Wyoming, Sheriff Dean Templeton shut down interstate 80 for 8 hours. The standoff ended before the National Guard was fully deployed. It took only eight hours to discover how important I80 was to same-day shipping. Templeton lost any and all public support. An MNN poll showed 32% of voters supported the death penalty for treason.

In Newsom, Arizona, Sheriff Dean Wedelen, owner of fourteen cowboy hats, and counting, led his deputies to the City Hall building. They handcuffed the city council to their desks and the mayor to his office chair. They wheeled mayor Peter Dew to the center of the meeting hall, recording the entire scene. Sheriff Wedelen stood next to mayor Dew, steadying him with a beefy hand.

- By the power vested in me by the United States Constitution, I hereby depose you, Dew. I demand you officially relinquish all power and transfer all titles to me, Sheriff Dean Wedelen of Carbon County.
- What the fuck are you *talking about*, Dean?! You *ass*! Why are you doing this?

Deputy Dean Wedelen Jr., no relation, helpfully chimed in.

- Because we elected a n-
- Dean, we said in the meeting that we weren't going to say that! Keep the quiet part quiet.

The sheriff turned away from his deputy. He spoke directly into the camera.

- We are declaring our independence from this illegal government. Evelyn is a tyrant and a monster and we do not recognize her authority. To all true patriots out there, now is the time to rebel. We have endured too much... uh... we have endured too much dishonor from this illegal government! Rise up! Begin the fight!

Deputy Dean Wedelen jr. immediately uploaded the video. In an hour, it had millions of views. Sheriffs Dean Raleigh and Dean McNeigh of Fort Stockton, TX and Argent, WV, respectively, heard the call and sprung to action. Sheriff Raleigh had his deputy live stream their overthrow attempt. Shakycam footage, shot on a smartphone, showed Raleigh shuffle stepping with his gun brandished. He narrated the action in his Texan accent, wheezing breaths punctuating his affected guttural tone. His chest heaved in and out, even through his excitement at the culmination of all of his beliefs and his newfound freedom to unleash impulses that were barely below the surface anyways, he thought,

- Sheriff Dean is

- Let's Do Thiiiiis! Let's! Do! This! I am gonna kick This. Door. In!

Having also seen the video, the city police stationed inside the city hall building had barricaded the front door. Knowing Sheriff Raleigh was very capable of shooting a doorknob, they took no chances. Every file cabinet in the building blocked the main entrance, ensuring the entryway was Sheriff-proof. Inside, they heard muffled thunks followed by loud cursing followed by three gunshots followed by more cursing followed by two more gunshots. When they felt the energy outside ebb, one of the officers leaned out of the window and called to Raleigh.

- Hey buddy, you done out there?

Raleigh's deep breaths could be heard echoing through the courtyard. They eventually slowed in frequency and when they were gone completely, he responded.

- You guys want to come out and reckon with the future? This government is unelected and illegitimate! We are declaring our independence!
- Dean... independence from what?
- We must take back our country! Do not stand in our way!
- Wait, are you taking it back or are you declaring independence?
- Sometimes you have to destroy a government in order to restore it.
- Why again?
- Because President Evelyn is a n-
- Hey Dean, we're livestreaming this, remember?
- Because President Evelyn is a tyrant!

From the window came an exhausted voice.

- Dean... I know for a fact you *voted* for her.

- Well... I couldn't vote for a Democrat.

At that, all of the revolutionary energy dissipated. The Sheriff and his deputies lowered their guns. The livestream cut out.

Similar events broke out in thirty other counties. There were loud declarations of independence, short standoffs, and, inexplicably, no arrests.

Sheriff Wedelen, however, was determined in a way the others were not. He escalated his coup to a full-on hostage crisis. He directed his deputies to handcuff themselves to the city council members so they would have human shields at all times. The deputies all agreed this was a great idea.

Mayor Dew was not charmed. Sheriff Wedelen had been a nuisance from the day he was elected. He had attempted to intimidate members of the city council to increase his budget by inundating them with petty citations. In general, Dew thought he was an asshole.

- Dean, this has got to stop. Just... please stop this. I don't know what you think you are doing, but... Dean, she hasn't even been *inaugurated* yet.

Wedelen leaned in close to Dew's face, their noses almost touching. Dew jerked his head away.

- Jesus, Dean, you smell like cat shit.
- *You* smell awful. You smell like *catshit*, Dew.

Dew called out to the deputies, ignoring Wedelen entirely.

- Guys, come on now. Put down your guns. We'll tell them it was all his idea, because of course it was, and we'll just pretend it didn't even happen. We'll say the video was a joke that got out of hand. It's not even that big of a deal, honestly.

Wedelen raised his shotgun like an axe then brought it down, smashing the butt of his gun into Dew's wrinkled forehead. Bone cracked. Peter Dew crumpled to the floor. The deep thud of a two hundred and fifty pound man on hardwood flooring was followed by a stunned silence. The noise woke everyone from their dreamstate. The deputies suddenly felt as if they were reenacting a civil war that never happened. They felt exposed. They were embarrassed; too embarrassed to do any more harm, but also too embarrassed to speak out.

The silence lasted for hours. Theirs eventually became the longest and last remaining standoff. As such, the amount of law enforcement and media grew larger, surrounding the building. They outnumbered the would-be freedom fighters by a factor of fifty. Surrounding the media were protesters holding up signs both clever and profane, "More Like Civil Bore!", "Go Home Wedelen -You're Drunk" "Yosemite Sam For Sheriff" "I shot the sheriff but I did not shoot his deputies" "I hate self-checkout" "Don't Dew It" "The Constitution? I don't think it means what you think it means" "I took over city hall and all I got was this lousy protest" "Legalize it" "I just work here!"; signs with pictures of a swastika on a sheriff's badge and endless memes.

More than a few of the cops surrounding the building previously expressed support for just what Wedelen was doing, but now, seeing the reality, they weren't impressed.

Three representatives from the various agencies on-site simultaneously barked commands through garbled bullhorns, rendering all three unintelligible. They then turned their bullhorns on each other, yelling different versions of "You're out of your jurisdiction, we are in charge here". Again, they were unintelligible. Realizing they couldn't understand anything yelling at the same time, they waited politely for the others to speak. Then, like trying to get out of the way of a stranger on the sidewalk juking one direction only to find they have gone the same way, they



paused then spoke at the same time again. A few rounds of this ensued until the FBI representative got fed up and screamed for everyone to shut the hell up.

As the commotion continued outside, the deputies inside looked at each other nervously. None of them wanted to be the first to give up, afraid to lose the respect of their peers. Finally, Deputy Dean took charge.

- Sheriff. It's time to stop. We don't have a chance here. We lost. It's over. Take the cuffs off.

The deputy freed himself and his hostage. The other deputies followed suit. Sheriff Wedelen looked down at his bloody gun, the comatose mayor. He uncuffed himself. He freed the mayor. He unloaded his guns, dropping the shells one by one to the ground.

- Boys. Well. I guess we *are* done.

He backed away from the Dew's unconscious body slowly, then ran to the rear door. He held his gun up, pointed straight in front of him. He kicked open the door and charged the crowd. The surrounding officers were so surprised they opened fire. After the shooting stopped, Sheriff Dean Wedelen lay dead. The building behind him was so riddled with bullet holes, a clear silhouette of his body could be seen.

Sheriff Dean was the first, and last, to die in the Second American Civil War.

## Chapter 5:

They mingled at the costume orgy. It was *the* orgy, a must-attend.

Primarily a networking event for the attendees, the orgy part... most were just going through the motions. The video game streamer VictoristAslan said, "If you've been to one org, you've been to them all; you can't swing a dick without hitting a dick at those things. It's not the 70s anymore, folks."

The costume theme this year was Disney. Most of the women were either Jasmine or Belle; all of the men were the Robin Hood that was a fox. The costumes cost thousands of dollars. They were all made by the same man, who worked year round making them. There were so many attendees and suits took so long to make, he finished the last suit of the year the day before, and started the first of next year's suits the day after. Elias was the best and this was *the* orgy.

Elias' best suits - his masterpieces - were reserved every year for eight particular men. These eight men literally ruled the world. Only those at the orgy knew this titanic fact, and all swore fealty to The Eight.

It was The Eight who hosted the orgy. The yearly orgy was the day the attendees reaffirmed their loyalty. They hated it. They hadn't enjoyed it since the 70s. But it was tradition and tradition is paramount. Tradition and ritual.

The orgy was instituted after a long conversation with Jack Parsons and it was meant to serve the dual purpose of reaffirmation and the summoning of an elemental. After 30 years without elementals, they dropped the rituals and stuck with tradition.

The Ceremony of Devotion was held at the conclusion of the orgy. The theory being that loyalty was best reinforced by humiliation. When sweat - along with other things - dripped from every head to every toe. When self-awareness returned and at least a small amount of shame rippled

through the crowd, that was when they knelt in front of eight men wearing goat heads. They pledged death before betrayal, pledging their very soul.

This, too, had become stale. Results diminished with every repetition. Even orgies - perhaps especially orgies - turn banal. And as far as humiliation goes, one can only be ashamed of flop and flab for so long.

Though the event was now defined by its apathy, there was an even darker cloud this year. The Eight were projecting their dour mood, permeating the collective.

When the ritual concluded, the eight men retired to their private study.

They sat around an obsidian, octagonal table. They set their respective goat heads on the table, directly in front of their seats.

- Honestly, this took me by surprise. I'm more impressed than mad. How is she pulling this off?
- Does it matter? She is now the most dangerous threat we've ever faced.
- Don't be so dramatic.
- I agree with the drama thing, but I also agree she has to go.
- The gun looneys almost did it for us.
- No. They didn't. They never had a chance. I get they had step 1, but violent coup is the easy part. What then? They don't know how to rule. Imagine those morons managing garbage pickup! Their ideal society is contradictory nonsense and if we weren't here they'd eat each other alive.
- They were having fun, there's no need to be so *harsh*, Van Doren.
- We're bickering then?

- Not anymore-
  - -you ruined it-
  - -dick.
  - I would like to see what she's going to do next.
  - My God, VD. Do you have a school girl crush?
  - Terry, literally every-
  - -don't include me-
  - -one hates you.
  - Oh. I thought you were going to say something else. Yes, everyone hates you Terry.
  - Please put your metaphorical and literal dicks back in your robes and let's move forward.
- Idiots. How do we get rid of her?
- Grab the book. What number are we on?
  - 233.
  - Odd then. Total is 8. Is it a prime number? I feel like we've had a bunch of primes recently.
  - Gimme a sec...Yes, it's prime. My son just searched it.
  - Did you just...text him... from your smartphone... asking him to search... on his smartphone...then texted you back... a text you read on the very same smartphone?
  - Odd even prime, then. What's odd even prime?
  - It's mind control. We're doing mind control again.

- I'm serious. I don't want to kill her. I think she's *fun*. And I think she's good for us. We're *stale*. I'm *bored*. This orgy *sucked*. Let's have some fun for once in the past twenty years. What do we have to lose, honestly?
- VD. The rule during odd, even, prime is lose anything, lose everything. Odd even prime is high stakes.
- Hell yes! That's more exciting! I'm pumped about this. We've barely had to try since Reagan! Besides, watching Terry get humiliated on a daily basis is ambrosia.
- You're right. I say she lives.
- Yup.
- Me, too.
- You twits will reap what you fucking sow, you hear-
- -Aye.
- Aye.
- Aye. OK. 7 to 1. She lives.
- We can't do nothing, though. Terry isn't the only one embarrassed by her betrayal. We need to put her on blast.
- Oh for fucks' sake. Did you text your son for that slang?
- We send the assassin.
- Really? We're on mind control, remember? What's the point in sending him. His expertise is what makes him valuable... *and that's in his mind*.
- No, not him. The ugly one.
- That moron? He's a fucking...*mascot!*

- *You're* a fucking mascot!
- ...what?
- Shut up. That was funny. I thought it was funny.
- ...
- ...
- ...
- Yea, send him. He's perfect.
- He's going to be a warning shot, right? You're not double-crossing me?
- Double-cross isn't until even even cube. Then we're all gonna get weird.
- He's a warning shot.
- 100%
- Ok. Well, I can't really trust any of you. I mean, Terry's such a piece of shit. Are you going to kill her, Terry?
- I don't know, VD. Am I?
- Bunch of toddlers you are, whatever. I don't have any interest in continuing this line of conversation. Who sets everything up?
- I must, I suppose. It's the only way to be sure she lives.
- Fine. Everyone agree?

The eight men signaled their assent by placing their right hands on their respective traditional goat heads. One of the men spat on his hand first, signaling objection, but he was the only one. Silently, in turn, each man stood, walked to the study door. Before exiting, they lit one of eight candles set in a candelabra placed atop an ornate pedestal, then immediately put it out.

When seven men were gone, the last waddled to the fake-book filled bookshelves. He clenched his fist and visibly shook. When he could keep his emotions in no longer, he pulled an empty book, wearing Upton Sinclair's "The Jungle" book jacket, and tossed it on the ground. Then he grabbed fake "Pride and Prejudice" and did the same. He repeated this process until fake books covered the floor.

They would not see or speak to each other until their next scheduled meeting, The Eight's Annual Best Ball Golf Tournament.

## Chapter 6:

- Behold!

Jeremiah, born Harold Long, boomed at his followers.

*If you are going to start and maintain a cult, you better boom some “Beholds!” People join cults just for the “Beholds!” Crucial thing to do. I should write a book. How-To style book. Really, it’s already written for me. I’ll just rewrite one of those expose books and put a positive spin on it. Get rid of all that judgy stuff.*

- Behold! Again! The last days are upon us. I have received a vision!

Step 1: *God or Whatever must be speaking through you.*

- I have seen the end times. The end times are now! The time of the end will be... two years from now! Two years from this very second! Now it’s two years from five seconds ago. The countdown has begun!

Step 2: *Put a timer on it. Doomsday cult needs a doomsday. Two years is a good number.*

*Absolutely has to be an even number. An odd number would put possible cult members off. Ten years is too long. People will lose interest. There’s no sense of urgency. Six is no good. Six makes less sense than five, even though five is an odd number. The only odd number that acts like an even number is five. Three could work, too. Two years is the best though. It’s non-stop adrenaline when the wait is two years. I found that out while doing a two stretch for a B&E. It’s hard to do two years. You want to sleep but can’t. The days go slower and slower. And people are such dicks.*

- We must spend the time left in prayer, reflecting upon our sins and the sins of the world.

The sins that bring us this Reckoning.



Step 3: *Give it a name. Not Ragnarok.*

- Sins like greed!

Harold carried a recently acquired layer of fat around his still powerful frame. He was once Harold, holder of the record for longest shot put in NCAA Division 2 history. He dropped out of St. Alvernon in the first semester of his senior year. The day he dropped out just so happened to be the day before he was to be expelled. Harold was caught snorting coke in his dorm with his roommate and three freshmen - all of whom were undressed to some degree or other - Harold, of course, being entirely unencumbered. The campus cop busted through the door at speed. He fell. When he told the story he said that he came mere inches from a hospital visit due to an uncircumsized poke to the eye.

- We are to remove temptations from our flock, so that we may survive the end. He, capital H, has charged me with our finances! We must give our money to me, so we will be free of greed. We will not be seduced from our penitence!

Step 4: *Take the cash.*

- We must free ourselves from romantic attachments. God has judged us for all of the dirty, dirty sex we had. So we will free ourselves of lust. No sex. Which, I know, that's a real bummer. But it's God, and we gotta do it.

Step 5: *Channel sexual energy into service to the leader, i.e., Me.*

Harold was maimed in a car accident at twenty-four. The endless pelvic surgeries rendered him impotent. He couldn't tell anyone for obvious reasons; he had an ulterior motive for the forced celibacy.

- And finally, we must free ourselves from doubt. Both inside and *out!* That means we must rid ourselves of the doubt in our minds, and the influences that put it there. If your family asks you why you believe, you must rid yourself of them. There is total commitment... or *Death!*

*Step 6: Really lean into screaming about death.*

*Step 7: Isolate. Isolate. Isolate. With us or against us, no nuance whatsoever. Join or die. This is the big one. People will give up money and sex, everyone both loves and resents those.*

*Everyone's been through a little celibacy for longer or shorter; everyone's been a little pissed off to see a happy couple; everyone's been broke - everyone cool anyways - and resented people who weren't; everyone has dreamed, at least for a second, of getting rid of those two things forever, of never having to worry about them again. Family, though, family is in-or-out time. For some, it's not even a thought - families can be families, so to speak - but for others, it's the last tether and the most important.*

*Remember Luke from last time. Luke pushed back. Luke told the flock about his family: six sisters - two older, four younger - about his mother, aunt, aunt, grandfather and great uncle, all living together in the house inherited from his grandmother. He said he would never let them go. That's fine. All you do is banish him. Everybody loves a good banishing; it's the "Behold!" of punishments. But Luke didn't stop there. Luke called "Jeremiah" a false prophet. He said that "Jeremiah" was trying to manipulate them, not save them. He said that "Jeremiah" had no more connection to God than T-Mobile had to cell service.*

*Step 8: Never allow insurrection of any kind. Punishment must be swift and severe.*

*Remember standing up to Luke, calling him a blasphemer (sp?). I stood up, shoulders back, strong, I was stronger then. I was taller then.*

*6'4 then, now I'm 6'3, but still.*

*Remember jabbing your finger into his chest, your other hand raised in the air behind you. I looked like Merlin casting a spell. They saw me shoot a bolt of lightning through Luke's chest. I damned his soul to Oblivion. They saw it.*

*Step 8.1: keep a taser up your sleeve.*

*Remember brandishing your hands above your head, acting like your fingers were weapons. I was really good in my high school's production of *The Tempest*, so it wasn't too hard.*

*Remember bellowing "Begone!" - "Begone" being almost as crucial as "Behold" - and pointing to each member, one-by-one, and each turned their back silently, like it was choreographed in advance. We didn't practice that, but it went off perfectly. After watching so many cult movies, I think people kind of have an instinct, or at least people who would join a cult, towards what they think is proper 'cult behavior'. Movies and TV have been really helpful in that regard.*

*Step 9: Give them what they want. Most everybody wants to be in a cult, really, when you think about it, so just give them what they need to be happy within that space.*

*Remember Ruth, when she asked, "How will it happen?" What a douchebag of a question. The obvious answer is, "How the hell should I know?"*

*Step 10: Always have an answer, even if it doesn't make any sense.*

*That's maybe more of a Pro Tip.*

*Pro Tip: Always have an answer, if the answer doesn't make sense, don't worry, they just wanted to hear sounds in a comforting tone. Answers are noise.*

- So long as your commitment remains steadfast and pure, the horseman - horseperson, sorry - of death will pass us by.

*Formerly Step 11, now Step 10, also the last step which makes the most sense: Choose. Do you live or die in the apocalypse? What type of doomsday cult will you be? In short, we drinkin' poison, or what? This is counter to Step 9: Give them what they want. This is the big one. This is where you tell them what you want. This is the moment. What you choose will determine what type of cultist you're attracting.*

*Choosing to "transform" or whatever word that means you knock off, will draw - and no one really knows exactly why this is - a much cooler cultist. All of the best artists want to see the apocalypse but have no intention of living through it; the apocalypse will be stunning and beautiful in its way, but damned if we're going back to pre-indoor-plumbing. The cultists that want to live through the apocalypse are really judgy; they tend to think that they deserve to live through the apocalypse because the apocalypse was caused by the people who deserve to die in the apocalypse.*

*Choosing to survive the apocalypse means you can postpone the grift indefinitely, though. If you choose to die, you gotta die sometime - Step 9: Give them what they want - so that's a pretty big commitment. Do you really want to die? Or do you want to give endless worship and adoration a try? Think on this fact; you can always switch to death cult, but you can't switch back. In this one perfect instance, you literally cannot lose. So don't be an idiot.*

- To sum up! Give me your money! Quit fucking each other! I am the only person you can trust, if anyone disagrees, remove them from your life... forever! And if we succeed, then we will live through the tribulations to come. If we don't follow these commandments,

then we will perish with the non-believers. And, I hate to repeat myself, the only way we keep this cult running is with your continued monetary support. Let's go... I can take a check. And that check will save you.

*Follow these steps and you, too, can start a cult.*

*Or you could join mine.*

*Join me.*

*Only I love you.*

*Only I can save you.*

*For \$49.95, we have a special going this week.*

## Chapter 7:

From David's tapes : Jeremy 2.12 : Monologue while replacing the transmission of a red Toyota Camry : Whatcha thinkin' Earth?

Ok. So what would Earth say if it could talk? It would obviously say, "Hello / is it me you're looking foooooor?" but then what? Maybe he'd be like,

Guys - persons, sorry - quit it! I'm serious. You are not Biggie. You are not ready to die. You persons always, always do this. Do you know how annoying it is to be the member of the group who's always doing the I-told-you-so's? I don't want to be that member of the group! You know how you get all pissy when I say I-told-you-so? Well if you'd take the advice I give you *before* you go and do some dumb shit, then I wouldn't have to say it, now would I? You bring this on yourself. I'm the collateral damage and that's not fair. If you keep going, I'll be hideous. *For awhile*. Cause eventually, I'll be *fine*! And the last thing I'll say as *you* folk kick the bucket is "I told you so!". And then, when you're gone? I'll find myself new friends. I'll join a bowling league.

That may be paraphrasing, yes. But I think I'm one hundred percent right.

Well, Maybe not. I just expect more from Earth, you know? What would you say?

Oh, this is fun. Been awhile since I've had a good reboot, you understand? Unlike Spider-man - zing. Everything gets stale after a while. Everything. Life especially. See, the bummer for you is time. I am totally alive, right? And I could communicate with you for sure if you weren't dead so fast. I'm 5 billion. Do you know, relatively - and since we're out here in space, relativity is relevant - speaking, you exist in one billionth of a

second to me. You try talking to something that blips into and out of existence faster than you can *perceive*! Call me an unfeeling god? I'm out here just... *old*.

How are you talking to me?

You are talking to yourself, don't worry, that is a normal thing a lot of people do

How do you know?

I'm just trying to be nice. I'm 5 billion years old. I don't care either way.

Will you miss us?

*\*maniacal laughter\** No.

Wow, you really don't like us.

No. You don't like you.

Oh right, right.

Hey though, how about you're the douchebag, huh? Maybe you've been prejudiced against us from the start. Maybe you should accept some responsibility for all of *\*gestures towards everything\** this. We show up here - not our fault, we didn't ask to be born - and you cover everybody in, I don't know, whatever, and we're all just supposed to *not* kill each other?

Smallpox is a better example. Ooo, no! Malaria! No, Mosquitoes! No, Men... but in a general way! That's on *you*. We didn't come up with smallpox. Sure, we turned it into a weapon, but hey, that's still on you. If you weren't such shit, we wouldn't have had to learn how to use tools. If you had been fully furnished, maybe we could've done better for each other.

Fair enough, though. We *do* have a foundational myth pointing out how we're too stupid to enjoy paradise. You may be right. Maybe we're just wackadoo.

We should get counseling.

When we're gone, I just want you to know, I want you to be happy. I want you to remarry. Love again. We took you for granted. That's so us.

I told you so.

Getting real sick of your shit, Earth.

\*END\*



## Chapter 8:

David alone is David watching reality TV. Reality TV is made for people with too many thoughts, in order to help them decompress.

*Reality TV is the American version of Freudian therapy; everything is repressed something, and everyone is full of shit. It's some sort of EMP for higher thought. Get within its area of effect and find your brain in the off position until the - I don't know - half-life? Is that a thing with EMP's? No. Never mind. Until the circuit breaker is turned off and on again? Works with computers...whatever. All I say was that movie where the handsome people steal all the stuff and everyone is handsome and then they all live happily ever after until they come out of retirement for one last job - never do one last job. Why does everyone do one last job? If you're a week away from retirement, try using your sick days, right? Or personal days. Whatever you do, do not take one last job. Definitely don't train your replacement. You'll be replaced! Duh. I didn't do any of my homework senior year of high school, I was a whole year away from retirement (from school) and I didn't do a God. Damn. Thing.*

*True, I didn't graduate, so there is an argument to be made that closing strong is a good idea.*

*Then again, I wasn't murdered tragically, either.*

*Which is better? The world may never know.*

David had too many thoughts.

His favorite genre was

two-to-four-dudes-probably-family-who-build-custom-\_\_\_\_\_-and-have-to-make-a-custom-\_\_\_\_\_-for-some-random-rich-guy-but-they're-running-behind-so-they-get-into-a-fight. He also appreciated the

six-to-ten-talented-\_\_\_\_\_’s-compete-to-make-whatever-fits-within-their-focus-but-they’re-unde  
 r-a-clock-so-it’s-not-always-the-best-who-wins game shows. He wasn’t a fan of  
 I-didn’t-come-here-to-make-friends shows; he preferred  
 high-stress-situational-bonding-plus-occasional-cooperation. He wept along with the other  
 contestants when someone was eliminated. He didn’t like crying due to the myriad stresses of  
 life, those tears are shed alone. When a talented \_\_\_\_\_ is eliminated, and five people onscreen  
 are weeping together, their bond he hoped would last beyond the short time it took to build, the  
 minor tragedy frees the tears that a major tragedy imprisons.

He never felt as open and vulnerable as he did when a chef looks down at what they’ve made,  
 realized that it was not only the reason they would lose, indeed, it was the worst dish they’ve  
 ever made in their entire life; they choked, and the moment will never be forgotten. It was like  
 watching the ghost equivalent of childbirth, gross and terrifying and, eventually, beautiful. In a  
 gross and terrifying way.

It occurred to him - long after it should have, in his opinion - *he* was a random rich guy.

He had to start with a vehicle. There were so many shows of the type; it would be both the  
 easiest to get on and a traditional spot to begin. The popularity of this genre began in the garage,  
 so should he.

*Wouldn’t it blow their minds if I got on the show and was like, “It’s a car/submarine already! I  
 want you to turn it into a car. Just a regular car. With really big subwoofers. So big.” Or that  
 car/airplane made by, I want to say, Chrysler? Jesus Chrysler, is that anything? Jesus Christler.  
 Nope, that’s more Hitler. Ok.*

*How about a motorcycle? Do I want a chopper? A beast! Some loud, masculine announcement of concrete existence. "I am here, wherever I am, you are a witness to my me-ness!" Take that and add neon lights to it. The ISS should see it. The goddam... I don't know...Glorbons better be able to see it.*

*Nope, that's like saying "I wish I was big." No truck. Same reason.*

*Classic car, maybe classic car is best. One of the first two cars ever... the one that crashed into the other one. "Put it back together - I don't care that it no longer exists! Have you not heard the one about the ship? The ship is called Petunia or Naglfar, and over time, you have to replace each part or toenail until every part or toenail is replaced. Is it still the Petunia or Naglfar? Of course it is! This is the great teaching of physics. Matter is neither created nor destroyed and at the quantum level, everything was once everything else, and still is. Make the car, imbue the car with your spirit - just say it's the car - and it will be Petunia again. Yourself, myself, someone said that we replace every cell in our body every 7 years and maybe that's even true instead of something I half remember from an article I didn't read all the way through. And if it's true, then where does the matter from those dead cells go? It goes everywhere! The car is the car you say it is and you are who you say you are." Those guys will go nuts over that. Huge ratings from the fights, all the drama. Memes, so many memes. I'll be the new alien meme guy.*

*Or maybe I want a fish tank.*

He leapt into action, raiding electronics stores in nearby towns of all available recording equipment. He made submission tapes with ever increasing quality and budget, tailoring them to their intended audience.

Finally, he was chosen.

He was getting a van. It would be filled with cheap, shoddy, gaudy nonsense and have a high-quality decal of a unicorn stabbing another unicorn, drenched in rainbow-colored blood on the side door and it would be *boss*.

To prepare, he watched old episodes of the show. One stood out in particular. A gangly, ghostly blonde wearing a suit that made him look pixelated wanted a van made entirely out of the wood paneling he remembered from the glory days of the station wagon. He asked for it to reference the Spruce Goose. And he wanted it to float. And fly. When finished, it did not float or fly, nor did it resemble the H-4, but it was made entirely out of his nostalgic wood paneling, and it had a fantastic stereo. David felt an attraction to this effete dreamer. David thought he was pretty in a skinny white boy kind of way. He looked detached but not by choice; David saw a brief spark when the host pulled up in the eyesore. There was *something*. He was sad and David was attracted to sad. David needed to *fix* sad.

David's episode aired and it similarly attracted the attention of the owner of said wood-paneled van. The unicorn-encased van was so garish it projected intense yellow light that reflected off of David's eyes, making them look feline. David towered over the host and his can't-make-the-receding-hairline-work-anymore shaved head highlighted his dark brown skin, Cornelius Van Doren felt he had no choice but to call the producer and get David's info. It was five minutes from the moment he desired David, to the moment he texted him. It helped that he owned the network.

David's text thread:

UNKNOWN: Hi, David. How are you? Can we talk???

Normally, David would delete any text from an Unknown number without bothering to read it; by accident he checked the banner and his heart rate immediately spiked.

*Does whoever, whomever, whatever not know this is the most terrifying text? Three question marks, three! Are you insane?! Is this an automated robo text meant to drive people insane? Is this a viral ad for STI testing? What kind of monster would do this?*

David stared at his phone, unable to move, struggling to process what he was reading. He mentally cycled through his metaphorical rolodex, trying to deduce what ex or unprotected sex partner this could be. Then he ranked the possible STI's he could have and experienced psychosomatic symptoms as he named each one. Made his groin itch.

*Hell, everybody has HPV, no big deal there. Jesus, what are the ones that you can't cure? Is syphilis still a thing? Am I going to lose my nose? I love my nose.*

Van Doren, checking and rechecking his phone, reading and rereading his text, eventually realized what he had done.

UNKNOWN: Oops!!! Sorry, David. I've got a wood-paneled van! I'm Cornelius Van Doren

ME: You have the van? THE van? THAT VAN?!!

UNKNOWN: Yes. It's my van.

David didn't appreciate Van Doren's usage of punctuation.

ME: Can I see it

UNKNOWN: I don't know where I put it.

ME: ???

UNKNOWN: I don't know where I put it.

ME: I get that for sure yea

ME: But wtf are you talkin about?

ME: Willis

UNKNOWN: I don't know.

ME: You don't know what?

UNKNOWN: I don't know where I put it!

ME: Put what?

ME: haha

HANDSOME VAN CORN: The van.

ME: All right dude

ME: Whatever

ME: What's up then?

HANDSOME VAN CORN: How's your van?

ME: Looooove it! I know where it is

ME: It's on the street!

HVC: I'm not good at this. Hi. I saw you on TV.

ME: Yea, no shit

HVC: and I would like to take you out to dinner.

ME: Uh... whut?

HVC: Let's get food.

HVC: This conversation has been quite the struggle.

HVC: lol.

Van Doren watched the ellipses roll in and out of existence.

He was nervous. That he was nervous made him nervous. He felt it unbecoming of the obscenely rich. Then he remembered his friends and realized unbecoming conduct was the conduct of the obscenely rich. It was one of the chief luxuries. His anxiety was quickly replaced with a naive excitement. He was 42 with a teenage crush. His first crush, really. Bred to be an oligarch, he was infused at birth with a necessary detachment. No child is born without a heart. That is why the rich are raised to fear it, and to fear anyone who starts in on those notions. In its way, simply waking up wealthy is heartless.

The ellipses stopped.

Van Doren told himself that that was no big deal. The ellipses always stop before the message comes through, *duh*. The text and the ellipses cannot be onscreen simultaneously. He merely needed to wait for his phone to vibrate and ding like the unanswered bell in front of an obnoxious hotel check-in clerk.

It dinged. Obnoxiously.

From Van Doren's text thread:

ME: lol

Unicorn Dave: ...hmmm

Unicorn Dave: hmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm

UD: Where at?

ME: I have a sushi place in Tokyo. 3 Michelin stars. The chef is a personal friend. Serf.

Whatever. Lolol.

UD: First date sushi

UD: basic...

UD: ...

ME: Uhm. So?

Van Doren watched the ellipses' appear, and again he felt nervous. This time, though, he was in a much more confident place mentally; he couldn't help but feel in the stronger position. He was flexing on Dave with his sushi chef. It is an understatement to say not many people can do that. What's being wealthy except one giant flex?

David, for his part, was considering the offer. He didn't appreciate the flex. Van Doren flaunting his wealth was a dick move as far as David was concerned. But he wanted to see that van, and he had dealt with rich people like this before. All you have to do is flatter them for five or ten minutes, let them talk for two hours, and get a free meal. Simple.

From David's text thread:

HVC: Uhm. So?

ME: .... so.

ME: I'm gonna see that fuckin van

ME: Japan huh? For real?

HVC: Yes.

HVC: Would you like a ride?

ME: Really? And risk being trapped there with a possible mass murderer?

ME: Or war-crimer

ME: Or Jimmy Buffet fan.

HVC: Are we playing two truths and a lie?



HVC: lol.

ME: hahahaha you're 100% going to kill me.

ME: Whatever! Send the address.

ME: I'll meet you there.

ME: Next wed?

Van Doren was excited to be excited. Everything felt easy again. His boredom lifted like the morning fog; minute-by-minute his vision became clearer and he finally felt like he could chart a path forward. That path included David, for whatever reason, all he had to do next was take a step.

Cornelius Van Doren hired a private detective to track down his wood-paneled van. When the detective returned four days later, he told Van Doren that the van was sold. A Saudi prince had purchased it to fill the room he dedicated to National Lampoon's Family Vacation. This left Van Doren with only three days to convince the Saudi prince to give him the van, pick it up, then send it to Japan so he could show it off to David.

The fact that this scenario resembled something one might see on a reality show did not escape Van Doren; it delighted him to no end.

Utilizing his vast resources - only barely hyperbolic to call them infinite - Van Doren successfully maneuvered his pieces and, three days later, he drove up to the sushi restaurant in a disgusting, wood-paneled van. The valet took his keys and took the van to an automated parking garage. When the process was complete, the wood-paneled van sat snugly next to one with a garish unicorn.

Van Doren treated David to a night of the kind normally reserved for dreams.

He had seen a movie once where the wealthy pursuer cleverly shed all bourgeois trappings, and made a humble, home-cooked meal for his guest. Demonstrating that, beneath it all, they were the same.

Van Doren did not subscribe to that. He did the exact opposite. He treated his paramours to the life he was born into. He ratched up bourgeois trappings to their apotheosis. He wanted to demonstrate that - beneath it all - he was a powerful, powerful man. He would not allow a moment's confusion on that fact.

For most, it was intoxicating to be close to someone who can wield money like a god, creating pleasure and plague out of thin air; David ignored all of it. He was busy talking. Van Doren, to his pleasant surprise, listened. Van Doren listened to everything. He nodded, he laughed, he clapped his hands in delight. When appropriate, he made sympathetic noises. He awww'd, and ooo'd, and oh no'd! He paid attention.

What intoxicated David was Van Doren's intensity. When he applied the full force of his focus, Van Doren could block out any undesired input. He made David the object of that focus and David felt like the only person in the world. It was easier for him than usual, partly because he was finally alive after years of malaise, and partly because David's speed and dialect were such that he could barely get a word in edgewise had he wanted to. David's voice, too, was a rich tenor; he was not unlike a tall John Legend.

They spent the night together in Van Doren's unconscionably expensive penthouse atop an apartment building in downtown Tokyo. David talked nearly the whole night.

When the sun rose, the Tokyo skyline casting long rectangular shadows over the sofa cushions splayed out as a makeshift bed, the two awoke surprised to find out they must have fallen asleep

at some point. Neither could remember doing so, but after a quick glance about, they deduced that however the night ended, it was thoroughly unchaste.

The sober morning did nothing to dispel the enchantment. The connection was clear, even without the whiskey ginger lubrication. They felt incomplete, now, if they weren't touching in some way. They took turns waking up, fondly staring at the other sleeping, then falling back asleep. One such time, Van Doren looked over at his new... *something*... and thought to himself, *What a turnaround! Two weeks ago, I was miserable at the Worst. Orgy. Ever! And now I'm in love! Don't freak out, don't freak him out, don't mess this up, we need this, Cornelius, we can do it.*

## Chapter 9:

Evelyn sat behind a Presidential-looking desk, in a well-decorated room that was nevertheless obviously a bunker. She was bathed in that specific yellow light that only exists in bunkers.

She wore a charcoal black suit, low cut, with a black-and-white geometric patterned blouse that accentuated her dark brown skin. She allowed herself one flourish, two blinding silver earrings, thick and kinetic, blessing her face with perfect light. She resigned herself to the compromise of it; she preferred to be more unapologetic. She wanted to wear a wrap and something sleeveless.

Unfortunately, she could not. Just because America elected a black woman didn't mean they were ready for *that* - maybe never would be.

She looked directly into the camera and spoke; it is not an exaggeration to say the entire world listened - for obvious reasons. It's not so much that people thought it was impossible for a black woman to become president, in fact, most people thought it was inevitable. But in 2016 "inevitable" really meant "in the long distant future."

Today, I greet the world for the first time as the President of the United States.

Before I continue, I must first address the events of yesterday. The fears of so many were almost realized by the actions of one man. I would be lying to you if there wasn't a part of myself that expected it. It would not be the first time that

progress for African Americans has been slowed by the actions of white supremacists. Indeed, white supremacy is baked into our nation. We all know this on one level or another. Some see this threat and seek to fight it, many more ignore

it, deny it, insist it never was, or even cheer it on.

But yesterday is an example of a deeper truth: *they will not win*. We move forward.

We have marched and trudged and slogged and crawled for 400 years and no matter how hard they try, *we move forward*.

I am reminded of the words of Audre Lorde: “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never allow us to bring about genuine change.” I have thought on this quote for many years; today I am proud to rebut her. Today, I say to all of you: Those tools are *not* the master’s tools. This is *not* the master’s house. This is *our* house. These are *our* tools.

A man *stole* everything from us and *called* himself the master. We have no master.

Two days ago, when they finished writing the speech, Shannon Tanners, her incoming Secretary of Defense, told her that anyone with half a brain would catch on at that line. Simply put, Republicans don’t quote Audre Lorde.

Evelyn’s resume included House Representative, Diplomat, Senator, and now President. She cultivated a reputation for frank confrontation, barbed humor, and unflinching conservative principles. This was her goal. She guessed, correctly, that the first woman president would be a Republican.

In a sense.

I was homeless at 14, not because I lost my home. I was homeless because my home was stolen from me long before I was born. I had no money because they *stole* it from my father and his father and his father before him. And yesterday, they meant to steal my *life*.

The enemies of progress know no race. That is true. But it's no coincidence that a majority of them are white. We Americans alive today did not create white supremacy, nor did we create the system. We were *all* born into it. We are not responsible for their cruelty. We are responsible for our actions *today*. Those who prop up this unjust system are responsible for the crimes committed *today*. Those who deny the system is unjust bear responsibility for that injustice *today*. Those who *admit* the system is unjust but do nothing, they too bear responsibility for injustice *today*.

When we who fight injustice look around the rest of America we see ourselves as outnumbered.

I see something else, too. What I see when I look around is confusion. I see a people living in a state of perpetual fear, I see the American people trying to write a new history every day, a people struggling to understand why we are where we are, and grasping on to whatever explanation *feels* good.

The blame for our situation is not shared equally. We do not share guilt, equally. What we share equally is *fear*. Whether the fear is based in reality or not, we are all in a state of constant anxiety. I see shivering masses afraid of corporate overlords and corporate overlords afraid of shivering masses. I see fearful bigotry and the fear of bigotry, sometimes on the same face.

She had her father until she was 8 and her mother until she was 14. That her story was not uncommon was offensive. She lived with her grandmother until 19. She conceived of the plan at 20. In essence, she was going to steal from the rich and give to the poor.

At 24, she added more steps.

I see one last thing - the thing that unites almost all of us - *we are all sick of this shit.*

Two days ago, Maya Burgos, Evelyn's Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, reminded Evelyn that, actually, some people, the very powerful ones, were absolutely not sick of "this shit," indeed, they were very invested in "this shit" remaining right where it is. Evelyn did not need this reminder. Maya had only known about the plan for two months. Evelyn had spent 20 years carefully honing it to perfection. *Of course* she knew.

*They were the targets for chrissakes'.*

Maya and Shannon and Evelyn wrote the speech in her soon-to-be-sold D.C. apartment only after performing a thorough sweep for cameras or bugs. They put their phones in the freezer. They changed clothes in front of each other. They took every precaution.

Evelyn had never shared the plan before. Maya and Shannon were the first two to know.

We have been force-fed *bullshit* for our entire lives. And I am *sick* of it. It ends *now*. It ends...*today!* Last night, I was officially sworn in as your President. This morning, I went to work.

Well... I'll be honest with you, I have been working on this for my entire career as a public servant. I would love to dramatically reveal the fruition of my plan, but unfortunately, considering my current location, I am not exactly in the loop. If not now, then soon, the news will break. I have done what I'm sure most of you believed impossible. There were times when I nearly lost my belief as well.

But here I am. Here we are.

Evelyn relished the suspense. She had worked so hard, for so long. For years she was abused with aggressions, micro- and otherwise, and slights, and racism ranging from so quiet it was almost imperceptible - almost - and racism so loud it could only come from the combined screams of millions of people across history.

In anticipation of her next line, Evelyn couldn't help but smile. Shannon said that politicians had said this type of thing so many times in the past, it would almost certainly get a laugh. Had she been able to deliver the speech to the mall as they planned, maybe she would've found out. As it was, there were no laughs in the bunker. In celebration, for the first time in her professional career, she dropped her code switch.

We got em, y'all.

No one knew what to make of that, until the news networks cut away from the speech. Evelyn got her wish; immediately after she said it, the news broke. Suddenly, they were broadcasting shaky footage shared on the internet. The clips were taken all over America. All followed the



same plot: a small crowd gathered around an unconscionably beautiful residence; a large number of heavily armed law enforcement; a writhing person wearing an unconscionably comfortable robe.

The networks cut back to Evelyn's speech

...to hold parties responsible for the bailout. That has always been my goal. In the years since, my predecessor has taken a lot of abuse from the Republican Party - to avoid riling them up, I shall just refer to him as He-who-shall-not-be-named - but there is one thing he's always had in common with Republicans, a refusal to hold the financial industry to account for their crimes. Everyone knows why and you would have to be very obtuse to find some other explanation. Which, as *almost* everyone knows, my Republican colleagues have.

I stayed true to my campaign slogan; I am *doing* it for you.

When I said I have been working on this for my entire career, I am not referencing my voting record. As a lawyer, as a House member, as a Senator, I voted for legislation that relaxed regulations, I voted to keep corruption legal, I voted against my principles, the ones you elected me for having. Unfortunately, that had to happen for me to get here.

While those votes and events were taking place, I was also doing something else. I investigated and documented every criminal act by every executive and trader and

lobbyist and liar.

And we got em.

I did it *for* you.

I did it for *you*.

Maya and Shannon were incredulous upon Evelyn's reveal. Evelyn had a record as one of the most conservative congresspersons, ever. They did not believe her. They didn't believe this was possible. They thought, to put it simply, that she was fucking with them.

She showed them the evidence. When they saw, they knew why every precaution was taken. In essence, she planned to rewrite the global economy in one night.

Shannon thought that was bold of her, and, considering the very public assassination attempt and minor revolt that occurred the day after she was elected, that she would smarter off jumping in front of a train, or jumping off a skyscraper, or going back in time to mine coal, or going to a watering hole to poke Hippos with a crudely made wooden spear.

Or, Shannon went on to suggest, she could get into a dunk tank with acid instead of water and have her collected enemies - the number of which was incalculable - throw balls at the target until she melts piece by piece.

Or, Shannon added, she could amass the world's largest collection of killer bees, put them in an enclosed room, just large enough to house the entirety of the bees plus one person, and then get inside while playing Bon Jovi on the radio - a band killer bees *also* despise.

Maya raised her arm, palm flat, looking like she intended to slap the President-Elect, then froze, tried to laugh and found no voice. Hunger pangs flashed; she felt like she might vomit. She mouthed "What the fuck..." to no one in particular.

Evelyn beamed at them. The shock on their faces was Evelyn's creation and she was proud.

I can already hear the howls of my many and varied detractors. I can see in my mind the scared faces of an American people that dream of accountability for the powerful, but have no hope they will see it. I can see confusion written in 100-foot tall letters in the sky. To that I say, I understand your fears, I understand your trepidation, I understand your confusion, but honestly... *don't worry about it.*

The choice was clear. To allow them to continue destroying not just our nation, but the *world*? No. They have to be stopped. They rip life from beneath us, and they doom our children to die on an uninhabitable desert planet.

It's as if oil companies want to live on *Dune*.

It is 2016, and we are *almost* there. Today, we change the course of history. Today, we begin to repair the damage they've done.

Evelyn explained her plan to de-gaslight America: she would tell as close to the truth loudly and repeatedly and ignore any criticisms until enough people believed enough in reality to have a productive conversation. After that, they could get started on nuance. Until then... "keep it simple."

She had only one argument:

- This is our last chance to do *something*. We've reached the edge of the abyss. So we might as well go all-in. *No* half-measures. *No* compromises. We are in a bad situation right now, but *it could absolutely be worse*.

We are left with three options in America: We can die, we can delay, or we can win. We can do what we're doing and die, we can change a little bit and delay, or we can change everything and win.

I was raised to think winning was America's greatest export, and yet all I've seen America do in my lifetime is lose. Lose wars, lose rights, lose hope.

I don't lose. I haven't lost an election - I haven't even lost a *fight*, isn't that right, Martia?

- and I'm not about to lose to the worst criminals on the planet.

It's time to do what needs doing - like what Martia needed.

We are about to find out what the President of the United States can really do, because unlike other Presidents, I'm not about to get my ass kissed or kicked by slimy oil executives or bankers or lobbyists or whomever else wants to manipulate the system in favor of the few over the many.

My fellow Americans, Jesus said the meek will inherit the Earth.

They're about to.

Shannon advised against this part of the speech, reasoning that, because America has a long history of absolutely *hating* the meek, Americans wouldn't respond well to the suggestion that the meek might *actually* inherit the Earth - especially Christians, most of whom were of the opinion that, yes, the meek *will* inherit the Earth, just not, you know, *now*.

But, with more faith than certainty, Evelyn explained that it was a damn good line to end on - very action movie - and that, deep down, everyone felt meek. Everyone felt under attack. But, in

her estimation, only the genuine would respond to it. The liars would scoff. The powerful would howl with rage.

The meek would cheer, maybe even do a fist pump; she thought it was a simple way to weed some chaff.

Most importantly, she was relying on the answer to a question never polled: if billionaires lost their money and went to jail, how would you feel? She felt - correctly - the answers would range from “Fuck ‘em” to “That’s all?” and this was the type of bold, popular action that could acclimate people to her obvious overreach, convince them it’s a good thing, and by the time she announced reparations, they’d all be onboard.

## Chapter 10:

Evening News Broadcast Immediately Following The Speech:

Laura: We have just received a phone call from the owner of this channel, Terry McMillan, who is also inexplicably the Vice President of the United States. That such a thing is legal is insane to me. I would say more but he has threatened to fire me for saying any negative words to or about him. When I pointed out the massive conflict of interest to him, he locked me in a small box overnight. We are now joined by VP McMillan. Thank you for being on the show, Mr. Vice President. I do not mean that sincerely.

McMillan: I will put you back in that box, Laura, I swear to God. I hired you because I thought you were the *other* Laura Dern. Now let me talk, little lady.

Laura: Did you just call me “little lady” on national television?

McMillan. No I did not, and that is just like your sex to lie about me. That isn’t important, I know your type are easily distracted, so I will forgive you for the digression. What I am here to say is that the american people have lost faith in Evelyn Praetel. She must be removed from office immediately and by any means necessary.

Laura: The question was rhetorical, actually. You did call me a little lady and then followed it up, somehow, with worse. You do realize this is being recorded, right? There is video evidence of you doing everything I said.

McMillan: First, you should smile more. Second, and I’m gonna be a little on the nose here, but Reality is what I say it is. Third, delete these tapes. Never mind. Get her out of here. You know where to put her.

\*Three men walk in to frame. They take Laura out of the room. A tall blonde then takes Laura's spot behind the anchor's desk\*

McMillan: Good evening, Laura, I'm glad you could join us tonight.

Laura: Happy to be here, Vice President, hopefully soon President Terry. Please continue with what you have to say.

McMillan: You're too cute, Laura. As I was saying before I was rudely interrupted by that vicious woman, Evelyn Prattle must be removed from office, now. Permanently. By any means necessary. Did I say that? I want to be sure that everyone knows that I include violence in that.

Laura: I'm gonna go ahead and believe what you say is true, Mr. Vice President. But how do you react to the polls? After Evelyn arrested both financial criminals and war criminals, polls have consistently shown she has the highest approval rating of any president in history.

McMillan: Laura, I hate it when women ask stupid questions, it's very unladylike. Those polls are clearly fake. Again, to be on the nose, any poll that disagrees with what I say is Not. Real. Put the results of the poll I commissioned on screen.

\*The screen behind Laura shows a close up of a receipt. Handwritten on the receipt is "Approve - 2%" below that, "Disapprove 98%". The "Approve" is scratched out and underneath is written "Uninformed"\*

Laura: Are you at a restaurant, sir?

McMillan. No. I was earlier. That's where I conducted this poll of real Americans. The best place to do so is a restaurant, duh. Think, woman, think.

Laura: And how many people are in this sample?

McMillan: Me and my son.

Laura: That's a wonderful poll.

McMillan: I know, thank you for saying so. Please stop talking while I'm speaking, though.

Now, I cannot say this enough, Evelyn Prattle must be eliminated and I must take her place as President. When I do, I will be able to undo all of the damage she has done to our formerly perfect country.

Laura: And what exactly would you be undoing?

McMillan: Well, obviously, the first thing I will do is pardon all of the people she brutally arrested today and return their money to them. Then I will return their money, along with damages equal to the amount budgeted for Medicare. That will teach all of you about the value of things.

Laura: Wouldn't a lot of that money go to you, at least indirectly through all of your shell companies and offshore accounts?

McMillan: Yes, of course. That's the point. Are you slow? I will stimulate the economy by taking money from you people and giving it to myself. I have graphs and statistics to back this up. Show the picture.

\*The screen is replaced by a close-up shot of a scrunched napkin. Written on the napkin:

"Economists" below which was "Agree - 100%" which was next to "Disagree" surrounded by a red circle with a line through it\*

McMillan: Do you see now?

Laura: Yes, absolutely. I do. That's very illuminating, thank you sir. Will you do anything else?



McMillan. You're welcome, it's nice to help out a damsel in distress. And no, not really. One last thing before I go, if Evelyn is not removed from office, everyone *will* die. I can promise you that.

Laura: Uh. Sorry...is that a threat?

McMillan: Of course not, I would never threaten anyone. I'm asking you to do the smart thing and save yourselves. It will not be my fault what happens if you don't. Good bye, Laura.

\*Terry's split screen goes black. Cut to a wide shot of the studio\*

Laura: Quite a call to action, Mr. Vice President. By the way, my name is Denise and now we go to commercial.

## Chapter 11:

Morningstar limped down the cracked stairs in a dimly lit parking garage.

He was self-described as hideous and his name, “Morningstar” came from a former friend. The erstwhile friend said, “Your face looks like Satan’s asshole.”

His left leg was two inches shorter than his right. Though he wore corrective shoes, he walked with a limp out of habit. He was 5’9 on a good day and fat every day. He wore ill-fitting t-shirts and ill-fitting jeans and occasionally a bra.

He was born in Prague between 40 and 50 years ago. Beyond that, no information about him was known for sure.

The world agreed unanimously that he was the best assassin in it. No one knew who or how many people he assassinated. Most intelligence agencies assumed if an important person - however that is defined - dies, it was either old age or Morningstar. Or Lee Harvey Oswald.

The title of best assassin in the world comes with an invaluable privilege.

After so many failed assassinations and the brinkmanship that follows, the world needed a solution. What they settled upon was underwhelming. Perhaps befitting of governments taken over by middle-men, they agreed to a timeshare scheme of sorts.

The world’s governments reasoned thusly:

Assassinations are going to happen, like it or not.

On the whole, assassinations are better than all-out war.

If an assassination fails, it's probably going to lead to war.

It's in everybody's best interest if assassinations are always successful and always untraceable.

If everyone has the same assassin, everyone will know who did it, but no one will ask who is behind it.

This only works if the target *always* dies and no one *ever* knows for sure.

Or.

If *everyone* knows.

No one once considered seriously the idea of just *not* assassinating people.

Lt. Colonel Ty contacted Morningstar on behalf of the eight - of which seven remained - and arranged a meeting. They met at a hotel of the sort Morningstar frequented, though it was not the hotel he was staying in. When he traveled for work, Morningstar booked between eight and twenty small, mid-level suites at between five and thirteen hotels. He didn't sleep in any of them. Ty told him the target and he balked.

- I won't. Not for a billion dollars.
- Oh. Ok. That's no problem then.

Morningstar stood, assuming the conversation was over. He reached out to grab the handle when Ty affixed a computer chip to the nape of his neck. Morningstar was unsurprised. He had always assumed this type of thing would happen sooner or later. He worked for governments. He had no illusions about their ability to keep a promise. He felt a tinge of excitement. *How am I going to get out of this? And how am I going to kill this guy?*

The computer chip gave Ty complete control over Morningstar's body. Unfortunately, the chip did not control his mind, nor mouth.

- No fucking shi-
- -You're going to kill Evelyn.
- Yes, I *know*. ...*Dick*. I'm going to do whatever the fuck you tell me, duh. Why the hell would you do this to me if you weren't going to get complete control? If I have even a fucking *sliver* of control, I will use it to murder *you*. So your bosses or whomever will have already figured out fucking everything.

The computer chip was only the first step. Ty slapped it on like a kick-me sign. Then he had to give the injection. Until then, Morningstar could shout obscenities all he liked.

- You absolute moron. You fucking do prdcl Jdi do pici! I don't want to be the guy who says, do you know who I am, but do you fucking *know who I am!*
- Yes.
- Ty jses vul! I am going to kill you. Shoot me in the head right now or you *will* die. That's your only hope. I can guarantee you, I'm more valuable alive than you. And that means they've already given you to me. Shoot me now.
- I'll be fine.
- The fuck you will! I am the God of Fucking *Death!* I'm fucking *Czernobog!*
- Thought you were Morningstar.
- It's all the same shit, *kurva!*

Morningstar walked over and knelt in front of Ty. He extended his arm and pulled up his sleeve, offering his veins.

- You stupid piece of shit! Fucknuts! You fucking no-leg-day-doing son of a fat fucking whore.

Ty kept Morningstar at a distance, choosing to sidestep both the insults and the possible bites. He reached out with the syringe. He was rewarded for his caution; as he got close, Morningstar lunged and snapped his jaw like an alligator. Had Ty been nearer, he would be missing a fair chunk of his hand.

The serum worked in seconds. Morningstar was finally silent, no trace of disobedience in his face, no smouldering eyes to suggest some part of him was raging inside, nothing. He was an automaton.

And then...

Morningstar found himself in a dimly lit parking garage, limping down the stairs.

He had his bearings instantly. His first instinct was to feel disappointed in Ty. *Shoulda killed me, wouldn't've minded, honest. He was... laconic. I liked him.*

- I'm going to *kill* you, Ty.

The words echoed back. He attempted to take a step and realized that he was still helpless from the neck down. The serum had worn off, the chip remained.

- *Fuck* you, Ty.

His next thought was a doozy. He didn't remember it, obviously, but there was a high likelihood that he had just assassinated the President or, at least, the people who controlled him via remote had. He always succeeded - he was the best assassin in the world, natch - but at the same time, *he* didn't do anything, so it was a fifty-fifty shot they fucked it up somehow. Then again...

The title of “Best Assassin in the World” is not about skill or talent. It does not denote the *best* assassin in the world, only the assassin who will always succeed in assassinating the target. The only way to guarantee that an assassin will always succeed is to stay out of the way, if not outright help.

Morningstar was not especially talented. He was, however, very ugly. The world’s nations really liked that in an assassin. They hired him to do their dirtiest business; they wanted him to *be* dirty; to *be* grimy; to be the disgusting, *hideous* murderer straight from a slasher flick. They - the powers that be, whomever they are at any given point in time - figured that, when involved in an immoral act, it is easier to feel morally superior to your partner if your partner is unattractive. Presidents and dictators and kings gawked at Morningstar, amazed someone so ugly and so evil could even exist, and then they signed the checks.

The arrangement wasn’t about talent, he didn’t need to be very talented. For most of his targets, the participating governments had already hashed out in advance who/what/where/when - very rarely did anyone bother with ‘why’ - and all Morningstar needed to do was show up, pull the trigger once or twice, and then go home. His job was considered ceremonial.

As they collectively reasoned, the only way to make sure assassinations always succeed is if *everyone* knows and everyone agrees. There’s no way to make that happen on the merits, so they worked out a timeshare: each nation had the use of Morningstar for no more than 4 days of every year to take out no more than 8 individuals - days must be used consecutively and the rule of no-backsies applies.

And that is why Morningstar found himself limping down the dimly-lit parking garage stairs.

Had he taken the job, had they asked politely, the President would’ve died. He could’ve walked

up to her in the middle of the street, shot her and then walked away, metaphorically speaking. Everything would have flowed through the proper channels from there. The mess would be cleaned up. It, most decidedly, would not be their first rodeo/world leader assassination. That is why Morningstar exists: axeman for the proper channels.

- What the fuck are you morons *thinking!*

To distract himself from the eldritch horror of being a passenger in one own's body, Morningstar shouted at odd intervals to time the echo exactly, hoping to create a round, an aural tornado of 'Fuck You!'s. Instead, he populated his parking-garage-oleum with angry ghosts.

*If they're doing this whole... spiel - the eight, that's what Ty called them - then they have to be ready to fuck off with the rest of the world. They have to be willing to out and out burn this place to the fucking ground. It's a crazy fucking thing to think...fuckin...I mean...Jesus! I've been doing this job for six years - best job I've ever fuckin' had by the way - and these assholes just come out here and fuck everything up. Like, rich people have never jumped into a system they didn't understand or care about assuming they could improve it and then go on to fuck it up in a way that is incomprehensible to a person with even the slightest amount of human empathy!*

- And I don't even *have* empathy, you dumb motherfuckers! But I'm still smart enough to know you fucks are the dumbest motherfuckers that have ever lived! You *literally* cannot hear me! Fuck!

The screaming successfully distracted him as he descended the stairs; he noticed nothing but the sound up until he took two steps on the first floor; he was snapped back into the present.

He saw a crowd of people, a single crowd, but clustered in groups of three or four.

At their head was Lt. Col. Ty., brazenly waiting for him. Morningstar summoned all of his will; he gave everything to lift his arm and pull the trigger. No movement at all, not even a twitch.

- Derek, before you start, please, let me explain what is about to happen.
- Ty-
- -Derek. Stop. Luckily, or maybe predictably, you have shouted for too long and too loud and you have now lost your voice-

Morningstar attempted to emphatically disagree, then discovered Ty was correct. He had lost his voice. Whether or not he believed the screaming too much part - he was a world class screamer - perhaps it was a side effect of the serum, there wasn't time enough to think on it. Ty was impatient, he had no interest in slowing down or, god forbid, stopping.

- -will not be killed today. They have arcane rules that protect you. I have no idea why, and it was against my advice. I will be providing you with necessary information only. I am not a supervillain. Pay attention.

Morningstar rattled something hoarsely in response, but Ty could not make out the garbled

“Uhhh...guhfuckyourself...”

- First, you did not kill the President. It was not your fault that you failed. The failure was part of the plan. Which means you succeeded. You will be rewarded for that success. You will be taken to a plane. The plane will take you to an island made for you. There, you will be showered with every luxury imaginable. For the rest of your life. You will also be kept on the island forever. It will be your prison. I think the eight intended for that to be an ironic, monkey's paw twist.

*Fair.*



Ty pointed to the nearest cluster. Their white lab coats blinded Morningstar; he grimaced and squinted his eyes. Seeing past the white lab coats, he was blinded by their white teeth. They were dentists, there to 'fix' his teeth. They shook hands with Morningstar.

- Derek-

Morningstar tried and failed to yell, "My name isn't Derek, you fucking asshole!"

- -The dentists will come to live with you. They are dedicated to taking care of your teeth.

Ty pointed and another cluster came forward.

- Plastic surgeons, for your face and whatever else you-

The plastic surgeons shook hands and Ty pointed to the next group. The process played out dozens of times as Ty announced the myriad specialists who would care for him. There were doctors, dietitians, physical therapists, voice coaches, personal trainers, dance instructors, beauticians, and stylists; as well as architects, contractors, woodworkers, glass-blowers, smiths, interior designers, and experienced laborers; plus farmers, gardeners, breeders, biologists and geneticists; then Ty introduced musicians, artists, writers, producers, dj's, dancers, directors, and actors; and he went on to introduce a great deal more.

*This motherfucker is showing off. I - or whatever - just attempted to assassinate the President from less than a mile away, law enforcement from every branch - the fucking Coast Guard even - would know where he was in minutes. I should either be dead or getting the hell away from here as fast as possible. But this fucker is introducing me politely to a fucking Pharaoh-level number of servants and taking his sweet fuckin' time about it, too. The asshole is flexing on me. I get it, they control everything. Cool.*

*Morons.*

- In short, you have everything. Second, on a personal level, I don't want to die, but more than that, I *really* don't want to be killed by you. While you were fully under my control, you were implanted with a dead man's switch. If I die - at any time, for any reason, even if it's not your fault - you will explode. Literally, if you intend to get revenge on me, you should start by digging two graves. So don't.

Ty communicated through his tone that he was not bluffing or threatening, he was stating a fact.

Morningstar was furious. He *really* wanted to kill Ty, but he had been outmaneuvered.

*If I were the most talented assassin in the world, I could probably figure out a way to disarm the bomb and kill him.*

*I should call that guy. Maybe he won't try to kill me this time.*

- Ok, Derek. Now you need to say yes. Arcane rules, can't go without your consent.

Morningstar had every intention of saying no, maybe even spitting on the ground for style points, but when he opened his mouth, all that came out was "yes". Whether it was a residual of the serum or genuine longing finally escaped, Derek Wojcik didn't know and after two months on the island, he lost interest in finding out.

When Ty finished introducing the retinue, he led Morningstar to a black limo. Once inside, Morningstar watched his hundreds of new servants disperse into cars of their own. When the convoy was ready, Ty's limo led them all the way to Thurgood Marshall Airport in Baltimore, leaving a trail of newsworthy traffic-pocalypses. In an unbroken chain, the cars filed on to the tarmac, debarking passengers in front of two chartered 747-8 jets.

Ty and Derek watched the staff board, waiting until the pilot gave the signal that everyone had found their seats.

- I'm going to kill you, Ty. I will. I promise.
- Ok.

The pilot signaled, Derek climbed the long steps. Before entering, he looked back at Ty who made no expression, not acknowledging him at all.

It was this final indignity that changed Derek's mind.

*God, Ty is such a dick. Nothing? I get nothing from this guy? Fuck. Him.*

Derek boarded and slammed the door behind him. The flight attendant waited until he passed before opening the door and then closing it properly.

Derek was led to his seat. His plane had installed a private box - Derek named it super-first-class - and he lounged in the beige leather recliner, surrounded by all possible luxuries.

*Ty was right. The eight are bribing me with beauty. I'll become beautiful and be surrounded by beautiful things. Then I'm trapped in a prison of beauty and wealth, teaching me a lesson about how the grass is always greener on the other side or whatever Twilight Zone bullshit they're pulling.*

*How do you get revenge on the people who gave you everything?*

He meditated on this thought for a full hour before falling asleep.

When he awoke, he had his answer. He forgot what it was for a moment when he realized that he was on a palanquin, being carried from the jet to a modest castle on the horizon. As they came closer, smaller coach houses became visible - presumably servants' quarters - then he could see the 'servants' themselves already abuzz in preparation for their new lives.

*Didn't we arrive on the same planes? How long have I been asleep? Shit. Did they drug me again? I hate these assholes.*

He drifted in and out of sleep for two days, finally regaining consciousness at the crack of a lightning bolt. He scanned the room. Like the plane, it was more luxurious than he thought possible. It was amazing to him how quickly it happened. His chest heaved; he hyperventilated. *No fuckin' shit. It really is Twilight Zone. This is all bullshit. Pointless bullshit. And I'm going to live in this hell until I die. And after that I'm going to hell.*

That was when an idea struck him - not unlike a lightning bolt - the paradise-is-actually-hell/be-careful-what-you-wish-for stories all share a crucial element: the main character is alone. The Eight had miscalculated their ironic punishment. They had given him servants, thinking he wouldn't view them as people because *they* don't view them as people. In the course of two minutes, he had gone from abject despair to triumphant ecstasy. He had won.

He ordered his soon-to-be-former servants to gather together. There he outlined his revelation. For a thirty-hour work week, the collective combined their expertise and hammered out The Agreement.

Derek, instead of living as a pharaoh, relinquished all control. Three hundred and forty-eight citizens of Satan's Asshole created an egalitarian society. The Agreement was perfect and the eight's ironic, island paradise prison became a sincere paradise.

*Paradise...is other people.*

Chapter 12:

McMillan News Network.

Monday 8:29 p.m.

Terry McMillan's son Rory McMillan:

Tonight, I begin my show by saying, Thomas Jefferson was clear when he said that the tree of liberty must be watered with the blood of tyrants. We should hang them all together, not separately. My guest today, here to disagree with me while I shout over her is Audre Tomeka Adeguaybe. Did I pronounce that right?

Audre:

\*chuckles\* No, of course not, but you are far from the first to pronounce it incorrectly. That's close, Rory, but the quote from Jefferson was "The Tree of Liberty must be watered from time to time with the blood of patriots *and* tyrants."

Rory:

So you agree with me. Jefferson himself says that Evelyn should bleed on that tree.

Audre:

What? No. Uh... I was correcting you on the quote. I think Evelyn has done an incred-

Rory:

-Well that's wonderful, I wasn't expecting such an agreement between us but even you Ms.

Adeguaybe, an African American woman, are willing to admit the hard truths-

Audre:

-No! No, that is not-

Rory:

-Ha! I always thought your people always agreed with each other-

Audre:

-What the *fu*-

Tuesday 6:59 a.m.

Terry McMillan's daughter Teri Flynn:

Our top story this morning: historians are debating whether or not Thomas Jefferson would have called directly for the assassination of Evelyn, the maybe, maybe not President. I personally think he would have done it himself - he did kill king George, after all.

Terry McMillan's nephew Tanner McMillan:

Thomas Jefferson was one of our greatest founding fathers in my opinion.

Teri:

A lot of people bring up the slave thing, but everyone was doing it at the time. Only bad people try to tarnish his memory and the memory of the revolution he started. They're traitors. We know what needs to be done to traitors, right?

Tanner:

I agree, only traitors talk about Sally Hemings.

Teri:

Evelyn once told me that she wants to erase the memory of Thomas Jefferson from the history books. I can't remember when, but I'm pretty sure she said it. She is a national disgrace.

Tuesday: 1:15 p.m.

Terry McMillan's brother Reed McMillan:

Our top story today: many people are calling the cult-like followers of Evelyn traitors to the country for their offensive views on Thomas Jefferson, the great President, founding father, and brilliant businessman.

Tuesday: 7:01 p.m.

Rory:

Before we get into our top story, in the past 24 hours, it has been proven again and again that Evelyn is a traitor. This is something I say with grave sincerity. No one could ever have imagined that the United States would be taken over by an enemy - except Thomas Jefferson, who clearly predicted this circumstance and prescribed a cure. Not to mention that Evelyn has been accused by this network of sex work. Her administration is not elected, it is a coup!

\*thumps hand on desk\* She is destroying the United States. I call for direct action! Our reaction must be quick and violent \*thumps hand on desk\* ...I mean politically of course. In order to take our country back, we must fire an impeachment bullet into the back of her head. We must defend our beloved flag by any means necessary. She is actually Satan and the Antichrist and we must destroy the Antichrist-

Unannounced guest:

-Wait, if you believe the prophecy is true, wouldn't you want it to be fulfilled? Because if it's not, doesn't that mean the prophecy was wrong, and if the prophecy is wrong, isn't the entire book invali-

Rory:

Unfortunately, our guest tonight has taken ill and will not be joining us \*muffled shouts\*. And now, onto our top story, should athletes be allowed to speak?

Tuesday 11:15 p.m.

Terry's granddaughter Terry McMillan:

We apologize for the rude interruption at this late hour, but it appears that the White House has been attacked and alleged traitor Evelyn was successfully defended by heroic secret service agents, despite, I'm sure, their own personal objections. We here condemn these senseless acts of violence. We urge our viewers to put down their arms, but also keep them close. Evelyn will no doubt use this, probably fabricated assassination attempt to try and take them from you.

Obviously, we have no idea what the motives behind the attacks were, nor what inspired them.

More news as the story develops.



## Chapter 12:

Seven hooded men stood around an octagonal altar. Eight golden chalices were placed in front of each vertice, one for every hooded figure, and one for a member conspicuously absent.

- What are the protocols here?
- Real quick: is this the children's blood we drink to live forever or the stuff we drink to get high? The eternal life stuff has a real metallic aftertaste that I'm not really feeling right now...
- I don't think he should be allowed to just leave like that. Has anyone read the bylaws lately? Do we hold a trial or something? Do we just kill him?
- Not yet. The process begins with a letter announcing our vendetta. We must all sign it. Then, he has thirty days to R.S.V.P. with an apology or he must accept our declaration of war, and agree to terms.
- ...no shit? That much, huh?
- I hope it's the stuff that gets us high, you know? Things have been pretty stressful lately. I could use a bit of a vacation from my anxiety.
- Yup. It's a process.
- The rules are what separate us from petty presidents and prime ministers and kings and queens. Governing from the shadows is *boring*. They get to play at governance. *Play*. It's mundane and we need to keep it that way. They get to do the wars and everything. We just...tell everyone what to do. Hell, we don't even do it in person anymore, we just email people! Like we're in customer *service*, the world's leaders send us questions and we

answer them. This honorable conflict will be filled with drama and pageantry and paperwork.

- It's the eternal youth cocktail, I'm afraid. I added a little orange zest, so hopefully the citric acid will counteract the metallic aftertaste. I don't know what to do about the texture. I've never appreciated the...mouthfeel? But I feel like watering it down is counter to the whole spirit of the ritual, you know?

Under his breath, thinner and taller than the others, one of the members muttered, "I know *I'm* still aging, and I'd bet so are all of you..."

He was strenuously ignored.

- But he's going to tell someone for sure. This is more important than the rules and the laws and traditions. The last time one of us left, we had to stitch up the Romanovs and all those people got merked by Stalin. And I quite liked the Romanovs.

The same thin figure coughed the word "bullshit" loudly.

- I'm sure you enjoyed their company. *Personally*. Because you're obviously hundreds of years old. Because we drink blood. Which is totally a thing.

He was seventeen and had just taken his spot at the altar. His dad, despite a frantic search for and deep belief in an elixir that would give eternal life, died. Like everyone else. He was uninterested in keeping the eternal life myth alive. He knew firsthand that the members passed their spot at the altar to the firstborn. He asked his father often, "Why do we pretend?" and his father always replied, "because that's how it's always been done." Then he would say back, "That's why we still have Daylight Savings Time, even though everyone knows it's stupid and pointless!" His

father confessed on his deathbed, “No. Daylight Savings Time was my idea. It makes people like you *so* angry. I find it hilarious.”

- Don't be that guy. Be quiet. There's no need to ruin it for the rest of us. Like, we get it, Omega 3 is bullshit, but it's not hurting anyone. Yea, the copper bracelet that's magnets or something doesn't do anything, but who's the worse guy, the guy wearing a dumb bracelet, leaving everyone the fuck alone, or the guy yelling at a stranger about something that has no effect on his life at all?
- ...Whatever. I'm thirsty. Are we going to do the ritual or what?
- I mean... we can, but it doesn't work without eight around the altar.
- For fucks *what*? It doesn't... whatever! Why are we here then?
- To discuss the traitor's fate.
- Right, but why are we *here* here. Like, if there's no reason for the ritual, couldn't we have done this somewhere else? Like a fucking bowling alley or whatever?
- You're *doing it again*!
- Oh my God! You already said we were just sending a letter.
- We all have to sign it.
- We could've *E*-signed it!
- It's just... I hardly ever see you guys anymore so I thought it would be fun to just...get together.
- Jesus Christ! Why don't you just s--
- --Please stop taking the Lord's name in vain.
- Fuck you Pope John Mark Paul Gossalar the Third.

- Hey, what is your *deal* today?
- My dad just d--

Before he could finish the sentence, the six other conspirators erupted with noises.

- Nope! Nuh uh! No. Stop!
- La-la-la-la
- Bupbupbupbup
- Noonoonoonoo
- Hey now! Watch it!
- Nooooooooooooo!
- Fine! Just let me sign the letter and go!

The disgruntled 17-year-old in his ill-fitting robe ripped his chalice off the altar and downed the drink like he was rushing a fraternity. He pulled a fountain pen from a pocket inside his robe.

- Let's get this over with.

The others sighed together, their robes slumping down with their shoulders, sleeve ends almost touching the ground. The de facto leader removed an inkwell from his pockets and placed it on the altar. He opened his robe to reveal a hip-holster containing a ceremonial knife. With it, he pricked his finger and a single droplet fell into the inkwell. He intoned:

- This is a symbol of my commitment.

The knife and the inkwell were then passed from person to person, each of them pricking their fingers and repeating the words. When the inkwell was once again in front of the leader, he pulled out his fountain pen, dipped it in the black ink tinged with red, and signed his

great-grandfather's name on the bottom of a blank sheet of printer paper. Once again the inkwell went around the circle, the other members' forging their ancestor's signature in turn.

- We'll figure out exactly what the letter is supposed to say later because d-bag over here wants to leave like a crybaby.

The bereaved son took the words like a slap, but kept silent.

- We are in agreement.
- Ok, good. I'll shoot you guys a text when he gets back to us, cool?

The hooded figures nodded as one. They turned around 180 degrees and walked out of the stone chamber.

The 17-year-old, the only one to drink from his chalice, ran to the bathroom and vomited.

## Chapter 13:

- Daves! I have some *crazy* news. You are *absolutely going* to believe *this*.

Van Doren charged through David's front door breathlessly, slamming it into a hamper of plushy turtles David placed there in response to Van Doren's near constant breathless charging. When slammed, the turtles squeaked; their secondary function was that of a doorbell.

David, having heard the squeaks, left his office chair and went to greet Van Doren.

- Ok, serious confession time. You are totally right. Like, I *believed* you were right before, but now I *know* you are, and that is an *entirely* different beast, isn't it?
- Hi, Dors. How was your day?

David was not allowed to be annoyed when Van Doren charged through the door, as he did the same, with similar frequency, but nothing annoyed David more than himself.

- They - well, *we* - were taking it easy before, but now they - *not we* - are really going to do it. It was really surreal when we were talking about it. It was like I was living a dream, you know? Everything was uncanny. Like, you said the world was going to end, and that's all well and good, people always say that - it's honestly not that weird at all. The prepping thing, hey, that's all good fun, but it's real, it's really *real*.
- No shit, huh?
- No shit?! Yes, no shit! *Zero* shit to be found. None. It's like the world is constipated there's so little shit.
- Who told you? Besides me of course.
- It's a long story. Can I tell you the whole thing?
- Yea? The whole thing?

- The whole thing.
- Can we sit?

Without waiting for an answer, David left the vestibule, now covered by a thin layer of turtle plushies, heading toward the main room. This day it was sparsely decorated. Instead of doors, there were two gates, one for the north wall, one for the south; the south gate was marked with “Enemy’s gate: Down.”

The couch was composed of two cubes attached with velcro handles: TV stand, reclining chair, stereo system, etc., all were composed of cubes identical to the couch.

- Good idea. If you want to hear the whole story - it’s a loooong story - it’s a good idea to sit. What time is it?
- 2ish.
- We could start, uh,...drinking now?
- Brilliant ideas all around then. You get the drinks, you’re the one with all the momentum.
- Wait, pm or am?
- What time zone are you in?
- I was in Tenerife for a couple days.
- That puts you at 7 p.m.! Congratulations, you’re a responsible alcoholic. I’ll be joining you, of course. In my time zone, though, I am an irresponsible alcoholic.
- I’ll try to drink irresponsibly then; I don’t want you to feel alone.
- You’re sweet.

Van Doren exited through the north gate, curled around and entered the adjacent kitchen. The kitchen was covered from floor to ceiling with tropical plants. There were however, a few stray

cubes, of the same type as those in the living room. They were not tidy. Van Doren filed it away, wondering if it deserved concern. The themed rooms were never cross-pollinated. David was a picky eater, and he treated the rooms like his food - nothing could touch.

*Did he order too many...uh... cubes?*

Van Doren ultimately decided that a pattern required at least three events. Conscience assuaged, he picked at bumps on the vines. He had never been in this iteration of the kitchen before, but David had *some* habits, so it was not hard to find the whiskey (mini-bar sized bottles of Jameson inside bitter oranges); the ginger ale was harder, but it was predictable in retrospect that David would house it within a mangosteen - David drank a lot of ginger ale and he loved to say the word mangosteen. Van Doren could see David snapping open a mangosteen, pouring the ginger ale, and singing a song with lyrics that consisted entirely of “mangosteen”.

*Probably a samba.*

- Daves! Double?
- Double-ubble, Dors!

Van Doren mixed their drinks, then walked through the “down” gate and curled back to re-enter the living room. He handed David his drink, ice still swirling. They clinked their glasses together. He nearly took a sip but an idea took him, one that replaced “drink” with “talk” - it was one or the other, always. While he talked, he stood perfectly still, at arms, as if he was talking to a superior officer.

- Ok, so, in a very literal way, I rule the world.

Van Doren took a deep breath with his entire body.

- I... am one of The Eight.



- Duhn Duhn Duuuuuuhnnnn, brrrrrummp.
- According to our secret history, The Eight have always existed. Since man first came down from the trees, The Eight have ruled over all. The Eight are inevitable, you see.  
Ok... wait.

Van Doren finally took a sip and, like it was an energy drink, it inspired him to pace.

- Soooo... The Eight *have* always been around but... ok... Obviously there weren't "The Eight"'s before there were enough people in one grouping to... like... congeal their own "The Eight".
- I'm afraid you're making *too* much sense, Dors.
- Right. Let me begin from the secret histories then, *Daves*, I basically had to memorize them. But they were *boring* so I was trying to... you know... spice it up a bit.
- I'll cut in with snide comments so I don't lose interest.

Van Doren stood at his full height and spread his arms far apart like a bat preparing to take flight.

He put on an imitation of a booming voice, though his was too nasal to do any more than imply at a commanding tone.

- We are the true Eight. We are the final Eight, the eternal Eight. It is we who conquered the others.

Van Doren dropped the voice.

- The history says that, eventually - inevitably - a large enough civilization will create a group of eight secret oligarchs. This group will take control of... *everything*. They make every decision. They choose monarchs and dictators and presidents and tell them what to do. They create a public government in order to protect themselves from consequences.

They guide the growth of their civilization until they meet another, and that other civilization has their own secret oligarchs. They war until only eight are left alive. Doesn't matter which eight, mind you, only that eight of the sixteen are alive. They become the new eight, and so on. When the entire world was mapped, there were only eight left standing. We... are they!

- The Eight?
- Ok... like, the concept is as old as humanity. It was before there were cool words like “*Illuminati*” ok? I’m sure the very first eight just said... I don’t know... “Uhg” eight straight times.
- I’m not saying it’s a *bad* name...
- That’s what I’m hearing.
- Check your hearing.
- You’re cute, you know?

Van Doren walked over to David and gave him a quick peck on the lips, then resumed pacing.

- So don’t judge. Anyways... membership in The Eight is passed down from father to son or it is taken by ritual murder.
- *Ritual* murder?
- Oh my god, there are so... many.... god...damn... *rituals*, Daves, so many. The second dark pope was obsessed with immortality and everybody kinda went along with it and now it’s one of those things where it’s, like, we just do it because it’s the way things have always been done.

- Ugh, I *hate* it when that's the reason for doing something. Inertia isn't a *reason*, fucknozzles!
- Tell me about it. Some of those guys drink children's *blood*. Don't worry, it's ethically farmed.
- What?
- For real. It's *so* gross.
- And?
- And what?
- .... *Are* you immortal?
- *I'm* not. I don't know, maybe the dark pope was for a while, but he's dead now so you can't really ask him.
- How old *are* you?
- Forty-five.
- You look great, Dors. ‘

Van Doren walked over and gave David a peck on the cheek. He returned to his drink, sitting down in the chair-cube next to the table-cube.

- You've got the gist, right? Secret oligarchs, dark rituals, control of the world and so forth. Right. So that brings us to today.
- Sure, why not?
- So I was in Tenerife.
- Ohhhh, yea. I remember that now. That was a *while* ago when you told me that.

- So yea, we were at the annual orgy - dark pope - and we, The Eight, got together and all things considered they decided to kill the President. They didn't come out and say it, in fact they said the opposite, so it's obvious they're going to do it. You have to listen to what they *don't* say.
- Orgy. Sure. Why not? You're going to orgies? I thought we were going steady, huh?
- It's not like that. They're really boring and no one enjoys the sex. It's like how if you've ever been to a porn set and watched them film it, it's just... the *least* sexy thing there is. I don't know if they were ever fun, to be honest. Orgies are a craigslist kind of thing, not a... a class *reunion*.

David was willing to accept that explanation, but he couldn't suppress a jealous thought. He felt like a hypocrite. He had always imagined himself as the ethically non-monogamous type, but still, he felt possessive. That he was angry made him feel shame, when he felt shame, he got angry. But he felt his anger was unfair to Van Doren, and he was unable to express it. On the verge of exploding, he guzzled his drink. David pointed his empty glass at Van Doren.

- Drinks, Dors.

Van Doren leapt up from his cube. He swiftly complied; he again walked out the north gate, curled around into the tropics, mixed David another, and refreshed his own; he again walked through the south gate, curled around into the "down" gate, handed David the glass, and stood still at attention, ready to resume the explanation, but he wasn't sure if David wanted to hear it. David dipped his finger in the glass and used it like a spoon. He licked his finger clean, then took a light sip.

Almost in self-defense, his mind conjured Jeremy underneath a car lecturing to no one on proper crosswalk etiquette and the responsibilities we have to accept our feelings, not detach from them... like a crosswalk or something.

Stunned, David became a much better listener.

- Anyways, I told them they couldn't do it. According to the rules, if I successfully avert her assassination, I am banished from The Eight - along with my house, not literal house, family - but I get to live and keep all of my vast wealth.
- What happens if-
- For two years. Then I can be assassinated or I can challenge my way back into The Eight. Since you get to keep all of your vast wealth, it's usually pretty easy to get back in. So far, in these situations the offender got back into The Eight 2 out of 3 times.
- What happens if-
- If I get back into The Eight, I will get first pick of partners at the annual best ball golf tournament.

Both of them paused, maintaining intense, competitive eye contact. David broke the silence.

- What happens if-
- The stakes are always the same. The Eight can only ever be eight. And anyone who leaves, or is kicked out, or loses a challenge is not just killed, but erased from existence. I mean, it's a global conspiracy...you can't have disgruntled former members out there telling everybody the whole story.
- Like you, now.
- *Exactly* like me now!

Van Doren's arms flew up like they were shot from a trebuchet. He clapped over his head; the sound echoed off the bare walls, ensuring David would stay silent for the next part.

- And if I don't stop her assassination, I will lose the respect of all of my peers. If I lose their respect, they will not invoke the treaty if I am challenged. We lost Frederick like that.
- You're in a real bind, huh.
- *We* are, my Daves. I told you, they destroy your house, you're included in my house now. We've been dating longer than seventeen weeks.

David then burst from his cube, standing up and waving his arms around wildly, at nothing in particular. His mouth was agape in an exaggerated expression. He hyperventilated for three or four measures before he found his voice.

- What the *fuck* is going on with all of these goddam rules?

Van Doren shrugged.

- We use a different set of rules every event.
- ...what?
- Yeah... ok... so it's actually very boring to rule the world in the shadows. Everything is so *boring*. So the random rules are one of the ways we entertain ourselves. Lord knows how things will work after this event.
- It's... It's *Calvinball*!?
- What's that?
- The Eight play *Calvinball* with humanity? The only rule is that you can't play it the same way twice.

- I mean, more or less... yeah.
- *God damn it!* That just makes *so much sense*. We couldn't possibly make up so many fake conspiracies if there wasn't a real one.
- That's about right, yea. The fake conspiracies distract from us, well... *them*.
- And the world does seem like it's run by a capricious God. But it's just them. Of course it is. It's almost like simulation theory, you know?

Van Doren collapsed into the cube, sinking in as deep as he could. He was drained and he knew David was about to go on a tear; he decided to watch the show.

- The world is a simulation, see? Or it's close enough to a simulation as to be indistinguishable. The Eight are the programmers. They're the ones running the simulation that the rest of us live out. Even if we are "real" - whatever the fuck that means - it doesn't matter because our lives are controlled by a specific set of choices made by detached psychopaths. You guys stole humanity, man. You just get to capriciously do-what-thou-fucking-wilt with the lives of *literally* everybody?
- I don't know. *Do we?!*

David deflated. He stopped gesticulating wildly, stopped stepping in circles.

- Ok, Dors, I'm sorry. That was aggressive and I'm not trying to blame you, personally, ok? It's just one of those things where someone walks in and they're like, "Everything you think you know is wrong," and you're like, "Oh for fucks' sakes, what are you even talking about?" and they're like, "For real, everything you know is wrong. See, there are eight *fucking* people who rule the *fucking* world!" It's exactly like that exact example becaaaaauuuuse... *there are no other examples!*

- Well... like, the same thing obviously happened to me. I know what you're feeling.
- What, when you were a kid? It's a different story, it's just a different story.

David stood up and walked out of the north gate, curled around into the kitchen. He opened and closed everything there was to open and close without taking anything out. He poured himself two fingers of whiskey, slapped the glass on the counter, and then inhaled the liquid. In an instant the glass was empty, refilled, empty again.

This was not how David thought the afternoon would go.

David reached up and grabbed a bag of chips; they were hanging from a vine like a passion fruit. He stared at the bag for a long minute, opened it, ate one stale chip, put the bag in a fabricated venus fly trap, refilled his drink - this time mixed - then walked out and around into the "down" gate.

- OK. That works for me then. Why are you stopping the assassination Dors? Not judging, but you're an unimaginably rich psychopath, like all unimaginably rich people, and this seems way out of character.
- Listen. I was getting real sick of those guys, and real sick of the job, and real sick of everything, really. Then you came along-
- -don't do that. I'm not doing the whole, "you-
- It's not like that, Daves, it's more like, screw it, you know? I've been hanging back in that world for so long, insulated from everything, and I needed to make a leap. I believe in what you're saying Daves, I believe you, and I'm going to be there to do what needs to be done. Whatever that is. What are we doing again?



- I guess you're having a midlife crisis in the form of stopping the assassination of President Evelyn and then we're going to save the whole fucking world.
- How?

## Chapter 14:

Harold stood on the Charles R. Walgreenfield tarmac, shocked. He wore his proclaiming robes - billowy, technicolor-dreamcoat-y wizard robes. That Dixon had an airport was “not memorable” in the sense that it was impossible to remember. Dixon having an airport, even a small one, seemed so unlikely, no matter how many times Harold was told of it, he simply could not keep that bit of information in his mind. Harold was freshly shocked the airport existed every time. He was shocked to be waiting for a plane. He was even more shocked that it would be landing at an *airport*. In *Dixon*. It was surreal to see the small jet grow from an insect-in-the-distance to a holy-shit-that’s-a-plane. In *Dixon*.

Harold had received a letter eight days prior containing a note and a check. The note said “it’s real” with a number to call. The check read \$100,000. It was made out to Harold, not Jeremiah. Finding his real name wasn’t hard, he was exposed as fraudulent almost as soon as they started. But, so long as they weren’t causing trouble - keeping to themselves, not killing people to start a race war, simple stuff - no one really cared. He was surprised when someone did. It was disconcerting, even for a man used to receiving unearned money. He called the number. A soothing, feminine voice told him to cash the check, “it’s very real, one string attached: meet the benefactor at the Dixon Airport, 6 am eight days from now.”

In response, Harold laughed, “Now I know you’re scammers. Dixon, my dear, does *not* have an airport!” Then he hung up. When he clicked the red button, he felt a sadness. There was a time when you could *really* hang up on someone. A thick, plastic bang that could be heard by the neighbors. Not so with touchscreens.

The phone rang again. He silenced it. The phone vibrated and a text notification popped on the screen. Without reading it, he defenestrated his phone. One of his acolytes, specifically, the one whose position it was, found the spot where the phone landed. They picked it up and removed the sim card. The pieces and the glass were carefully swept up and then deposited into a recycling bin and a bin for “angry glass” respectively. The recycling bin already held pounds of phone debris. Next to those bins was another bin marked “phones”. Inside were scores of the same model and make of phone - all brand new. They charged Harold’s new phone. When the sim card was inserted, a deluge of missed calls and unanswered texts nearly blew up the screen. The next morning at 8, a barbershop quartet knocked on Harold’s door, carrying a novelty check the size of a barbershop quartet. In a lovely, if antiquated, four-part harmony, the striped and be-hatted gentlemen sang their message. The chorus was clear, “Get up / Get down / Airport now / you fucking clown”

Eager to be helpful, the phone collector told him the airport was only ten minutes away. Harold was shocked to discover Dixon had an airport.

- Dixon does not have an airport.
- Well...
- Do planes just land on the football field?
- No, Jeremiah it’s, like... it *is* an airport, but not, like, an *airport* airport. It’s like how we have canals around, but they aren’t *Panama* Canals.
- Huh.

Harold attempted to transfer this information from short term memory to long, but gave up quickly.

- Ok. Sounds great. Let's do it.

As he was finishing his statement, the tenor pressed his finger to his ear, his eyes unfocused and were directed upwards. When the directions ended, he huddled with the quartet. He whispered instructions and then, in four-part harmony, they sang, "Airport next week / Dawn dawn dawn / I don't know / Is that good for you"

- Oh. Ha, funny. Ok, yeah. I want two hundred grand and I want to meet around... 8:30ish.

The quartet sang, "Works for us / see you tomorrow / this message will self destruct in..."

The quartet huddled around the tenor again, then sang in a confused, harsh disharmony.

We're off to Dixon

my Dors

pack for cold

weather

once we're done

You and I will go out

To a nice

Shit

They're still singing

The quartet stopped, relieved. The bass, a squat man with a moustache and that's all, hairwise, upturned his hat. He walked through the small crowd. No one carried cash, no one but Harold even had cash, so the quartet had to make due with the 76,000 each David paid for the gig.

Harold stood on the tarmac, the jet parked in front of him. Two men emerged. The first, a tall, gangly black man came bounding down the stairs, waving his arms wildly. He wore a green swishy track suit. Combined with his frame, he wouldn't merit a second glance should he have a seizure in front of a used car dealership. Harold saw the man screaming greetings, but could not hear him; the engines hadn't stopped. David was halfway to him before Van Doren was fully out of the door. He, too, was tall and thin, but had what he called a "tasteful, downright regal, pudgy". He had an impossibly thick head of tightly-gelled, slicked-back blond hair. His face was beautiful, even with the slight jowl. He was ill-proportioned, though, and, no matter his wealth, he would never look good in a suit. He wore a brand new suit every day, natch.

- Jeremiah, Jeremiaaaaah! Hello! Can I call you Harold or do you prefer your bullshit?  
Gonna be honest, I'm torn. I like your showmanship, kid, you've got flair, but at the same time, I really hate religious scammer-types. So how about Jerold? That a good compromise? Cause I love it and that's what's happening next.

The engines still roared, Harold only heard "Jeremiah" and "Love it"

- Yes, I *am* Jeremiah...Behold!

Harold was loud, and his voice boomed above even jet engines.

- Who! The Hell! Are You!?

David took his lead and met him dB for dB. For fun, he opened his diaphragm and added a bit of opera.

- I'm Daaaavid. I want to buy your cuuuuult! Back there is my very own sister-wife and they have all the muuuunney in the woooooorrrruuuullld! He's the billionaire playboy not

named Bruce Waaaaayne! Give it up for DJ Cornelius Van Doren the  
 THIIIIIIIRRRRRD!

Van Doren flashed a wry smile. He preferred to be heard clearly; he refused to talk before the engines fully stopped. He hated the noise. His earplugs - he wished David would wear earplugs - didn't help near enough.

Harold was more used to being the steamroller, not the steamrollee. He accepted the unspoken challenge. Roaring back at David, spreading his arms apart aggressively, Harold signaled his readiness for the fight - rhetorical or otherwise. He expected David to reply in kind.

- David? I am the Jeremiah here, and this cult - flock - is my flock. *My* flock!

As an afterthought:

- And yes, they choose to be here and follow me.

David hugged Harold, shocking him for the second time. David had not broken stride; when Harold spread his arms wide, eyes pointed to the sky - force of habit - David snuck in and wrapped Harold up. In spite of himself, Harold really liked it. "A really good hug melts glaciers," he thought, remembering when glaciers were still a thing. The hug ended right as the engines silenced. The rising sun reflected off of Van Doren's sunglasses.

- Hello, I'm... David may have introduced me already.
- Of course I did! You're beautiful, darling, and yes, I called you DJ Cornelius Van Doren, because it's a great fucking name, recognize. I'm making it a thing. The kidz will meme you. I don't know if you heard it, but that was a "kidz" with a z, bro. They share memes, you know? That's fun language. Share. *You* post shit online, but kids share shit. Some of them share Nazi stuff, though, so...double-edged sword right?

- David. Van Doren. I am a huge fan of the large amount of money you sent me. It's great stuff, real great stuff kid. Riddle me this, though, who exactly, the hell, *are* you guys?
- Jeremiah my fearless leader, mon capitan, I would like to retain your... hmmm... flock's services. I want to give you all of the money there is to have a 100% ownership stake in what you tell your flockowwers. You can even stay supreme leader! I just want you to say what I tell you to say, and do what I tell you to do. In return, you will get *all* of the money. That's *all* of it. It's more money than can *be*. All you need to do is call 1-800-infinite-money.com. Listen. Dors, I have to say, this deal is too good. We're going to sell out fast, so let's put a clock on this one. Call now or you'll miss out!
- You want to... *buy*... a cult?
- Yes! How fun is that? And hey, I don't want to be a Cynical Sally or nothing, you know me - you don't, of course - but you *feel* me, right? Do you really care about what you say? Don't you just want an all-you-can-eat buffet of pleasure? Do you *care*?
- I totally care

Harold's voice cracked, giving him away. Negotiations were done.

- Of course you do, my sweet! My bad. I would never insinuate otherwise me hearty. What you should know, what I hope helps you decide, is that - come here, my bespoke beloved Dors here, he wants to join your cult! Flock! Whoops! Jeremites! A private ceremony, just the two of you. And me. But I don't want to join, that's gross! Don't worry, though, you'll save face.

Once, when he was four, Van Doren mated an adult in 4 moves, in front of a large, hostile crowd. The adult was embarrassed. Van Doren saw that same face on Harold.

- I mean shit. I guess... yea. You could be nicer, all I'm saying.
- Sorry, Jeremiah, Daves is wonderful... but he's not really *nice*.

Harold, the explanation of David confirming his instinctual evaluation, liked Van Doren.

- You want to become part of the flock?
- Yes. I do.
- Right, right... Everything is mine, you see, when you're a Jeremite. That plane-
- Yes?
- -is mine. See? I'm not sure you understand.

David objected.

- We do, dum dum. You don't. We're taking over, quietly, and Van Doren will be our cover. We won. I have some contracts right here, none of which are remotely enforceable, because no one would believe this was happening anyways. This is more about us coming together. We're now partners in this quest! The terms are favorable to us!

Harold would do what he was told. He was relieved. Making decisions is harder than not making decisions. He finally felt like a Jeremite. Let those idiots do the work.



## Chapter 15:

- Jeremites! Our Lord, God, has blessed us with another vision! We're going to build a dome!"

Harold was bored. Every teacher can tell you that it is tough to provide enough activities to keep children occupied. Cult members are a lot like children in that regard. Yes, everyone knew the world was ending in six months, but what really, was there to do? Harold had predicted the full-on apocalypse, not a catastrophe that could be avoided with hard work and preparation. They leaned in to community projects. Dixon was now populated by 5,000 Jeremites, and they were dedicated to improvement because there really wasn't much else to do. Everything will disappear soon, why not live well? He removed his, and everyone's, money from their banks and created the Dixon Community Jeremiahite Bank, or DCDB as no one called it. Sure, everyone saw that Dixon was turning into a commune, and the non-Jeremites were moving out, but again and again, when disasters strike, you'll find that people band together to help each other.

*I was just trying to live comfortably without actually doing anything, I was going to bail in a few months. I was lying. What the fuck is this shit? Then David did what he does.*

Conmen can't play one role for too long, David knew, or they begin to con themselves, too. Harold had already begun thinking of himself as Jeremiah, forgetting Harold, but when he heard the real Jeremiah's tape, he believed. Belief is a bad thing for a conman to lose control of. David convinced him that he or Jeremiah or both really were chosen.

*A dome is good. Domes are undeniably cool. Domes are expensive and probably ineffective, but - and this is a huge but - domes make everyone both hot and bothered. Especially if you are*

*a cult member. Domes are second only to coordinated footwear in terms of member engagement and excitement.*

The dome was made of a new kind of aerogel, a super-material almost completely transparent and thousands of times stronger than steel. It was almost lighter than air, yet it could neutralize heat and cold. It was the only material that could realistically serve their purposes. It was also to David's delight that the strongest transparent material, one that could protect the citizens of Dixon, the Jeremites, from nearly any outside influence, was created on a bet in the 1920s. Kistler bet Learned over who could replace liquid with gas in jellies - all of the words in that statement being absolutely hilarious to David. In his imagination, the bet was made in the dark morning hours, after a bout of marathon drinking and a scientist shouting match; breaks of up to an hour were allowed to investigate any sources cited.

This dome would not be possible without two things. First, a city planner and an architect both became Jeremites and perfected the snowglobe city. Shipping containers were perfectly intertwined, each capable of holding two Jeremites. All of the containers were outfitted with circular, hobbit-hole doors, every makeshift domicile could be entered from all sides. From one container you could move to every other both horizontally and vertically. There were also pneumatic conveyors that would shuttle occupants to different common areas in the dome. It was self-contained and self-sustaining. It was an impossible marvel. From outside the dome, one could see something not unlike a recycled castle, masked by vapor with a slight blue tint. In advance of the move, Harold had forced everyone to switch to a vegan diet. For some Jeremites, this was worse than any of the other rules Harold had forced upon them. One such Jeremite was the other, "more" important factor that made the dome possible. The dome was built with Van Doren's money.

Van Doren was a billionaire. He didn't do anything to get it and he didn't really like having it if he were to be honest with himself. He only met with the other seven because his dad used to, his heart wasn't really in it. He often thought, defensively, that no one ever dreams of being an evil billionaire; no three-year-old answers the old, "what do you want to do when you grow up" question and responds with "crush the will of the proletariat." It's a gig you just fall into.

He didn't have any particular moral compass, nor was he in any way religious, so it came as a shock to the world when he donated all of his inheritance to a cult he then joined. "What the fuck, dude?" was the world's unified response. Did he not know that cults can do some real damage with that kind of money? When it was reported, many breathless public opinion-havers suggested that the government should intervene. A cult having that much money is a national security threat, they shouted in print. They quieted down only slightly when it was pointed out to them that a large number of televangelists own more than one private jet and nothing could be more cult-y than the prosperity gospel lunatics. And really, if you stop to think about it, you'll see that there's not much difference between what Jeremiah was preaching and the Book of Revelations. And honestly, aren't all religions just cults that went viral? As if the Jeremites could do more with forty billion than the Vatican did before the word billion had been applied to money.

Why Van Doren did it was puzzling to everyone but him and David. On the other hand, David thought, as his grandmother would say, "Don't dip your balls in the gift horse's mouth".

## Chapter 16:

In the tradition of American Presidents, a heat wave saved her life. Event #5, like Lincoln and Kennedy each having 7-letter names, was pointlessly similar to Richard Lawrence's attempt to assassinate Andrew Jackson.

An overlooked gun blended with the crowd, close enough to read the words on her lapel pin: "I'll Do It For You!".

If you're alone, if you don't make noise, don't talk to anyone, and, above all, if you're a white guy between 160 and 190 lbs with short, dusty-blond hair - like a glitch in American culture - you can go completely unnoticed.

Despite a security team that had already defeated 4 plots-to-assassinate - perhaps the most practiced security team in history - Private First Class Don Hood, a quiet white male, 172 lbs, who lived alone in a house he inherited from his aunt - still registered in her name - who had short, dusty-blond hair, pulled an honest-to-God snubnosed revolver from his back - he had taped it there to emulate his hero, John McClane - and aimed the barrel through the back of her eyes.

Wanting so desperately to say something cool like, "Sic Semper Tyrannis" but unable to come up with the words, he double-clutched. He intended to rip out the gun, deliver an action hero one-liner, then fire the bullet that would save the world all in one smooth motion. Instead, when

the one-liner didn't come to him, he froze. He wondered for a moment what the hell those improv classes were for if he couldn't come up with something badass when he needed it. He shouted.

FUCK!

Now commanding the attention of the entire funeral procession - Senator Colby Wennsler, noted Anti-Vaxx activist, died of polio the week prior - PFC Hood snapped out of his reverie and once again aimed at Evelyn's skull.

Too shaken, he utilized none of his military training. Off balance, his arm wobbling, he pulled the trigger. Lucky for Evelyn, Hood's aim was poor. Lucky for Leigh, Evelyn's personal assistant, who stood four feet to the left of Evelyn, the gun jammed.

PFC Hood had an intense love for his thoroughly fictitious America; Evelyn was the single greatest threat to this America that has ever existed. She was black and she was a woman and PFC Hood was sure there was more to it than that but there wasn't.

In the beat of silence that followed - the 'click' of the misfired gun, already a loud, distinctive, terrifying sound, paralyzed the entire funeral procession, up to and including PFC Hood himself - Evelyn acted. Time slowed down for her. She saw everything in slow-motion to the point where she had plenty of time to wonder if, assuming everyone is the hero of their own story, each and every one of the people must be experiencing these events in slow motion as well, and if that's true, to what speed is everyone's relative slow motion? Is my slow motion slower or faster than your slow motion? If you follow that thread, isn't the question essentially boiled down to how do I know you're real? Are you just someone in my story? Am I someone in yours? And isn't that question really boiled down to what is? What is? What a stupid question.

That she had had this entire conversation with herself and still no one had moved so much as an inch through time, proved to her she was, in fact, moving in the slowest slow motion.

And so it was to each to experience the next moment in their own varied slow motions, unable to do anything but witness.

Evelyn ripped the gun from PFC Hood's hands and gracefully smashed it into his face, demolishing his nose and driving him to his knees. She tossed the gun off to her side. When it landed, there was a muzzle flash, and then a bullet blasted through Senator Wennsler's coffin, exploding his knee, hitting it with such force that it amputated his lower leg. That something so silly, so positively slapstick, could actually happen, paralyzed the entire funeral procession all over again, providing Evelyn one more beat which she used to even more gracefully side-kick Hood's face, breaking one tooth and sending Hood's skull rocketing to the ground. The cemetery's well-curated grass broke his fall; his groans were muffled.

The 'thud' of his head landing had the opposite effect of the 'click'; it roused the entire funeral procession to action. Slow motion hastened. Hood was instantly piled upon by the surrounding agents. Those not piling on un-holstered their guns and pointed them at every suspect, which is to say, everyone.

Evelyn coolly turned to Shannon.

- Make that two funerals today.

The event was broadcast live on MNN and within seconds the clip of Evelyn clobbering her would-be assassin, then following it up with a flippant remark was viewed billions of times and, though MNN's commentators were doing their best to call Evelyn a violent criminal who

assaulted an innocent gun-loving American executing his constitutional duty, the internet loved it and loved her for it. Evelyn was universally praised.

She had become popular when she prosecuted bankers and war criminals and loud-chewers, but this was different, her utter dismantling of the attacker touched a deep and primal aspect of Americans. Namely, it is the not-so-secret wish of nearly every American to fully and righteously, unimpeachably, beat the absolute shit out of a jabroni. To just really fuck him up. Not kill him, no, just a thorough, satisfying beatdown. Buried deep within the collective psyche, one thing unites all Americans; an expression of the pride in winning World War 2 mixed with disgust at the cruel and unjust wars since; a general sense that someone, somewhere, is fucking with you, be it King George or the asshole sitting in front of you in traffic, someone is in need of an absolute shit-kicking. And it is righteous and it is good to deliver that whupping with a smile and the blessings of God.

The downside to this, of course, is that Americans are always looking for a jabroni to whup and rarely looking in the mirror, where they are most commonly found.

The Side-Kick made her the most liked person in America, if not the world. She converted even those who would have cheered had the assassination been successful.

It was the day Evelyn finally became President.

It also cemented, though only eight men knew this, the literal end of the world.

## Chapter 17:

Construction on the dome never stopped. 5,000 Jeremites working together in insectoid harmony.

Van Doren observed the construction by walking in circles, slowly drawing from the center to the edge like a record. As a reformed oligarch, he felt renouncing his fortune would be the proper thing to do. He thought it would be wise of him to join the other Jeremites in back-breaking labor, demonstrating his commitment to the cause.

But he really didn't want to do that, because back-breaking labor would break his back, which he liked.

*Besides, I'm paying for the thing. That should count for a hell of a lot. That costs as much as America. This is expensive. Woof. Money is not supposed to be real.*

The dome grew quickly, and it drew attention from the conspiracy minded just as fast. It drew a great deal of attention from those only conspiracy inclined as well. A cult had usurped a small town in Illinois and was now building an impenetrable dome around said town and this was suspicious to literally everyone.

Neither David nor Van Doren needed to study much history to know that this was the type of suspicion that leads to both torches *and* pitchforks at the slightest evidence of witchcraft or minor inconvenience. To stave off the mob's eventual need to Frankenstein's-monster the unfamiliar, David advertised the town as a tourist attraction - Come See the Biggest Dome Ever Built By Totally Normal People! - the dome was made of downright sufficiently-advanced-might-as-well-be-magic material, the buildings were architectural oddities,



energy was recyclable; at the very least science-y folk would want to ogle at the town. The tourists could see the town, confirm it wasn't a guns-dealing compound, that no one believed in a space-ship, that there was no coercion - other than the natural brainwashing that comes from the reinforcement of an isolated peer group - that, aside from constantly talking about the end of the world happening on October 10th, they were very nice and not something to be suspicious of at all. The town was open to anyone who wanted in.

David invested in social media influencers, amplifying the narrative.

He *memed* the Jeremites. And then, like all memes, talking about, caring about, discussing, even *remembering* the Jeremites was *lame*. In weeks, the Jeremites went from object of suspicion to object of derision to forgotten conversation. The internet's fickle attention span made hiding in plain sight easy.

Along with invisibility, the Jeremites temporary fame also proved to be an effective recruitment tool. Unfortunately, for their purposes, it was too effective. Only 20,000-ish would be allowed in the Apocadome (or *Arkpocadome* as David preferred). Over 200,000 wanted to join and they didn't even know the world was *actually* going to end. David couldn't imagine the nightmare that would result if everyone knew the truth. He really couldn't. The enormity of what he and Van Doren had to do next was equal only to the tragedy.

Their responsibility was no less than to choose the survivors of the human race.

When the potential followers went from trickle to deluge, David instructed Harold:

- Proclaim or decree or scream out a big 'ole behold or whatever it is you do. Say there's a cap on the number of Jeremites we will accept, but, like, don't tell them what it is, you

know? Keep a mystery, we can't have an intrepid reporter coming in here and holding us accountable for our actions. We just don't have the *time* for it, man. Any other apocalypse, I swear we'd do it in a much more ethical way - although probably not, it's a real panicky situation, ya know. Furthermore, *none* of this was *our* idea. We're just the ones stepping up. So if you want to step up and save the human fucking race, *Harold* - you'll never be fucking Jeremiah to *me* - then *you* can fucking do it. Until then, get the fuck off of my ass!

Harold was already planning to kill David, Van Doren, and everybody else, then rule the world; he didn't mind the tirade.

- .... Ok. I'm sorry for that. I wasn't trying to be mean, it's just... fucking... there are... *billions...* going to *die*. And we're choosing the survivors. Well...

*That's what Jeremy is doing here, isn't it? We've been killing ourselves over this, talking about cloning - that's gross - and collecting sperm and just generally preserving everything aboard the Arkpocadome and then deciding we're the ones to choose, but it's obvious. This is why Jeremy is here, why we're here. He's going to choose. He's the only one who can do it. He's.... oh man, woof... he's graduated to the teen who brought all of humanity together.*

- Hooooly shit, Harold. Harold. Harold. Harold.
- Yes, what?
- Tell your people to set up interviews - like Scientology but not weird - and Jeremy will talk to them and we'll do what he says! Of course! Everybody here has a purpose, Harold, and Jeremy's couldn't possibly be fixing cars in a future where there are no cars. That would be stupid. *Obviously* this is his *purpose*, man! Shit, yea. I'm telling you, I'm

really starting to believe in this whole prophecy stuff. Look, you got *their* date right - we still don't know if that's the actual date, ok, so I can't just be saying you're a prophet, but all the coincidences piling up, all the pieces falling into their piece places, this might be something more.

I was really struggling with this, you know, because all of the stuff about apocalypses being the result of an inherent seed of destruction - the whole apple of the knowledge of good and evil curse - so I was feeling a bit of why bother, but think about it, ok, suppose for a second that all of those people throughout history are wrong and stupid because they're so fucking prejudiced, they'd rather the world fucking end than *learn* anything. For example, take the Noah story. Noah was just an asshole who loved a regressive, patriarchal, vengeful douchebag of a God.

And Noah? Noah was a *dick*. Your God killed everybody on Earth for the sin of *having a good time*. He's 10 million Jon Lithgows in Footloose. *He's* the bad guy.

'Oh no! Oh my You! Don't kill me, I'll do whatever you say. I'll build your boat!'

You know who else tried to kill everybody and would kill you if you didn't do what he said? Fuckin' Hitler.

Sure, maybe he's real. So the fuck what? He *sucks*. I don't take orders from *anyone* who commits capital G Genocide, even if they have a capital G in God. So fuck that God, and fuck Noah.

What if instead of Noah, it was someone *cool*? What if it was Jeremy?

- Does he... *know*?
- Absolutely not, I would never do that to the kid.

- How will he pick the right people? We're going to need scientists and all that. I don't know... botanists, I guess.
- Ok. Ok. I got this. We're going to pre-screen. Set up a shit ton of interviews-
- -uh-
- -I know, *sooooo*rry. Would you please have your people set up a shit ton of interviews?

Just because Harold had already decided to kill them, did *not* mean he was fine being ordered around.

- Will I get a say?
- Fuck and No... OK, sorry, I'm a little excited, this was really scary for me and Dors, so now I'm like, really raw, you know? Like when my cousin was dying. I knew he wasn't gonna make it, they told me, and we stopped hoping for a miracle, you could see it. So you know the score, you know death is coming, but you don't know when. So you have to wait. And wait. Eventually you're finished grieving, and you've moved on, even though they're still alive. I was over my cousin's death before he died. I started treating him like he was dead, and then I avoided him. Who wants to hang out with the dead? And then, when they finally do die, there's a massive release of shame and emotion and everything inside that you didn't even know you were holding in. I wasn't over his death, I was in denial. When he died, I was free of the denial. I felt so much better, and that was the worst feeling in the world. I'm just *so* fucking *happy* this is Jeremy's problem. And I can't believe I'm so terrified of this I'm allowing a 16-year-old kid to do it for me. What a coward... So anyways. No. I bought this cult. Our deal was you say my words, not yours. You do not have a say.

Every morning Van Doren walked his same route. He observed the construction, convincing himself that, by watching them build, he was participating. The construction replaced his favorite reality shows. Now he watched other people do good work in person. Gradually, he saw more and more people wearing casual worship/construction clothes - the uniform of the Jeremites was comfort - and the dome's construction accelerated.

He liked all of the new people. He had no idea who any of them were, nor did he care, nor did he bother to learn their names. They did not ask him to, which is why he liked them. The demographics of his new fellowship were growing with a clear direction. There were far more women than men, outnumbering them almost 10 to 1. This made sense to him in context. *Men aren't that valuable post-apocalypse; they eat too much food, take up too much space, talk too much, aren't as important to repopulation, and just generally cause too many problems. And there's an easy argument to make that it's the fault of men we are where we are. I should know, It's basically my fault.*

David went to Jeremy and asked him for a favor.

- Would you mind talking to some people for me?-
- Yea, sure.-
- Jeremy, before you answer, I'm asking you to interview thousands of people-
- yea, all good-
- you're gonna have to sit next to Jeremiah-
- sure no problem-

- -and when you're done I need you to tell me if they fit in. The town is growing and since you, you know, whatever it is you did, you should choose who comes to live with us. .
- Take yes for an answer, dude.

Jeremy interviewed applicants one-by-one in rooms that looked identical to interrogation rooms - bare walls and floors, large table in the center with two chairs on either side, two-way mirror, poor lighting - but over the two-way mirror was a banner that read: Don't Worry This Is Not An Interrogation Room. The banner was a thin fitted sheet. The words were written with hastily slapped on paint, the large size of the "Don't" contrasted with the scrunched up "Interrogation Room" implying a lack of planning in its creation.

When an applicant was led into the room, it was the slumped, poorly made banner that greeted them. Every applicant responded to it with a loud sigh of relief, a release of tension so swift it was like a punch to the gut. The thought being, "Whoever put this up is either an empath who recognizes the intensity of the circumstance and seeks to dispel that anxiety with humor. Or they're an immature psychopath playing sick mind games before eventually finishing the job, brutally. Either way, it's really out of my hands; there's really no point worrying now, I'm just along for the ride."

After the banner, the applicant would turn to see Harold, decked out in brilliant gold-laced robes, jewelry-laced fingers, silver-laced teeth and looking every bit the part of "Jeremiah" sitting next to Jeremy, handsome, wearing jeans and a hoodie with the sleeves rolled up drawing attention to his smooth forearms that were alien to his craggy, calloused hands. Harold kept his nose turned up, retaining the aloof demeanor of a prophet. In the same way the banner worked to ease the

tension around the intimidating room, Jeremy's smile eased the tension around Jeremiah's intimidating presence.

The interviews were short. Harold said nothing. Jeremy chatted.

Harold was increasingly in awe of Jeremy. The ease with which he communicated; it was as if Jeremy had a skeleton key that could unlock any chest. Every question Jeremy asked was answered fully and honestly. One interviewee melted to tears, admitting that he didn't like the color of Jeremy's skin. He had wanted to hide that truth; overtly racist answers are not good interview material. He apologized and left, unable to make eye contact. Jeremy followed him and warmly thanked him for his honesty, then waved him off. When he returned to his seat, Jeremy said, "I'm sorry Jeremiah, I know you liked that guy, but he sucks and he has no place here." Harold did not like what Jeremy was implying, nor did he like the idea that Jeremy may open him up, too. Jeremiah was a mythical figure, and myths are not meant to be unlocked.

The selection process took two months, interviewing seven days a week. Applicants were accepted or denied on the spot. When the two months were up, there were an additional 16,274 Jeremites.

At the end, Harold despised Jeremy. Harold didn't know why Jeremy chose who he chose. He could see why Jeremy rejected people - there turned out to be a significant number of closeted racists - but Jeremy's thoughts eluded him. And not having any input himself made him still angrier. He disagreed with Jeremy's choices often.

*One of the perks of being a cult leader is that you're supposed to be obeyed, not disagreed with, let alone ignored. What the fuck does this kid know that I don't?*

When they finished, Harold knew what he had to do.

Van Doren neared the end of his daily walk to the wall. No longer the quiet, uninterrupted stroll, everywhere was bustle. The town had changed. In two months, the Jeremites had tripled in size. The dome was almost finished. Van Doren wasn't impressed with it any longer, or, he was still impressed by it, but he didn't feel impressed when he looked at it. He felt apprehension.

*Dome? More like... Doom! Amiright? Hey, so... what else is in the news...*

The dome had gone from engineering marvel to ominous reminder. The dome was there for a reason, and it was not a reason Van Doren cared to dwell on. For the same reason, the flow of tourists slowed as the construction sped up, fueled by a massive influx of dedicated followers, all of whom were notable for their diversity, their work ethic, their positive attitudes, and their commitment to openness and vulnerability.

This was the first time Van Doren really felt like he had joined a cult.



## Chapter 18:

As a reformed oligarch, Van Doren felt the proper thing to do was renounce his fortune and join his fellows in back-breaking labor, demonstrating his commitment. But he really didn't want to as back-breaking labor was awful in a self-explanatory way. He observed the construction unable to forget that he was looking at the physical manifestation of all of his wealth. Like Scrooge McDuck had his silo filled with gold, Van Doren had a really expensive dome.

It was Jeremiah's decree that, until the dome was complete anyone who wanted could come in and out of the Apocadome (the name is fungible). There were tourists taking pictures, some marveled, others mocked, but everyone was treated with a solemn respect by the Jeremites. Sometimes David would join him on these walks. Their intense attraction had faded somewhat into a more stable, less distracting, commitment. David combed through his recordings of Jeremy, and this work superceded the desire to just stay in bed and, well...fuck.

Jeremy worked in the car repair shop still and wasn't much bothered by the world. Cars and trucks were needed to bring materials and food and gas and everything else, so Jeremy didn't build with the Jeremites. He didn't consider himself to be one, ironically, or maybe purposefully? No one could be sure. He was Jeremy.

His humility continued to piss off Harold.. The benefits of being a cult leader with infinite resources without having to make any meaningful decisions. It was like being L. Ron Hubbard but he never had to write a screenplay. But Jeremy was so naive and so humble it grated on the ears. That he was the center, the gravity that all Jeremites orbited around - literally, his house was in the exact middle of the dome - his ideas were the heart of the world and he was as innocent as a Disney cartoon, specifically the ones made in the early 90s. Go back too much further than that and, historically, it's no longer an applicable analogy. Harold had no inner

conscience, so he was unprepared to meet one in the flesh, let alone one that could replace his transmission.

Almost against his will, it chafed at Harold to be given directives from a teenager. God damn if he could just accept it and let it ride, he thought. What chafed still further was that everything Jeremy said was in direct opposition to what Harold's instincts were. It began to dawn on him that, if everything Jeremy says to do is right, and it's the opposite of what Harold would do, then Harold must be wrong. Not just that, but if everything Jeremy said to do was good, then that means, following the same logic, that *everything* Harold does is bad. To follow the thread still further, then if Harold wanted to do the "bad" thing because it was what he had always done, well, then, hadn't he always done the "bad" thing?

The logic was more instinctual, though. The literal thought was, "Oh my God, have I always been such an asshole?" Harold was in this particular headspace, as he always was after a visit from David. David had finished listening to August 6th when Jeremy said to Stacie, while explaining the constant repairs needed for the Ford Fiesta, and about how the issues were generated because of the need for billionaires to make not just more money, but *all* the money. He said that, as the rich grew richer, the poor grew poorer, the border between the two became larger and stronger. Jeremy said that borders were stupid. That borders make people stupid. The border says, I am here and you are there. "When you get rid of borders, Stacie, we're all just here."

When Harold was told this meant they would finally accept new members and allow those who wished to leave go as they please, he pushed back.

"David, I get you, I do. And look, it is pretty fucking great the bullshit Jeremy has been on, for real. I don't mean to understand it in the slightest and I'm proud to say I Do. Not. care. But, and I like to think I should get a little respect in this one area; seeing as how I had this whole cult thing

up and running for a good long while before you dropped in, you should listen when I say this isn't how you do cults. They like the rules, they love the restrictions, they don't want to be told what to do, they want to be told what they can't do. No one, cult-wise at least, wants to hear, in response to, "What should I do?" "Whatever you want." It makes things challenging, my buddy, and cults are about simplification.

"Harold..., apologies... Jeremiah, you might be right, but if we're going to improve upon the society soon to be apocalypted, we have to begin with that improvement. We can't say we'll do it later, after all of our problems go away. That's what they said," David gestured to everything, as his arm swung around, almost like he was signaling for it, a fire truck's alarm could be heard throughout the entire dome. David's phone vibrated immediately, filling him with an indescribable dread. J & D Automotive repair was burning.

## Chapter 19:

The seven remaining members of The Eight were gathered to confirm the judgment. They performed the last ritual and whined the way the wealthy whine, violently and over nothing. The bylaws were clear. They danced around the church they ordered built earlier that morning and the manpower they commanded was enough to complete the church in one day. The last ritual required a burning church.

Unfortunately, they hadn't measured in advance and the fire was so large they had to back away nearly twenty feet. To represent the circle required them to spread apart from each other far enough that conversation was impossible.

Terry thought this was absolutely stupid on account of the conversation being the point and the ritual being pretend magic from lore.

They were there to sign in blood the death warrant of the world.

Terry put his hands on his head and spat out the second half of his thought.

- But first we have to do this fucking *dance*!

The others were unable to hear him. Another aspect of their miscalculation, the sounds of a too-big-for-their-purposes-church collapsing in flame made more than enough noise to drown out even the loudest whining.

The dance was intricate and had been performed only six times in The Eight's history. This would most likely be its last display. The dance had lower stakes when, say, the Mayan Eight danced; they could only destroy themselves. This dance was for everybody.

Privately, they could admit that, at best, this was an overreaction. The bylaws were written thousands of years ago when ending worlds was ending the lives of a few hundred people.

Ending this world, now that they were the only Eight, meant *actually ending the world*. For the slight of desecrating the body of a member's nephew...

After the undulating, in no way graceful dancing, they commanded the same crew that built the church to put out the fire and dispose of the debris.

They returned to the makeshift campsite. Their tents were made of varied animal skins sewn together and slathered with pagan symbols. Gourds filled with a dark, mucous-y liquid were placed in a circle around each tent. Yoga mats were placed in front of the openings.

The men kneeled on the yoga mats, dipped their hands in the liquid, and traced unique lines on their faces. The 18-year-old looked at his phone; he was playing a tutorial video on the lines he was supposed to trace. The others needed no assistance; the ritual was practiced every year upon ascension. The new member became frustrated when his finger slipped and the liquid stained his phone.

- Can we just *not* do this?
- Not do what?
- *This!*
- The ritual?
- No, the whole... *thing*.

Three of the members raised their hands. A fourth spoke for them.

- The rules are The Rules. The rules have worked for thousands of years. They have guided us to greatness.
- Yea...and now they're going to kill everybody. *How is that not a thing that matters to you?*

The six others looked at each other, sharing the facial expression of someone who has been asked a question begging what the other thinks should be an obvious, irrefutable answer that absolutely will not come, as it is so foreign a concept it might as well be in Elvish.

- ...Uhhh...does it matter to you?

The youngest, having not considered that question fully before, checked in with his true self. He quickly found his outrage. He was outraged at the stupidity. They were about to do something that made sense on only one level - an outsized feeling of importance leading to revenge over even the tiniest slight - and on every other possible level, it made no sense at all. It was if they heard the adage “cutting one’s nose to spite one’s face” and thought, “damn, that’s a great idea, I hate that fucking face.” He hated them for their blind adherence to insane ideas regurgitated by cavemen.

Then he dug deeper; he found a stronger resentment beneath his outrage. He hated his father for putting him into this situation. He hated them for acting like his father. He hated everyone. He hated himself. He wanted to *die*.

He dug deeper still and realized that he *didn’t* care about what they were doing. He was *personally* outraged. This wasn’t about them, nor the soon-to-be-victims, it was about him. He was acting out of the same rage, the same outsized importance, that he criticized them for.

He hit bottom and realized he wanted exactly what the others wanted. Everyone *should* die. He just wished *they* would die, too.

- Ok, no, it doesn’t really matter to me. But this ritual is still stupid.

He was answered by the First Speaker, the position occupied by the third oldest member, in this instance - the true creator of both Microsoft *and* Apple - Leon Haipumbu.

- Whether or not it's old gods, aliens, new gods, TV or whatever, it is our tradition to ask the Darkness' blessing. For what we are about to do, it is wise to speak their names and invoke their power.

The First Speaker having spoken first, the floor was open for the rest to join in.

- It is our way.
- We have to follow our traditions.
- Now listen...gonna be honest.... I'm with the frickin' kid here. We've got a good thing going on, why can't we just ride this one out? People are stupid; it'll take some time, but we'll convince them that Evelyn caused all of their problems and they'll believe it like they always do. All that happened was a dead body got shot, that's not enough for me.
- Thaaaaank you!

Terry and the eighteen-year-old high-fived. The First Speaker barked in response.

- Terry! *We...* do not wait things out. *We...* run this world. And if *we...* are not the rulers, the world must end. This is *not* about the *corpse*. The rules dictate our response, and we will follow those rules, but we are doing this because Evelyn has won... *and we cannot lose!*
- Not for one instant!
- We play the game with them. They do *not* get to play the game with us.
- What does that even fucking *mean*, Pope-y?
- It means we rigged the game. We can't lose a rigged game.

Terry nodded, appearing to accept this explanation with very little effort. The eighteen-year-old was the last remaining holdout and he made his feelings known.

- So instead of losing the game, you're going to flip the board over like a bunch of fucking spoiled *babies*?!

The First Speaker opened his mouth to respond when Terry interjected.

- *You're* a spoiled baby! Quit whining and *do* somethin' *asshole*. You're an asshole kid. You're an *asshole... kid-*

Leon bristled.

- -and what you need to *know...* is how frickin' *stupid* you are.
- What you *both* fail to understand, is that we have no other choice. We have performed this ritual together six times previous. The Eight have snuffed out every coup attempt. Eight shall rule. And only eight. Evelyn threw us into chaos. We have lost one. We are fighting with ourselves. Our servants have been defeated. Our power weakened. Our power is total, or nothing. Do you understand? We cannot survive *any* weakness. If they do one thing out of our control, we must end them, to keep this disobedience from spreading. They are a disease, and when they do as they are told, they are a welcome distraction. But if we lose containment, they will destroy everything.
- ...we're going to destroy everything first?
- *Yes!* You frickin' *moron!*

It was personal for Leon, too. He hated these people. They hated each other. They were sick of their lives. They were increasingly unable to convince themselves of immortality. They didn't like the way people were... making them... *feel* bad.

It used to be fun to direct from the shadows. They had been insulated from the reality of their capricious manipulations for so long, they couldn't understand why the subjects they thought



were blissful in their ignorance wouldn't stop being so *mean* to them now. Every day a new poor posted a mean comment online and it had taken a toll.

That was really all it took to prejudice them towards apocalypse.

- Listen, Terry. *You...* moron. If you didn't suck so hard, we wouldn't be in this situation. You doomed everyone as much as they did-

Every member of The Eight agreed with the sentiment "It's everyone's fault but mine".

- Please, in Satan's name, *shut the fuck up*. Finish the *fucking* ritual!

Leon raised his volume and cowed the easily cowed world leaders. The group seethed. On their knees in front of their tents, wearing tailored animal skins, hands dripping with frog entrails, their resolve to end it, *everything*, became hardened alloy.

They resumed performing the intricate dance of invocation. They chanted in unison the names of dark deities both real and fictional - though real is not the word - without discrimination; they prayed to Satan and Cthulu with equal respect; they figured the only difference between the two was time; they might as well cover their bases.

When they completed the ritual, all but the First Speaker felt embarrassed. It wouldn't make sense, given his power as an oligarch was essentially limitless, for the First Speaker to feel pride in his position as First Speaker to the point where he got really into the dogma of The Eight as an ego boost. And yet that is exactly how he felt, and exactly what he did.

The First Speaker took a deep breath, taking ten beats in and ten beats out.

- Ok. Thank you guys for getting through that. Now that we've invoked the dark blessings, we need to check the bylaws for how to proceed.
- Thank fucking *Christ!* Let's get out of these skins.

## Chapter 20:

*Literally, the plan is perfect. The plan is foolproof because I am the one doing it. There is no plan, yet, but whatever plan there is, is foolproof. My plans are foolproof. I am the leader of this cult. I am infallible. Or at least they will tell me that I am infallible. Which is the same thing, really. And reality is negotiable, so I'll negotiate a reality where all of my plans work.*

Harold lifted his portly frame up off of his leather recliner. His study was drab and the books were fake. The leather chair was stained with the ghosts of a thousand chicken wings. His joints popped. He hated his body, now. He had long spindly legs, thin like barbed wire, his arms were short and thick. His center of gravity was above his gut and his shoulders slouched. His gut entered rooms first. The cracked, ashy skin of his back was covered with acne.

His gut entered the bathroom. In the mirror, he watched his unfamiliar, hated body go through the motions. He watched his chunky arms rise and his swollen hands remove his glasses, setting them in their case, closing it with a satisfying, magnetic snap. He unscrewed his contacts and inserted them one at a time.

He opened the medicine cabinet and removed his makeup bag. Harold hid his gaunt face with an inorganic bronze. His sunken eyes were caked with a similarly tinted, uncanny shade, like the background layer in an old Hanna Barbera cartoon. It was labeled "Summer Suntan".

He shaved with an old, dull razor.

He waved deodorant at his armpits.

He washed his hands without soap.

He opened each of his pill bottles, then dropped one of each onto a tortilla. Pill tortilla in hand, he left his private pod, more luxurious than the other Jeremites, including David and Van Doren,

but still a pod, then made his way to the dining area. His chef, a person born in France to a Japanese mother and a Ghanaian father, had already prepared scrambled eggs, bacon, cilantro, melted cheese and a dollop of tuna salad. She took Harold's tortilla carefully then added her ingredients. She said, "All praises be to you, boss."

Harold liked being called boss; early on, he told the Jeremites to call him "boss". They added the "all praises be to you" and he had no idea why.

Harold left the domicile, a grass-covered buckyball with larger rooms than the grass-covered buckyballs connected to it on any of its sides. He went towards his golf cart first, then changed his mind. No one was around so he spoke to himself.

- Lovely day for a walk, isn't it?

*I need to lose some weight, Jesus.*

Harold sauntered to the downtown area of New Dixon. It was unrecognizable to the residents of Old Dixon. With Van Doren's money, the Jeremites had replaced the town. Though the non-Jeremites were resistant, the Jeremites outnumbered them 4 to 1 and had won every local government slot - not that it mattered; they would do what Jeremiah - David and Van Doren - told them to even if it killed them.

It wouldn't kill them, though, which was the point.

While one wing replaced the roads with large pneumatic tubes, criss-crossing Dixon, containing comfortable egg-shaped passenger cars that could carry up to 15 people at a time. Cars were abolished; all fossil fueled devices were banned - punishable by banishment. Van Doren's money powered the town, devoted as it was to researching and implementing self-sustaining energy.

It was almost a thought experiment: “What if a small town had infinite money? What would they do with it?”

The answer was not found in a vacuum, instead it was by necessity. They knew the world was ending. They used that infinite money to thumb their noses at the ending world, staunchly refusing to end with it.

The centerpiece of that goal was the dome. The ecosystem within the dome could last indefinitely. When the project was completed, Van Doren would experience something truly novel: he was about to be broke.

Harold continued past downtown until he saw his target: D&J Automotive Repair. The building was ridiculous in the way of David’s design choices. A rhombohedron with 10 degree angles on the vertical axis, painted orange and yellow - neon both - with an intrusion of D&J in three-foot-tall Cambria font. Everyone hated it. The paint job was once reported for assault. Even so, everyone from Old Dixon went once or twice a month to say Hi to Jeremy. Very rarely was the conversation any more than exchanging Hellos, and though there would always be a pretense for visiting - some errand or other - it was rarely completed. Jeremy was the kid who brought a town together, they loved him and no matter how much Dixon changed, they would always love him.

Harold hated Jeremy for that. The plan was to kill him.

Finally there, he walked into the D&J main office. The bells jingled but Jeremy couldn’t hear them. He was in the garage dismantling cars. Now that the roads were banned, there was nothing left to do but recycle them. No one was ever in the office. The orange plastic chairs, held up by harsh metal cylinders with bulbous, jaundiced screws - the type that exist only in repair shops -

were unoccupied. On little tables next to the chairs were perpetually unread magazines, nevertheless replaced every week. The dust-covered phone had not rung since it was installed. An unspoken agreement had always existed between David, Jeremy, and Dixon. Jeremy's customers would take care of the point of sale themselves. David trained Stephanie, the first ever D&J customer, on the accounting system. She trained the next two customers and they in turn and so on until all of Dixon knew what to do. Jeremy would do a so-so job of repairing their car and say, "I don't know, this is probably 650, ring it up if you want to." Then the customer would pull up the app on their phone, swipe their card, then input the transaction into the accounting software Jeremy had never once looked at. David checked in every week, like he was removing cash from a vending machine.

The only sound in the office was an ancient cathode-ray TV, blasting morning talk shows regardless of the hour.

Harold fiddled with anything not tied down. Four fingers slapping the back of a chair in syncopated rhythm. Rapping the desk with his knuckles. He dragged a fingertip across the surface and the gunk felt like a sheet of ABC gum. It disgusted him.

He circled the desk to search for some cleaning supplies, but all he found was a black lockbox, unlocked, that held petty cash.

He went to the bathroom. He wetted a scrunched up handful of toilet paper with soapy water and rushed back to the desk. He tried to wipe the grime off but the toilet paper just disintegrated in the face of a superior material. He was not pleased with his work.

*Somebody!*

- -clean this shit up!

*That's right, I'm alone. Whoops. This is weird. Usually people are around to do my bidding.*

- Well. Guess I'll do it.

He redoubled his search. He became more and more frustrated when he couldn't find anything.

His eyes were wide and bloodshot, veins popped on his neck, his cheeks were flushed, teeth clenched, and his fists were balled.

*I am going to destroy this fucking desk.*

- I am going to *destroy* this *fucking* desk!

He raised his fist, but suddenly he stopped himself.

- I... don't work here. How did he do that?

The crushing weight of his imaginary day job lifted. He practically skipped to the garage door.

The outside had David's flair, but the garage itself was indistinguishable from any other common shop: grey pavement, bright red drawers filled with well-organized tools, hydraulic lifts, coiled yellow tubes.

Harold saw Jeremite Derek Tisdale loitering in the southwest area. Apparently he had just come to watch. Jeremy was busy dismantling a red Ford pickup truck. He alternatively muttered and sang to himself while he worked, oblivious to the world around him. Harold stage-whispered to Derek.

- Psst! Derek! I am here on a *holy mission*.

*Holy mission, Batman!*

- I am on a mission, Derek, and no one can know what I do here today. I, Jeremiah, have given you a powerful gift. By giving you this test, this test of keeping your mouth shut, I have chosen you for a higher calling. This is what happened: Jeremy is a hero who saved

your life. You will tell anyone who asks what didn't really happen. What happened, you will not tell them. What is about to happen is what you will keep secret. Nod your head in prayer to me.

*Not sure if that made sense, but hey, if they were interested in stuff making sense they wouldn't be listening to me at all.*

Confident he was understood, Harold turned away. He scanned the garage. Neither Derek, because Jeremiah had told him not to, nor Jeremy, because he was searching for his train of thought, paid any attention to Harold who, after finding the gas can hidden in the corner, was splashing it on every surface.

Derek smelled the smoke and left, but the fire surrounded Jeremy completely before he was aware enough for it to register. Outside, Derek watched the fire like Moses watched a bush. By then, Harold was already halfway finished with his second breakfast pill burrito.

## Chapter 21:

## HERO TEEN DIES IN ARSON ATTACK. SUSPECT AT LARGE!

The Dixon police are investigating the death of Jeremy Williams, 17, as a homicide by arson.

Firefighters were called to the scene at 3 pm Tuesday to a fire burning at D & J Automotive repair, said Dixon PD police chief Wesley Roberts.

Jeremy was the only casualty of the fire. Witnesses in the repair shop said Jeremy was a hero.

“He went back in twice before the firefighters got here. He got me out. I’d be dead if it weren’t for him,” said Derek Tisdale, one of the men Jeremy saved.

Jeremy was found collapsed in his office. Friends suspect he was clearing his browser history.

Witnesses viewing the fire from across the street said that a man wearing a red, white, and blue balaclava entered the shop carrying a one gallon gas tank. “Fifteen minutes later, the whole place went up. It was f--- crazy,” said Danny, who did not wish to be named for this story.

Police found it odd that none of the witnesses remember the masked man leaving the building.

“He must’ve escaped because we didn’t find another body, but hell if we have any idea where to,” said a baffled Wesley Roberts. “Do you have any f---ing clue?” To which I replied, “No.”fw

Police are waiting to review the surveillance footage but say to be on the lookout for anyone around 5’10. “That sounds like the right height and we simply cannot rule out anyone,” said borderline lunatic Police Chief Wesley Roberts.

A wake will be held soon.



## Also Chapter 21:

- Marie, you are my favorite Marie and I know six. I have just finished replacing most of your car with most of a different car and I am not entirely sure whose. It is a delight to see you in this weather, have you seen the clouds today? They are absolutely gorgeous.
- They are lovely, Jeremiah, they are.
- Sad news is we probably won't be able to enjoy them too much longer. Sometimes I think the human race is too smart or too dumb or too something else to make it through this. I suspect people are very smart, but mostly lazy and we mistake that for stupidity.
- I say laziness is next to Godliness.
- Most of us do. Not a huge fan of people, I prefer Orcas. Big fan of Orcas.

## Chapter 22:

Van Doren knocked softly on David's study door. David didn't appreciate loud knocking, yelling, or sirens. Loud noises sent him into a destructive mood these days, moods that lasted longer and longer, angrier and angrier; yelling and shouting turned into fists smashing walls and photos ripped from frames. When he finally calmed down, he would lock himself in and watch tapes of Jeremy. David would talk to tapes as if Jeremy was still alive. He apologized to Jeremy. He thanked Jeremy. He told Jeremy secrets.

Van Doren's heart broke for David. David wasn't himself, he was a person no one wanted to be around. *Grieving, yea, man, but get the fuck over it. What about me?*

- David?
- Yes, what?

David spun in his squeaky chair, swiveling back and forth. When he wanted visitors to go away, he would squeak his chair as loud as he could. He would never take his eyes from the computer screen. Where he used to radiate a manic force, sucking whomever got too near into his vortex, now it pushed outward; no one could get close. The air crackled with bad vibes.

- They, uh, texted me.
- *They, they?*
- Oh yea. They want to come to the party.
- They want to *what?* Sure! Send them in. Tell them I'm going to kill them. Tell them I am going to put them in a trash compactor. I am going to turn them into cubes. Tell them I will turn them into cubes and then I will light those cubes on fire. Then I will sprinkle the ashes into gravy and I will fucking eat them. I am going to eat them because right now, I think they're shit and later, I am going to make that literally true. I am going to eat them

and turn them into the shit they are. Dors, do we have the technology to keep their heads alive in jars? I would like for them to watch me eat their ashes.

- I think that's their plan as well.
- Great minds...
- Sure, sure.
- Why did they text you?
- We have rules and, like, bylaws. We're civilized. In all the conspiracy movies, everyone backstabs each other and everything falls apart, the rules are supposed to stop that.
- But they don't?
- Of course not. We wouldn't get to our positions if we thought rules meant anything. The rules are about boredom. Ceremony and holy ground and rules of engagement are just more fun.
- So they text you... To ask... To kill us.
- Isn't that fun?
- So you can say no?
- Yes.
- Are you going to say no?
- Am I?
- Yes!
- I don't know. That's against the rules.
- I really hate--
- Right, like... obviously. But it's tradition to always say yes. It's like old-fashioned dueling, you see? It's about honor.
- None of you have any of that.

- Psychologically, I think that might be why we do it. If you think about it, nothing is really honorable about secretly controlling the world. My theory is that The Eight, and really all rich people, realize that they got to where they are by exploiting slave labor, which isn't all that honorable when you think about it. So they create elaborate games to manufacture honor they can't actually earn.
- They?
- We.

David's mouth was agape.

- You've already texted them back, haven't you?
- Well...
- You said y--
- It's tradition.
- Ok.
- So...,
- Do you ever think about what you're doing, Dors? I get that you were raised to rule and everything, and that every whim becomes reality for you, and always has, but do you ever even think about *me*?

Van Doren took the assault, the only evidence the verbal blow had landed was a pinched face and a lean away. An instinctively defensive position he learned to cope with his father's brutal habits.

*Showing emotion only made it worse then, who knows about now.*

Van Doren wasn't angry or sad or guilty, he was surprised at himself. It was blindingly obvious and it had never occurred to him. He was very thoughtless. He should've asked David.

*We're partners, right? And yea, they are planning on killing both of us, not just me, so it does make sense that he would want some input into the decision. But he hadn't. He just... texted back.*

*On the other hand, David has been distant. What, is he going to show him every text he gets?*

*On the original hand, though, this text was about our deaths.*

*Right.*

Van Doren's perspective was transformed, and he was ashamed. *He* was the thoughtless one.

Which he really should've known, considering he was always the thoughtless one. But, up until now, he had never really thought about it.

- Oh, David... I'm sorry. I really fucked up here, didn't I?
- You fucked up a lot, Dors. You fucked up so god damn much. It's amazing how much you fucked up. You fucked all the way up to the stratosphere. You have fucked up so high you are an honorary astronaut. This is the most you *could* fuck up.
- Fine, fine. Gees. I'll text them and tell them I've changed my mind.
- ...question: If you text them back, saying you've changed your mind, telling them that they are not welcome at the party, will they not? Will they actually stop?
- On a case-by-base basis, most of them will listen. You know, some of us like the old ways more than others. We're not a monolith, we *are* individuals, Daves.
- Then could you please tell them not to come.
- ...Sure. For you. I'm sorry.
- But they're still coming, right?
- Someone probably, yea.
- Ok. I guess this is actually good. You know, this is probably the best possible scenario, right? If you didn't have the rules, they would've surprised us. If you had just said yes,

they all would've come. But now it's only a couple. Someone was coming no matter what, right? So yeah, we're good. Good. I guess let's get something to eat.

The thought occurred to Van Doren that David needed a project to get him out of his depression and that, though this isn't how he *should* look at it, it's how he, of course, did. Everything had once again worked out in his favor even though he was the asshole.

## Chapter 23:

Evelyn didn't know why David and Van Doren contacted her. That he could in direct fashion said enough. He told her to hold a fundraiser. She thought they were just looney tunes. They were both members of a cult in Dixon, IL.

She went from table to table, charming and entertaining the people, true friends and fans. As she expected, Van Doren, wearing a slightly velvet suit, bespoke, swaggered in. He wore an imaginary tophat.

*Thin for an oligarch.*

When Van Doren sighted her, he spread his arms wide, palms open. He smiled wide, as though he had been marooned on an island and she his first human sighting in a decade. Evelyn was caught off guard. He *had* tried to assassinate her.

*Is he going to kill me himself? I wonder what his middle name is. The world will know it if he kills me. What's Sirhan Sirhan's middle name?*

- President Evelyn!

*At least one person uses the title.*

- Hello to you!
- Yes. Hello Mr. Van Doren.
- Let me catch you up.

Van Doren deliberately adopted his most giddy, non-threatening tone. He *had* tried to kill her after all.

- I am, first, no longer a member of the eight, ah. Sorry about all - of - you know. That. Anyways, I fell in love with a dreamer. He hijacked a cult. He uses the conman leader to preach his new gospel, the gospel he writes by interpreting what a 16-year-old says at an auto repair shop. He records everything the kid says and watches them in a

basement like Howard Hughes. Also, David is pretty sure the world is gonna end soon. But not, like, climate change and, uh, I guess that's caught you up. Too quick? You tell me. Whatcha think? In or out?

Evelyn did not like how often he was taking her off guard.

- Yea, I'm the first woman to be president and I'm black. I hear that apocalypse stuff a lot. AntiChrist and whatnot.
- Oh. Yes. Of course. I see what you mean. Let me say David thinks the world is, uh, ending, but for, ah... *non-racist* reasons. Nor misogynist for that matter.
- Mmhmm. Is it because I'm adopted.
- What! Good lord, no. I didn't even think of that one.
- It was a joke.
- Wonderful! It was truly a great, great joke.
- Mr. Van Doren. I'm going to level with you in a way I will not be with the other guests at my table. You tried to murder me-
- I apologized for that!
- -And I am not in a good position to forgive would-be assassins. If you are here you must want to buy my forgiveness and then, I imagine, buy me.
- That's not all the way untrue.
- Piffle.
- A robust response, I salute you.
- Douglas Adams?
- Very much so!

At that point, Evelyn relaxed, correctly reasoning that anyone who loves Dirk Gently cannot be evil.



- Just two things President Evelyn. I want you to talk to David. It's his plan.

When Van Doren said David's name, David burst through the doors and swaggered over. He wore a mauve onesie with a tuxedo pattern on it. Like a bright red toupe on the empty, sunburnt skull of a swarthy man, it was not subtle.

David spotted Evelyn and spread his arms out wide, palms forward, a non-threatening smile spread from one cheek to the other. His partner had tried to *kill* her after all.

Evelyn, no longer capable of being taken aback, thought, "Sure. Why not this then?"

Van Doren grabbed David's hand. David tripped; he was pulled so hard, but recovered without grace; an ugly tumbling motion followed by pushing his hand hard on the floor, too hard. His body flung backwards and he was off balance again, 180 degrees opposite. His arms waved in circles like he was trying to row through the air. In some ways succeeding. He didn't faceplant at least. Overall, it was comical, slapstick-y even. No one helped him. *Buncha dicks*, he thought, *buncha fucking dicks*.

The smile disappeared, replaced by a scrunched expression.

- And we want to invite you to a party!

Evelyn, furious at somehow being taken aback again, bent over and put her head in her hands.

She mustered a stern tone.

- Guys. Come on. Can we not.
- It is not *just* a party. Hello Madame Presidente. I'm David. Nice to meet you. I'm a big fan of your whole, I don't know what you'd call it... pulling the ole switcheroo? Whatever. We're going to finish this project, and when we day, we would like you to attend a - Dor calls it a party.
- I can also call it a christening if you like! A non-religious baptism. There will be drinks...
- I was going to say no, but then you said drinks-

- Open bar!
- -so yes, sounds great.
- Really? Just like that?
- No. Of course not. I'm the President, I cannot be plied with drinks.
- Yes! That makes sense. We are also offering all of the money. Like, all of them. So much of all of the money.
- And?
- And what?
- And what else are you asking for?

Van Doren turned to David, confused. He raised his eyebrows and caressed the lapel of his suit.

- What else are we asking for?
- Yes. What else. Or are you saying that you're giving me all of this money to *just* attend your... baptism.

David interjected.

- Money is imaginary.
- Ah yes, I think I left something out, thanks Daves. The party is also on the day the world ends. Isn't that fun!?
- Right. You're one of them. I see. I can't be seen with a cult on the date they predict the world ends. You didn't see a Mayan apocalypse party at the White House in 2012.
- Yes. We did. I was one of the eight you recall. We had a lovely affair that night at the White House.
- Jesus Christ. Disagree with everything then. That's a very fun side of a conversation to be on.
- David. I am having trouble, I feel like I'm doing a terrible job here.

David caught Van Doren's eye with a glance that shouted "No!" Van Doren gritted his teeth in response. So David began:

- Ok, the cult. Right. I get it, I would love to give you a good explanation but I'm running into a couple of road blocks. First, there is no good explanation. That could very well be last, but it's not. Second, there is *no* explanation. That one is the last. It, and I hate to put it like this, but it might be God. God might be real. But not, like, the religious type real where it's wonderful to believe in magic. He might be real in the way that a truck t-boning you in an intersection is real. It's not real, until it's very real and you are bloody chunks on asphalt.
- Cool. Cool. The answer is no then.
- Supreme Leader Evelyn, please-
- I am getting tired of no one callin-
- I get it, we're a couple of weirdos, I understand. But most of the people who fund everything are fucking wack jobs who believe they will be rewarded even *more* in the afterlife. *They are fucking crazy*. I'm not selling you the crazy part. I'm giving you money, sorry, *we* are giving you money to go to a party-
- I need you to stop-
- -I mean, how many decisions are made by people who believe in the literal devil. Also, Jeremy said that if people believe in white Jesus then they are the white devil. I don't know if that means anything, but hey, it sounds great and I think it means something if you do.
- -because this whole... conversation... is not how things work. My schedule doesn't work like this. If you want to set up a meeting, you will need to talk to my ever increasing number of handlers.

- Right. Well.

David shared another pregnant glance with his partner.

- Dors, what do we do here?

Evelyn, exasperated by their hushed tones, cryptic messages, and conspiratorial looks, rolled her eyes and turned toward her entourage. As she opened her mouth, ready to end not just this farce of a conversation, but indeed her entire presidency she was so exhausted with this type of nonsense.

An image popped into her head unbidden. In her hand was a gun. She saw herself asking one of her agents for it; the muzzle was nestled, digging into her back. "I could always just quit this job," before the scene played out, she left her reverie and shook her head, like the physical act would force her thoughts away, expelling them out her ears.

It was now clear that her two antagonizers had finished their silent *tete a tete* and had come to a decision.

- Who's listening right now?
- I've spent the last twelve years believing everyone is listening. If you want to keep a secret, never let it out of your head.

David said, performatively under his breath, "Fine, *be* a dick."

Evelyn swallowed her words. It was an immutable truth that, if a woman is angry for a reason, she will be told to calm down for being irrational. An obvious untruth that would send any right-thinking person into a rage. When that very rational rage is called irrational, it only burns hotter, giving off the appearance of being irrational. Then they are dismissed as crazy. And that's just white women. If a black woman...

- Sorry, I am very stressed. I just lost a close friend. He was pretty much Jesus.

Van Doren pulled a notebook from the inner breast pocket of his suit. He slid it to David, who pulled the pen from its aluminum binding.

- We believe wholeheartedly in what you're doing President Evelyn. The two of us want to support you in a monetary way as well as by throwing the full support of the Jeremites behind you.

Evelyn interrupted with an unintended burst of laughter.

When she laughed, David began writing while talking. Evelyn didn't hear a word, she was so focused on his scribbles - even though he never broke eye contact with her. When he was finished writing - not talking - he passed the notebook over to her.

It read:

I respectfully apologize for my curt words. I fear you are going to be assassinated and - well, I obviously know they're trying to kill you, Dors told me all about it. What's troubling is that I think they might succeed here in a bit. They are not sending assassins, they're sending missiles. They - ya know, *they* - are dumb. They'd rather everyone die than lose their money. It's gonna happen on the same day as our party - that's the point. They're trying to get rid of all of us. That's what the project is about. It's a dome, a protective dome. They're going to destroy the whole world to spite you, Evelyn. That's how racist they are. Anyways, where were we...

David had practiced speaking and writing simultaneously since he was a child. He saw a magician do it. Sleight of hand and conjuring didn't interest him - they weren't *real*. But thinking two different things at the same time, splitting your thoughts in two; that's twice as many thoughts! Sometimes he thought it was half as many, but only the one half thought that. He was 15 years out of practice so, though Evelyn understood the important parts, he had lost the thread and trailed off.

- Anyways... where were we? Oh yea, you should go to the party!

## Chapter 25:

Evelyn had seen pictures of the interior, video tours, satellite images, but in person, it was a far more impressive structure: a translucent geodesic dome with a miles long radius, built to withstand the end - The End, the end, not just “the end”.

“Needs to look cool as fuck,” was David’s first planning note and, because of his hands-on direction, it did.

Van Doren insisted that, at a reasonable height, circumferencing the dome, the dome had to preserve culture. If a visitor walked around the dome, never straining their necks once, they would see paintings, photos, comics, sheet music, pages from all genres of book - both fiction and non-. At precise intervals were speakers and subwoofers and mixing boards and turntables and *all* of the instruments. There were screens everywhere: flat screens, LED screens, 4K and cathode ray alike. There were playbills, posters, magazines.

Van Doren tried for sculptures but it was yet to be seen how they could be secured to the structure, so they were stored away with a promise to return.

There was a repeating pattern of phones, tablets, towers, laptops, and PCs. There were two Bob Marley t-shirts and one Velvet Underground: Velvet Underground was Van Doren’s favorite band.

And a great deal more.

Evelyn saw every cultural contribution every culture had contributed. She was beyond moved by the medium height rotating museum.

In her honor, Dixon was distastefully decorated in the style of a 1950s mayoral stump speech, distorted in size. Evelyn was set up to give her speech in a gazebo that comfortably fit four

hundred. Flags lined every major street from Timber Creek to Bloody Gult. At every corner the familiar red and white stripes alongside the unfamiliar fifty-two stars on the blue background waved gently in the breeze. In between the American flags were the flags of every other nation, both past and present.

This display did not move her. Looking at the repeating display of nations forced her to think about what it would take for all of humanity to come together in the way these flags represented. It would take some threat beyond our comprehension, something that can only be solved by uniting as one, an extinction level event.

*Maybe nations fighting each other is a pretty solid sign the human race isn't on the edge of being wiped out. The movies always have humanity uniting and surviving at the end, but that doesn't seem likely. If there were aliens - ok, different aliens than the ones I know - who wanted to get rid of us, we'd already be gotten rid of, united nations or no.*

*What did the Ark look like to Noah's neighbors. They must have laughed, then shook their heads at the poor madman, then they must have been really freaked out.*

The configuration of the flags was also a bit it's-a-small-world-after-all-esque and that song had always annoyed Evelyn.

The dome was a wonder. It was no less than everything. And what could not be preserved physically was done digitally. This was the impenetrable stronghold that would guarantee more time. At least a little more time.

*Or maybe it's nothing. Maybe it's our last shot and it wasn't good enough. At least we tried. Not trying is unAmerican.*

*Today the dome is done. Let's have a party.*



David was wandering through his house, fretting from room to room. Each time he would take two steps into a pod - the house was now redecorated as an ant farm - then he would indecisively back out.

- Today is the fucking *day*!

To his dog, Send-George-W-To-The-Hague, or Hague-y for short, he spoke in a terrible cockney Dick-Van-Dyke-y accent.

- Oi! Today is the *fucking day*!

Van Doren, ensconced in his own pod, recognized the solemnity of the event. Today, The Eight would end once and for all. He spoke to the mirror.

- My grandfather had no problems. Lived his whole life, like, secretly running the world.

This sucks. This does not go into the win column.

*Then again, if he hadn't had so many bad ideas that reverberated throughout history, maybe I wouldn't have had to do all of this. The Eight got out of control. As usual. Someone gets all megalomaniacal and convinces the rest to buy our own bullshit, then the mob comes. They always come. It's like they're our only natural predator. Snake and mongoose.*

- Why can't we all just... get along.

*Like, ok, why would a group of eight always show up if they didn't want us? Is there some kind of subconscious wish to be dominated and, yea, lightly murdered. No one wants to do the murdering that makes society hum, but someone has to. The Eight are practically a public service.*

*Until they lose their fucking minds, too.*

Harold tried out a twirl. Today was the day. He wondered if it was inevitable, going crazy.

*I always thought it was about buying your own bullshit. That's what it's supposed to be. I'm not saying anything but what I'm told to, you know? I don't have any bullshit to buy. So I can't be crazy.*

*Am I crazy?*

*The constant adoration, hey, that's great for sure, for sure.*

*What it is, what it is is this shit is crazy out there, and I'm just reacting. A fucking conspiracy that's real? Fuck me.*

*God damn lunatic shows up and takes away my flock. My flock. I built this shit from the ground up.*

*Dude just drops in, swoops in, and then I lose everything.*

*Ok. Not everything. Just my freedom.*

*Ok. Not so much my freedom, either, but a little freedom.*

*Ok. Well, I didn't really lose anything but God-like power over a bunch of folks.*

*But now someone tells me what to do.*

*I fucking hate it.*

*A lot.*

Six of the remaining eight had already retired to their respective bunkers. None of them had any idea where the others were, save one. Twelve years ago, all of The Eight wound up trying to buy

the same plot of land in a silent auction. Whomever one kept the secret close to the vest, probably out of a healthy distrust. They all agreed that it was great land for doomsday prepping.

Terry McMillan had not built a bunker. He never expected for this to actually happen. It had been a point of pride for him.

*Buncha idiots, what are we doing, Mayan Calendar shit? Get the fuck out of here.*

Bunker or no, though, he was still prepared. The plan was already unfolding. He had an operative in the dome. He was going to pull a cuckoo and own the place.

*Stealing from VD is EZ. HA! He could never understand power.*

Terry boarded his private jet with his small retinue of underlings. He was on a course for Dixon, IL.

*Oh fuck.*

*I'm going to live in Dixon.*

The Jeremites relaxed. The tension, built over two years, was like a tiny vice around their lungs. It wasn't suffocating, but for two years it had been just a little bit harder to breathe. Waiting, waiting, waiting, with the dangerous doubt about whether or not their sacrifices, their beliefs, were real and, if so, were they worth it?

They were gathered around David's ridiculous kaiju gazebo. The Dixonites hated David for it.

The Jeremites were commanded to love it, so they did.

For the first time in two years, as she walked up the endless gazebo stairs, Evelyn felt safe. Under this dome, surrounded by these people - the majority of which would die for her - the Gordian knots that had replaced her shoulder muscles were mercifully cut.

Shannon ran on a treadmill at the gym she always means to go to but doesn't. Today was the day. She surprised herself. It was time for afternoon tea, but here she was running. She replayed the last twelve months in her head over and over, like a kaleidoscope whirling too fast. The near-utopic first half, the nightmarish second. For six dreamy months, she had helped sculpt the world. For once everything made sense. Until it very much didn't.

*Of course it all went to shit. Maybe it's not possible to do good.*

Maya was shit-faced, dejected shouting down a bartender in Spanish.

- Dame otra Birros mamabicho! Me cago en nai, vetu pa'l carajo! Eta pa la porree, puneta.  
Drink! Give me a driink! Todo se ha do a la mierda! Piche! No beer. *No Beer!* Get a pool full of liquor and I'm going to dive in!
- Ma'am-
- -Madame fucking Secretary! Evelyn tenia razon. No show respect. Look it up, I'm the secretary of fucking housing!
- You're still drunk.
- Embusteria! E-booster, booster-ria!
- Cabinet member or not, we need you to ga ma'am. I'm going to call the cops.
- Do it, mamabicho! You think I give a fuck!?

*Dors looks beautiful, of course. He's always impeccable and unflappable. Today's the big day! How is he not freaking out? I'm freaking out. What do I look like? I probably look like a crazy person. Or do I look fine on the outside? This is like, apres-anniversaire. Next year we'll be commemorating today. Probably with a very nice memorial service or whatever. People don't even know. People don't even know! That is crazy. Me freaking out is rational. People are going to the store right now. The store!*

*They're all going to be gone soon.*

*All of them.*

*It's going to be so...weird.*

Van Doren found David's anxiety unattractive. He barely made eye contact. When he did, his eyes were so wide they touched the uncanny valley. He had anime eyes. They were unnerving.

*What's the big deal here guys? Everybody Daves knows is here, everything Daves needs is here, We have everything!*

*Ok, maybe not.*

*But we can make our own cooking shows, Daves. They're not expensive to produce. We have 3 chefs, we have cameras and cctv. Everybody could be a judge and studio audience at the same time. We'll teach people how to operate, like, boom mics or something. We can train anyone on anything. I downloaded, like, every tutorial video the internet had.*

*Plus there's less traffic.*

*What's to complain about?*

Harold waited at the bar - once an American Legion building - where the after party would be held. It was empty, except for the occasional kitchen staff bouncing happily in and out of the doors, setting out various decorations and tableware.

Harold lazily edged his way behind the bar in the way of a person paradoxically trying *very* hard to look nonchalant. Harold mixed some drinks for fun.

He perused the liquor shelves; No half-measures today, every bottle was virginal.

*Boring. The best shot is the last bit of the bottle that's not quite enough for a full shot so you just have to open another bottle and, for it is an ironclad clause in the social contract, a shot must always, always, always be served full, hey, already opened a new bottle, there's no guilt in taking another shot to christen it. What the hell is the point of an unopened bottle.*

Harold pulled down a few bottles, chosen by how much he resonated with the color of the glass.

He had never actually made his own cocktails - even before he was waited upon hand and foot by cult members - his talent was in getting others to work for him. Naturally, the liquors he grabbed were thoroughly incompatible. Whatever unholy fluid congealed from their mixing would have been a crime. He assumed wrongly, yet consistently, that he was the best at everything. With an entire cult supporting your every move, it can be easy to believe that, despite a complete lack of knowledge, training, or practice, it will only take one attempt to reveal a natural talent greater than anything mere practice could achieve. Thus, with a psychopathic confidence, Harold poured a finger of this, a finger of that; he threw chunks of ice in and squeezed a mint leaf. He changed his mind capriciously and threw the concoction into the pristine sink. He attempted again, this time with more promising bottles. He mixed his

ingredients with whimsy but, when he attempted to secure the shaker to the pint glass, the contents splattered onto the floor.

- Shaker's got a *hole!*

He tossed the "defective" shaker into the sink and found another, made another attempt with the same result. On the third try, he succeeded. He admired his work. It was brackish, but that adds character. The pride he felt in his accomplishments led to an unfamiliar calm. He "got" the Japanese Tea Ceremony now.

He took a sip and was disappointed to discover that the liquor had, obviously, expired. It must be very old, too, because it seems to have curdled. He tossed the liquid into the sink, checked the bottles he opened for an expiration date and then decided to toss them all in the garbage.

The hour or so drive from Peoria to Dixon was nerve-wracking for the Vice President. He needed to stay out of sight. He was going incognito. No motorcade, no police escort, just a small car, German. That was his camouflage. He was widely known as a proud Texan; no one would suspect him in a German car.

*It's her own damn fault, bless her heart. It's all their faults. If they had all just did what I told them, we wouldn't be in this damn situation, and I wouldn't have to live in fuckin' Dixon for the goddam rest of my life, surrounded by fuckin' Harold's cult members, God bless it.*

*And the fuckin' morons in The Eight. What a bunch of lunatics. Why follow the dumb fuckin rules if they're bad for us? "Cause that's the way it's always been done". It's good to know for sure what I've always suspected, the people who rule the world are fuckin' insane. No wonder the people who live on it are too.*

*I swear, I'm the only non-stupid person on this whole goddam planet.*

*Damn... that's going to be actually, literally, 100% truly, truly, true for the rest of my life. No joke. In an hour... no more Einsteins.*

*Fuck him. It's not like he had nothin' to do with the bombs about to fall.*

David had assigned five Jeremites to a sacred task. When Evelyn was done speaking, and the applause was at its highest point, they would close the dome. Once closed, the dome could not be opened. It could be opened, but it wouldn't be opened for a long time.

*Unless they decide to open the dome after losing all hope, deciding to commit mass suicide which, I gotta be honest, is pretty fitting for a post-apocalyptic society built by cultists. That one's gonna be on me if it goes tits up. They are primed for a demagogue to convince them that there is no danger outside of the dome, and that the whole thing is a hoax, and then they open the door and all die. That's so zombie movie.*

The applause would cover the tremendous Ka-thunk of the dome. These were the most devout five, there could be no second thoughts. It was their greatest honor.

*Only the five of them, me, Van Doren, and Harold know today's the day. If Harold's prophecy is right - God, I can't believe I thought that. It's not a prophecy, it's a coincidence - if the coincidence continues along the way it has been, then everyone will be very mad at me, and then they will look up to see their salvation.*

*What kind of face do you make you're on the ark and the rain starts?*



Shannon jamming to Jock Jams was rudely interrupted by her phone ringing. She stopped her treadmill and answered.

- Shannon, it's happening. Where are you?
- Who is this?
- Jesus, Shannon. It's Jenna. I'm the Secretary of Agriculture! We've worked together for two f'in years! Where are you? Where's Evelyn?
- I'm at the gym, Jenna. Before you go any further, I'm as surprised by the sentence I'm about to say as you will be. Evelyn is at the doomsday party in bumfuck Illinois.
- Today? Really?! That's...
- Oh yea, it's a dome built to survive doomsday.
- That's a stroke of luck, huh. How far away from a safe house are you?
- If I ran out right now at this very second I'd be about an hour away. What's a stroke of luck?
- And hour... an hour is too long, Shannon. I'm so sorry.
- ...Fuuuuuck me, huh?
- We're at the White House now. No one here is really sure about whether or not we can withstand what's coming.
- I sure as fuck won't. What is it? How's it going down?
- Worst case scenario total nuclear war slash winter slash the end of all life.

Shannon couldn't suppress a sob that, through Jenna's receiver, sounded like a goose. She recovered by deepening her voice, opening up her diaphragm and yelling.

- Those maniacs! Damn them, damn you, you blew it-

Jenna's short burst of laughter was all Shannon could handle. She hung up. She threw her phone at the glass window with a pitcher's windup. It smashed into the sturdy glass, the impact making a loud thunk and startling the man outside. He dropped his groceries and raised his arms like a bank teller at gunpoint.

The gym rats froze and their heads turned to her. Her face was a deep red. Her rage dripped from her eyes as salty tears. Her vision was blurred and her fists were balled so tight her nails drew blood.

- Hey fellas, we're all fucking dead. You're going to want to focus on your core. I don't know how long we'll be screaming in terror, so you're gonna want to have a strong diaphragm.

Maya's head bent over the bar, bouncing up and down like she was trying not to fall asleep in church. She thought about the past twelve months. The delirious success of the first six, and the devastating failures of the last. She was well past drunk now. She was in the twilight before a headache would pound her skull like a blacksmith.

- Carajo! Bullshit!

Her involuntary outburst roused her enough to notice the music was stopped, and the TV was blaring. The local news anchor, Don Melonot, his thick grey hair and jutting chin projecting a calming air of authority. That calm was juxtaposed with his flailing arms, his papers flying in every direction, and an almost puppy dog whine.

Next to him, a perfect hairstyle with a previously extraneous person named Denise Parker attached. She stared directly into the camera. She dropped her TV voice and spoke to the viewers with a soothing, if a bit detached, tone.

- It was inevitable, wasn't it? It is 2:25 p.m. and we have just received the news that there are a staggering number of ICBM's aimed at all of our homes. To those who do not know, an ICBM is an Inter-Continental Ballistic Missile. The missiles will reach us in less than one hour. They carry giga-ton nuclear bombs. The United States Government has launched their missiles in response.

Don Melonot touched his forehead to the desk, whispering a frantic prayer. Denise ignored him and sustained an intense connection with the camera, bordering on maniacal.

- I have lived, I have loved. I have my disappointments. I have my regrets. We all do. Life has never treated any of us kindly, has it? In some ways, I welcome this. I will not outlive my loved ones; I will never have to grieve them. They will not outlive me; they will not be forced to grieve for a deceased daughter. It's almost a relief, isn't it? It's almost a relief... I suppose a belief in God might help make sense of what is happening now. But for me, that we wake up to this day suggests to me that, either there is no God, or there is a God cruel enough to break the rainbow promise and end the human race again.
- Denise it is the station's policy not to comment on controversial politics.

The screen turned a harsh blue. The bartender slapped the side of the TV even though he knew TVs didn't work like that. It was a compulsion he learned from TV and movies. They always slap the TV when it goes out, like they always tap the fuel gauge when it's empty. He just needed a violent use for his hands.

Maya was pissed off by the anchor giving her news so terrifying she sobered up.

- Cabron! We got no time left, start pouring everything into glasses and drinking up! I'm not going out sober.

Evelyn finished her speech to rapturous applause. It was louder than she thought possible for a crowd this size. She didn't know it, but it was, in fact, impossibly loud for a crowd that size. Van Doren goosed the volume with an applause track he broadcast through the PA. She could feel the applause like wind. When it finally died down, she nearly lost her balance.

Curtis Mayfield played through the soundsystem next and she was escorted down the gazebo stairs.

Minutes before the five Jeremites closed the door, a German car pulled up to the entrance. The Jeremites were nothing if not welcoming and, though they were about to close the door, the policy up until then was still "Let Everyone In" - there was a sign on the wall.

The German car's window rolled down. The lead Jeremite greeted the driver and exchanged polite conversation, neither betraying the knowledge they both knew the other couldn't possibly possess.

She let the car drive in and returned to the other four; they were in the gate control room, ready for the signal.

- No kidding, my brothers and sisters, no joke, that was *The... Vice... President*. Of us!
- I don't think he was invited.
- I heard he was a huge asshole.

- Prez and V. Prez, is the rest of the executive branch coming? I don't like the politicians comin in here.
- Why don't you like politicians?
- Why don't you like him?
- Because they commit crimes.
- Because he probably did 9/11.
- Truth.

Lt. Col Ty had no interest in experiencing what was to come. In the Midway airport bathroom, minutes after the news broke, he shot himself in the left temple. A thousand miles away, unaware of everything but glorious pleasure, Morningstar fell dead. The others on his island paradise spent what time they had left in confused mourning.

Harold received the text in the middle of his fourth attempt at an old-fashioned.

- It's just *oranges* and shit, Jesus H. Me! What am I supposed to do here? Screw it.

Harold called to any follower in earshot.

- Jeremites! To me!

Three uniformed kitchen Jeremites rushed to him. They arranged themselves in a neat, practiced line. Harold often ran drills. When teh assemble command is given, any Jeremite in earshot must line up in military fashion, three feet from Jeremy, one foot from each other.

*Specifics are crucial. That belongs in a book of quotes. I never get the chance to say that.*

*Specifics are crucial. I'll write a book of quotes. It'll be a best-seller.*

*It'll have to be.*

- Hello. I hope the three of you are well. May I help you?

It was ritual. The Jeremites responded in unison, “Hello, Jeremiah. We *are* well. Let us help you!”

This was how Jeremy greeted people at the repair shop, and David made Harold adopt it. David figured if you can make a secret greeting, you should make it nice. Harold hated it. He couldn't wait to be rid of David's whimsical bullshit.

After the greeting was complete, the Jeremites relaxed from their stiff, at-attention poses to loose, congenial expressions. Jeremiah commanded them.

- Just want to say, first, you guys are all doing really well and I'm proud of you. This is good stuff. It could've been a really shitty day, and you guys-

One of the Jeremites coughed loudly.

- I'm sorry, *persons*. You've done a great job, Kudos!

Harold raised his arm to give an imaginary toast.

- Ok. Cool, cool, that's outta the way. I need you to mix four alcoholic drinks. I tried and succeeded of course, but I cannot make the drinks for guests, I can only bless them.
- What should we make?
- Something strong enough to cover the taste of poison!

The Jeremites laughed for one reason, Harold for another.

## Chapter 26:

Teresa Franklin was bored sitting in the cramped space between massive command/control computers that were built and installed in 1983. The tech itself had never been updated or changed, tube monitors displayed MS-DOS prompts, similar to a text-based adventure game, and there were red light bulbs directly above switches close in size to Dr. Frankenstein's than to a house fixture. Some bulbs were lit, some were not. The current combination of lit/unlit bulbs was good. If some of the unlit bulbs and some of the lit bulbs were to switch, it would be very bad. The fate of the world was written in those lights.

If the order were given, Teresa would turn the keys to arm the missile, then press a button. This button press would then start an automatic process that would launch the ICBM housed in the silo.

After three years as a technical officer, she was stationed at the silo. That was now fifteen years ago, long enough to develop a relationship with the world-ending missile. She thought of it as hers. She named him Dr. Opper.

If the silo spit out the missile in its Freudian way, automated systems from every nation would kick in and the world would end in an orgiastic display.

By popular reasoning, the extinction of most forms of life can only be avoided by giving popularity contest winners the power to cause the extinction of most forms of life.

Next to her was Peter Franklin. They were unrelated.

Peter sat in front of a different set of light bulbs, switches, and dilapidated computers one generation removed from punch card calculators. On his left was a phone that was not ringing. Similarly to Teresa's bulbs changing their status, if that phone were ringing, it would be bad.

Peter's job was to monitor two screens. The first screen displayed the statuses of the myriad moving parts, fuels, hardware and software. If any of these displayed an error, Peter would descend further into the silo and take care of it.

Fixing or replacing damaged parts at a nuclear missile silo was, at a distance, a high stakes endeavor. Peter knew different.

Teresa, after fifteen years, and Peter, after eight years, took the same lackadaisical attitude as any overworked and underpaid employee. The popular theory was that harsh discipline and pride in one's country are a substitute for a good paycheck and job satisfaction.

Peter's second screen displayed radar systems and sensors. If the sensors relayed some alarm, Peter and Teresa would begin the very straightforward process of ending all life. They would prepare the missile for launch, then, when they received The Call, they would either launch or stand down. If they didn't receive a phone call, they would launch.

Peter had a hard time expressing the tedium of the most potentially catastrophic job in history. He knew a contractor who regularly took molly on the job. He was dismissed eventually, but vices the same or worse were prevalent in the missileer corps. When he was first stationed there, when asked, Peter proudly described the importance of his job. Then, after a year, he was so bored, describing his job put him to sleep. Now, he told people he was an accounts analyst at a small investment bank.

On the day - *The Day* - February 17th, 2018, two years to the second from Jeremiah's pronouncement, the wrong bulbs lit up. Teresa didn't believe it. She thought it had to be a test, or a harck, or a trick, or something else. No one would actually use these weapons. Who could



possibly be that stupid? Despite her thoughts, as automatic as breathing, she prepped the missile for launch.

Peter, though, was struggling with every task. Despite his years of training, faced with the reality of his job, he was choking. He frantically searched for a step-by-step instruction manual, preferably with screenshots. His flailing about pissed Teresa off. How like a man to panic. She saw his hesitation and realized she had an opportunity.

- Peter! Stop! We can't do this.

Peter was angry with himself. When the wrong bulbs flashed, he panicked and nearly cried. Then he felt shame. He had thought himself courageous and here he was facing a crisis like a coward. Shame then led to rage. With every mistake he grew angrier.

- Terry, what the fuck are you talking about?

- It must be a false alarm. It has to be.

- No. It's not. I can feel it.

- I'm telling you Peter, *we cannot do this*.

- We have to follow our orders. We need to do our job.

- Seriously, think about it, this has happened before, a few times. Remember that Russian guy? He saved the world by himself, and he did it by *disobeying* orders. Also, these machines are old. Your phone is one billion times more reliable than this raggedy-ass nonsense we are working with. I don't believe a fucking thing this machine says to me.

- Wrong, these were built to last and they're too important to be wrong. All we do is make sure these machines work properly. All of these systems are working because of *us*.

- Fine. Fine, Peter. But even if it is what we think, I'm not doing it. I will not be responsible.
- Why not?
- What?! I'll say it again, *what the fuck*, Peter? I'm not doing it because I have a fucking conscience!

Peter had finished prepping during their argument. He reached over and grasped Teresa's switch, turning it simultaneously with his. The automated process worked perfectly; they were good at their jobs, after all.

Teresa leapt at Peter screaming and scratching. She pushed him as hard as he could, slamming him into the giant computers, smashing their screens.

- You maniac! You fucking maniac! You goddam fucking *monster*.

Teresa collapsed. Bloodlets dropped from the deep scratches on Peter's cheeks.j

- Oh fuck, oh fucking fuck, holy shit. Ho-lee shee-it. Holy shit, man. We are all going to die. We're literally, all of us, going to die.

Teresa sobbed.

- God. You are so fucking *stupid*, Peter.
- Teresa... it's over.

Peter didn't bother to understand what he had just done. The end of life as we know it. Period.

"Thank god Bowie didn't live to see this," he thought for some reason.

The phone rang. It was so loud, and they were so quiet, their eardrums nearly burst. Peter answered.

- Hello?

A reedy voice replied.

- May god have mercy on us.

The \*click\* that followed was the loudest sound Peter and Teresa had ever heard.

- Teresa... you owe me twenty bucks.
- No....No.
- I told you so.

The world had about forty-five minutes to an hour. Teresa felt weightless. Her anxiety disappeared, an anxiety she didn't even know was there until this very moment. She no longer needed to bother to live.

- Shut the fuck up, you fucking moron. You are so fucking stupid. You are so goddam fucking stupid. Don't you get how much worse that is? Maybe we could've saved someone if we hadn't launched. Do you get that? Maybe someone would've made it the fuck out alive.
- ....
- God. You asshole, you fucking asshole.

The click was loud, but the silence they sunk into was somehow louder still.

- So...
- So...
- Sooooo. What do we do now?
- Do whatever the fuck you want. Just stay away from me. How about this, I've got an idea. Cut your dick off and shove it up your ass. I want you to literally go fuck yourself. I will spend what moments I have left shellacking your dick into a useable dildo. You

know what? You smell terrible. I could work on my aunt's farm for a month, rolling around in pig shit every day and I still wouldn't smell as shitty as you. You smell like a shit farted a shit. I fucking hate you and I'm fucking leaving and, honestly, for fucking real honestly, I hope you survive. I want you to experience some ironic punishment for this fucking unforgivable crime. If I had a gun, I would shoot your knee right fucking now.

- That's not ver-
- You shut the fucking fuck up! I will choke the life out of you. You fucking Morlock.
- Sto-
- I told you to Shut! Up!

Peter moved forward, arms in a defensive posture. Peter was not unfamiliar with women taking a swing at him, and he could sense what was coming. She would throw a wild right hook, then try and use her body weight to knock him down. He used what he thought was his most soothing tone - the one that came off patronizing.

- Terry, it's ok. This is planned for. They wouldn't do this unless they had a plan.

Teresa's rage choked her. She couldn't speak, couldn't move, she was so overwhelmed with fury. Peter, oblivious, continued speaking.

- We never tried ducking and covering, you know. What if we get under the desk and it works? I bet everyone's fine out there.

Teresa ground her teeth. She bit her tongue until it bled.

- You go check.
- No way. I get sunburnt easily and that's just regular radiation.

- What would happen if I fired a gun in here?
- Based on how you're speaking to me, I imagine if you fired a gun in here I would be its target and wouldn't care what happens after that
- Neither would I.

They both looked to the ladder: the ladder to hell. It was an ominous presence. The way out was now the way out of... They stared in silence for an infinite twenty minutes.

- It's been a half-hour since launch...

Peter trailed off. Both of them knew that the second part of that sentence was "...that's how long it takes for the first one to hit New York."

- I think my parents were in LA this week.
- Yea.
- Most of the rest of the world now, too, huh.
- Not yet. Most, yea. I saw one expert say that, if what's happening now happens, one of them might blow up the supervolcano under Yellowstone. Did you know there was a supervolcano? If that goes off it's really big bang city, you know? Hit the reset button.  
Blow on the cartridge and try again.
- What do you think it would sound like?
- I don't know. Nothing? Maybe when it goes off you just hear the ringing sound.
- Maybe we just disappear. Maybe it's too fast for us to even notice.
- ...You got anything?
- Want some oxy?

Teresa shrugged. Peter pulled a couple pill bottles from the inside pocket of his jacket. She ripped one from his hands, pouring a handful and swallowing them as fast as she could, barely caring enough to sip from her water bottle to keep from choking to death.

Peter decided to flirt with death.

- Do you uh...should we... you know?
- No. I get it. But I'm not in the mood. Especially not with you.
- Thank God. I'm not really into it either. But I feel like it's just an "end of the world" question I had to ask.
- Yea. Fuck off. I've heard that noise before. "I'm joking unless she says yes, then I'm being serious." I'm done with that. I'm done. I'm out.

Teresa stood up, free. Peter thought of denying it, of defending himself, but couldn't think of a reason to lie and he had no defense.

Teresa pulled her shoulders back and walked over to the ladder. She half-wanted Peter to tell her to stop, to warn her, to tell her to stay, to tell her that, secretly, he had loved her from the beginning. She would've enjoyed saying to his stupid face, "I hate you, and I'm so happy you're going to die. I'm fine with the deaths of billions so long as you're one of them. Fuck you." But he didn't.

Peter sat there watching her move. He could see the rage of Achilles on her face. Her eyebrows were twitching, echoing her volatile thoughts. He wished he had the courage to tell her to stop, to warn her, to tell her to stay, to tell her that, secretly, he had loved her from the beginning. He didn't say anything.

Teresa climbed the ladder.

## Chapter 27:

Harold did not thank the bartender, who handed him a platter with four perfect old-fashionedes. Harold already held his drink, a carbonated water that tasted like water was thinking *real hard* about lemons. Harold's review was "It tastes like they made a pot of water watch a movie about lemons." For the past two weeks, he made a point of announcing that he was forsaking alcohol until after the reset.

The first time he made announcements regarding the reset, he called it "the cleansings". It was pointed out to him by a Jeremite that 99.999% of the people who were to be "cleansed", were actually quite nice, and that "cleansing" was pretty racist if you think about it. So now he called it the reset, and had a much more somber mood when describing it.

He loudly detailed his plans for abstention to anyone within speaking range - he felt it would be smart to establish a backstory to explain why he would only be watching his four guests drink old-fashionedes, rather than just announce that he had poisoned the drinks. When the poison kicked in, he would be running things again, and the poison would kick in quick.

*Finally. David and Van Doren did their job, and now I'm back running things. The fate of humanity is at stake. This was always my destiny. I knew it.*

As Harold dreamt of his coming theocracy, Terry McMillan, in the back of the black Range Rover, dreamt of *his* coming autocracy. The truck pulled up to the bar and let him off at the curb. Harold was there to greet them per their weeks-old arrangement.

The arrangement: Harold would poison David and Van Doren and Evelyn, then they would lead the Jeremites together. "The fate of humanity was at stake, David and Van Doren had a

successful partnership,” Terry had said to Harold. Neither for one second believed that was true, but, for now, it was more convenient than fighting each other. Terry’s driver was already replacing Harold’s flavored water with a different can; it was filled with cyanide, of course. The driver would also utilize some classic pickpocket techniques to plant a confession/suicide note in Harold’s jacket. It would seem like Harold had murder-suicided and now one would suspect a thing. Well, everyone would suspect *something*, but Terry felt he could talk his way into power, and the Jeremites, by nature, would probably just go along with whatever. They were cult members.

Terry entered the swinging doors with a flourish. He scanned the room until he caught Harold’s eye. They both felt a twinge of, if not guilt, then regret, they knew that one of them was going to die today; they only disagreed on whom would soon be doing the mortal coil shuffle. “What an idiot,” they thought of each other.

While the two would-be rulers plotted both with and against each other, David and Van Doren walked a few circles around the bar, admiring the world before it became “The Old World”. Van Doren’s hands were clasped around David’s elbows, his head resting on David’s shoulders. The time came, the dome fully closed, maybe never to reopen. David knew it had to be psychosomatic, but it felt like the air went instantly stale, maybe never to be fresh again.

*On the other hand, no mosquitoes so... win some lose some. Or maybe the outside radiation will transform mosquitoes into 20-foot-tall beasts with proboscises twice as long. Then the dome won't really matter will it? They've already killed half the humans that ever lived, perhaps they*



*will complete their macabre mission by drinking our blood and infecting us because, on top of everything else, they still carry diseases. Probably super malaria.*

When the door closed, they felt they had finished their job. The survival of humanity was at stake, after all, and they had secured it - giant mosquitoes aside. They weren't done, though, there was always more to do. They would never be finished. There were memorials to plan, and, since *everything's* gone, everything needs a memorial.

*We crushed it.*

David admired his work aloud.

- The trees are gorgeous and alive, Dors, thanks to... I don't know...science I guess. Not my job.
- It's very green in here, which is nice.
- I keep thinking, as good as we can do, we'll never see a beach again. No more beaches. But survivors can't be choosers, I suppose.
- It's also very quiet, which I like.

Their admirations completed, they were ready to meet Harold at the bar. David's hand was on the saloon door when a massive crowd advanced on them.

Evelyn was at the podium speaking when she sensed the change in air quality. Sooner than the mob behind her, she tasted the confined air and instantly synthesized her situation. She struggled with the panicked instinct to scream, "They closed the dome! It's a trap!" before she could, her politicians' training saved her.

- Please, ladies and gentlemen, before I continue, I must ask you *not* to panic.

She wanted to say, “Don’t panic... RIOT!” but, unfortunately, she thought, mobs are never the answer; they are an exercise in short-term satisfaction and long-term destruction. The politician’s goal is controlled release. She felt it was her job to save the human race from itself, though she accepted that she was arguably too late.

She grabbed a bodyguard, whispering something in his ear. The bodyguard lit up with surprise for the briefest moment before regaining control.

Evelyn pushed the agent aside, then sprinted at David, her right fist clenched. Her bodyguards chased after her. From his point of view, David saw the still-technically-President-of-the-United-States and five large persons wearing black suits all looking very angry, indeed, very angry at him in specific.

Before she could unleash her fury, though, the sky darkened. The sun was hidden by thick, oily rain, tinged brown and green and ash-gray. And then, the sun was *gone*. They were, albeit comfortably, buried alive.

For 15 stunned seconds, the dome had no light beyond the various spotlights used to accentuate Evelyn’s authoritative appearance. After a series of deafening metal clicks, like the sound of a roller coaster slowly reaching the apex, a sunlamp scaled to mimic the size of the sun in the never-to-be-seen-again sky, burst into light. It was uncanny, like an old friend with a new moustache.

The Jeremites were elated. Everything was *real*. Everything they believed was *true*. A general vibe of if-only-the-leaders-of-other-world-religions-were-here-to-see-this permeated the group. They had always believed with unwavering faith, of course, but actually being right is a different

feeling. Unfortunately, one of the drawbacks of their particular religion being correct is that there is no one around to really gloat to. They could harangue the Dixonites about it, but they're going through a lot right now, and one of the good things about their religion was the practicing of empathy. They could gloat later, when everyone was over it.

For good measure, the Jeremites chanted Jeremiah's name solemnly.

For the Dixonites, as well as the journalists and attaches and aides, the terror did not leave when the replica sun wiped away the dark. They panicked, gasping for any rational explanation.

*Statistically - check the almanac - this is probably a summer storm and when you think about it, the most likely situation is a coincidence. Just 'cause some weirdos predicted the end of the world on a coincidentally stormy day doesn't mean anything. Or maybe it's a joke, is this a fucking joke? Did these assholes decide to play a huge prank on us? Cause it's not fucking funny. Not now. If it's a joke, it'll be pretty funny in a few months, but right now it's fucked up. Is it terrorists? What is this?*

They marveled at the Jeremites' eerie calm. They echoed Evelyn's desire for torches and pitchforks, but the Jeremites' almost joy made it impossible for them to rile themselves all the way up to tarring and feathering. The feeling was akin to the instinctual suspicion that grips anyone who sees a hundred dollar bill on the ground with no one around; that rational paranoia that says "something is off; this isn't right, it's a test; it's an experiment; it's the fucking cops."

Harold blasted out of the saloon doors like John Wayne. He'd always dreamt of this dramatic entrance and when you're a cult leader most of your dreams come true.

- *Behold!* We have been delivered!

The Jeremites cheered so loudly Evelyn and company stopped to observe.

- Tonight! Drinks are on God!

At that, Jeremites and more than a few Dixonites cheered.

- The truth shall be explained... tonight! I will broadcast a full accounting of our old lives and explain our new lives. Now... Go home! Turn your TVs to channel 3 at 7 or 7:30 tonight... I was told we can't do cell service yet, so it's CCTV or radio. Now... Begone!

The crowd sighed with collective relief; in the face of an impossible event, direct instructions were water for thirsty people, lost in the desert. The crowd returned to their homes, the Jeremites did their best to help the accidental survivors who were absolutely not coming to grips with their new circumstances. The time was 4 p.m., so they sat on their couches and chairs and beds and waited, staring at the wall, thinking nothing. They would turn the TV's on at 7, but they knew Jeremiah's 7/7:30 actually meant 8.

With the crowd dispersed; Evelyn, David, Van Doren, and Harold were left in the room alone. Evelyn opened her mouth as if to say something, paused, then closed it. She turned her head up, down, to the left, right, and south. She put her hands on her knees. She took several deep breaths. The other three gave her nothing. Blank faces waiting for her to accept what happened, as if *she* were *overreacting*. She had never wanted to kill someone more than in that moment.

Evelyn found her voice.

- Please. Explain now. There's nothing left is there...

- That's almost true! Dors over here says the six left have their own live-through-the-big-bang bunkers, too, which blows. They killed everyone. It's unjust is what it is. They blew it up.
- They blew it up? They really blew it u-
- Damn them. Damn them all to hell.
- Daves, please don't make jokes right now, Evelyn is struggling.

Jeremiah, seeing them distracted, seized his chance to dominate the conversation.

- Today is a day to get fucked up, lady and gentlemen. Do you realize what happened? It is fucking *wild* if you think about it. Anyways. I have bad news, really, really bad news. A million fungus-infected toes wearing a human suit is here. Before the dome closed he drove up to the door and, because of our open door policy, they let him in. Let's wait for him to get here and then we only have to have this conversation once, right? In the meantime, let's start with drinks 1 through 4.

Evelyn was suddenly very, very tired.

- Who is he talking about Van Doren?
- You don't know? You are not going to be happy.
- Do *any* of you realize what happened? Hell. Has. Come. To. Earth. *That* is what I am unhappy about. There is *nothing* else.
- It's Terry. Vice President Terry McMillan is one of the eight.
- Mother. Fucker. Well...

She let the silence hold for two deep breaths.

- Don't care. *This* is the big reveal? *He* was one of them? Well I *don't* care. I just don't care. All of this... court *intrigue* or whatever... that's the old game. He's nothing to me now.

More than sadness or regret, Evelyn felt shame.

*I lost. Everyone lost. Except for that utter moron Terry. Have the basic human decency to shove a shotgun up your ass split yourself in half, Terry. You absolute fucking prick.*

Harold, fearing a bottleneck to this conversation, attempted to hook his arms around Evelyn's and escort her inside. When he got close she put her hands up in a fighting stance.

- Do not touch me!

Harold backed off, hands raised.

- Jesus H. *Me*. I was just trying to be polite.

David moonwalked to position himself between them, successfully diffusing the tension. He often reflected upon how easy it is to slapstick your way to peace.

They all smiled, albeit wanly. Harold felt sad about David.

*He's honestly a good dude. Funny, smart, easy on the eyes if you know what I'm sayin'. He's just not going to fit in my world. It's his fault, really. I told him this was my show. He made me do it.*

## Chapter 28:

Terry leaned on the bar, his back to the door. Evelyn and company walked in.

- Terry?

He swiveled his uncomfortable, 270 lb frame around, revealing a grin eating so much shit.

- Hello, Evelyn. I've been expecting you.
- No shit, Terry. Is this your big supervillain moment? Go fuck yourself. I don't care anymore. There are, like, a *thousand* of us. Literally, like a *thousand*, dude. So I don't care, Terry, just go away. I don't want to see you in the apoca-life ever again. I guess we could put you on trial for your massive genocide, but that somehow seems silly right now. There's no one left, Terry.

Van Doren nodded in support. He waved. In a jovial voice, he said:

- Hi, Terry!
- Hi, VD. It's good to see you, too. I'm disappointed in you, VD, I really am. It would never have gone this far without you helping her out.
- Hey, Terry. I'm David, first time long time and all that. I'm a little nervous, but I just wanted to say that what you just said was fucking dumb and if you say anything that stupid again, I will shit in my hand and throw it in your face, swear to God.

David turned to Van Doren..

- Sorry I've been dumb, Dors. I know it's been rough on you.
- I'm glad you're feeling better, David. I'm proud of you.
- Let's get drinks before we start shitting in hands!

Harold signaled. The bartender appeared with premade old-fashioned. They were placed in front of their intended victim. Terry winked at Harold. Harold didn't react. Terry reached for his glass, intending to toast the future. Evelyn interrupted.

- Stop! I want an explanation, I don't want an afternoon *cocktail*.
- Evelyn, please. I understand, but it's important. The apocalife needs a drink to get started.
- Harold. Stop pushing. Evelyn, let's step outside. You, me, and David, because *we're* not insensitive *assholes*.

Terry looked at Harold, pleading. Harold had an idea.

- That's smart, really is, VD, how about you take them with you?

Harold passed a glass to Van Doren, who passed it to David, who offered to Evelyn, who declined with a gesture. Harold passed the next glass to Van Doren, who passed it to David, who offered it to Evelyn, who once again declined, leaving David with two glasses. Harold passed the last glass to Van Doren, who offered it to David. He raised his two glasses and shrugged. Van Doren looked directly at Evelyn, who declined again with a hand gesture and, this time, a stern waggle of her eyebrows.

- Evelyn, sorry for everything. I understand this must be a very... difficult time, yes? See, we've known about this for months, so we're pretty much over it. We've even made up a few post-apocalypse jokes. Like this: How many evil dudes does it take to destroy the world, then you say, I don't know, how many evil dudes *does* it take to destroy the world? Then I say, up until now the answer was unknowable but now we know the answer to the question: how many evil dudes does it take to destroy the world is seven. Seven is the number of evil men that destroyed the world.



Daviid put his arm around Evelyn's shoulder. Looking at Van Doren he said:

- Evelyn, come out with us, we'll sort it.

Van Doren put his arm around Evelyn, too. The three of them walked through the saloon doors.

David went through last. He pushed the batwing doors hard; they flung in and out, making an enormous sound.

- Harold, if this doesn't work, I'm just going to shoot them. I have a gun with me.

Outside, David engulfed Evelyn with a hug. She hugged back hard, burying her face in his chest.

They stood there silently, Van Doren looking on. Evelyn's grip firmed, her strength returned after its brief respite.

- All right. Ok. O. K.

She took deep, almost wheezing breaths. Van Doren raised his glass high over his head. He caught David's eye, who handed Evelyn her glass. He was expecting her to decline, but this time, he would force her to hold it. Instead, she looked at Van Doren intrigued and took the glass out of habit. Van Doren waited another beat to make sure of their attention, then he violently smashed the glass on the ground, like a rock star disintegrating a guitar. David followed suit.

Evelyn blinked in confusion, taking a moment to process exactly what happened. Then she raised her glass and with a little hop - like the little jump tennis players do to gain height on their serve - she vaporized the glass on the concrete.

- Better?
- Sure. All it takes is a broken glass to overcome the apocalypse.

- Wonderful! I'm impressed. It took me months to get over it. And, on top of that you lost your job? Losing your job is tough. I know, I've been fired twice.

Evelyn regained control. She was calm, the type of calm that flows from the knowledge that nothing will ever get better, it will only *ever* get worse. All she had to do was shut up, and place one foot in front of the other until she died. This she understood. Her neck straightened, her chin lifted, shoulders lifted, defiant.

- Ok. All right. So. How is this going to work?
- How is what going to work?
- This! This whole... thing. And everything else, too, while I'm asking.

Van Doren broke eye contact. David looked sheepish. He took a deep breath.

- Honestly, I kinda don't want to say. It's a little embarrassing when you say it out loud. Because it makes me sound like a narcissistic maniac with delusions of grandeur.
- It's like pulling teeth with you idiots. You are fundamentally incapable of just saying something. Please, no more preambles, no more qualifiers. Just say it.

David snapped to attention, with a hasty salute.

- Yes, sir. Commander-in-Chief, sir. I uh... so I have been taping a kid while he fixes cars and - see - that sounds fucking cuh-razy, right? It's not like it gets better from there. So. I had a dream - ok, I know, dreams aren't real - but anyways, I had a dream that this kid was, like, the new messiah or whatever - real Jesus/Muhammad/Buddha-type situation. I figure religion in the apocalife needs to change, because the old religions pretty much - well, here we are, look around you - Anyways, I've compiled a philosophy. I watched these tapes for a long time, trying to figure out what it means - Jeremy died in a fire, it

was really... it fucked me up for awhile. So I watched these tapes - sorry, Dors - trying to figure out what exactly it was that put this kid in my dreams, you know?

Van Doren focused in on David. He had never heard the entire story before. David didn't usually talk about real things. He made jokes, he deflected, he almost never revealed himself. Van Doren thought of how many times he had asked David to explain; he told David there was nothing to be embarrassed about; he told David how exciting it all was; he told David that it was more about the process than the result. Instead of answers, David gave little pieces of the plan wrapped in dick jokes.

Van Doren suddenly realized that David had been talking during the time he was lost in thought. It was too late to ask for a rehash, so he redoubled his efforts to listen, hoping to figure everything out from context.

- ...didn't find anything. I really don't know. I think the explanation might be everything is a coincidence maybe? At first I thought it was a simulation, that makes a certain sense to me. It's logical, I guess. So if we're in a simulation, then religion doesn't really matter - or at least, it's definitely not real - so I kinda figure what's the point of bothering? Not just that, but what's the point of decision-making at all? Or maybe the *only* point is decision-making. Because that's what the simulation is trying to simulate, isn't it? So we need to be faithful little simulations that make the decisions they are looking for which are literally all decisions. How many simulations do they run that are just like this one? What if they're simulating a universe where people are never satisfied, to some extent or another? Maybe nothing we do will really change anything, because that's the programming, that's our *programming*. Can't get rid of your programming, it's not yours.

I was a Calvinist for a tick - love that strip - predestination and all that. But that sucks, you know? That's a real shitty reality. If we *are* predestined, then whatever, you know? Fuck it. Why even bother with predestination? It's stupid. Also, I get 4-dimensional space, so time really isn't even a thing. So I wrote these four pages - editing was a nightmare, I started with several hundred - and I've got it. Mostly. That's why we invited you here, not because you were the President - we couldn't give less of a shit about a President, *Fuck* the President - see, you were in my dream, too. You're going to lead. The thing is, we were going to do a perfect society thing, but we realized too late where we made our mistake. We're starting over with a *cult*, Evelyn. They can't lead themselves and it's not their fault, but we need a stopgap between cult and perfect society. When I figured out what you had done, when I saw your whole grand scheme, I knew you were that stopgap. How long was your plan?

- 'Bout 20 years.
- Yea. Plans that long don't work. It's just silly. But yours did. I think your plans work. I think that's what's going on here. And I think you're a hell of a lot better than fucking *Harold*.
- That's it? I was in your dreams and my plan worked? That's why I'm here? Well look around. My plan *didn't work*. Everyone's *dead*.
- Not your fault. It's not. Terry in there - is what killed everyone. You're going to save everyone. Well... *left*.
- Cool. No pressure then.
- Also, Dors is going to kill Terry when we go back inside.

Evelyn found a genuine smile on her face.

## Chapter 29:

Harold scooted next to Terry. They hated each other for being each other instead of hating each other for being themselves. Irrationally blind to their own faults, they saw them reflected back.

To someone proudly delusional, an accurate mirror is a nightmare.

Harold casually popped the top of his theoretically flavored water, but left it on the bar. He performatively licked his lips.

- Soooo... How was the trip? Did you make good time?
- It's actually...it's actually pretty funny. The entire convoy followin' me 'round was on the Brussels tarmac - not sure which airport - they was on the Brussels tarmac when I got the word. All the other guys were hours away from them bunkers and then, well, there I am in fuckin Spain or wherever. So we haul ass at mach speed - balls to all the walls - and when we land back in, I'm firin e'ryone on the spot. Sad all the idiots back home. Me and my driver - I'm callin him Joe - we hop in a small plane and fly over to Dixon, Illinois - as if that's a place - we get close and pow, what do you know, the dome! We forget the fuckin dome! That means we gotta fly to Peoria - which is even less of a place than Dixon - then we had to drive. Barely made it.
- Yea. That was funny.

Harold reached for his can clumsily. He slapped at it, knocking it off the table. The carbonated water fizzed on the floor. Harold knocked cans to the ground so a Jeremite could appear and refill the can with whiskey. Everyone knew he did this. Except Terry.

Van Doren, David, and Evelyn came into view. Harold saw they were not holding their glasses. He searched for any indication they had at least taken a sip. Until he was sure, he couldn't give anything away.

- Feeling better Evelyn?
- Terry. Shut up. Never speak to me again. I've never wanted anyone to die in front of me more than you.
- Evelyn, listen hun, there is no need to be rude. This is the new world. The past is the past. What's left to fight about? We gotta move forward. Together. Since everyone but ourselves right here does whatever my boy Jerry over here tells them to, I propose the five of us forming a little governing committee. 5 is a great number for democracy.

The prospective council uniformly glared at Terry. All four knew that Terry was going to die today, not all for the same reasons, or in the same way, but he was not going to survive the day. Harold was banking on being the only one left. Terry was doing the same. David, Evelyn, and Van Doren just wanted Terry gone. They had no malice in their plan. What was the point of malice? They would even forgive him.

But Terry can't be in the new world. Terry needs to die with the old, otherwise he'd try to recreate it and the cycle would begin anew. All of the Terrys had to go.

Harold and Terry had read online the poison only took a minute or two to kill, but nothing was happening. They felt that sinking feeling one gets right before a plan is confirmed as a failure - hopeful, yet distraught.

- Slow it down, Terry. VD, D, and E. Let me refill your glasses.
- We need fresh glasses.

David was anxious, and he decided now was the perfect time to begin his favorite game, one he and Van Doren played for hours. It was called, “And that’s when it got *really* crazy”.

- Yes! We totally... tripped and fell. The three of us all at the same time. It was a classic pratfall, Three Stooges-esque. I was trailing behind these two beauties, when, out of my little eye, I saw the last, last dodo. And this throws me for a loop, buh-lieve me, you couldn’t make this up-
- -I would like another glass-
- -Cause now here’s when it gets really weird. Like a white lady in a horror movie, I trip at the worst possible time. My drink goes flying up in the air and lands, where else, on the last dodo bird’s head, killing it instantly - I swear, those birds are just... I mean... they went extinct for a reason-
- -Ok, I’ll get everyone a new glass.

Harold left to the bar.

- -now that’s when the light from our dear fake sun glinted off the clocktower - Evelyn, did you know that’s the clock tower from Back to the Future? It’s not actually, but no one fucking care anymore - and then, I... uh... Oh. Right. I saw my reflection in a beer glass - now, if that happens, as everyone knows, the pint contains some of your soul, so the only way to get it back is to break it. So I’m twisting my whole body around, still in the air, faster than these two could even see, right Dors?
- Absolutely Daves.
- Exactly, and I snatch that glass right out of the air-
- -it was very cool, until...-



- -it was never not cool, Dors. Anyhoozle, I snatch it out of the air while I'm in the air. Then I see my reflection in Dors' glass and shit, I gotta break that one, too. Thinking quickly, I threw my glass at Dors' glass. I'm currently an all-state shortstop, church softball division. I hit his glass with both velocity and accuracy, knocking it out of his hand. Both glasses shattered into pieces. And then - get this - and then *Dors* tripped! Can you believe it!

"Can you believe it" was the way they signaled the end of a turn.

- Now this is my part, Daves, let me tell it. Because that's when it got really crazy. So now I'm flying through the air, and I'm thinking this is like... it. The it. Time for me to meet my maker in the apocalypse cause I tripped! Absolutely insane. I'm surviving nuclear, like, winter, and I'm going to die tripping on steps! No way. So I tuck and then expand and I'm doing backflips. Three or four at least, now, this is easy because I'm the best backflipper in the tri-state area, but then - and this is important - the fake sun... ok... let me back up - I geolocate by sunlight, so I'm really thrown off by this whole apocalypse thing - so now I'm out of my rhythm and I start falling *the opposite direction!* Ha! I'm in a hell of a pickle, so I've only got one option-
- -A Qi blast-
- No, very much not, *David*. You know I'm only a brown belt. What I had to do was release the special parachute I keep in my fanny pack and then use it like a trampoline. The goal was to bounce off of the parachute and land with a dancer's poise. Can you believe it?

- No I can't, Dors, because that's when things got *really* crazy! Before he pulls the cord, what runs up to me but the *actual* last dodo! I hadn't killed the last one. It ran up to me and its beak got caught in Dors' ripcord, so when Dors pulls it, guess what, the damn bird strangled itself! These birds never had a chance, swear to Gods. Can you believe it Evelyn! Let's hear what happened next from you.

She had no interest.

- None of that happened. I threw the glass on the ground as hard as I possibly could.

Everyone felt awkward including Terry, who had picked up the game and started to enjoy it.

Evelyn wondered if she would be better off in the wasteland.

Terry paused to communicate a general, "What's the deal? She on the rag?" vibe. He thought he was in company that would commiserate and, because he had spent his life rich, he assumed he was. This, the others thought, was why he had to go.

Having heard nothing, Harold returned from the kitchen holding three more glasses.

- I have returned! Drink!

Terry relaxed. He assumed that everyone had either already drunk the poison, or Harold had put some into their new drinks, and they were about to. He did not know that Harold didn't know where the poison was, and so, being lazy, decided to hope they were already poisoned.

Neither David nor Evelyn knew Van Doren that had taken a gun from one of her bodyguards.

Terry didn't know that Harold had poisoned his drink, nor did he know that his was the only one still poisoned, and he never once suspected it might be. When he met Harold, he sized him up as a coward, an underling, a henchman. The dome's historians would record this as "The Last Hubris". Terry had no idea he was eulogizing himself with his last toast.

- To us. To everyone here. The world as it was was terrible, and filled with greedy, ruthless backstabbers, willing to sell anything to anyone with no regard for decency or chivalry. The new world cannot have those people any more. Today we build a new society, based upon honor and we will build a more perfect world. This is our opportunity! To us!

No one but Teddy drank.

Van Doren pulled a gun from his bag and pointed it at Terry's heart. He froze. He started to struggle for air, as if he had a sudden asthma attack. His hands grasped his neck. They thought he had accidentally inhaled the whiskey. Van Doren set the gun down.

David, Van Doren, Harold, and Evelyn did nothing.

When he stopped moving, Evelyn took a long pull from her glass.

## Chapter 30:

David rushed to Terry's side. Cradling Terry's head, he called out to the others.

- We have to help him.

No one moved.

- What are you persons doing?
- Daves... what if we just, like,... didn't do anything?
- What are you saying, Dors? We *have* to help. This is Jeremy's world now. If we want to survive, it *has* to be Jeremy's world. And *Jeremy* wouldn't let *anyone* die.
- Right... right... but, what if... instead of doing that... we just went, "Oh nooo, help, help!" but... uh... no one came? He did order a genocide. A for real genocide. I say just let him die. In fact, is there any way we can make him suffer more?
- *He* would do that, Dors-
- -me too-
- -we can't be him. We have to break the cycle.
- For sure, for sure. I get it. But he's guilty of genocide. And we don't even need a trial, Daves, we know. So, like... *Fuck...Him*. For the record, I was going to shoot him, so your moral argument is kind of moot. He was going to die twice over today. There is no real need to be concerned.

Terry's eyes were bulging. He truly couldn't believe he was dying, that he was losing. That *Harold* had poisoned him.

*What a fuckin' toad. Muh-ther-fuck-er. I hope I shit on you, bless your dumb fuckin' heart.*

David recognized that he was outvoted. He sighed and let Terry fall to the floor. They watched Terry writhe on the floor, gasping for air, no one making a sound.

David wanted to make an impassioned argument for compassion, for sacrifice, for a commitment to moral actions, even when they are unpopular, but as he raised his arm to speak, Terry gave one last gasp and collapsed.

He did not shit himself.

David searched deep within himself for righteous anger. He felt a strong desire to need to lash out at those responsible for this crime - just or not, vigilantism is *wrong*. Instead, he found the desire to want to feel righteous would never get past intent. David was not surprised to find he didn't care; he felt a little guilt for not caring. He thought a good person would care.

Evelyn relished watching him die, and she would say it proudly if asked. She wanted to know who the hero was. Meaningless as it is now, they would be awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom and a new honorific that comes with a much bigger medal she was thinking of calling the Greatest Person Ever.

- Who do you think did it? He was poisoned, right? I get that this is a stressful time, but that ass was a psychopath, he's not dying of a heart attack.

Harold had one chance before the cement dried.

*Act fast, and the story is mine; act slow, and it's out of my control. What did I do?*

- Terry, he, uh, ...called me two weeks ago. He set up this plan to poison you three and then we would run the show here. I couldn't let that happen, see? So I pretended to go along with him. I told him when the dome would be closed. That way, when he got

here... I uh, I would double-cross him and then... and then he would be the only one who died! I... saved your lives! Ha! Holy shit!

Evelyn turned to David and Van Doren.

- Either of you do it?
- Well Daves obviously didn't, and as much as I would've liked to, it wasn't me. I think Harold might be telling us the truth.
- *Really?* That's not *just* hard to believe, that is ...carbon *nano-tube* hard to believe.
- Well it's fucking *true*. Isn't that just right up your asses.

*Ok, ok. This was my plan the whole time. Terry was the only one who I really wanted dead, to be honest; maybe instead of it being a complete accident that they aren't dead, it was all part of my plan. My plans always work. So...if this is how it went, it worked. I'm the hero.*

- *I'm* the hero here, fellow survivors. I'm what I have always been... I am the *savior!*  
 Seriously, think about it, I have *literally ended evil in this world!* That was the last guy!  
 I'll admit, I am a little surprised too...

Terry suddenly coughed. Evelyn instinctively kicked him in the face and Terry would never make another noise.

- *Fuck. You!*

Evelyn kicked him again. Van Doren couldn't deny enjoying the impact a little, but he was exhausted. He was grateful the worst was over and he wanted to go home. He tried to pull David to the side, away from the violent outburst. David absentmindedly pulled his arm away; he looked dazed.

- Daves, come on. It's done now. Harold poisoned him. You didn't know about it. Morally, you're in the clear. And Evelyn kicked him in the face, which I think she earned karmically, so she's in the clear, too. And Harold is already so, like, morally dubious it's hard to imagine he gives a shit about morality in the first place. And I am just too tired to care. It's over, Daves. We begin the rest of our lives today, and they will be nothing like our old lives. I don't know if they'll be better or worse, I don't know if this will wind up mattering at all. Maybe we're all gonna die in here instead of out there. Maybe everyone in here will lose hope and we'll all ritualistically kill ourselves because, like, we *are* in a cult, or at least *they* are, and that would be really on-brand. Then again, Harold may actually have ended evil in the world. Except himself, I guess. But that's full circle stuff, Daves. Evil is the only thing that can truly end evil, maybe, or maybe not. I'm saying let's kill Harold.

David awoke from his shock, laughing.

- So, like, thanks Harold, I guess. That was very dramatic and exciting. I don't think things will ever be that dramatic again, will they? We're living in a post-entertainment world, aren't we? We're just... living?... from here on out. That's... fun?

Evelyn kicked Terry's body one more time. Finally satisfied, she addressed the others in turn.

- David. Thanks for inviting me to your party. Harold. Thanks for killing Terry. Van Doren. I don't hold the assassination attempts against you.
- Gee, thanks. All I did was fucking *end* evil in the world.

Without acknowledging any of them, Evelyn stood up and walked out the doors.

Van Doren knew Harold was lying. He suspected that, had the three of them not tossed their drinks on the ground, they would be dead, too. However, he also quite liked how everything turned out. Everyone he wanted to be here was here, everything he wanted to happen - relatively speaking - happened, and the future - relatively speaking - was bright. He reasoned that, while the ends don't justify the means, he still had to deal with the ends, whether or not he was a fan of the means. In this case, maybe keeping an eye out instead of seeking out retribution made the most sense. He decided to do nothing, and the decision made him very happy.

Harold felt like he was standing outside of a bank he just robbed, alarm blaring, holding two giant burlap bags filled with cash emblazoned with the dollar sign, cops surrounding him and, instead of arresting him, they cheered his name, following it with "Hip hip, hooray!"

- David, Van Doren. I think you two should rest. I'll follow after Evelyn.

He walked after Evelyn, stopping at the entrance. He snapped his fingers and a ten-strong bar staff appeared, lining up neatly on the wall. Harold pointed at the body, then walked outside. The ten Jeremites sprang into action, removing the dead body with practiced expertise.

Whether cult members join a cult learn to efficiently remove a dead body or join a cult because they already know how to efficiently remove a dead body is unknown, but these cult members could remove the hell out of a dead body. David and Van Doren blinked once and Terry was gone.

- I guess that's that, then, huh Dors? That's... that's the whole thing...
- Yea. There's nowhere left to go.
- Like...*literally*.



## Epilogue:

Harold found Evelyn at the lookout point. David had it installed before the dome was half-finished. He meant it to be a place of solemn reflection on the inhumanity of man. It was an elevated platform with 360 degree coin-operated binoculars, modified to make coins unnecessary.

The *world* had been modified to make coins unnecessary.

Evelyn looked out at the devastation. She didn't feel somber. She felt stupid. The nuclear desert, the flashes of secondary explosions and their aftershocks like fireworks on the Chinese New Year, the visible, tangible extinction of life - entire species ripped from the Earth to satisfy egotistical old men - and the knowledge that she would have to share this wasteland with a bunch of goddam assholes just like them, combined to engender a deep helplessness in Evelyn.

*What was the point? I hereby name this place "What Was The (Lookout) Point?"*.

Harold bounded into view. He was the absolute last person Evelyn wanted to see and he knew it, enjoyed it even.

*God. That guy is such an asshole.*

- It's like a fucking Cormac McCarthy novel out there, eh?
- What do you want Harold?
- I came to see how you were holding up. I mean... look out there. I've been knowing this was gonna happen for two years now...
- Really? You're going to pull that with me? David told me the situation.
- David's a liar.
- *You're* a liar.

- I *know* liars.

Evelyn could feel herself getting drawn into a stupid repartee with a madman. She took a breath and regained control.

- Harold. Look. I'm a fan of how you killed Terry. Now leave me alone forever. Don't ever speak to me again. Right now I can see you opening your mouth to say something to me, despite me telling you - to your face - that I never want to hear air expelled from your lungs, let alone make a sound, *let alone* make an intelligible one. Please. Go. Away.
- I just wa-
- Why will you not just *leave!* *Why?* Just. *Fucking!* Go!
- Bu-
- What. Ever. Just go. Just go and then I'm probably going to murder you. Just say your shit and then I will shoot you with a gun. I will shoot you in the face with a gun and you will die and no one will care. So just say it. Say your last words.
- Well... I just wanted to say... Cause I know this is a hard time... I'm sure this is really rough on you...
- *Spit it out!*
- It's just... It...
- *WHAT!?*
- ...It coulda been worse.