

# WASTELAND™

CULTS AND CRIMINALS



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## All Bad Things

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**ALL BAD THINGS**

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ISBN: 978–1–941210–01–7

*“Greatness comes from humble beginnings. One man can shake the Earth until it falls from the quaking.” —James King, Hour of the Church Triumphant, Season 1, Episode 12*

No one causes trouble in the Central Market. The snipers make sure of that.

It’s been here for years, at least as long as Samson can remember, in the middle of a bombed-out five-story building on South Broadway, the roof torn out and all but the bottom floor destroyed. The walls—ringed at each floor by a few feet of rickety, crumbling cement and steel pipe that the two-man sniper patrols walk along, looking for trouble down below—seem held up by magic. The only concession to a roof is a series of badly stitched-together blue tarps that flap and snap in the wind high above. They keep the sun and the worst of the rain out, but just barely.

The first time he was here, Luke Samson was five, maybe six years old, and running with some kids in a gang called the Leather Jerks, doing what they had to do to stay alive. Good days were running messages, picking pockets, bashing heads. Bad days—well, there were things some of the kids did that didn’t bear thinking about. By the time Samson had joined up he was already towering over kids twice his age, and nobody made him do anything he didn’t want to, but he’d seen things. The memories make his blood boil even now.

But he’s not that little kid anymore. Six-foot-five, solid muscle, flaming red hair and a matted tangle of beard beneath eyes that people call crazy even on his good days.

He steps to the head of the line, patient, calm. That’s what you do at the Central Market if you don’t want a bullet through your head. He towers over Bernie, a wiry man with jet-black hair slicked back with greasy pomade, the wrinkles in his nut-brown skin so deep you could toss bricks in and never fill them up. Bernie ticks a mark with a graphite disc onto parchment made from dog skin, tallying up the people who step through the gate.

“Name?” Bernie says, his voice creaky like a rusty hinge.

“You know me, old man,” Samson says.

“Yeah, you know us,” Cyrus adds, poking his pock-marked face with the fringe of unruly brown hair out from behind Samson. For a moment Samson had forgotten Cyrus was with him. Loud when he wants to be, silent when he needs to be, it’s easy to forget he’s there sometimes. Until you suddenly have a knife in your throat.

“Yeah, I know you,” Bernie says. “But do you know yourselves?” He cackles at a joke only he seems to understand. Laugh turns to cough, then to hocking a thick, phlegmy gob onto the cracked pavement.

“The fuck does that mean?” Cyrus says, but the question has Samson stuck. Does he know himself? He’s been wondering that a lot lately. Not sure what he’s doing, not sure why he’s doing it. Maybe the real question isn’t what he’s doing, but who he is. His brow furrows and he can hear the clicking and clacking of bolts being rammed home, snipers taking position. He blinks, lost for a moment.

“Meant nothin’ by it, Samson. Meant nothin’ by it.” Bernie is sweating, eyes wide, shaking.

Samson blinks. “What happened?” he says. At least three snipers on the walls above have him in their crosshairs.

“You got that murder look on your face, Sammy,” Cyrus whispers. “You chill? Tell me you’re chill.”

“Yeah, I’m chill.” Murder look? That only happens when he’s angry. “I was just thinkin’ is all.”

“We talked about that, man,” Cyrus says. “I do the thinkin’ for us. You know that.”

“Yeah,” Samson says, slowly coming back to himself. “Uh, here.” He fishes a couple of pieces of scrap out of his pocket, chunks torn from a busted-up carburetor they scavenged out in Monterey Park, hands them over to Bernie. “That get us in?”

Bernie takes them, looks them over carefully. “Shell casings would be better, but this’ll do.” He squints up at the snipers. “All good here, boys. All good.”

The snipers stand down, go back to their patrols, but Samson can still feel their eyes on him.

“Weapons in the box,” Bernie says. Samson puts his sledgehammer and shotgun into the plastic bin and takes his marker, a green rubber toy that’s so chewed up he can’t tell what it used to be. Cyrus does the same with his knives and pistol, and he grabs a pair of plastic dice threaded together through holes drilled in each. “You lose them tickets, you ain’t gettin’ these back.”

“We remember,” Samson says, but he knows Bernie has to say that. One time he didn’t and there was an argument over a lost ticket. Guy got drilled by the snipers but not before he tossed a grenade into the Market and took out eight people.

“And keep your elephant on a leash,” Bernie says. It takes a second for Samson to get that he’s talking to Cyrus.

“Sure, sure. All good.” Cyrus leads Samson past Bernie and into the Market.

“The fuck’s an elephant?”

“One of them things with the long noses,” Cyrus says. “I showed ‘em to you in that book a while back.”

“Oh, right. Right. Did I really have my murder face on?”

“Man, you so had your murder face on. Come on, let’s go sell some shit.”

The sights and sounds of the Market are jarring. Multicolored string lights line every stall, recorded Mexican music whines through tinny speakers competing with an unseen drum circle somewhere in the back. But it's the smells that hit Samson the hardest. Outside they compete with burning trash, swamp water, rotting vegetation, the occasional corpse, but in here it's all hot metal, cooking meat, spices carted down from Gilroy. Samson stands there a moment with his eyes closed, just breathing it all in.

Samson follows Cyrus as he makes his way over to Two-Ton Tess, an enormous Asian woman with jowls that flap when she talks and skin growths that look like barnacles on her forehead. Cyrus upends a bag of reading glasses they looted from a buried pharmacy last week. Samson is proud of that find. They're in pretty good shape.

"The fuck are these?" Tess asks, her voice wet, breath stinking like a dead rat.

"You never seen glasses before? You wear 'em on your eyes," Cyrus says. "You see better."

She peers through one lens, grunts. "Whatta ya want for 'em? Got some Pruno the Russian boys brought over today. They say it tastes just like vodka."

"Horseshit. Whatta they know? Nobody's made real vodka in thirty years," Cyrus says. "Ten kilos of saltpeter, three of mercury fulminate."

Tess cackles, her jowls wiggling. "For this? Nobody wants to see better in this place, pencil-dick. What are they gonna look at, their festering boils? This gilded fucking paradise we call home? One kilo of saltpeter and a gram of fulminate."

"Nine and a kilo."

Samson watches the haggling go on for a few minutes before he gets restless and wanders off. He stops at Pedro's Carniceria, his mouth watering at the smell of dog and rat cooking over a grill. He buys some possum on a stick with a chunk of scrap metal, then wanders back over to Cyrus as he's finishing his negotiations.

"Three kilos of saltpeter and five grams of the fulminate," Tess says. "Final offer."

"Done," Cyrus says.

"Pick it up outside in the back," Tess says. "And be careful carting it around. The fulminate's in water, but it'll still go up."

"That's okay," Cyrus says. "Sammy here's carrying it."

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"Fire in the hole," Cyrus yells, touching a burning stick to the fuse while Samson shoves his fingers in his ears. The fuse goes fast, faster than either of them expects, but when the blast comes it's less an explosion and more of a metallic pop.

The tunnel fills fast with dust—plaster, drywall, brick, toxic shit you can't breathe—but Samson doesn't mind. Cyrus, though, is wheezing like a TB patient.

They found the tunnel while exploring a nearby apartment building that had collapsed into the water that had flooded Los Angeles during the apocalypse. When the nukes fell in the water off Long Beach, the blasts had blown the ocean all the way up the L.A. River and formed radioactive lakes and swamps where before there had been only concrete and yucca plants.

But the swamp in Hollywood had receded again decades back, so the building had long ago been looted of anything valuable—wiring, pipes, doorknobs. The only things still there were too big to move and too rusted to cut up, like the massive air conditioning units that had crashed through the ceiling long ago, or they were too labor-intensive and low-return for big-time scavengers to bother with.

Samson and Cyrus were not big time. They were hungry enough that tearing through the building's drywall to get to the framing behind it seemed like a good idea, even though building timber didn't pay much more than pounds of scrap on the ton. It was Samson who had punched through the wall of a back office and uncovered a stairwell leading down into a collapsed parking garage. And that's where they found a tunnel that ended in a pair of rusted steel doors that even Samson's sledgehammer couldn't budge.

Cyrus wipes his eyes, winces. "Should have grabbed some goggles at the Market," he says, coughing through the cloud of dust.

"You always say that when we blow things up," Samson says.

"Yeah, well. Damn things are expensive."

The dust clears enough as far as Samson's concerned, and he heads down into the tunnel with a lantern, ignoring Cyrus yelling behind him. The blast has blown the hinges off one of the steel doors just the way they planned, and it hangs at a cockeyed angle. Samson grabs it with hands the size of Christmas hams and yanks the door down with a shriek of tearing metal.

He raises the lantern to look inside and gasps.

"What?" Cyrus says, running up behind him. "What is it?"

"Untouched," Samson says, his voice a reverent whisper.

*“And lo, did God Almighty command them, and they did break open the seal and unleash His Great and Terrible Retribution upon the land.” — James King, Hour of the Church Triumphant, Season 8, Episode 7*

“This section must have been sealed off when the building above collapsed,” Cyrus says. He looks up at the ceiling, rotting acoustic tiles, exposed ductwork. “Nothing but mud and rubble up there as far back as I remember.” He runs a finger through the thick layer of dust on a counter.

“Never seen a place ain’t been looted before,” Samson says. He sees a sign made of glass tubes on the wall. “What’s this say?” He knows the sign is letters, but Samson can’t read.

“K O C T,” Cyrus says. “Cocked? The hell does that mean?”

Samson shrugs. A reflection in the lantern light catches his eye. “Hey. Think I found something.” He steps around a desk next to a door at the far side of the room. Shoves it out of the way for a better look.

“Bones,” he says. No meat on them. No smell, either. What little clothing left is rotted away except for buckles and plastic. Samson nudges the bones with a toe and spies a badly corroded pistol in the corpse’s hand.

Cyrus bends down, plucks a shiny buckle and a handful of metal buttons off the corpse. Looks the gun over, tosses it aside. “Man, if there’s more like this, we’re gonna be rich. This place is a gold mine.”

Samson has already moved on. He finds a gray metal box on the wall with a big red lever on one side. He’s seen these before. Never asked what they do. No point. Every time he’s pulled a lever, nothing’s happened.

So he’s surprised when he pulls this one and the lights come on.

“Holy Jesus monkey fucking Christ,” Cyrus says. “There’s power.”

Samson blinks at the lights in the ceiling. Most of them are dead, but the ones that work buzz like pissed-off wasps. He traces a metal conduit up to the ceiling from the box.

“It’s not a generator,” he says. “Gas in a generator would have gone bad a long time ago. Solar?”

“Has to be,” Cyrus says. “Can’t be nuclear. Let’s see what else this place has.”

“Miracle it’s still workin’,” Samson says. Something about this place feels off to him. Not bad, not wrong, just different. Special, maybe. He’s having a hard time seeing it the way Cyrus sees it, as a place to loot. There’s more here than just things. He can feel it.

“I want to know what this place used to be,” Samson says.

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As it turns out, it used to be a television station called Knights of the Church Triumphant.

Samson’s heard of television stations, though he’s never seen a working television. They find a series of offices and a full studio with three cameras on a set with a big desk in front of a dusty map of the world with a big red stain covering most of it. Samson’s seen a few maps like it, pictures of distant places he’s convinced don’t really exist.

“‘Nother body,” he says, bending down to look at the moldering bones. The skull is a shattered mess, and it doesn’t take the stain on the map behind it to tell them what happened.

“Somebody shot him,” Cyrus says.

“Bad way to go,” Samson says.

“You know a better one?”

Samson thinks for a second. Shrugs.

“I ain’t seen any other ways in or out of this place besides the tunnel,” Cyrus says. “You?”

“No. You think this was a bunker? Panic room?”

“Probably, yeah. Those steel doors were pretty thick. Explains the power.” He puts a hand against an air vent near the floor. “Ventilation too. This place was buttoned up tight.”

“How come they didn’t come out?” Samson says. “Think they ran out of food?”

Now it’s Cyrus’s turn to shrug. “Dunno. If they got power, some of this old stuff might still work. Keep looking. See if there’s anything we can load up and sell at the Market.”

“No,” Samson says.

“Whatta ya mean, ‘no’?”



"I don't want to tell anyone about this place yet. If we sell stuff people ain't seen in fifty years, they're gonna wonder where we got it. I don't want them to know. Not yet."

"But—"

Samson leans over Cyrus, his face twisting into a frown. "I said, *no*."

"Fine. Fine. We don't tell anybody." Cyrus shrinks back from Samson's gaze. "But we're gonna have to sometime."

"When I'm ready," Samson says.

There are mysteries here. Samson can feel them hidden just out of sight, but something tells him there are answers, too.

Three days later Samson finds them.

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"And there was a great earthquake, and the moon turned red like blood and the sun turned black like sackcloth—"

Samson hits the stop button on the VCR, freezing the image of the blond man speaking on the screen, his arms outstretched, eyes wild.

"What's sackcloth?"

"Dunno. Cloth you make a sack out of?" Cyrus says. "Come on, hit the button again. I want to see what he says next."

They'd found the room full of old videotapes, labels faded, plastic pitted and worn, on their first day. They didn't know what they were or how to use them until Cyrus found a sheet of instructions laminated in plastic stapled to the wall. Samson couldn't read them, but Cyrus figured it out pretty fast. He popped a tape into one of the machines and they watched the video, transfixed as the Right Reverend James King came on, his voice scratchy through the old, degraded speakers, preaching something about end times and the sins of Communists. Given that he was sitting behind the desk in the studio in front of the giant wall map, they figured this was the guy they'd found who'd had his head blown off.

Each tape they watched was pretty much the same thing, though who King railed against changed from tape to tape. Communists, Washington Elites, Pinkos, Women's Libbers, Reaganomics, Jimmy Carter, Sesame Street. Samson had never heard of any of these things before, but if James King were to be believed, they were responsible for the destruction of civilization.

"Friends," James King says on the screen, his blond, moussed hair as still as a helmet as he bobs up and down in his seat, "today we are going to talk about the real end times. Not just what the Good Book says, but real, absolute, no-shit end times."

This is different from the other tapes Samson has watched. At about this point King would take callers who would ask him about the Rapture, or his assistant Mindy, a woman with hair almost as shiny and blond as King's, would come on and talk about how the Women's Libbers were going against "God's plan for the weaker sex."

"Friends, there is a reckoning coming. In the waning days of this century, there will be a calamity the likes of which no one has ever seen. Brother will turn against brother, nation against nation. The bombs will come a-crashing down and lay waste to this world like the stinking Sodom that it is."

"Hey," Samson says. "You think he—"

"Quiet. I want to hear this."

"In the darkening days of 1998," King says, punctuating each point with a fist slapped into an open palm, "the missiles will fly, the bombs will drop, and everything we know, every dark and stinking sinner, every whore and whoremonger, every sodomite, every devil, every sick and perverted nightmare will be wiped clean from the Earth in a storm of fire and radiation that will sweep across the globe!"

"Holy shit," Cyrus says, grabbing the tape case and rubbing dust off its cover. "This tape's from 1996."

Samson sits there slack-jawed. "He called it. He called the Apocalypse." Everybody knew when the bombs fell, when the missiles flew. Even now, seventy-five years later where there were no schools or lessons or teachers to teach them, people learned that the sky turned dark with ash and fire in 1998.

"And this is how it should be," King says. "This is how it's meant to be. The world is sick with sin, and the only cure is fire and blood. You know that I won't let you be swept up in this plague of fire and ash. Some of you will be called up by the Rapture instead. God will call you home before the flames burn everything to the ground. But some of you, some of you will be left behind to finish God's work. Not a punishment, but an honor. He will call upon you to bring fire and retribution to those who refuse to be saved. And I, your Shepherd, will show you the way." King leans forward, spreading his hands. "But we're going to have to prepare. Bunkers and food and weapons with which to do the Lord's work, and as you know, those things take money—lots of money. Which is why I want you to call the number on your screen right now. The end times are coming, my children. And only your dollars can save those left behind."

Samson and Cyrus stare at the screen, dumbfounded, as numbers flash by and the announcer shouts about credit cards and toll-free numbers. Samson had always heard crackpots going on about how God had made the Apocalypse happen, but he never paid attention to them. What did they know? How could they be any more privy to God's plan than anybody else? After all, wouldn't they be in the shit, too?

But this was different. This man had predicted the end years before it actually happened.

"Put in another tape," Samson says, his voice quiet. "I wanna know more."



*"It is not enough that God show you the True Path. It is up to you to walk it." —James King, Hour of the Church Triumphant, Season 2, Episode 18*

They spend the next week watching the tapes. As the episodes go on, King gets more and more specific. Washington, D.C., would fall first, then Moscow, New York, Paris, Leningrad, London, Los Angeles, Miami, Detroit. Cities would topple like dominoes, their streets running red with blood. Riots and looting would destroy the world's economy, and the righteous—those who have given themselves over to God's plan—would prevail.

"These will be the people who take up arms as God's soldiers," King says. "They will be the True Chosen who will carry the world back into the light of righteousness. People like you. The Unbelievers will mock you, they will call into question your resolve, but God's light will show you the way. The bombs will fall and the bodies will stack up, but you will remain unscathed so long as you adhere to God's plan."

"I heard that's exactly what happened," Cyrus says.

"From who? Crackpot Billy down in Pershing Square?" Though Samson knows there's a truth here, he's still doubtful. But he doesn't know if that's the doubt of someone who knows better, or the doubt of one of King's Unbelievers.

"The end is right around the corner, sinners," King says. "Maybe as soon as tomorrow. Maybe you'll wake up tomorrow morning to a world changed by fire and radiation."

"You mocking me?" Cyrus says, a dangerous edge in his voice. Samson isn't sure if he's talking to him or to the television.

"Nah," Samson says. "Just not sure is all. I mean, he says the whores are all gonna burn. You and me, we been to whores. You even got sweet on one of 'em once. Hollywood's loaded with whores. And what about them druggies he always talks about? You and me, we done that horse pebbles shit. Everybody does."

"Will you be worthy of God's plans?" King says, his voice reaching a fever pitch. "Will you repent and be right with the Lord when the bombs fall tomorrow?"

"You sayin' we're not worthy?" Cyrus says.

"I dunno," Samson says. He watches King as he rails against homosexuals, pounding his desk with a fist.

"Maybe we're God's Chosen," Cyrus says. "Maybe we're supposed to bring King's words back to the world. That's why we found this place. We're here to spread the gospel. Remember when the power came on?"

Samson chuckles. "Yeah. You were scared."

"Fuck you, I was not scared. Surprised, maybe. But you remember what you said? You said it was a miracle. I think you were onto something. This whole place is a miracle. God's plan. That's why we're here. That's why we found this place."

Samson thinks hard. Did he say it was a miracle? He doesn't remember. "So what? How does that mean we're the Chosen Ones? Maybe we're just here to give it to the Chosen Ones, let them spread the Word."

"I know you got your doubts, Sammy," Cyrus says. "But I think this is the real deal. I think this is why we're here."

"Put in another tape," Samson says, as King fades away and the credits roll. He doesn't want to keep talking about it. He knows Cyrus is right about one thing, at least: Samson does have doubts. Samson has always had doubts. He's been looking for answers his whole life. And now that one might be staring him in the face, he can't bring himself to believe in it.

"There isn't another tape," Cyrus says. "That was the last one."

"Can't be. How many we been through?" Samson counts back, he's memorized every episode. Knows the answer before Cyrus says it.

"Couple hundred tapes, two, three shows on each. This is the last one. Did you hear what he said about the bombs? How they were gonna fall tomorrow? I think he was right about that. I think they fell the very next day and that's why there's no more tapes."

Samson sits back, stunned. "You really think that?"

"I do. And I really think we're the Chosen Ones. How about you, Samson? You think you're a Chosen One, too?"

Samson says nothing, but deep in his heart he knows the answer is no.

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"Samson," says a voice. He feels someone shaking him awake. "Samson, we need to talk." At first Samson thinks it's Cyrus, but as he comes out from the haze of sleep, he recognizes the voice. It doesn't have the scratchiness he's grown used to, the warble of bad speakers, but he knows it just the same.

"Reverend King?" Samson says, rubbing sleep from his eyes and sitting up from his tangle of blankets on the studio floor.

“Call me Jim, Samson,” King says, sitting cross-legged in his blue suit on the floor. He smiles with teeth so white they seem to sparkle in the darkness. “We’re friends, after all.”

“Are you real?” Samson says. “Is this a dream?”

“No dream,” King says. He stands, reaches down for Samson’s hand, pulls the larger man up to his feet.

“You’re shorter than I thought you’d be,” Samson says.

King laughs. “Height means little to the Lord,” he says. “Beneath God’s gaze, we are all equally judged.”

“You said that in season three, episode twenty-seven,” Samson says. “When you were talking about that basketball player.”

“I did. You’ve got quite the memory for that sort of thing.”

“I remember the important stuff,” Samson says. “Not much on reading and writing, though. Can’t seem to get a handle on that.”

“That’s all right, Samson. Cyrus over there, he does plenty of reading and writing for the both of you. You know why I’m here?”

Samson shakes his head. He’s still having trouble with the idea that King is standing in front of him. It doesn’t feel like a dream, but then dreams usually don’t.

“I’m here because you have doubts.”

“Oh no, sir. I—”

King stops him with an upraised hand. “I know you don’t doubt me,” he says. “You know what I say is true. I can tell. In your heart of hearts, son, you know that mine is the Word of God, the Almighty. You’re no Unbeliever like those sodomites and catamites out in Hollywood. But I know you have doubts about yourself.”

Samson looks at the floor. He can’t bring himself to meet King’s eyes. The shame burns in him like hot coals. King touches his chin and Samson looks up at him. King is suddenly taller, towering over Samson, his head brushing the ceiling of the studio, a heavenly light glowing all around him.

“Do not doubt yourself, Samson. I know you have done sinful things. Things you don’t believe can be forgiven.” King’s voice booms in Samson’s ears. “But the way to wash those sins away is to follow God Almighty and enact his plan for the Earth. For you are one of the Chosen. You and Cyrus will carry my words to the far reaches of the world, you will bring the Faithful into the fold, and you will lay waste to the Unbelievers. The sinners will fall beneath your hammer as you smite them in God’s name.”

Samson is crying, tears running thick tracks through the grime and dust on his face. All his doubts are washing away in the light coming from King’s glowing form.

“You will be my champion,” King says. “You will be my voice.”

Samson is heaving with huge, wracking sobs. He has never felt so complete, so right. Finally, he has a purpose. He falls to his knees, his hands in prayer, King’s words burning deep into his soul.

“You will spread my Word across the land,” the Reverend says. And he tells Samson what he wants him to do.

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“Get up,” Samson says.

Cyrus rolls over, looking up at Samson towering over him. There’s something different about him, but he can’t put his finger on what. Like he’s got a glow about him or something.

“What’s got you all riled up? Something on fire? There looters in the tunnel? Swamp water risin’?”

“No,” Samson says, and that’s when Cyrus figures out what’s different. Samson’s smiling.

In the years that Cyrus has known him he can only remember a handful of times he’s seen the huge man smile. And every time it ended badly.

“I thought you said you weren’t gonna do no drugs no more, Sammy. Remember last time you got into all that Salt? Hollywood wouldn’t let us in for three weeks after what you did with them whores.”

“This is better,” Samson says. “I saw Reverend King.”

“You what? You found another tape?”

“No. I saw him. Here, in the studio. He came to me last night and told me his plan. You were right, Cyrus. We are the Chosen Ones. He wants us to spread his Word to the rest of the world, build a great army for God and wipe the Earth clean of the Unbelievers.”

Cyrus stares up at Samson, blinking sleep out of his eyes. He had hoped Samson would go for the whole Chosen Ones bullshit, but he never thought he’d take it this seriously.

The idea that they could start a cult using the teachings of James King had hit Cyrus about a week ago. There were lots of cults in L.A. after all, though “gang” was probably a better word for them. Cyrus figured that if they could get one going, they could pull in some people, maybe make them do the looting and scavenging for them. Hell, if they got some of those whores from Hollywood to join, Cyrus could be neck deep in as much pussy as he wanted.

He’d been trying to subtly nudge Samson into thinking he’d come up with the idea himself ever since — dropping hints, playing up the “miracle” of finding this place. Play it up like it was Samson’s idea. He was always easier to maneuver when he had the illusion of being in charge.

Of course, subtle didn't always work on Samson. He wasn't stupid. Just not much of a thinker. His plans didn't go past figuring out his next meal. Cyrus was getting ready to ditch subtle and come right out and tell Samson his plan. To hell with having him think it was his own idea.

But then subtle went and won out anyway.

Cyrus smiles. "Sure," he says. "Okay. We can do that. What are we doing?"

Samson tells him, and the more he talks, the more Cyrus realizes that this might be much bigger than he ever thought possible.

*“And God said unto them, ‘Take my teachings and spread them across the land. Those who believe will follow, and those who do not will fall beneath my vengeance.’” —James King, Hour of the Church Triumphant, Season 4, Episode 27*

Samson hasn’t been out of the bunker in three weeks. He pulls at the dirty white smock Cyrus made for him, a silver cross on the front made out of duct tape.

They talked about the plan for three days before Samson said he was ready. It’s a simple one, really. Go out and spread the Word. He’s memorized a really good sermon and he’s itching to try it out. After that, though, it’s a little muddy.

Samson’s been struggling with what to do if the Word isn’t accepted. He knows what James King wants, knows he can do it, but he’s still hesitant. There’s something about it that makes his gut feel hollow. He’d prefer if Cyrus were with him, but the little man said he wasn’t up for the long walk. And besides, he had to do all the hard work of writing up the sermons so he could teach them to Samson later. Samson thinks Cyrus is just being a lazy asshole, but he didn’t argue the point.

They figured it’d be best to skip the gangs at first. The Echo Park Locos probably won’t like hearing the sermons, and though Samson forged an uneasy truce with them when he killed nine of their best three years ago after they jumped him, he doesn’t want to kick that particular hornet’s nest. Yet. He can still feel the chunk of the bullet in his scalp from the last time.

So it’s over to one of the camps in the hills of Silver Lake. There’s one they’ve traded with. Small group, twenty people. They might listen, they might not, but if they don’t, he’s not likely to get shot in the head.

He makes his way west, following the ruins of Sunset Boulevard, then north to the Silver Lake reservoir. It hasn’t been full for as long as Samson’s known about it—the scummy swamp water spread through so much of Los Angeles never made it up into the hills—but everyone still calls it the reservoir. When there’s a really heavy rain, it fills up with radioactive water that no one goes near. The smell of poison and rot are too strong for even the hardiest survivors.

At the bottom of the hill Samson crosses himself just like he saw James King do on the videotapes, his fingers brushing against the shotgun shells in their bandolier. He follows it up with a check on the twelve-gauge slung over his shoulder, the sledgehammer on his back, the Bowie knife strapped to his forearm. Once he’s ready, he heads up the hill.

The camp is quiet. Ragged men and women, thin from little food, sick from unnamed diseases. Samson steps out from a blasted-out house at the top of Angus Street, and the ones still mobile enough to care freeze when they see him.

Samson clears his throat. “And the Lord said, ‘Lead not into temptation the lambs who you would take under your protection, for I am the Shepherd and I—”

“Who the fuck are you?” a woman says, stepping out from behind a plastic sheeting lean-to, her rifle in a grip that tells Samson she knows how to use it.

“I’m here to spread the gospel of James King,” he says. “To show you the path of righteous—”

A rock flies from the side and bounces off Samson’s forehead.

“We don’t need your kind here,” a filthy boy says, picking up another rock.

“Malcom, you cut that shit out,” the woman says. “But he’s right. We don’t need your kind here. Don’t need no preacher bullshit. Get plenty of that already.”

“I’m different, ma’am,” Samson says. “I bring the Word of God’s Prophet, the Reverend James King. He foresaw these troubles, saw the bombs coming, saw the hardships we’d all be facing when the judgment day came.”

“Yeah? Then how come he didn’t do anything about it?”

Samson’s ready for this one. His answer is straight from season four, episode nineteen. “Because it was God’s plan. God wanted us hammered into something stronger, something better, and the only way to do that is through hardship and perseverance. You have raiders come by, right? Try to steal your food?”

“Of course we do. And we fight ‘em off, just like we’ll fight you off if that’s what you’re thinking of doing.”

“No, ma’am,” Samson says. “I’m here to spread the Good Lord’s Word and, should any of you fine folks like, have some of you join our new Church.”

She laughs. “A church? You want us to join your church? And I suppose you’d be sitting at the top eatin’ the best food and getting handjobs for your trouble. Is that it?”

“We deny the pleasures of the flesh,” Samson says, “so that we may be pure in the eyes of the Lord.” Season fourteen, episode nine.

She narrows her eyes. “No, I don’t think we’re gonna listen to you. You gotta get gone, Mister.”

“But—”

“I said get outta here.”

Doubt fills Samson and he stammers half-formed objections, unsure what to do next.

“She’s not listening to you,” James King says to him, appearing at his side. Samson turns to see him, his shiny teeth, his flag lapel pin, his unmoving blond hair. “She’s not listening to us.”

“She doesn’t know us,” Samson says. “Once she hears the sermon—”

“Who the hell you talkin’ to?” the woman says. “You’re crazy, aren’t you? I got enough problems without a crazy man comin’ into my camp.”

“If you’d just listen,” Samson says, frustration building, a red haze descending on him. Anger bubbles up through the cracks in his psyche, and there’s nothing he can do to stop it. He knows what happens next, sees it clear as day.

“It’s all right, Samson,” King says. “You know what you need to do.”

Samson shakes his head. “But sir—”

“I asked you who the hell you’re talkin’ to,” the woman says.

Samson can take it no longer. The rage sweeps over him like a flame. “You are disrespecting the Reverend King,” he says. “You are disrespecting God.”

“Give them Salvation,” King says. “Show them the Light.”

Samson says nothing, lost to the red rage filling him. He slides the Bowie knife from its forearm sheath with a practiced move and flings it with all the force he can muster. The blade punches into the woman’s throat, blood erupting around it. She fires the rifle, but Samson’s already on the move and the shot goes too high to touch him.

Samson’s sledgehammer is in his hands. He swings it at the boy who threw the rock, shattering his sternum with one blow, caving in his skull with another. There is screaming, gunfire, but it’s all so distant. Samson is just a vessel, a vehicle for carrying out God’s will, enacting His plan. His sledgehammer swings home countless times, crushing everything in its path.

James King hovers over Samson’s shoulder. “Kill them, Samson. Kill them all. Kill them for God.”

And that’s exactly what Samson does.

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Samson meets Cyrus outside the doors to the bunker where he’s reinforcing them with welded metal plates. He lifts a new pair of goggles from his eyes, stares at Samson standing there, smock soaked red with blood.

Samson looks down at him, eyes unfocused. He doesn’t remember coming back here, barely remembers going to the camp.

“You okay?” Cyrus says.

Behind Samson, James King says, “You sent many souls to Heaven.”

“I sent many souls to Heaven,” Samson says. His voice is a distant echo in his ears.

“So they didn’t listen?”

“They wouldn’t listen,” King says. “They disrespected the Lord.”

“They wouldn’t listen,” Samson repeats. “They disrespected the Lord.”

“Oh. Well, they deserved what they got, right?”

“They did,” King says, but Samson says nothing. He pushes his way past Cyrus, boots squelching from all the blood in them, heavy red tracks following him inside.

“You hurt?” Cyrus says.

“I don’t know,” Samson says. He doesn’t think it matters.

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That night, Samson, blood and bits of bone scrubbed from his skin as best he can, sits in the editing bay and watches episode fourteen from season twelve of King’s show. This is the one where King calls for the cleansing of the land of Unbelievers. “Those who disrespect the Lord deserve the sword.” King sings it like a children’s song, repeating himself over and over again.

“I remember those words,” King says.

“I killed people today,” says Samson. “I didn’t even get to bring them your sermon.”

“They wouldn’t listen.”

“I didn’t give them a chance.”

“Yes, you did,” King says. “You came bearing my Word, you invoked my name. And yet they denied you. You did what was right. You cleaned the land of their foulness and delivered their souls unto the Lord.”

“Will there be a lot of that?”

“The land will be bathed in their blood,” King says. “Count on it.”

*“To deny God’s truth is the greatest sin. And those who do not believe must be delivered unto the Lord for punishment.” —James King, Hour of the Church Triumphant, Season 4, Episode 2*

“Some folks take exception to you showin’ your face, Samson,” Bernie says. “Don’t think you should be here.”

Samson looks up to see a pair of Central Market snipers looking at him through crosshairs. Others are coming from the sides, leaving their regular patrol posts walking the Market’s perimeter.

“Come to trade,” Samson says, lifting a dirty duffel bag in one hand. “And spread the Good Word.”

“I’ve heard of the good word you been spreadin’. Seen the bodies, too. Gettin’ yourself a reputation. Buildin’ yourself a nice little army out there in Echo Park.”

It’s true, though Samson doesn’t like to call them an army. In the last six months he’s visited camp after camp, converting the worthy and sending the souls of Unbelievers to the Lord. Those he’s brought into the fold have joined him and Cyrus at the studio, and it’s starting to get a little cramped. They’ll need to move soon.

“True believers,” Samson says. Almost a hundred of them now.

Bernie cocks his head, squints at Samson. “You’ve changed. I don’t know into what, but you’re different.”

“I found God and follow the teachings of our Savior, James King.”

“Uh—huh. Or you’ve just gone even more batshit crazy than you already were. Somebody told me you’re hearin’ voices. That true? You gone completely round the bend?”

“You gonna let me in, Bernie?”

“Answer my question, I’ll answer yours.”

“God’s grace lets me see the Reverend.”

“Got it. Batshit crazy.”

Samson’s smile never wavers, even though he’s never liked being called crazy. Likes it less even now, but that’s okay. Bernie doesn’t understand the gift God has granted him. Of course he thinks Samson is crazy.

“I answered your question, Bernie. Now answer mine. You gonna let me in?”

“No.”

“Just like that? I thought everyone was welcome at the Market.”

“Not murderers,” Bernie says.

“Not a soul inside those walls is free of that sin. If I kill, I kill for the Lord. Can those men up there say the same?”

“You want to get in, you’ll have to kill me.” Bernie cocks his head toward the snipers above. “Them, too.” A few have Samson in their sights, but most are just watching. None of them are at their assigned posts.

Samson’s smile grows, but it’s a little sad, a little wistful. “All right,” Samson says. “If you insist.”

Shots ring out from across the street and the snipers covering Samson drop, their heads exploding from high-caliber rounds. A couple start to raise their weapons to take out Samson, but they die before they can even get a bead on him. The others move to cover, try to find targets. Too preoccupied to notice the men and women who have climbed up from the inside of the Market behind them while they were watching Samson’s conversation with Bernie. By the time they figure it out, the knives have come out and it’s too late.

Samson heaves the duffel bag into the entrance to the Market, thumbs the detonator palmed in his other hand. The smoke grenades inside go off, spewing green and purple smoke in a hazy curtain too thick to see through.

The fighting inside is quick and brutal. Samson’s people have been in the Market for hours, getting in position, waiting for the smoke to hide their attack. Only a handful are up there taking care of the snipers. The rest are down below, rounding up the Market patrons, the shop owners.

Bernie pulls out a little Saturday night special, its grip covered in duct tape to keep it all together, and pops off a round. The bullet grazes Samson’s skull, and the sudden sharp pain takes him by surprise. Samson knocks the gun from the little man’s hands, picks him up by the neck.

Bernie stares at Samson, stunned, his face going red and purple. “What the fuck,” he says, wheezing. “This place is neutral. Everybody and their fuckin’ grandmother’s gonna be comin’ for your fuckin’ pea head.”

“You built your house on sand, Bernie, and great will be its fall.”

“The fuck does that even mean?” Bernie’s eyes bulge in their sockets.

Samson squeezes harder, hears something pop in Bernie’s neck. The man shudders, lets out a final, strangled gasp. Dies in Samson’s hands.

“I don’t really know,” Samson says, thinking about it for the first time. “Something the Reverend King says. I’ll be sure to ask him.”



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“How many?” Cyrus says. Samson’s used to this. Cyrus doesn’t say hello, doesn’t ask how Samson is doing. Even if Samson comes back covered in blood, Cyrus doesn’t ask whose it is.

“Dead or with us?”

“With us. I don’t care about the dead.”

“Fifteen.” And forty–seven dead. Cyrus may not care, but Samson does. He’s the one consigning souls to Heaven, after all. It’s his job to care.

“Good.”

“None of ours fell.”

“Even better. Net gain. And the gear?”

“Cleared out. Building set on fire. Here’s the list.” Samson hands him a moldy ledger they found in the back of the studio that they’ve been using to track what they get from dead Unbelievers. Cyrus leafs through it. Samson’s learned to read a little, but he’s still not very good at it. All the words jumble together into a big mess in his head, so he always has someone on hand who can do it for him.

“Guns, good. Ammo, better.” Cyrus gives a low whistle. “This is what I was lookin’ for. Tess’s stash.” He runs a finger down the page and stops at one entry. “35884–77–6. Five—shit, no, fifteen canisters? Perfect. I’d heard she had some of these, but fifteen? I don’t even want to know how she got her hands on this stuff. She put up a fight?”

“Not much of one,” Samson says. He’d given her the choice the way he gave everyone the choice. She answered him with a bullet that missed him by a mile. He’d always respected her, so he made it fast. One blow from the sledgehammer was all it took.

“Is it safe to keep all that stuff here?” Samson asks. “Isn’t it dangerous?”

“Yeah. And we’re not gonna. Had a team scouting the last couple weeks. Found a new home. Bigger. We’ll keep this place as a—”

“Shrine,” Samson says. “This place is a shrine. We’ll move everything out and seal it up like we found it. This is where Reverend King died.”

“Sure. A shrine. Exactly what I was gonna say. I was thinking we should keep a few people here to guard it. Maybe some guns and ammunition. Supplies. You know, to keep it safe. We’ll seal off the studio where his bones are.”

Samson narrows his eyes at Cyrus. He knows he’s being played, but he can’t figure out how. “All right.”

“Good. Glad we’re on the same page. So this place I’m thinking is plenty big for us. And it’s close, too. I did some digging. Used to be a church. We’ll make it one again.”

Samson frowns. A church? Big enough for everyone? Right now most of their people are sleeping in a camp just outside the tunnel leading to the basement bunker. He knows only one building still standing nearby that might be big enough for everyone.

“The Arena? Over by the park?”

“That’s the one.”

The Arena is a big, semicircular building down on Glendale across from the flooded swamp that used to be Echo Park Lake. The Locos run a big fight club there every Friday night where half a dozen cage matches on a big stage end in at least one corpse being tossed out the back for their nuke–pooches to eat. Samson fought there back when he ran with the Leather Jerks, before the Locos ran the gang out of the area and over into Atwater.

“Used to be called the Angelus Temple,” Cyrus says. “Big enough for our needs. Great location. We can house everybody, fortify it, hold Church services. It’ll be great.”

“But the Locos. Cyrus, that’s their headquarters. They all live there. We don’t have enough people to take them on.”

“Not in a straight fight, no. Not yet, at least. But I got it all figured out,” Cyrus says. “You’re gonna love this plan.”

*“It is through trusting in God that He will deliver you from evil.” —James King, Hour of the Church Triumphant, Season 14, Episode 8*

The crowd inside the Arena is screaming for Samson’s blood. They stand in the auditorium booing, throwing bottles and cups full of urine at him that bounce off the chicken wire enclosing the stage. He stands with chains circling his waist, cuffed to his wrists and ankles. His shirt is streaked with dried blood, eyes swollen from the beating he’s taken at the hands of his captors.

Samson does not love this plan.

“I know you don’t feel the blows,” King says, a soothing hand on Samson’s shoulder, “but they sting nonetheless.” King’s perfect teeth shine in the stage lights, his dark blue suit without a speck of dust on it. Being God’s chosen has its perks.

“I can take a beating, Reverend.”

“I know you can, son,” King says. “And tonight you’ll have to. For God.”

“I know, sir. I won’t let you down.”

A shriek of feedback punches through the auditorium followed by a loud belch. “Listen up, you cocksuckers,” says a voice over the PA. “You are going to abso—fucking—lutely love the shit we have in store for you tonight. We got ourselves Luke Samson, who if you don’t know the name you sure as shit know what he’s done. This is the fucker who shut down the Central Market three months ago. The guy who’s been killing everybody from here to Hollywood. And you know what we’re gonna do to him? We’re gonna kill him and pass his skull around.”

The crowd answers with a roar like thunder. They want Samson’s head on a stick. They want to cut him to pieces, light him on fire and parade his skull—fucked corpse down Sunset Boulevard.

“It won’t be long now,” King says. “Hold fast, make it look good, and they won’t know what hit them.”

It’s funny, Samson thinks, that the Locos don’t seem to be asking why he’s here. He just showed up a week ago, walked into the main room, told some kid who he was and waited for the beatings to start. Everyone knew who he was—they all know him on sight—but strangely, no one’s asked him why he surrendered. No one’s asked him why he’s let them beat him and hasn’t put up a fight.

And no one’s asked him where his army is.

“We got five guys gonna get into the cage with Samson tonight and the only one ain’t walkin’ outta there is Big Red himself.”

The crowd is a wild animal, barking, spitting, straining at its leash. They aren’t individual people anymore. The crowd has subsumed them, absorbed them into its seething mass. It’s like a river in a storm, threatening to overflow its banks—nothing but mindless energy bent on seeing Samson’s destruction.

Samson can’t count the people in the crowd, but if the entire pack of Locos wasn’t sitting out there, or somewhere in the building, he’d be surprised.

The stage has chicken wire covering the front, but the back is all razor wire. Once a man goes into a fight, the Locos don’t want him running out the back. Aside from a door in the razor wire fence, itself wrapped in razor wire, there are a dozen trapdoors in the floor.

Five of them pop open at once to let Samson’s opponents onto the stage. They start to pull themselves up, but Samson wastes no time. His feet may be manacled, but there’s more than enough chain to allow him a full range of movement. He takes advantage of that, runs to the closest fighter and kicks him full in the teeth. The guy topples down the trapdoor before he can even clear it.

One down, four to go. The crowd screams at first blood. Two guys come at Samson from each side, circling him. One carries a machete, the other a meat cleaver. Beefy, muscled men, with scars all over their torsos. They’ve experienced violence most people see only in their nightmares.

Samson goes after the machete first. As the man brings the razor-sharp blade down, Samson loops a length of chain around it, pivots on his heel and slides past, forcing the blade down and pulling the fighter off his feet. Samson drives an elbow into his face that fractures bone. The man hits the floor with a dull, wet thud.

The cleaver’s more problematic. Though the machete has a longer reach, Samson was able to use it against itself with the chains. The cleaver’s somewhere between a knife and an axe, a good slicing weapon, and if you have enough room to get a good swing in, you can really fuck somebody up.

Samson backs away from the cleaver’s onslaught, trying to keep enough distance to not die, but not so much that the guy can get a good swing going. It takes everything he has just to keep from being sliced to ribbons.

He needs to do something fast. He doesn’t see them, but he knows there are two more guys behind him. He knows he’s being herded back into them, so instead of stepping back from the cleaver’s attack, he waits until he sees an opening and steps into it.

His timing is a little off, and the cleaver skims along his forearm, opening it up in a long, thin slice.

The pain shoots through him, igniting a fire in his mind that he’s been able to keep tamped down through all the beatings he’s taken in the last few days. Now it doesn’t matter. Now he needs it. He lets the red rage wash through him, feels his features twist into what Cyrus would call his murder face.

With a burst of speed, he knees the cleaver man in the nuts, hears a popping noise past all the screaming, watches blood spread through the crotch of the man's pants. Samson throws his arms wide, snapping the chains from his wrists. He wraps the guy in a bear hug, squeezing hard until he hears his back snap, then spins, throwing the body into one of the guys coming up behind.

Cleaver's not getting up again, but the other guy will soon, so he needs to take out the only one standing fast. This one's got a shiv made out of a sharpened chunk of sheet metal, and he's big—almost as big as Samson. This might very well come down to a contest of brute strength, and the way he's feeling right now, Samson isn't sure he'll win it.

And then the floor drops out from under him.

Samson falls through a trapdoor, one of the few on stage designed to open down instead of up. He drops a good five feet, rough hands grabbing at him to slow his fall. He swings a fist, connecting with somebody's face, hears a voice telling him over and over that it's all right, he's all right. Someone slaps something onto his face, straps and buckles cinched tight over the back of his head.

Through the smeared plastic of the gas mask, he sees James King standing before him, beatific smile on his face. "It's time, Samson," King says. "Time to deliver them to God."

Above him, Samson hears a series of muffled explosions, five in rapid succession, then ten more over as many seconds. Surprised yelling as the crowd realizes that something's wrong but doesn't know what it is.

Then the screams start.

Cyrus had explained that the chemical he'd wanted from Tess, the stuff labeled 35884-77-6, was something called xylyl bromide that was used as a tear gas in some war over a hundred years ago. How Tess got her hands on that shit he had no idea, but now that he had it, he was damn well going to use it.

In small doses exposure leads to burning eyes, throat damage. Higher concentrations and the eyeballs swell and scar, airways close, lungs burn. And in the concentration they just dumped into the Arena, no one's getting out alive.

Samson follows the group that pulled him off the stage through a tunnel that leads to the outside. They get through a basement door and then seal it with a couple of pieces of rusty rebar through the door handles.

Samson pulls off the mask, takes a deep breath of cool, clean air, then starts to cough. Barely a whiff of the stuff got through the mask, but his skin is already beginning to itch, and his eyes burn. A woman who helped pull him out of the building pushes him to his knees and pours water from a bottle into his eyes.

"This will help," she says. "And we'll want to get your skin scrubbed clean, too. But that can wait. Can you breathe okay?"

"Yeah," Samson says, though his swelling tongue makes him wonder how long that will last. "Just my eyes sting is all."

She hands him another bottle. "Keep flushing your eyes, sir. I need to get back to the doors, make sure nobody gets through."

"Okay, Novice..."

"Initiate, sir. Initiate Katarina Volkov. Glory be to God and his Prophet James King."

"Glory be to God," Samson says, watching her retreat through blurred eyes.

"A few more minutes and our people will go in and finish up the survivors," King says. "Every one of those godless sinners delivered unto the Lord. A glorious victory for God's Militia, don't you think, Samson?"

"Of course, Reverend," Samson says. He wonders how many were in there. The Locos had a good hundred, hundred fifty members, and with so many wanting to see Samson's head on a platter, there had to be a lot more than that in there. Two hundred, maybe? Three? He's never seen that many dead. He has a hard time wrapping his brain around it.

"Something wrong, Samson?" King says.

"Just that we never gave them the choice. Even at the Market, even at the camps, we gave them a choice."

"We gave them a choice here, too, son. You walked into their heathen's den, let them subject you to beatings and torture. They could have stopped. They could have never started. The ones who went to watch your assassination in there, they could have stayed home."

King shakes his head, puts a hand on Samson's shoulder. "They didn't have to participate in that barbarism, but they chose to, anyway. Never think they didn't have a choice."

Samson pours more water in his stinging eyes and trusts in James King that they did the right thing.

*“And the seeds of your downfall will be sowed in the soil of your successes.” —James King, Hour of the Church Triumphant, Season 4, Episode 7*

Four hundred and twelve dead. Samson sits on muddy grass, damp from the wet, fetid wind blowing through the city, and says it to himself again.

Four hundred and twelve dead. They declared the building free of corpses last night as they dumped the final one into the pyre burning in the emptied Echo Park Lake. The fires dance in Samson’s eyes, the breezes fanning them higher, as if God himself were stoking the flames with his hot breath.

The sky above is an overcast orange, low clouds underlit by the pyre, as the haze and smoke blow toward the coast.

“Smells like barbecue,” Cyrus says, sitting down next to Samson to watch the blaze. It’s been three days and Cyrus has been too busy to check on Samson. That’s fine. Plenty of other people have been checking on him.

Samson nods. It does smell like that, actually. His mouth is watering a little bit, and he could really go for some grilled possum. He hasn’t eaten much since he gave himself up to the Locos.

“How’d you know that plan would work?” Samson says.

“God told me.” Cyrus laughs at the look on Samson’s face. “Nah, you’re the one with the radio to the big guy. It’s just that I know the Locos, I know these people. They didn’t care why you were there, they just wanted your head. And the Locos wouldn’t just chop it off, either. They’d want a spectacle. So we gave ‘em one.”

“We killed them all.”

Not everyone died from the gas, at least not right away. The ones hit first went fastest as their throats closed and their lungs shriveled up in their chests. They suffocated within minutes. Others took longer, but they died the same way. For Samson the worst were the ones the gas didn’t kill, just left them in shivering agony, blind, blood running from their burnt-out eyes. Most of those couldn’t even scream, just lay there, waiting to be put out of their misery by the Church’s soldiers going through the Arena with clubs and knives.

“That we did, my friend,” Cyrus says. “Every last stinking one of those sinners. And got ourselves a fancy new pad. Clean it up some, air it out. Gonna be a few days before we can go in without masks, but then, voila.”

“They’ll hate us even more now,” Samson says.

“Good. Easier to separate the saints from the sinners. We’re doin’ God’s work,” Cyrus says. “Somebody’s against us, they’re against God.”

There’s a hole in that logic somewhere, but Samson can’t find it, so he leaves it alone. Instead he says, “What now?”

“Now it’s time to regroup, get our act together, get ready to really expand. Did you know they have a radio in there? Stupid bastards didn’t even know enough to use it right. It’s just a big jumble in an office. Thinkin’ it’s time we powered it up and started spreading the good word to some heathens a little farther afield. Going to start transmitting the Sermon According to James King. Spread it all over the place.”

“Like how King had his television show?”

“Better. He had competition. People had lots of things to watch. But you turn on a radio today and you’re hearing some yokel going off about acid rain or a flare-up of radiation sickness somewhere. We get this thing going, and we are going to clean the fuck up. Spread the word farther and wider than it’s ever been spread. We can get all of Reverend King’s sermons onto the airwaves and out to everyone. The church is gonna be huge.”

“It’s not about the church, Cyrus. It’s about God. It’s about Reverend King.”

“Of course,” Cyrus says. “Sure. That’s what I meant.”

“Excuse me.” A shadow falls across them. Samson looks up to see a tall woman with long black hair and a red smock holding a bottle of water out to him. “Sorry to interrupt, but I thought you might want some water. The medic said you should flush your eyes out several times a day for the next week.”

“Novice Volkov,” Samson says, taking the water. “Thank you.” There’s something familiar about her that he can’t quite place. “Have we met?”

“You’re welcome, sir. Yes. I helped get you out of the Arena. And I got you water for your eyes. It was the least I could do. You sacrificed a lot for us, sir. It must have been awful in there. And it’s Initiate.”

“It’s Novice now,” Samson says. “I knew that God was watching over me. I had nothing to worry about.”

“Where you from, honey?” Cyrus says.

Volkov startles, as though just now noticing Cyrus. “Hollywood, sir. I’ve been with the church for about a month now.”

“I hear they’ve been expanding.”

“They were when I was there,” she says. “Refugees, mostly. People afraid to give themselves over to the church.”

Cyrus nods at the news. “You can go now.”

She bows her head and hurries away before Samson can even say goodbye. “What was that about?” he says. “You never ask where people are

from.”

“Hollywood’s getting too—” Cyrus pauses. “Full of sin,” he says. “Whores and faggots and druggies and Communists. You asked what was next. That’s next.”

Samson had been wondering when they were going to have this conversation. He and Cyrus had been to Hollywood plenty of times to visit the whores before they found James King and everything changed. When he’d first been there years ago, it was little more than a camp, but it had grown since then into a decent-sized town. Last he’d seen it had almost a thousand people, and if what Volkov said was true, then it was even bigger now from all of the sinners the church had been driving into its arms.

“If you say so,” Samson says.

Cyrus laughs. “We ain’t goin’ for a while yet. Not until we get this place up and running. Not until we consolidate. We have people, sure, and they’re good in a fight, but we want to take down Hollywood, we’re gonna need a real army. And we don’t have one yet.”

Samson scratches his chin. “Okay. What’s it gonna take to get it?”

“You let me worry about that,” Cyrus says. “You just keep preachin’ and swingin’ that hammer.”

Samson frowns. “I ain’t a kid, Cyrus. I’m not stupid. I can help with the plans.”

“Of course you can,” says Cyrus. “I just don’t want to distract you with the boring stuff. I know you’re not stupid.”

But Samson knows it’s a lie.

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Samson is a lot of things, Cyrus thinks. Insane, idealistic, gullible. But goddamn can he hold a crowd.

“You might think you’ve come to us for different reasons,” Samson says, looking out at the assembled flock lined up in rows in front of him outside the Angelus Temple, his voice bellowing through the loudspeakers.

“But it’s all the same reason. You’re lookin’ for answers. Lookin’ for hope. You came because you saw the Truth and the Light. You came because you know that the way of God through his Prophet James King is the one true way.”

Cries of “Amen!” and “Hallelujah!” erupt from the crowd. Cyrus stands to one side, scans the crowd, sees rapt attention on everyone’s faces. They’re in the presence of greatness, and they know it. Stupid greatness, sure, but most of these rubes can’t find their asses with both hands. Samson goes with his gut, goes with what feels right to him. Leads with his heart. And that’s just what these people want. Samson throws enough passionate bullshit at them, they’ll follow him anywhere.

And that scares the shit out of Cyrus.

Because he knows, knows as surely as he knows that these people will lay down their lives for Samson, for the gospels of James King, for God and Truth and Light and all that other horseshit, that they will never do the same for Cyrus.

Samson’s always had that certain something, though the man can’t see it himself, that makes women fall for him, makes men want to be his friend or stay well the fuck away from him. Always has. That’s why Cyrus stuck with him, because if you can’t be great then you damn well better stick to greatness like flies on shit.

“Some folks are gonna listen,” Samson says. “They’re gonna let you in with open arms. They’ll come to us easily, willingly. And there are those who won’t. And do you know what you have to do when that happens?”

“Amen” and “Hallelujah” are replaced with “Kill ‘em,” “Burn ‘em,” and “Eat their fuckin’ babies!” Samson nods to all of these, though there’s a sadness in his eyes when he hears each one.

“They will be cleansed in the fires of God’s love, their souls sent to Heaven with machete and hammer and gun. You will be the instrument of their salvation.”

The crowd roars. They reach their hands out to Samson. Some of them have tears in their eyes. Cyrus cringes. There it is. Love. And not for the church. Not for the message.

For Samson.

Cyrus looks behind him at the Angelus Temple, then back to Samson. He’s more the Church than the Church is him, and that means that if Samson dies, the church dies. And if the church dies, what the hell happens to poor old Cyrus?

Fortunately, Cyrus has some ideas about how to refocus that love, how to make the Church more than Samson, and the best part is, Samson’s gonna be the one saying the words that’ll make it happen.

“So we get our shit together,” Samson says, just like Cyrus told him. “You’re all gonna learn the gospels so you can welcome your brethren with open arms, and you’ll train, all fierce and shit, so that you may meet the Unbelievers with furious vengeance. And so starting tomorrow you’ll all be assigned into ranks, placed into squads and battalions. Some of you will be captains, knights, administrators. We’ll match our faith with discipline. We’ll become the army that God needs. We will be his red right hand.” Samson hammers the podium with his fist, makes the whole stage shake.

The crowd screams amens and hallelujahs. Demands the blood of the Unbelievers. Cyrus smiles. Samson just pounded the first nail into his own coffin. It’s still way too early to move Samson aside. He’s larger than life, more real than reality itself. Right now, the whole thing will fall apart without him.

But soon, Cyrus thinks, once all those captains, knights, and administrators get comfortable in their jobs, once they start realizing their future's secure as long as the church remains strong, *then* Cyrus can start thinking about doing something about Samson.

*“The Lord will set you on the path of adversity. Your failures will be many. But they are a test of your resolve and your commitment to His truth.”*  
—James King, *Hour of the Church Triumphant*, Season 4, Episode 19

To train his troops, Samson finds inspiration in movies with ridiculous titles from almost a hundred years ago found in the King’s studio. *Commando*, three different *Rocky* movies, something about a kid who learns karate, and a dozen others. They’re so badly degraded that Samson can’t begin to follow the plots, but they all show men and women fighting against evil and corruption with quick-cut training scenes, the end result of which is always the same—they have become unstoppable killing machines.

And so the Church’s training is fierce and rapid. Every soldier in God’s Militia drills, practices, marches, spars. They are schooled in flashy hand-to-hand, acrobatic sword work, double-fisted gun combat, and a form of battle meditation that focuses on ramming magazines into guns, slamming knives into sheathes.

It is a brutal training regimen, and those who survive know that they are the best of the best, God’s appointed soldiers. Those who can make the cut survive. Those who can’t, don’t. There is no room for the weak. For weakness, as Cyrus’s ever-expanding good book says, is a lack of faith.

With that, the Church’s soldiers go forth to grow their ranks and salt the Earth, certain that they can do no wrong because God, James King, and Luke Samson guide their hands.

They convert scores. They kill hundreds.

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They catch the spy in one of the buildings half buried in mud and swamp—grass along Franklin.

Samson looks down at the man on the floor in front of him, torchlight throwing flickering shadows across his face, hands tied behind him. He says he’s just a squatter, one more scavenger in a world filled with them. But he’s too well fed, too clean. Doesn’t have the haunted look of a man who lives by the hour.

Samson’s army has set up camp at the corner of Western and Los Feliz in preparation for their final push into that den of sin, Hollywood. It’s been a long year of fighting and training since they took the Angelus Temple, and Samson feels every day of that year in his bones. The Church slowly expanded its territory north into Los Feliz and Glendale, building and strengthening. Cyrus hasn’t seemed to be in any hurry to make a move on what he had said was their “next” target all those months ago, but all that time James King has been screaming in Samson’s ear about putting the whoremongers and homosexuals in Hollywood to the sword, making his blood boil and his head throb. It was tearing Samson apart, but thankfully Cyrus finally—finally—gave him the go-ahead, and now he’s on the march.

There has been surprisingly little fighting as they’ve moved down from Los Feliz. Guerilla tactics, mostly. Overgrowth of mutant oak, sage, and manzanita has crept down to Los Feliz from Griffith Park, making the whole area perfect for ambushes, but the fact that there have been so few tells Samson that Hollywood is waiting for something. He’s just not sure what.

“What’s your name?” Samson asks the spy, crouching down to eye level. The man’s been beaten, one eye swollen shut, enormous bruise on one cheek, blood matted in his hair. Samson looks up at the squad who brought him in, at their leader, Lieutenant Volkov, standing at attention.

“Jensen,” the man says, voice thick and slurred.

“That a first or a last name?”

“Dunno. Just Jensen.” His eyes aren’t tracking very well and go in and out of focus. Probably has a concussion.

“We been clearing the streets since Vermont. You’re the first person we’ve seen hasn’t taken a shot at us. Everybody else has cleared out. How come you haven’t?”

“Live here. Not gonna run just ‘cause somebody’s shootin’ the place up,” Jensen says.

“A man of principle,” Samson says, remembering how King used that word in many of his sermons, though he’s never really understood what it means. “Okay. But I don’t believe you.”

The man’s eyes snap into focus on Samson’s face, then drift back into their lazy orbit. “It’s the truth.”

“I think you’re a spy. From Hollywood. Here to check on us, see how strong we are, what we’re doing. That right, Jensen? You a spy?”

“Just live here.”

Samson backhands him with a fist wrapped in a leather sapglove, the lead weights in the knuckles cracking the man’s cheekbone and sending him to the floor. To his credit he doesn’t cry out, just hisses in pain.

“Don’t lie to me. I’ll just make it hurt more,” Samson says. The man lets out a croaking whisper, words too quiet for Samson to understand. He



leans down close, grabs the man's face in a crushing grip. "What was that?"

"I said you can burn in Hell."

That's when Samson sees that Jensen's hand isn't empty, sees the wires from the device in his fist disappearing into his sleeve. Samson tears the man's shirt open, revealing the bricks of plastic explosives strapped to his chest.

There's a click as Jensen thumbs the detonator, and Samson doesn't remember anything after that.

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Samson wakes to the sounds of gunfire in the distance. He coughs up plaster dust, pushes aside bricks and debris. The building is a ruin, but he, miraculously, is not.

"God provides," King says, reaching down to help him up. Samson waves away the assistance. If he can't get up on his own, he doesn't deserve to get up. He can't see out of his left eye, his left forearm is broken, and he's covered in cuts, many of which are going to need stitches, but he's in better condition than he has any right to be.

"I shouldn't have survived that," he says.

"Like I said, God provides."

Samson stands and looks out at the ruin around him through his one good eye. There's a charred lump of exploded meat where Jensen was, bits of him still burning. He's not sure, but he thinks most of the explosives didn't go off, just burned. But then how did the building come down around him?

He gets his answer a second later when a high-pitched whistle pierces the air. The ground quakes with the explosion of another building. Of all the weapons God's Militia has collected, they've never been able to lay their hands on artillery. Seems Hollywood hasn't had the same problem.

There's a groan from the corner. Volkov slowly drags herself from the wreckage. Samson hobbles over to help her out.

"You all right?" he says, once he's gotten her standing. She nods, her eyes clearing. She's cut up just as bad as Samson, a wide lump on her forehead with a bruise that spreads down the side of her face.

"What happened? How did he have a bomb? Who checked him?" Samson realizes he's shaking her and then stops, takes a deep breath, waits for her answer.

"Warner did, sir. He—" She stops as she sees the other members of her squad, broken limbs and blasted bodies scattered through the rubble. "He checked the prisoner. None of us thought to check him a second time."

A traitor. Samson had already guessed that much. He couldn't remember which one Warner was, though. The army had gotten so big so fast that he couldn't keep track of everyone anymore.

Another whistle of mortar fire, another explosion. They're coming closer together now, louder. They're walking the block, back and forth, laying waste to the entire area. It's a good plan. Samson wishes he could have done it to them instead.

"Come on. Back up the hill." Samson guides Volkov out to the heavily cratered street, dodging falling brick, flaming chunks of wood. There are bodies everywhere. The few of his people still standing are taking cover, trying to regroup, but with no officers to take charge, they're just an unruly mob dying by the score.

Communication is a shambles. Most of the radios were held by officers, and many of them are dead or dying. By the time Samson finds everyone and leads them back up Western to Los Feliz and out of the way of the mortar fire, they've lost dozens more. A quick triage to see how badly beaten they are—*very*, as it turns out, down by at least two-thirds of their original strength—and Samson has them back on the move.

Samson knows if the roles were reversed, he wouldn't wait long before he sent troops in to mop up, and with his army in such disarray, it won't take much to finish them off.

Retreat is just a nicer way of saying "run away," and it goes against everything in Samson's being, everything he's ever preached about, but as he looks around at the dead and wounded, he knows there's no way they'll survive a fight. There just aren't enough of them left. So he has the strongest take up the rear to watch their flank and gets as many of his people out as he can.

He looks behind him as they head toward Vermont and he swears he sees James King hanging his head in shame.

*“Do not mistake God’s message for God himself.” —James King, Hour of the Church Triumphant, Season 5, Episode 9*

“The tough part was the mutant elephants,” Cyrus says, walking through the open doorway, the doors long since torn from their hinges.

“Elephants?” Samson follows him in and stands at the edge of the pit just inside the entrance and looks at it through his one good eye. The patch over the socket where the other one used to be itches, and if he focuses too hard on anything, he gets a headache. He hefts his sledgehammer over his other shoulder.

Was the pit a well? A fireplace? It’s wide and not very deep. If it was for fires, it’s a pretty piss-poor design. There’s no chimney. The whole building would fill with smoke. Maybe it was for gladiators like they had at the Arena. There’s enough room for a couple of fighters at the bottom if you didn’t want them to maneuver very much.

“Yeah. Fuckin’ things were in the zoo when the end times happened. Now they’ve got tusks the size of a fuckin’ Buick and they eat meat. Who knows where things went wrong for ‘em? Radiation? Chemicals? But man, were these things big. And the fucking giant, acid-pissing meerkats.”

Samson doesn’t know what a meerkat is, and he doesn’t much care. His mind is on other things. “But you cleared them out?”

“We wouldn’t be having this conversation otherwise,” Cyrus says. “They’re still out there, though. You can hear ‘em at night. We’ll want to set up some guns on the perimeter before we can really get things set up here.”

Samson looks up at the cracked mural on the ceiling. Water has seeped in over the years, and black mold has spread through it like a rotten tooth. Was it supposed to be the sky? Stars? He can’t tell. There are other murals at the tops of the twelve walls of the room. They haven’t fared much better. They’re scenes of people, but doing what he has no idea.

“What was this place?”

“They call it the Observatory. Lookout post, I guess,” Cyrus says. “You saw those big domes on the roof? They had spotters there, or something. I’m not sure. Saw some signs for telescopes. Not much left in the domes, of course. Some scaffolding, something that looks like it might’ve been a cannon mount. I figure it was used to watch over the city before everything fell to shit.”

“It’s a good position,” Samson says. “Easy to defend. Good sight lines.” The building, an immense structure on the edge of Griffith Park, looks down at Los Feliz from a hilltop. Odd that he’d never known it was here, but from the street it’s hidden behind the layers of overgrowth, mutated trees and shrubs making it almost invisible. And nobody in their right mind goes into Griffith Park. The things Cyrus encountered were only one reason. There are rumors of other things in the woods—cannibals, monster bears, worse. He’s heard that some of the Leather Jerks moved up into the higher hills a while ago, and that there’s some group calls themselves the Mannerites wandering around the Glendale edge of the park, but no one from the Church has ever seen them.

He wonders if this area had been like that before the bombs dropped. If it was a no-man’s land like it is today. Probably not. They would have wanted to keep the sight lines clear so they could see the city below, and whoever built a place this impressive would want others to see it.

“How big did you say it was?” Samson asks.

“Not as big as the Temple, but it’ll hold the army well enough and then some. I was thinking we could call the building ‘The Bastion of Faith.’ How does that grab ya?”

Samson nods approval. In the last two years since their rout on Western, they’ve been slowly rebuilding the army, but it’s still nothing like it was. And Hollywood hasn’t given them a moment’s peace—not that Samson’s giving them any, either.

He follows Cyrus down a short hallway and past a pyramid-shaped device wrapped in metal coils with a ball at the top shoved into an alcove.

“What’s this?”

“No idea. Electric, I think. We’ll know once we get some power up in here.”

“I don’t think we have enough people to clean this place up,” Samson says. “But I can ask some of the militia to help defend.”

Cyrus grits his teeth, but a blink of the eye later and he’s all smiles. “Thanks,” he says. “We’re gonna need ‘em. Besides the monsters from the zoo, there are mutants out there, maybe some of those Hollywood fucks, too. Wouldn’t put it past them to try to set something up in the park. Not to mention the fuckin’ mutants trying to run us out.”

“How many people have you lost?” Samson says.

“No idea. Too many, I suppose.”

Samson snorts. Even now, when every person is vital to keeping him alive, Cyrus can’t be bothered to pay attention to the dead. He wonders if he even knows any of their names.

“I was thinking we could move most of our operations up here and keep the Temple for services.”

“Closer to Hollywood?” Samson asks. “Is that a good thing?”

“There are only so many ways up into the park. And to get all the way up here, it’s the tunnel or nothin’.”

From what Samson could see coming up here, the only route clear of debris is through a dubious-looking tunnel that they'll need to reinforce. The other roads heading toward the building are bombed-out craters so choked with fallen trees and overgrowth it would take a team with explosives at least a day to cut through.

"And it's a good staging ground for when we hit those bastards again," Cyrus says. Not if, Samson notes, but when. He wants to see Hollywood fall as much as Cyrus does, maybe more. Those fucks took his eye, after all, but as time goes on, he's less convinced that it's ever going to happen.

"Won't we have to clear the plants? Won't that make it easier for them to hit us?" Samson is thinking of the mortars that made his life a hell on Western.

"We got our own artillery now," Cyrus says.

That was one thing that had gone well in the last two years. On a raid, Samson had gotten hold of some of Hollywood's mortars. Maybe not enough to turn the tide, but enough to make Samson feel a lot more secure. And even better, they got hold of some of their engineers. Once they were given a choice to make mortars for the Church or die, they converted quickly enough. Most of them, at least.

"How's the game up here?"

"If you like mutant elephant, you can eat like a king."

"All right, then. Let's do it, I guess."

"Samson, I'm getting the feeling you don't trust me," Cyrus says.

"It's not that, Cyrus," Samson says. "It's—"

"No, it is that. I can tell. You don't have much of a poker face, Samson. What is it? What's eatin' you? Is it the sermons? It is, isn't it?"

Samson stammers, not sure what to say. It is the sermons, actually. Part of the reason he wanted to come up here himself. He was angry when he heard them on the radio, but he didn't know what to do about them.

"They're... not right," he says, though he isn't really sure how they're not right. They say all the right words, but there's something about them, something missing. No—something extra. Cyrus's sermons have all been about how people need to follow God's Militia, that the Church was the path to righteousness, not the Word of God, not the teachings of King.

Cyrus nods. "I hear ya," he says. "You're worried that we're losing the message. That the Church is getting bigger than the Word."

Was that what was bothering Samson? He wasn't sure. It felt right, but he didn't know for sure. He nods because he can't think of what else to do.

"Samson, God's Militia is the voice of God." He pokes Samson in his chest. "*You* are the voice of God. You're the one who talks to James King, not me. I just put his words out onto the airwaves. And yes, sometimes I make a change, but it's necessary. If people are going to come to us, they need to know who to come to, right?"

"I... guess so?"

"So if I change some of his words to point people toward the Church, to bring people to us, it's not only a good thing, but a *necessary* one."

Samson is having a hard time with this, but he tries to give voice to what he thinks Cyrus is saying. "To teach the teachings, you have to change the teachings?"

"Exactly," Cyrus says. "You totally get it."

Except that he doesn't. It doesn't make any sense to him at all. But then so little has, lately. Ever since the battle at Western, he hasn't seen or heard from James King, and he's felt lost, untethered. All he has left are the teachings, and if even those aren't sacred anymore, then where is he? What is he?

"So will I have those guys up here next week?"

"Uh, yeah, I'll have a squad sent up as soon as I get back to the Temple." Samson walks out of the Observatory and starts back down the hill, confused and lost.

*“The time will come for you to strike at the Unbelievers, the sinners and demons who plague God’s Chosen. And when that time comes, you must attack with all your might.” —James King, Hour of the Church Triumphant, Season 13, Episode 3*

Samson pulls his sledgehammer from the pulped remains of an Unbeliever’s head and slings it over his shoulder, bits of bloody brain and skull still clinging to it. The rest of them, six men and women spreading printed tracts about the dangers of the Church, lie dead in the street. Each one of them carried a backpack filled with almost a hundred of the little books.

Samson wipes blood from his hand onto his pants, picks one of the small picture books out of a pile on the ground. They’re about the size of a playing card and only a few pages long, but their pictures are telling, even if Samson can’t read the words.

“Is this supposed to be me?” he says, showing the tract to Knight Captain Volkov. She takes it from him, leafs through it.

“Yes, sir.”

“Is my nose really that fat?”

“No, sir.” She hands the book back to him. “Do you think they’re from Hollywood?”

“Where else would they be from? These things take paper, ink, a press. Who else could it be?”

It’s been three years since the Church’s defeat on Western. Hollywood stays in Hollywood, the Church stays in Echo Park. Silver Lake sits as a no man’s land where neither side holds sway.

Not that the Church hasn’t tried moving in, of course. But every time they do, those Hollywood bastards beat them back. They hit them at night with small strikes that whittle them down until there’s either no one left or not enough to hold the ground. Sneaky fucks, every last one of them. Though they don’t seem to want to expand their borders, they refuse to let the Church expand. And so an uneasy détente has settled over the area. Instead of all-out war, both sides have been fighting with radio signals. The Church transmits its sermons over the airwaves, Hollywood jams them on the same frequency, turns around and transmits their lurid commercials for whorehouses and drug parlors, and then the Church jams those, changes frequencies to transmit and then Hollywood jams... Just like on the ground, neither group totally controls the airwaves.

The tracts are just their latest strategy. Hollywood doesn’t fight fair. They can’t. The Church has numbers on its side. So Hollywood uses subterfuge, lies. Spreading their vile rumors about Samson and his followers, trying to undermine their influence. Trying to push everyone away from God’s grace.

“I want all of these disgusting books gathered and burned.” Samson says. “And kill anyone who has a copy.”

“Yes, sir.”

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“This one has you fuckin’ a dog,” Cyrus says, flipping through the pages of one of the tracts and laughing. He sits in his office in the Angelus Temple, his feet up on a heavy oak desk left over from when the Locos ran the place.

Samson shifts uncomfortably in his seat. He’s never liked being in Cyrus’s office. Makes him feel small, like he’s done something wrong. He knows it’s a trick. Cyrus has the desk on top of a raised platform so no matter what it gives the impression that he’s looking down on people, but it bothers Samson, anyway.

“It’s disgusting.”

“Sure, sure. But it’s still pretty funny. Got you a tiny little pecker here, too. Wish you hadn’t burned ‘em all.”

“I don’t like them. And I don’t know why you’d want to keep them around.”

“Oh, quit being such a hardass. This is me, Samson. And these? These are nothin’. Hell, this, the little raids into our territory, all their radio jamming bullshit, it all just means we got ‘em on the run.”

“What do you mean?”

“Besides this crap, Hollywood’s been pretty quiet. We got converts coming in from all over. Things are going pretty good, right?”

“Well, yeah, but—”

“And that’s the problem.”

Samson frowns, remembers that his frowns make people uncomfortable. His murder face, Cyrus calls it. He pushes his expression back to neutral. Ever since he stopped seeing King, he’s been trying more and more to live the way he thinks the man would want him to live. So he’s been studying the tapes more and more. And not just the ones that made it onto the air. The raw footage, too. And something he’s noticed is that King didn’t do or say anything until he was damn good and ready to do it. And that extended to his face. When he was angry he *used* the anger. He didn’t just let it

wash over him. He was always in control. And that's one thing that Samson has always had a problem with.

"Go on," he says.

"Enemies are more than just people tryin' to kill you, Samson. They're also there to be used. Why would someone want to eradicate the Church—sorry, the teachings of James King, the path of true righteousness—if it didn't threaten their heathen ways? The fact that they're trying to stop us only proves that we're doing the right thing."

"Having enemies who tell us we're wrong only proves that we're right?"

"Exactly."

Samson tries to twist his brain to follow what Cyrus has just laid out, and he can't do it. Much as he's had disagreements with Cyrus, much as he doesn't always trust the man's commitment to the cause, Cyrus is still the smartest man Samson knows. Certainly smarter than Samson is. Always has been.

"I prefer faith that we're right because our cause is just," Samson says, remembering something he's heard King say in his shows.

"Yeah, I know. Logic ain't your thing. Doesn't make me any less right. Point is that this gives us something to get the people riled up about. Folks have been getting complacent. They need to be reminded that there's a den of perverted heathens just down the street."

Now that's something Samson can agree with. The Church's little potshots at Hollywood, their patrols destroying contraband, none of this is furthering God's plan. He may not be talking to James King anymore, but he knows the sermons. He knows King's teachings. He knows what God wants.

God wants the heathens to burn.

"You have an idea?"

"Yep. You may run the militia, Samson, but I got spies. And stop lookin' so shocked. We need intel and this is how we get it. They tell me there's another group of these cocksuckers coming in, only this time they're not ringing the doorbell and dropping off literature."

"An attack? They don't have the numbers."

"They don't need numbers. They've got a bomb. A big one. Military ordnance they got from who the hell knows where. They're planning on carting it into our territory on a truck and setting it off."

"A truck? Where did they even get the fuel?"

"Who cares? Point is they've got it and they're coming to us with it."

"That's stupid. We'll kill them before they get close enough to hit the Temple."

"They don't need to hit the Temple. They just need to set it off in our territory. They're not trying to kill us with the bomb, they're trying to prove that we can't protect our territory. They're sending a message to everyone that we're under siege. It gives them the upper hand, and it makes this shit"—he tosses the dog-eared tract into Samson's lap—"look like the pointless crap that it is. They set that bomb off and they've won the propaganda war."

Samson doesn't know what propaganda is and he doesn't see how blowing up a bomb that doesn't kill anybody important matters, but he gets that it's a threat and it has to be stopped.

"What road are they taking? Not many between us are clear enough to drive a truck through."

"Wilshire."

"Okay. We'll send the army and crush them," Samson says. "We turn that thing around, drive it to the center of Hollywood and set it off there. Then I bring the army in while everything's still burning, and I finish it."

Samson is getting excited. This is perfect. He can crush Hollywood once and for all, take back the dignity they stole from him at the battle at Western. He can get James King back.

"No." Cyrus says it with such force that it stops Samson cold. "We are not blowing it up, and we're not bringing the army in. We are going to capture it. Once we have it, we'll figure out how best to use it."

"More waiting? They humiliated us!" Samson gets out of his chair and looms over Cyrus, slamming his meaty hands on the desk. "We've sat around too long as it is. We need to make them pay."

"And we will," Cyrus says, waving Samson down. "We will. But we do it smart. We get that bomb and not only do we have a weapon that we can use against them, but more important, they lose it, and everybody knows it."

"Is this a propaganda thing?"

"Exactly. Now you get it."

"No," Samson says. "I don't."

"Do you trust me?" Cyrus says.

"Of course," Samson says, though he knows he paused a little too long before he answered.

"Good. So we're agreed. Send a small force out there, grab that bomb, and bring it back here. We'll figure out what to do with it later."

"I—" Samson stammers, not sure how he lost the argument. "Sure," he says, but his heart's not in it. "When's this happening?"

"Sometime in the next week. My sources are getting me more information tonight, but it's definitely going down soon."

“I’ll pull a team together.”

“A small team.”

“Right,” Samson says. “A small team.”

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“Sir, you wanted to see me?” Knight Captain Volkov stands at the doorway to Samson’s office in the Temple. Unlike Cyrus’s, his is simple, sparse. He has a single table, two chairs, and maps of Los Angeles pinned to the walls. In one corner he has a TV and VCR playing on a continuous loop of James King giving a sermon, the volume turned off. Samson has seen these so many times that he doesn’t need to hear it to know what’s being said.

“Come in, Knight Captain. I wanted your opinion on something.”

“The bomb?”

“Cyrus told you?”

“He did. He wants to capture it. Send a small team to bring it back here and send a message to Hollywood.”

The moment Samson stepped out of Cyrus’s office, he began to have doubts. The rout at Western came flooding back to him, filled him with uncertainty. He prayed for guidance, prayed for James King to come tell him what to do, but no one appeared. He needed someone else to talk to. Someone besides Cyrus.

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea,” Samson says.

“It’s not,” Volkov says.

Samson is surprised. “You don’t agree with him?”

“Sir, Hollywood humiliated us. They—” She stops, looks at her feet.

“What?” Samson says.

“They humiliated you.”

“They did,” he admits.

“There’s one way to fix this,” Volkov says. “One way to fix you. We go get that bomb, we drive it right into the middle of Hollywood and we set that fucker off. Then we go in hard and fast and we fight and we don’t stop until there’s nothing left but ashes.”

In his heart he knows she’s right. Knows that this is what James King would have wanted. “We’ll need the whole army,” he says.

“Just give the word, sir,” Volkov says.

“Get everyone together. Quietly. If Cyrus finds out he’s gonna shit a brick. Take a couple of days. Leave the people at the Bastion of Faith.”

“Are you sure? If we do this, we’re going to want everyone,” Volkov says.

“No. It’ll take too long to get all of them here without Cyrus noticing. We don’t know how quickly Hollywood will start moving this bomb of theirs, and I want to move as quickly as we can.”

“All right,” Volkov says. “You won’t regret this, sir.”

He knows he won’t. Not if it brings James King back to him.

*“God does not teach caution. Caution is for the weak, for the fools. Caution will be your undoing.” —James King, Hour of the Church Triumphant, Season 8, Episode 9*

It takes two days to get the army assembled without Cyrus knowing. Five hundred men and women armed with guns, clubs, hammers, machetes. They march down Alvarado, then turn west down Wilshire through the overgrown jungle of MacArthur Park.

The plan is to intercept the truck before it reaches Vermont, kill its crew with snipers, and take the truck and the bomb. Cyrus thinks they’re bringing it back with them. But Samson is going to turn it around and drive it up into the heart of Hollywood.

“Check those buildings,” Samson tells Volkov as they stop at the edge of the park. “Kill anyone you find. I’m not walking into another trap. And I want one squad sent up ahead to see if they can spot the truck.”

“Do you want them to engage, sir?”

Samson doesn’t answer her for a long moment. There’s something he’s missing.

“Sir?”

“No,” he says, finally, unable to shake the sense that there’s something important that he’s not quite getting. “If they see it, I want them back here on the double. Give them a radio so they can let us know.”

“Yes, sir.” She barks orders to her men, and multiple squads fan out to check the burnt-out husks along Wilshire Boulevard as another group heads down the street as quickly and quietly as they can.

Samson shakes his head. The road in front of him is a cratered mess littered with rusting sedans, mud-drowned rubbish, and downed wires that haven’t seen power in fifty years—the detritus of a civilization long dead. How these people expect to get a truck full of explosives through it all, he has no idea. If this is what Hollywood sees as a good plan, they should thank him for working to wipe them out. They’re too stupid to live.

“You think they’ll actually find anything?” Samson says after the buildings have been cleared out and the army is back on the move.

Volkov scans the road ahead with her binoculars. “I’m sure there will be some—” A burst of static from the radio at her hip cuts her off.

“We’ve found it,” a staticky voice says over the radio. “Wilshire and, uh, Normandy. About four blocks ahead of us. Orders?”

Samson takes the radio from Volkov. “Stay there, stay in cover. We’re on our way.” He raises his voice. “Move out!”

The army wends its way up the street slowly, Samson insisting on caution, on making damn sure that every single door, window, or overturned car that might be a trap isn’t.

Two hours later, he sees what they came for. An old Peterbilt, a dingy tarp covering something big and bulky on its flatbed trailer, sits parked in the middle of Wilshire. Must have taken them hours to clear the road enough to get it this far. Samson scans the rooftops, looks over the truck through his binoculars.

“There’s no one there.”

“Maybe they abandoned it?” Volkov says. “We should get closer.”

Samson says nothing. Stares hard at the truck, weighing his options. Possibilities bounce around in his brain until his head starts to ache.

“Am I being too cautious, Volkov?” Maybe that’s why King hasn’t spoken with him in so long. Maybe it’s not that Samson lacks faith, but that he’s simply lost his edge. Before Western, he would have run right into this situation, trap or not. He was untouchable then. But now...

“Perhaps a little, sir.”

“All right. Send a squad to check it out. I don’t want to move any closer until we know what we’re dealing with.” The army is spread out behind him, snaking along Wilshire halfway back to Vermont. He doesn’t want them bunched up, doesn’t want a few stray mortar rounds to devastate them all over again.

He watches as the squad runs up, gets to the truck, pulls the tarp off. His view is obstructed, but he doesn’t hear gunfire. A few minutes later the radio crackles to life.

“There’s nothing here.”

“What are you talking about?”

“It’s a bunch of junk on the trailer. There’s no bomb, and there’s nobody around at all.”

A yawning pit opens in Samson’s stomach. It’s a trap. He knows it. But from where?

And then it hits him. There’s nothing in the buildings, there’s no one in the area. But there is one place it never occurred to him to look.

“Fall back. Get everyone out of here. There’s—” Samson stops as he feels a rumble deep under the street, a series of small pops like ammunition cooking off. The shaking travels up his legs. An earthquake? No. Something else.

And then the street explodes beneath his feet.



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Discarded napkins, torn notepads, sun-bleached posters, chunks of dry wall. They pile up along the walls of Cyrus's office, stacks upon stacks of landfill with nothing in common except that they'll take a mark.

In the early days, paper was hard to come by. So Cyrus wrote the sermons on whatever he could get his hands on. He wrote with discarded pencils, scratched marks into soft clay with sticks, scrawled the passages of God with his own blood and feces. He took down every word, every verse, every hem and haw from King's recordings, memorized them, showed them to the believers.

Now with the radio, the Word spreads across the airwaves, but he keeps these records with him anyway. The physical is important. It acts as a reminder of what it was like in those early days. And what needs to be done to never go back.

James King's words might have been fine for a doomsayer from the 1990s, but he was dead, and in a world gone to shit they needed upkeep. So what if Cyrus changed "God" to "the Church" in the scriptures? What was the Church if not God's will made real? What was it if not God's blessed voice, His fiery retribution? His guarantee that His plan for the world would live on, even if His greatest preacher happened to die an untimely death?

Cyrus knew Samson would have a problem with the changes—knew he'd want him to change them back. But Samson had always been so easy to manipulate. A few big words, a little twisted logic, and Cyrus had him wrapped around his finger. It was always so easy.

Just like convincing him to take a small team to get the bomb.

When Cyrus had heard about Hollywood's plan to set off a bomb in Church territory, he knew it was the perfect opportunity. He hadn't thought Samson would go for it so easily. Figured he'd put up more of a fight.

The whole thing was tailor made and fit into Cyrus's plans perfectly. Get Samson out there with a few of his most trusted lieutenants for witnesses—and then have Volkov kill him.

Oh, she'd make it look like a Hollywood sniper, of course. That was the whole point. Kill Samson in front of the troops and then have her and the others come back with the tragic tale of his death to light a blazing fire in the hearts of the Faithful. Make them pledge their lives to the church forever. Nothing like a martyr to bring the people together.

When Volkov had first come into his bed six months ago, he hadn't trusted her. He thought she was just another whore trying to fuck her way through the ranks. But she was smart. Told him how she thought Samson was destroying the Church, how he'd gotten soft ever since the disaster on Western.

It helped that she was really good in the sack.

And once they had each other's trust, he asked her to kill Samson. At first she was hesitant, but then he promised to put her in charge of the Church's armies, take the place of the martyred Samson and lead them in victory against the forces of Hollywood.

He'd never seen anyone jump at an opportunity so fast.

Running footsteps in the hall pull him out of his thoughts. This is it, he thinks. He hopes he can look sufficiently aggrieved, appropriately stricken at his friend's death. He practiced all night in the mirror, rehearsed what he would say. He goes over it one more time, mouthing the words silently to make sure he remembers them right. He tried crying on cue, but it just made him look congested.

"This tragedy will not stand before God. Our leader will be avenged, his death a symbol that we cannot be broken."

Yes, that will do it. He stands as the footsteps get closer, straightens his robes and picks at a loose thread. This is an important moment. He wants it to be perfect.

A crying acolyte bursts into his room, tears streaming down his cheeks. "They're all dead," he says.

"This tragedy will not—" Cyrus says and stops as he registers what he's just been told. "What?" All dead? That wasn't right. Samson should be the only one dead. Dumb bastard must have put up a fight.

"The army. The earth exploded beneath them and swallowed them whole. And then there was shelling and then troops came running down the street and shot into the pits and—"

"Hang on. What do you mean, 'the army'?" Cyrus says. That sonofabitch. Cyrus offers up a quick prayer, hoping against hope that Samson hasn't done what he thinks he's done.

"All but a few soldiers went down to Wilshire, sir. But it was a trap."

Cyrus grabs the acolyte by the collar, shakes him like a dog with a rat. "Don't tell me that, boy," he says. "That's not true. It was a small team. Ten people tops."

"No, sir. They're saying five hundred easy."

"This is a prank. Ha—fucking—ha. Big laughs all around. Now you fucking tell me the truth, you little shit, or so help me I will gut you right here and now."

"Sir, if you don't believe me, there are some survivors coming in from the fighting now. They're hurt bad. Real bad."

Cyrus lets the boy go. "Show me," he says. There is no way that it can be that bad.

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After three hours of interrogating the handful of survivors straggling in, Cyrus comes to one inescapable conclusion.

It is that bad.

They all tell him the same thing. Lots of explosions, street caved in, everyone swallowed up. Then the shelling started and soldiers came down the street to shoot into the pit. It doesn't take long for Cyrus to realize what happened.

The subway.

The subway tunnels under Los Angeles got the worst of the flooding when the tsunami hit. Whole stretches of them were obliterated. Over the years they'd drain and fill up again and sometimes people would go down there, scavengers and people trying to find a place to live, but few ever came back up. He'd still hear rumors every once in a while about them, but for the most part nobody thought about them. What was the point? There wasn't anything in them besides mutant rats and rancid swamp water.

Until now.

The bomb story had been a ruse, that was obvious now. Whatever bombs Hollywood had, they must have used them to seed the tunnels. Waited until the whole army was on top of them, then set off the explosives.

But how had they known the army would be there?

The answer comes to him in a flash and though he denies it, it won't go away. It sits there and gnaws at him like a starving rat, sends him into a rage. He stalks the office screaming, beating the walls. He rails against the betrayal, his own hubris that led him to this point. It's his fault there's no army left and—

There's no army left.

Fuck.

Cyrus runs into the halls, panic jumping through him like lightning. He grabs an Initiate, shakes him, yelling, "We're leaving. We're leaving right the fuck now."

*“They say that the truth will set you free. But those truths are not God’s truth. Those are the lies of vile men. And they will lead you to Hell.” — James King, Hour of the Church Triumphant, Season 18, Episode 1*

Samson smells burning and stale water. A thick, cloying mélange of gasoline, hair, flesh, and mildew. He dimly remembers screaming and gunfire, but that’s all faded to an occasional pop, a low whimper as someone else is put down like a feral dog. He opens his good eye, but night has fallen across the city and the only thing he can see are the dim flickers of fires reflecting off scummy water.

“You can’t die yet, Samson,” King says close to his ear. “God isn’t done with you.” Samson jerks at the voice. Of all the time for King to come back for him he had to pick now.

“Was a trap,” he says. His tongue feels like shredded hamburger, his voice slurry thick.

“It was. You got your ass handed to you.”

“I deserve to die.”

“You do,” King says. “You failed. But God has bigger plans for you.”

“I’m not worthy of God’s grace.” He should have seen this as a trap, should have gone with his gut. Now his people are dead, the army shattered. Without them, the Church will be overrun by the Unbelievers in Hollywood. Everything they’ve done will be destroyed. God’s plan will be left unfulfilled.

“What, are you stupid? You presume to know God’s mind? Samson, if God wanted you dead, you’d be dead. Now get up.”

Samson gets his hands under him, sinks them into a foot of stinking tunnel mud, pushes hard. The rubble on top of him shifts, bricks falling to the side, dust and dirt pouring off of him in great clods that plop in the mud. He gasps as hot, stinging air hits his lungs, crawls out of the swampy, burning pit to the sidewalk high above him. It takes an hour.

Wilshire is a ten-block-long burning crater belching thick, oily smoke into the night sky. Troops from Hollywood patrol the sides, shooting down into it whenever they see movement. Samson’s salvation, it seems, is one of timing. He watches as a soldier tosses a grenade down into the pit where he had been only minutes before. Had he moved a little sooner or waited a little longer, he would have been caught.

“You need to go back,” King says. “Rebuild, grow stronger.”

“From this?” Samson says. “How? It’s gone. We have *nothing*. There is no army, there are no defenses. They’ll run us down like dogs. How do we rebuild from this?” Samson reaches out to grab King by his throat, the red haze descending on him, but his hands clutch at empty air as King fades away into the smoke.

Rebuild? Madness. There is no way they’re recovering from this. The Initiates and Novices who are left are all clerks and scribes, carpenters and plumbers. They’re people who keep the machines working, the lights on. But where will they be when there is no one to protect them?

Rebuilding simply isn’t an option. But King was right about one thing. He needs to go back. Warn everyone what’s happened here. Maybe they can move everyone up to the Bastion in Griffith Park. It’s almost ready and it has the last remaining soldiers.

Samson ducks through a space between two buildings, away from the killers mopping up in the street, careful not to trip over the cracked and uneven pavement. He wipes blood and sweat out of his good eye. One leg drags behind him. His vision blurs, the world tilts.

He falls and darkness takes him.

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Somewhere along the line Samson has found a sledgehammer. Might be his, might not. He doesn’t really care. Its heft is comforting as he pushes past the pain and trudges slowly through the streets.

He knows at least a day has gone by since he passed out in the alley. He remembers drifting back to consciousness a few times to see the sun and the moon passing by overhead. He smelled the burning bodies, heard the screams and whimpers of survivors being put down. And then they stopped.

He presses on through empty streets, the only sounds his plodding footsteps, the metallic grind of the sledgehammer dragging behind him. Already deep within Church territory, he should be seeing people—not soldiers, they’re all dead—but the Church Faithful, the acolytes and followers. They’re not there. There is something deeply wrong.

It’s not until he gets to the Temple that he understands. The doors are flung open, the halls silent. Empty space glares up at him from the floor where furniture sat, doorknobs are conspicuous by their absence, bare wire hangs where light fixtures were torn away. The Temple is defined by what’s not in it.

A hundred scenarios spin through Samson’s addled mind. Horror stacks upon horror until he can’t think straight. Hollywood has been and gone

and taken everything. He's died and gone to Hell. Everyone in the Church has gone cannibal and eaten everyone else. He's the only man left alive on Earth.

He shakes himself, takes a deep breath, pushes the crazy as far away as he can, knows it's not far enough. Everyone is not dead, he tells himself. They haven't eaten each other in an orgy of madness and blood. They've just realized that without an army to protect them they'd be sitting ducks for an invasion, so they've retreated to the Bastion.

Samson wanders the empty halls. He's called this place home for years now, a thing he never really thought he would ever have. And now it's been taken away from him. He tries to muster some rage, but mostly he's just tired and sad. He tried to do a great thing here, tried to bring God to the Unbelievers.

"You failed."

He turns, expecting to see King behind him, surprised when it's not.

"Volkov?"

She stands inside the Relic Room, where they had brought all of King's tapes and video equipment when they left the studio, filling it with banks of televisions and VCRs for the Faithful to watch. It's empty now except for one cracked monitor and a VCR propped up against it, the readout blinking 12:00 over and over again, as if to say that time has run out.

"Do you even know what you were fighting for, Samson?"

"What are you doing here? How did you get out of the ambush?" He looks her over, his frown deepening. "Why aren't you hurt?"

"Do you ever question God, Samson? Ever question your precious Reverend King?"

"What are you talking about?" He steps closer, hefts his sledgehammer over his shoulder. It feels like it weighs a ton, but he manages it, anyway. "Tell me how you survived the street collapsing, Volkov. Why didn't you die like everyone else?"

"Or what, you'll crush me with your hammer? Look at yourself. You can barely lift the thing. Fine. You want answers? Here are your answers." She pushes the button on the VCR, and King's image springs to life on the television screen.

Only it's not King as Samson's ever seen him. His face is haggard, hair disheveled, two-day stubble on his face. Tears streak his cheeks, his eyes red and puffy. He stares at the camera with his mouth half open.

"What is this?"

"His final show."

"I've seen his final show."

"No. This one was never aired. It's from the day the bombs dropped."

"Bullshit, there isn't—"

"I don't think I'll live to see tomorrow," King says, cutting Samson off. Samson stares. He knows that voice, knows its cadence. This is King, all right, but he sounds worn down, voice like gravel. "I don't think any of us will."

"It's time to come clean," he says. "Whether my viewers see this or not, I don't know that it will make any difference. But I wanted to say this before it's too late. I... I'm sorry."

Samson stares at the screen, his mind reeling. This can't be happening. He's watched every show King produced, saw every recorded image. Where did this one come from?

"I've said terrible things on this show. Terrible. Lies. Slander. Blasphemy, even. And for what?" King laughs, hollow and sick, like he can't bear to answer his own question.

"I didn't start this way. When I started in Cleveland, my show was the Hour of Light. I talked about spreading God's love, about bringing peace to the world. Nobody watched it. I was canceled after one season. So I tried it again and again. Atlanta, Detroit, Chicago. And then one day I got mad on the air. Just couldn't take it anymore. Went off on... I don't even remember. Some teeny-bopper Madonna bullshit, or something."

Tears are pouring down King's face. His breath comes out in hitching sobs. "And you fuckers ate it up. You ate up all that bile, and the more I spewed, the more you came back. What the hell was I supposed to do? Give up the ratings, the audience? The money? Could you? I know what some of you have done in my name. I read my fan mail. It's sick what you people do. Attacks on gays, on immigrants. One of you admitted to burning down a synagogue, another murdered a black man because you thought I told you to do it. Did I? Christ, I probably did. And every day you tuned in and watched me spew more hatred. You fed on it, and you put it back out into the world. You're just as much to blame for all this as I am. Hell, more so. This is your doing. You people created me."

King pulls a massive pistol out from under the desk. "They say the bombs are dropping today. That missiles are already in the air. What good is being rich now? All the money in the world won't stop that from happening. This was all a sham. I don't believe in God anymore, but I do believe in sin. And I've sinned against everyone."

He racks the slide on the pistol, and the sound echoes from the speaker like God readying a thunderbolt. "Well, I can't take it back, but maybe I can still do something about it for anyone who survives. If anyone's still alive out there, if anyone sees this, just... just be good to each other. Please. Help each other out. All this hatred I've been spewing, that's not the answer to life. I see that now, and I'm so, so sorry."

Samson watches in horror as King places the pistol between his eyes. "All bad things must come to an end," he says, and pulls the trigger.

King's head explodes, spraying the world map behind him in a familiar stain of blood and bone, his body slumping to the floor. There's a scream

off camera. A woman runs to him crying and saying his name over and over again. A few minutes of this and the tape goes to static and then black.

“That’s your prophet, Samson,” Volkov says. “When the chips were down, he showed who he really was: a weak, blubbering liar.”

*“All bad things must come to an end.” —James King, Hour of the Church Triumphant, unaired episode*

“I thought he was murdered,” Samson says. “How did you find this tape?”

“One of your acolytes found it back when you were clearing out the old studio to bring everything here. He didn’t know what it was or how important. It was hidden in a vent behind some equipment. Gave it to Cyrus.”

“Cyrus knew about this?”

“He thought he’d destroyed it. Had the acolyte who found it murdered. He was so freaked you’d find out about it. But we got to it in time, replaced it with a blank for him to toss into the fire.”

“Who’s we?”

“Haven’t you figured it out, yet?” Volkov asks. “Hollywood. I’ve been a spy for them for years. Working my way up through your ranks, feeding them intelligence the whole time. Almost managed to kill you on Western when I brought in the guy with the bomb vest. I was even prepared to die for the cause that day. But goddamn, aren’t you one lucky sonofabitch.”

“I trusted you. You were my right hand.”

“You trusted your delusions, Samson. You trusted your hallucination of King to give you the justification to do what you wanted to do anyway.”

“No. No, that’s not—”

“You’re insane, Samson. You weren’t getting your cues from God, you were getting them from your cross-wired brain.”

“No. I talk to him. He’s saved me. He’s told me what to do. King was—”

“A lie. You’re not talking to King. He’s dead. He’s been dead for years.”

“Then who do I talk to when he comes to me?”

“Yourself, you crazy fuck. King was a lie that you bought into and Cyrus fed. Cyrus has never been a believer, you know that, right? Do you know Cyrus wanted me to assassinate you on Wilshire? He thought you were getting too big for your britches. I was supposed to shoot you and blame Hollywood for it and start a war. Dumb fuck didn’t know it was already on. You’ve been betrayed, Samson. By King. By Cyrus.”

“By you.”

“I’m not sure I count,” she says. “I mean, I’ve always been your enemy. You just didn’t know it. You know, the funny thing is that for all the horrors you’ve brought into the world, you’re an honorable man. You always treated me right, your people right. You even cared about the ones you murdered. I wonder who you’d have been if you’d never found King. Never found Cyrus.”

“Why did you come here? Why show me this?”

“Because I knew you didn’t die in the street. Hoped, at least. I wanted to see the look on your face when I showed you the lie you’ve been living for all these years. I’m sorry, Samson. I pity you, but you’re a monster. And monsters should be broken before they’re put down.”

Volkov pulls a pistol from her pocket.

Samson’s mind reels. The video changes everything—King’s teachings, the murders Samson and the Church have conducted in his name, God’s plan. It’s all built on a foundation of bullshit. Samson is a killer for a cause that never existed, the follower of a charlatan. All because he wanted something to believe in. He can feel it all coming apart in his mind. All the things he thought he knew disintegrating like sand in the wind.

“I can fix this,” he says. He has to fix it. If King’s teachings were all lies, then this isn’t God’s plan at all.

Volkov laughs. “Can you now? Can you bring all those people you murdered back to life? Can you rebuild the camps you’ve torched, the families you’ve torn apart?”

“No, but I can change the Church. I know where they are. I can take this to them. I can turn it around.”

“Sorry, Samson. It’s too late for that.” Volkov fires, but Samson jogs to the right and instead of punching through his chest, the bullet digs into his arm, a searing pain blossoming through his entire left side.

He launches himself at her, tackling her to the floor. He doesn’t want to hurt her, doesn’t want to keep up the lie, but she shoots him again, this time grazing his scalp, and he punches her in the face over and over as the red rage fills him up and blinds him. When he comes back to himself, Volkov lies motionless on the floor, her head a pulpy mess of blood and shattered bone.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “I’ll fix this. You’ll see. I’ll fix it all.”

“I don’t see how you can.”

Samson turns to see King leaning against the doorjamb, half his head missing, chunks of brain plopping onto the floor.

“What are you doing here?”

“Weren’t you listening to her? You’re insane. I’m here because I’m your crazy, fucked-up brain. Maybe I’m a stroke. Or maybe I really am

James King, here to lead you on the path of righteousness. Or maybe I'm the devil. I'm Satan and you're just my puppet."

Samson shoves the heel of his hand into his eye. Wishes it would all go away, that it would all make sense. He slows his breathing, counts to ten. Opens his eye.

"Still here."

"You're not real," Samson says.

"I'm as real as you are, Samson. Maybe more so. How do you know Volkov was telling the truth?"

"Because I saw the video. I saw you admit it was all lies."

"Maybe it was faked. Maybe your delusion is the tape and I'm actually real and you're *my* delusion. Wouldn't that be fucked up?"

"Stop it!" It's all too much and Samson can't take it. He's been wandering through the streets for more than a day, exhausted, dehydrated, starving. This is all just a hallucination, it has to be. King, the tape, Volkov.

"Nope. That's all real," King says.

"I didn't say anything."

"Didn't have to. I'm in your head. Hell, I *am* your head. Look, Samson, accept the fact that you've lost. That all of this is a psychotic break. You'll feel better."

"I will fix this. You're a lie. You've always been a lie and I was an idiot to follow you."

"I gave you what you wanted, Samson," King says. "I gave you purpose. And when you doubted, I was there to guide your hand. You think I'm not real? Without me, you're nothing. Not the other way around. You know what you should do? You should pick up that pistol from the floor and take my way out." King makes a finger gun with his hand and puts it to his ravaged skull.

Samson closes his eyes and screams. "No. That's a coward's way out. I'll fix this. I'll go up and talk to Cyrus and together we'll turn the Church around."

He waits for King to tell him he's insane or stupid, to mock him for what he's done. But he doesn't say a word. Samson opens his eye.

James King is gone.

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Samson heads up the hill, his left leg dragging behind him. It's taken most of the day to get this far and he's not about to stop. He can see the tunnel leading to the Bastion of Faith up ahead. Church members are stacking boxes at the mouth, unspooling wires and attaching them to a box inside the tunnel. And there's Cyrus sitting under an umbrella, giving them orders. He looks worried, a little haggard. No doubt he hasn't slept much, either. He keeps touching the gun holstered at his belt as though he's expecting the Hollywood army to overrun them at any minute.

"Samson?" Cyrus says, peering into the trees as he approaches. "You're alive!"

"Don't sound so happy, you liar," Samson says, stepping onto the road. "I talked to Volkov. She told me everything. She showed me the tape."

Cyrus chews his lip, says nothing for a long time. Then, "Everyone, we're done here. Back to the Bastion."

"But sir, the explosives aren't ready."

"They're ready enough." Cyrus goes to the box with all the wires and pushes a button. A readout on the box glows red with 2:00. Samson thinks he's set the bomb for two hours until the readout starts to tick down. Two *minutes*.

The acolytes run out the back of the tunnel and up toward the Bastion, throwing nervous glances behind them. Soon Cyrus and Samson are alone.

"Sealing the Church off from the rest of the world, Cyrus?"

"It's temporary," Cyrus says. "Give us some breathing room. We've got enough food and guns in there to last long enough. And I've already got plans for moving our territory north into Burbank. So. Volkov. She was a spy for Hollywood, wasn't she?"

"Yes."

"Should have fuckin' known."

Samson pulls the tape from where he's stuffed it into his waistband at the small of his back. Its sharp edges have dug into his skin. Bringing it up here is only part of his penance.

He throws it at Cyrus's feet. Cyrus stares at it like it's a dead rat. "Huh. Thought I burned that thing a long time ago. So you saw it. And I suppose she told you I was going to have you killed?"

"You don't deny it?"

"Why should I? You know the big truth already. What's one more little one on the pile?"

"We can fix this, Cyrus. We can make the Church different. King didn't want us to be murderers."

A noise in the distance. People moving up the hill. Hollywood soldiers? Has to be. Samson knows they couldn't have been far behind him. He was lucky to get here before they did.

Cyrus clears his throat. "I don't have a lot of time, so I'll keep this brief. You're an idiot. You think people are going to get behind 'be good to each other'? No. They need order and protection. They're sheep for fleecing and if we don't do it, somebody else will. Come on, Samson, you know

how this works. You kill or you die out here. There's no in between."

"It doesn't have to be."

"Yes, it does," Cyrus says. He pulls his pistol and shoots Samson in the chest. The bullet plows through Samson's right lung. He staggers, but he doesn't fall.

"You're the second person to shoot me today," Samson says through clenched teeth.

"Well, let me try it again to make sure it sticks." Cyrus pulls the trigger. The gun jams. He racks the slide, desperately trying to clear it, but Samson is on him in a flash, the sledgehammer swinging up into Cyrus's jaw. Bone shatters, teeth and blood go flying.

Samson brings the sledgehammer around again, swinging it hard into the side of Cyrus's head. His skull caves, spraying blood and brain across the floor of the tunnel. Cyrus falls to the ground, his limbs spasming, a low, thin wheeze escaping his lips. Samson stands on top of his chest and hits him again, kicks at his already-destroyed skull until it's nothing but so much red paste.

"It could have been different," Samson says.

A bullet whizzes over his shoulder, cracks the cement of the tunnel wall. At first he thinks it's one of the Church Faithful, but it's coming from the wrong direction. He turns to see a dozen Hollywood soldiers coming out of the trees toward him. He waves them back, yells at them to stop. Yells about the bomb. He needs to warn them, save them, needs to explain. He can fix this. He just needs time.

They don't give it to him. They rush him, firing blindly. He drops the sledgehammer, yells for them to listen. But a bullet pierces his other lung, and he's got no air left to explain.

They descend upon him with knives and hatchets, beating him, cutting him, slicing into his flesh. More join the fray. The tunnel fills with them, each looking for a piece of the monster. Each taking their revenge for a dead friend, a murdered lover, a slaughtered child, tears in their eyes. Samson lies there and lets them do it. It's his penance, his punishment.

He tries to say, "I'm sorry," but the only sound is a terrible rushing roar that fills the tunnel with light and fire that kills Samson, kills the soldiers. And kills the truth.



### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**



Stephen Blackmoore is the author of the novels *City of the Lost*, *Dead Things*, *Khan of Mars*, and the upcoming *Broken Souls*. His short stories have appeared in the magazines *Needle*, *Plots with Guns*, *Spinetingler*, *Thrilling Detective*, and *Shots*, as well as the anthologies *Deadly Treats*, *Don't Read This Book*, and *Uncage Me*.

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