

We From The Sunrise

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"Why must men like us destroy everything we love?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about life. I make one bad decision after another, and you burn down the town that treated you like a Son of God and nurtured you into manhood. We're backwards. We're stupid mules, and we'll suffer in eternity."

Michelangelo considered the words before he replied, "I'm no mule."

"One way or another. We'll pay for everything we've done. In this life or the next. But the problem is that we were always meant to be this way. God put it in our blood. It was intentional."

GENESIS

At the long-awaited moment of Barto's inaugural words, the brothers of Mission Hueco laid down their forks and waited to hear what wisdoms he had uncovered in the deserts of solitude.

He had not spoken for thirty years, bound by his vow of silence taken on the same night that a disagreement over how to salt the beef stew led to the slaughter of nearly five hundred Natives who came to celebrate the construction of the mission walls. The elder stood from the table and said very quietly to his captive audience, "Ferris Cabrera was a madman with blood-soaked hands. Let it be known that this mission was born in blood, and it will die the same."

Barto then spit into his hand and held it up toward the painted portrait of Ferris Cabrera that hung on the wall at the other end of the room.

Brother Herman gulped.

"You're mistaken, old bird," Herman announced. "Ferris Cabrera was a great man who changed the world. Now, deliver the candles to my chamber. I have a long night ahead of me."

Barto gathered the candles and followed Herman to the master's chamber. He placed the new candles on the table next to the others that had burnt down to their bases. At this stage of experimentation, the room permanently smelled of wax and herbs. The books scattered around the floor were medical and mystical in nature, as Brother Herman was still actively seeking a way to resurrect the dead.

Barto left the candles and slipped out of the room.

He quietly shut the door and turned to see Arcelia, the mission child, standing in the shadows of the hallway.

"What's he up to in there?" she asked.

"Seeking the mysteries of God, my darling."

"I can't sleep with that smell. It gives me nightmares."

"Pray for them to visit someone else."

Arecelia smiled. She was no longer a child and had blossomed into a beautiful woman. One would have immediately taken note of her slender legs and inexplicable bodily scent of cinnamon were it not for the swallowing tunic Barto demanded she wear around the clock. Some months ago, he interrupted her while she was changing clothes. The stimulation he experienced left him temporarily disabled from his duties.

He rushed to Brother Herman for forgiveness.

"I have seen a nude woman," he wrote on a piece of paper. He then slid the admission through the window to Brother Herman in the confessional booth.

"What did you feel, Barto?" Herman asked. "It is not a sin unless you experienced desire for her."

Barto burst forth from the booth and escaped into the cornfields to work the crops under the solace of the moon.

Arecelia's simple face had never known powders or paints, and Barto succeeded in raising her secluded from the outside world. She did not realize she was beautiful. She did not know her tunic was made for a man, nor had she experimented with the fashionable ways to style the natural curls in her hair, which hung in ringlets down to her waist. While Hueco expanded with an influx of Natives and vagabonds, Arecelia stayed safely within the walls of the mission. She had raised herself as a captive lion, eating when hungry and sleeping when tired. Her only task was to make sure the corners remained free of cobwebs, an easy assignment because the spiders had long ago been exterminated by the hands of Brother Thomas. The rest of the time she did whatever suited her unpredictable interests. On more than one occasion, she read through the personal diaries of the brothers. Some days she counted the pews. Others, she straightened up the pantry. She also rearranged the furniture each year on the first day of spring. Arecelia floated through the halls as a midnight specter, and often stopped outside Herman's door to listen to the hissing of chemicals as he continued searching for

a way to resurrect the dead. She also knew the late-night habit of Gary Sullivan III to explore his genitals in the washroom, which awoke in her the great mystery she would never solve: human sexuality.

Her only understanding of sexual encounters came from her limited reading of scripture. She wrote an inquiry to Brother Herman that went unanswered. The turning point in her curiosities came on the day when the brothers were forced to deliver a baby from a Native woman who had been banished from her tribe thanks to a secret affair with a Spanish woodworker. They sent Arecelia for towels to clean up the fluids. She peeked through the open door at the chaotic scene.

“My God,” she whispered. “She’s being torn in half!”

Later that night, Herman finally took out the letter and answered her most basic questions to his greatest ability. Arecelia listened with her hands clasped.

“I would like to know who gave birth to me,” she concluded.

Herman could not bring himself to reveal the truth: she was the daughter of a Native witch, fathered by none other than Ferris Cabrera, the charismatic explorer and founder of the mission.

“You’re special, Arecelia,” Herman said. “Like everyone, you are a child of God.”

“But who’s been having sex with God?”

The question earned her ten lashes from the whip wielded by Gary Sullivan III. But they had succeeded in withholding the scandal of her origin. Arecelia soon abandoned the search for her ancestry and resigned to sweeping up the dust brought in from the winter winds.

In those days, Mission Hueco grew into a dynamic center of faith. The Natives had always drawn near in the winter to receive food, but now they permanently moved their shanty camps to the outskirts of town. Where some saw a problem, Brother Herman saw opportunity. He passed out ears of corn and wool blankets to the starving savages. Church attendance doubled in no time, and then tripled, until Brother Herman split the Mass into two services. By season’s end, he started a rumor about expanding the building to accommodate the crowds.

One morning, Herman and Gary Sullivan III strolled through town square and stopped to look back at the mission towering over the town as a father would hover over his newborn child. Within those walls of adobe were dozens of sleeping brothers, a sanctuary, and a dining hall that served as host to meals and private meetings. At the head of the mission was a labyrinthine entrance that forced entering parishioners to become lost to themselves and found in the spirit of righteousness. Legends claimed the mission would never fall, thanks to a blessing Ferris Cabrera received from the hand of God on the day of its completion. The first rays of sunlight filtered through the bell tower, casting a long sliver of light onto the dusty streets of Hueco. Herman guessed the light to be angelic. The fields of crops surrounding the mission on three of its sides glistened with dew, promising a bountiful harvest.

“We did not come here to establish a charity,” Brother Herman said softly to his companion. “It is not the will of God to give food and blankets. It is the will of God to spread Christianity to all corners of the earth. First the spirit, and then the body.”

Brother Herman paid special attention to those who approached his table with lethal infirmities. He led them by hand around the back of the mission to perform his secret miracles. Herman’s latest technique involved filling his hands with medicated powders and blowing it up the nostrils of his subject.

“Go with God!” he proclaimed, exhausted by the procedure.

Word spread of the magical Christian who looked like a worn-out old stallion, and the Natives lined up down the street to be healed. The civilians also flourished. From the moment they arrived in Hueco, the men built structures and impregnated women at an alarming rate. A fresh crop of children, the first born in Hueco, filled the streets with their laughter.

All was great and glorious in the City of God, until the arrival of Sylvester Lacy.

Sylvester Lacy worked as the officer of town maintenance, which required him to walk the streets by night and remove any traces of unpleasantness. The majority of his time was spent cleaning up the donkey shit for which the brothers did not take responsibility despite their culpability. The brothers often led livestock through town to be traded with the Natives, leaving behind a trail of dung for miles at a time. Sylvester transformed an old barrel into a fire pit on wheels that he pushed around, feeding the hardened excrement to the flames.

One night, Sylvester pushed his flaming barrel around the western wall of the church. He noticed the orange glow of a window illuminated by candlelight. He peered inside.

Arecelia had just been listening at the door of Brother Herman, whose ambition to raise the dead had reached new heights. Afraid of being discovered, Arecelia ran down the hall and entered her room, lighting a candle and disrobing. She sat at the mirror completely nude and brushed her hair, mumbling to herself a new plan of how to outwit Brother Gary Sullivan III. Such was her state when Sylvester Lacy glanced inside.

Sylvester pressed his back against the wall and covered his heart so the mission girl would not hear its thundering beats. But the foul smoke of the barrel rose through the open window and alerted Arecelia to danger.

“Show yourself,” she demanded. “Or I’ll turn the dogs loose.”

Sylvester appeared as a silhouette in the window.

“I’m sorry. Assure the brothers I will be the first to confession in the morning.”

He fled to the river and jumped into its depths, swimming in circles to cool his excitement.

Sylvester returned the following night.

Much to his surprise, Arecelia invited him to come in from the heat and drink a glass of water. As she stood in the corner pouring two glasses of water, he suddenly knew everything in the world worth knowing. He stood from the bed and gently wrapped his quaking hands around her waist. Arecelia dropped the carafe of water.

"What's your name again?" she asked.

He kissed her neck with tremendous tenderness, and the sensation crawled up her spine and made its way down to her loins, where it set them on fire. Neither Sylvester nor Arecelia had ever felt anything quite like it. They succumbed to the armies of desire and pushed their wet lips together with abandon. Sylvester stripped out of his clothes as if they were filled with bees. They fell upon the bed. She clenched her toes as Sylvester ripped the robe away and explored her flesh. Then, by accident, he entered into the sacred.

She gasped with shock and pulled on his earlobe.

"I'm so sorry," he said, rolling away from the bed and making for the window.

"Wait," Arecelia said, stopping him in his tracks. "Come back tomorrow."

He smiled and dove through the open window.

The secret nights of carnal lechery carried on for months. Perhaps they would have continued indefinitely were it not for the growing bulge in Arecelia's stomach. Barto noticed the change in her physique but foolishly attributed it to gluttony. He charted her eating habits for a week and came to the difficult conclusion that she was pregnant.

Sylvester Lacy accepted the news like it was also the news of his imminent death. His solitary nights of pushing the flaming barrel became unbearable. At every turn, he battled the guilt of his lust for Arecelia. His work suffered. The dung remained on the road for weeks, and more than one person complained about the shrieks Sylvester released at odd hours of the night. In the depths of his torture, he conversed with himself in midnight alleys and frightened the local children to tears. His moment of reckoning came one morning when he had fallen asleep beneath a canopy, leaving the barrel to burn unattended.

"What are you doing?" a man asked him at dawn.

"Dying."

"Ah. Then put the fire out and go die someplace else. This is my personal property."

Arecelia, on the other hand, accepted the news of her pregnancy with joyful surprise. She would partake in the circle of life once explained to her by Brother Herman. Upon his realization, Barto ran away to his room for solitude. But the thought of her pregnancy forced him to recall the night he saw her naked and the greatly embarrassing confession he knew Brother Herman had not forgotten. He burst forth from his room with the remaining wisps of his hair standing on end.

“Who is the father, Arecelia? It’s best if we make quick arrangements for your marriage,” Barto proposed before the council that night.

“If I’m pregnant, the child has no father.”

“Who gave you the intercourse?” Herman asked.

“I don’t even know what you’re asking me. What’s an intercourse?”

Brother Herman walked over to where she sat and leaned in to whisper.

“Has a man ever been with you?”

“Many men,” she answered. “Only men, for my entire life. It’s women I’ve never been with.”

Herman’s eyes illuminated with an idea.

The brothers congregated throughout the night and decided to come to the conclusion that God had worked a miracle. They dove into the story of the virgin birth and found so many similarities between Mary and Arecelia that none could deny God’s plan to bring a Savior to Hueco. Brother Herman ran through the halls and entered Arecelia’s room without announcement.

“You have immaculately conceived,” he said, breathless. “You carry a son of God.”

The Vatican inspected and verified the miracle soon after. Pope Sincere IV wrote a twenty-three-page letter announcing the details, urging all pilgrims to go encourage the pregnant virgin and witness the birth of her son. Many dismissed the news as a publicity stunt to draw more parishioners to Hueco, which was not foreign to the character of Brother Herman. But the momentum grew when Ricardo Lacy, Sylvester’s father, glimpsed Arecelia walking past a window with her unmistakably pregnant stomach. He climbed a ladder and shouted the news

from the rooftops. From there, it spread to the farmers, and finally, to the Natives, who sent it down the river on their canoes to be shared with the rest of the world.

And so the storm began.

Over the next few weeks, thousands of pilgrims dragged their children and possessions behind them on ropes into the town of Hueco to witness the upcoming miracle. They came from all corners of the earth, introducing new cultures and colors and sounds to the town. Jugglers, contortionists, amateur magicians, and firework technicians appeared in Hueco for the very first time. Brother Herman journeyed to the top of the bell tower every morning with stale bread and a glass of water, which would sustain him for the day as he watched the travelers take the mountain road into the city.

“This is what the Lord promised to me when I was a child,” he said one day to Barto. “Life means death. And it is my destiny to raise the dead just as it is their destiny to die. Wait and see. I’m closing in on the impossible.”

The changes in population took the greatest toll on Sylvester Lacy. His nightly duties became impossible to fulfill, edifying the dark clouds of his madness. He pleaded with Herman to hire a second barrel man but was met with a cold stare. The failure of his profession soon collided with the unending guilt he felt for impregnating the mission girl. It became too much for one man to bear. In a night that would forever change his fate, he left the barrel burning beneath a canopy that set fire to a building and killed three children. His hand was terribly burned and shriveled as a raisin. Charred and dismayed, Sylvester escaped into the mountains with a cry of desperation to finish his days in solitude. The authorities were quick to the Lacy Ranch to tell the family all that had transpired.

“We should have known,” Ricardo confessed. “Last week I found three dead birds beneath his bed.”

Ricardo broke the news to his daughter, Venus.

“Forget that he ever existed. If I know anything, I know that he’s never coming down from those mountains,” Ricardo advised. “Now, lay back and relax. I’ll clip

your toenails and tell you of the future. One glorious day, you will be a queen and marry a king.”

The population surged not only with pilgrims and vagrants, but also with obscenities. Gypsy vendors descended upon the town with their suitcases full of hallucinogenic potions and erotic paintings. The Natives took notice of their financial success and began bootlegging bottles of whiskey up the river. Barto learned of this the hard way. One morning while taking his daily jog, he sliced open his foot on a shattered bottle of whiskey. He alone questioned the surging population. He approached Brother Herman in the bell tower for support.

“Herman, I think we need to address the soul of Hueco. It is rotting before our eyes!”

Brother Herman turned to Barto with a scowl.

“The way I see things, the Lord is working miracles and doesn’t need advice from an old buzzard with a crooked spine.”

Barto’s face flushed.

“Of course. Forgive my ignorance.”

He rushed away to check on Arecelia’s health.

*

The morning of the birth was overcast with thunderclouds, but the threat did not keep thousands of pilgrims from filling the courtyard outside the mission. They waited in silence from dawn until dusk, their hopeful spirits looking to the mission for any sign of the savior. Just when the tension became unbearable, a cry erupted from an upstairs window.

A collective breath of wonder filled the twilight.

Brother Gary Sullivan surprised everyone when he stuck his head out the window and shouted, “It’s a boy!”

The crowd grew so wild with celebration that they almost did not notice when Gary appeared again in the window and said, "Another boy! Another boy! The virgin has birthed twins! Double the blessings on all ye merry pilgrims!"

The second child surprised no one more than Arecelia, who thought she had accomplished something never done in the history of mankind: give birth to two babies at once. The Natives assured her that the situation was indeed rare but not abnormal. Barto stood by Arecelia's side during the whole ordeal. He wiped the children with towels and held them up in the candlelight just as he had held Arecelia so many years ago after she was birthed by the witch.

"What will you name them, my darling?"

"This one will be named Gabriel, and the other, Michelangelo. They're angels."

EIGHTEEN YEARS LATER

I

The Black Tooth Festival always started on the first day of spring and carried on for two weeks, stopping just in time for everyone to prepare for the season of heat. The intention of the festival was to commemorate the famous Coahuiltecan Native who never really existed, the same savage who killed his wrestling opponents by sinking his blackened and poisonous front tooth into their jugular veins. The Natives protested the absurdities of the festival each year, but with little success. Some years they withheld attendance from church, which left Herman no choice but to slam shut the pantries of provision. The brothers of Hueco, on the other hand, planned and executed the festival to its prestigious perfection. Each season, they sent out elaborate greeting cards and sacks of red candy to everyone in town to invite them to attend.

Brother Herman advertised this particular festival more than any in history because he had finally found a way to raise the dead. His years of solitary toil finally came to fruition one night when a dog that had been dead for three weeks wagged its tail. He planned to set up an exhibition on the final day of the festival to raise Juan Matias, an amiable man who had just died from a horse kick to the skull, in order to dazzle all in attendance and seduce them into the church.

Juan's body lay sealed in a glass box in Brother Herman's chamber. Herman spent every waking hour inspecting the body and rushing across the room to consult his books. Such was his state when he expected the arrival of his most promising pupil, Gabriel. The two believed in each other almost to the point of madness. Gabriel believed in Brother Herman's miraculous hands of healing, while Herman still maintained that Gabriel was a true son of God.

He had good reason to believe it.

The boy spent his time devouring Biblical passages in the original translations. Not only did he read the scriptures with the ferocity of a mountain lion and the obedience of a monk, he also possessed an uncommon ability to memorize them word for word. He could snatch a verse out of his head at a moment's notice, consoling the brokenhearted of Hueco. Not long after his fifteenth birthday, he became a prophetic voice in the community and took to posting his prophecies on the entrance of the labyrinth which led into the church.

Gabriel even had the look of holiness. He walked with a limp in his right leg, wounded from the night he lay prostrate at the altar and the scaffolding of the ceiling collapsed on top of him. They discovered him beneath rubble the next afternoon, where he had not ceased praying, and claimed he had not noticed the accident. Both knees and elbows were callused beyond recognition because of his prostrations. Arecelia vowed to never again mend his clothing until he learned to pray standing up. His mouth dripped with the honeyed words of scripture, his heart filled with the achievements of the saints, and none could deny the way in which he magnetized the poor and downtrodden.

The shooting star of his life changed course on the day he went out to the Matias Ranch to look at the recently deceased body of Juan, who had one day before been kicked in the head by the stallion. He and Herman journeyed through the outlands to determine if the corpse was ripe for resurrection. Brother Herman walked around the stables to inspect the premises while Gabriel knocked on the front door.

Francisca Matias answered.

"Can I help you?" she asked, leaning against the doorframe. She wore a workman's shirt unbuttoned to her sternum and her father's green trousers with a pistol tucked in the belt. She ran her finger along the trigger. She had a wild mass of buttercream hair that was tucked beneath a sombrero, although two thick strands swooped out and fell down her narrow cheeks. By all measures she was beautiful and dangerous.

"My name is Gabriel, and I have come to view your father's body."

“Did he owe you money?”

Gabriel pulled at his collar.

“I am with the church.”

She stepped out onto the porch, forcing Gabriel to back down the steps. That’s when he realized that everything about her was contrary. She was as slender as a princess but as strong as an ironworker. The color of her skin revealed the Spanish side of her heritage, and the poignant green of her eyes the Irish. She built her masculine power from years of horse training with Juan and throwing bales of hay through barnyard doors. Unlike her father, she did not trust the church, particularly the uncanny prophecies posted by Gabriel himself at the entrance of the labyrinth.

“What’s all this about?”

Just then, Brother Herman scurried around the corner of the house, waving his arms.

“Girl! He’s not dead!”

The holy man mounted the porch.

“Don’t be crazy,” Francisca said. “I found him face down in the mud with blood coming out of his ears.”

“Death is only a temporary inconvenience. Resurrection awaits!”

Gabriel pulled Herman aside and whispered into his ear.

“We should not be so careless with our words. I don’t want to give her a false hope.”

Herman shook himself free and straightened his robe. He looked across the porch at Francisca, who now held the pistol at her side and thumbed the hammer.

“On the final day of the festival, I will raise your father from the dead. Consider this a promise. He will be returned to you in this life.”

They tossed Juan’s body into the bed of the wagon and took the mountain road back to Hueco. Herman scolded Gabriel all the way for his lack of faith.

As soon as they reached the mission, Gabriel leapt from the wagon and searched the hallways for Barto. Those days, only Gabriel respected Barto as

anything more than the man who replaced the burned-out candles. He often sought the old man for his theological expertise. As children, Gabriel and Michelangelo sat on the knees of Barto and listened to the stories about the founding of Hueco. He often recounted the final disagreement between the Natives and the citizens, when they went to war over how to salt the beef stew. Barto survived the battle by hiding in the bell tower. In fact, he was the last person to see Ferris Cabrera alive. Just as Barto entered the tower, Ferris cast his engraved pistol into the corner and jumped, landing in the pot of stew and shattering his spinal cord.

Gabriel found Barto asleep on his knees, a candle burning in each hand.

"Barto. I need your counsel."

"Anything, my boy."

Gabriel fell to his knees next to the old man. "Is it possible for a man devoted to the church to love a woman?"

Barto considered the words carefully.

"A man may be devoted to God and love a woman. That much is true. But I do not think one can be devoted to the church and love a woman. You know this. Gabriel, you are to take your vows soon."

"Of course."

"Are you having second thoughts?"

"No. Thank you, Barto. As always, you are a man of wisdom."

Gabriel spent the evening writing a letter to Francisca demanding to know if she loved him or not, all based on their singular encounter on the porch. He admitted youthful foolishness in the letter, but made clear that his romantic desires for her outweighed anything else the world had to offer, if she would only recognize providence: they were meant to be together. He alluded to making a midnight escape into the mountains on a pair of ponies. He sealed the letter with a kiss and ran home to find his brother Michelangelo.

Michelangelo had no interest in the church or in the odd men who ran it. By the time he reached the age of fourteen, he had already taken his own vows to never again navigate the labyrinth or confess his sins through an elaborate piece of woodwork. He lived by his own code: to do whatever he felt like doing.

The irreversible moment that ensured his heathenism came one day while delivering a saddle, as was his job in those days. He opened the barn of the mission and interrupted Brother Brady Lou Stevenson undressing a whore in the stables. The other brothers were taking their weekly walk to pray over the sick of Hueco. Brother Brady snuck off with a sudden and fabricated urge to use a lavatory. Michelangelo remained in the shadows of the stables, watching the two of them grunt and fumble around in the hay. The whore looked over Brother Brady's shoulder and met eyes with Michelangelo.

"Like what you see?" she asked.

He did.

Michelangelo would never forget the whore's breasts glistening like a forbidden treasure in the noonday sun. He dropped the saddle onto the floor with a thud. The holy man jumped from the ground and caught Michelangelo by the collar before he could escape. He shook him violently.

"What are you doing here, boy? You will never tell anyone of this. Is that understood?"

"If they ask, I will tell the truth."

"And I will tell them how you looked at a naked woman."

"Good. Tell everyone."

He ripped himself free and fled with Brady Lou trembling at the thought of being exposed. For many years after that, Brother Brady offered candies to Michelangelo whenever they passed on the street. Michelangelo never accepted the treats, leaving Brother Brady to drown in his terrors.

When Michelangelo relayed the story to his brother that night, Gabriel reminded him that all men were destined to fall short of God's glory.

Michelangelo, in turn, reminded his brother that brothers took a vow of celibacy, not a vow to roll around with prostitutes in the barn. It was the beginning of their disputes and certainly not the end. The arguments between them were largely spiritual in nature, with Michelangelo believing the Bible to be a poorly constructed book of obscene stories – men hanging on crosses, giants having their heads cut off, and entire villages plundered of their women and children. He often opened the scriptures to satisfy his desires for sexuality and violence. Gabriel, on the other hand, esteemed the Bible as God’s honest account of history.

But nothing drove the stake of dispute between Gabriel and Michelangelo like their shared love for Francisca Matias.

As soon as Gabriel finished penning his love letter, he ran home to find Michelangelo. He found him sitting in the garden behind the house and eating a tomato.

“What’s your hurry?” Michelangelo asked.

“I need you to deliver a letter on my behalf.”

“Sorry, brother. I don’t do church business.”

“This isn’t church business. It’s my business. Private business.”

Michelangelo tossed the rest of his tomato across the garden and wiped his hands of the juices.

“What kind of private business?”

Gabriel drew near his brother’s face. “Do this one thing for me, with no questions.”

Gabriel removed the letter from his shirt pocket, neatly folded and tied with silk ribbon, and handed it to Michelangelo.

“And where does this secret letter go?”

“Francisca Matias. I can give you directions to her ranch.”

Michelangelo stuffed the letter into his back pocket.

“I don’t need directions.”

He knew the location of every ranch on the outskirts of Hueco. His work at the tannery often required him to travel out of town and repair and deliver saddles.

The undeniable quality of his work under the tutelage of Abraham Alvarez, the master tanner, was fashionable and in high demand among the ranchers. Only months before his death, Juan ordered two matching saddles for himself and his daughter. Michelangelo delivered the saddles one afternoon while Francisca was off bathing in the river and therefore did not see if the whispered rumors of her paralyzing beauty were embellished or justified.

Michelangelo rode to the ranch that afternoon and tied his horse to the trough so that it could water. When he turned around, Francisca fired a bullet into the air. He dove to the ground. She wore her father's green trousers and a wide-brimmed hat with frayed edges. She was beautiful, as he suspected, but only in the way lionesses are beautiful.

"If you've come to steal the horses, I'll kill you."

Michelangelo slowly stood and lifted his hands above his head.

"I haven't come to steal the horses. I've come on behalf of my brother. He wanted me to give you a letter. That's all, and I'll be on my way."

"Who's your brother?"

"Gabriel, the church boy. He says he knows you."

She lowered the gun and lightly tapped her forehead against one of the banisters on the porch, muttering curses to herself. She knew Gabriel had sent her a love letter lacking the passion to win a heart as wild as the one beating within her chest. Her father had warned her about men before he died, saying that someone would come along and try to build a fence around her heart, but that she ought to be on the lookout for someone who could build it a pair of wings instead.

"Tell him I said to go to hell. I'm not interested. Any man who sends a love letter through his brother is a coward and any man who posts prophecies outside a church is not to be trusted."

"What are you saying?"

"Tell him I will never love him back."

Michelangelo tore into the letter to disprove her prediction. He read through Gabriel's hastily scribbled romances. In that moment, Michelangelo realized he

stood in the presence of a woman who could see into the future and remained unimpressed. His hands grew cold.

“How did you know?”

“Because he looked at me this morning the same way you are looking at me right now.”

She turned and walked inside, leaving Michelangelo scandalized. Just before he returned to his horse, she opened the door and looked out at him.

“Are you coming inside or not? I’m used to cooking for two. Don’t just stand there.”

He sat at a chair in the corner while she cooked a beef stew. The house was humble. The kitchen and sitting room were indistinguishable and anchored by three small bedrooms. Above them, the ceiling had cracked and would collapse in time if not mended. She kept a cactus in a pot on the countertop. The place had the smell of earth and awoke a strange sensuality in Michelangelo. He watched as Francisca lit one of the candles in the windowsill and checked her hair in the reflection of the glass. She took a seat at the table and laid the pistol beside her silverware. He sat across from her, sipped at the stew, and cleared his throat.

“It could use more salt.”

She glanced up at him with a carefully protected smile.

“Tell me a story,” she said.

He recalled one he heard from a Native shaman.

“Once there were two wolves of equal strength, and they were tied up with chains. And each night, their master would let them out in a pit so they could fight. So tell me, which of these wolves wins?”

She shrugged. “No one could know such a thing.”

“It’s whichever one the master feeds.”

“He must be a lunatic,” she said after a while. “What kind of man keeps wolves for pets?”

For the next two hours he recounted his adventures with Abraham Alvarez, the master tanner who once assaulted Michelangelo in the middle of the night in

a state of drunken confusion. Michelangelo hit him in the head with a block of wood and dragged him back to the tannery. Abraham believed the whole incident to be a dream and took his concerns to Brother Herman, who prayed over his subconscious. He also told her about the wedding of his cousin, when the groom choked on a chicken bone and died in front of all the guests. Then, to cap the night, he told her wayward stories of his brother's spiritual zealousness. She listened in disbelief as Michelangelo revealed that Gabriel never looked down at himself while urinating so that his purity could be maintained. At this, she nearly tipped the table over with laughter, begging Michelangelo to stop torturing her. By the time he finally left, darkness had fallen.

He walked toward his horse standing beneath the sprinkling of stars.

"Thank you for the stew and the company."

He lifted his foot into the stirrup, but Francisca grabbed his shoulders and spun him around. She kissed his lips.

"Come back to tell me what your brother says," she whispered, with her eyes closed and her breath on his neck.

"I will. Tomorrow."

"Then I will cook for two again."

Michelangelo climbed into the saddle and rode home at a sprint, whipping his horse to outrun the bandits who camped on the outskirts of town. He walked into the house with a startled look upon his face. Gabriel sat by the fireplace reading a book of anatomical illustrations and looked up at Michelangelo's entrance.

"Well?"

"Where's mother?"

"She's taking a walk. Did you deliver the letter?" He stood and walked toward Michelangelo.

"Yes."

"And did she read it?"

"No."

Gabriel paced.

"You'll go back tomorrow. I cannot go myself. I will talk to Abraham if you're concerned about missing work."

"She didn't need to read the letter," Michelangelo said.

"What does that mean?"

"She already knew what you wanted. She said no."

"No?"

"No."

Gabriel collapsed into his chair. For the first time in his life, he realized that perhaps he had misinterpreted God's plans for his life. He picked up the iron rod and stoked the flames in the fireplace.

Michelangelo left him in despair and retreated to the bedroom. He stripped off his clothing piece by piece, careful not to touch his lips with anything that could wipe away Francisca's kiss. He fell into bed with fantasies of her lying next to him and dreamt of green trousers and green eyes.

The following morning, Michelangelo returned to the ranch to find Francisca riding a stallion bareback – the same stallion named Julius Caesar that kicked her father in the head and then tore through the wooden fence. Michelangelo watched long enough to see her bucked to the ground. She retaliated by throwing a rock at Julius Caesar, who pranced about kicking his legs at the other animals.

"You ought to try a saddle," Michelangelo called.

Francisca grunted and crawled out of the round pen.

"Since you're here, you can help me mend the fence. Later, we shoot the horse and slice up his meat."

The two spent the afternoon hammering the fence back together and taunting Julius Caesar, who knew of his oncoming death but could do nothing to prevent his fate. Michelangelo told her more about his apprenticeship at the tannery and of Abraham's habit of coming to work with chunks of vomit dried to his curled beard from the previous night's tequila. She, on the other hand, explained to him her lifelong habit of sneaking outside at midnight to take note of the moon's shape.

Once they had mended the fence, Francisca went inside for the pistol. She

returned loading rounds into the revolver and brushed the hair from her face as she aimed at Julius Caesar. The murderous stallion rose up on his back legs and whinnied one final time into the brisk air. She pulled the trigger, hitting Julius in between the eyes and dropping him into the abyss of death. Francisca collapsed onto the dust, and Michelangelo rushed to hold her in his arms as she cried the final tears for her father.

The weeks leading up to the Black Tooth Festival found Michelangelo avoiding his duties at the tannery in order to arrive at Francisca's ranch early in the morning and stay until the moon pacified her at midnight. The two spent their days mending what was and was not broken around the ranch. After work each day, they went inside for glasses of lemonade, which both satisfied their thirst and made their breath sweeter before they proceeded to kiss passionately at the kitchen table until midnight, when the moon rocked Francisca to sleep.

They were the best days of Michelangelo's life.

*

"Where have you been?"

Gabriel emerged from a corridor as Michelangelo crept through the dark house.

"Nowhere."

"For over a week you've been coming home at this hour."

"I've been working late, that's all."

Gabriel had been planning a trap since that morning, when Abraham Alvarez showed up on the front porch demanding to know the whereabouts of his pupil. The tanner could not be consoled. Abraham had invested heavily in training Michelangelo to open a brand-new tannery on the opposite side of town, putting a swift end to the rivalry efforts of Kerry Bean and Sons. All of a sudden, he said, Michelangelo neglected his duties without a word of warning.

"Abraham came by this morning. He said you haven't been working. And I'd

like to know where you've been."

Michelangelo remained silent.

"I cannot make you become an honorable member of this society. Nor can I make you into a true Christian. But I can request it of you. I don't care what you have been doing. I don't need to know, because God keeps track of these things."

"Then it's settled," Michelangelo said. "You can ask God when you see him."

*

When the sun rose over Hueco, the brothers walked the streets with their laughter waking everyone in the square. Brother Nehemiah blew a ceremonial trumpet to wake those who slept through the chaos of their mirth and then pulled the corks from the beer kegs brewed in the basement of the mission. One by one, oil lamps were lit in the windows of the tenement buildings surrounding the square. Curious faces peered out onto the dawn world. The streets filled with running children, artisans of specialty breads, percussionists, amateur magicians, and the best and worst citizens of Hueco. Painters made hurried portraits of entire families, hallucinogens sold in shadowed alleys, and the soldiers gave shooting lessons to children who paid by the bullet. The first act to take the stage was a team of acrobats from the Caribbean who wore matching blue costumes. They took their positions to thunderous applause as Gabriel mounted the stage to welcome the citizens to the festivities.

"This year's Black Tooth Festival is sure to expand your mind and your soul," he began. "It is in the spirit of our great founder, Ferris Cabrera, that we join together with the Natives in camaraderie and joyous celebration. Our first group of entertainers will test the limits of our imaginations with their acrobatic delights."

Gabriel fell silent.

He looked over the crowd to see Michelangelo and Francisca intertwining their fingers as they walked along sharing a roasted ear of corn. He went down to one

knee and fought to regain his breath. Thankfully, one of the acrobats rushed to the front of the stage before Gabriel fell onto his side. The crowd murmured in disbelief. Some attributed Gabriel's near fatality to the trickery of Satan, no doubt brought along by the Caribbean entertainers. Barto brought a chalice of drinking water and tipped it down Gabriel's throat with tenderness.

"Is this about the girl you love?"

Gabriel nodded.

"Forget her forever. Pretend she's dead. That's the only way you will ever find happiness."

Barto watched as they carried Gabriel through the labyrinth and into the mission. He then turned to see Michelangelo and Francisca exchanging kisses between each bite of corn as they danced in the wake of an accordion player.

*

After arriving back at the ranch, Michelangelo lifted Francisca off the horse. She wrapped her legs around his waist and kissed the skin beneath his ear. He felt the warmth of her thighs through the thin fabric of her summer dress and knew she was wearing nothing underneath.

"Take me inside so the whole world doesn't have to see us making love," she said.

They burst through the back door. Michelangelo hurled her onto the kitchen table. She spun him around and sank her claws into his neck, drawing blood.

"We were always meant to be together," she said.

He wrapped his hand on the collar of her dress and then ripped it down the middle, causing her to purr with delight.

The chaotic lovemaking continued all afternoon. Between that time, the two devastated the kitchen table, dismantled a couch, scandalized Juan's former bed, and shivered on the front porch as they consummated their love after sunset. They paused one hour for Michelangelo to sweep up the broken dishes and Francisca to

cook a horsemeat stew. Francisca handed Michelangelo a spoon and they ate straight from the pot like savages.

“We ought to regain our strength for later. I’m already feeling light-headed.”

“I think that’s the way it is supposed to be. If you felt fine we wouldn’t be doing it right.”

In the days to follow, Michelangelo and Francisca broke nearly everything in the house with their rambunctious lovemaking. The kitchen table cracked down the middle. The porch collapsed. By accident, she pushed him through a window. The mattresses remained damp from the onslaught of perspiration.

“I think I love you.” Michelangelo caressed her cheek. “I just came to the realization that my heart will never belong to anyone else.”

Francisca kissed his forehead and pressed her thumb into his chin.

“Then maybe you ought to move in here with me and start calling me your wife.”

“My brother would die. For now, we have to be happy with the way things are.” Michelangelo revealed a purple flower from behind his back and handed it to her along with a cactus needle.

She stood up and pinned the flower onto the wall alongside the others. Michelangelo picked a flower for her each day on the riverbank and then romanced her with poetry comparing her soul to the beauty of the flower. Francisca ground up a single petal into a potion they mixed with water. The magical water delivered them the stamina they would need to continue loving one another with such ferocity. She sat down on the floor, her bare back resting against Michelangelo’s legs.

“They’re going to raise my father from the dead tomorrow.”

Michelangelo stroked her hair. “I hope you don’t believe that.”

Michelangelo knew of Brother Herman’s lofty ambitions to raise the dead. With his own eyes he had seen the many books of anatomy and spiritual healing sent home with Gabriel each day. His brother obsessed over the diagrams while warming his feet by the fire.

"I want to believe it's possible," Francisca said quietly. "I want my father back."

"As soon as Satan realizes you're hungry for bullshit, he'll feed it to you for the rest of your life."

Francisca shrugged. "One way or the other. If I find out they lied to my face, I'll kill them all. Every one of them."

She hummed her father's favorite song.

*

Brother Herman spent the night on his knees. He prayed without ceasing for the faith required to raise a man from the dead, beckoning God to poke a hole in his head and implant the wisdom of the ancients. Gabriel took it upon himself to shake the old man out of his trance.

"Brother Herman, today is the day. Brother Herman?"

Herman lurched upward and clutched Gabriel by the throat. Tears streamed down the old man's face as spittle gathered at the corners of his lips. He released the death grip as he came back into contact with reality.

"Forgive me, Gabriel. I was just sitting at the right hand of God. The journey back from heaven was emotionally stimulating." The old stallion wiped his face on the sleeve of his robe and patted Gabriel's shoulder with assurance. "Tell me. What is our prophecy for today?"

"Elijah and the slaughtering of the priests of Baal."

"It makes no sense."

"Should we expect an assassination attempt?"

Brother Herman laughed. The high-pitched bellowing almost caused Barto to suffer a heart attack from three rooms away.

"Don't play with me, boy," Herman said. "The day someone in this city kills me is the day I will be escorted to Hell by a caravan of demons. It's impossible. We are beloved servants."

The crowds had gathered early in the morning to view the dead body of Juan

Matias and ensure its authenticity. Even the other entertainers put their acts aside to witness the promised miracle. Everyone knew about the horse trainer's death and the attempts of Brother Herman and Gabriel the Savior to raise him up from the dead. Few in that gathering doubted the capabilities of Herman's healing hands. Their sentiments were strengthened at the unlikely appearance of storm clouds and low rumbles of thunder. Others had witnessed his healing firsthand, as his abilities to save children from the torments of smallpox could never be overstated.

Gabriel mounted the stage next to Brother Herman. The elder removed his sandals and placed both of his hands on Juan's face. The crowd watched in complete silence as Gabriel took a bucket of water and washed Juan's cold feet. He then stepped back and fell to his knees, praying for Herman to accomplish the impossible.

Brother Herman lifted his hand to the heavens and cried out in desperation, "Raise him up, O God!"

The color drained out of his face, creating a spectacle that would forever haunt the nightmares of the children in attendance. He babbled through the book of Haggai, spitting onto Juan's body between verses.

"Get up, Juan! Abandon thy temporary death!"

From the crowd, someone laughed. The disease of doubt spread until a chorus of gay voices filled the square, mocking Herman. Juan's body remained motionless.

"Not now. Not after all that I have sacrificed," Herman murmured.

Herman's body trembled under the weight of his failure. Blood ran down from the ducts of his eyes, carving a path through the dust on his cheeks.

From the back of the crowd, Francisca Matias pulled her father's pistol out of her trousers and pointed at Brother Herman's head.

She pulled the trigger.

The sound of the gunshot ripped through the air and caused a panic among those who stood near. Herman tried to shield himself with the bucket used for

cleaning Juan's feet, but the bullet passed through the ceramic and entered his skull.

The soldiers patrolling the festivities identified Francisca as the assassin and fired thirty-nine bullets into her slender body under the command of Captain Paul Jordan. The first bullet fired into her chest may as well have been fired into the chest of Michelangelo, because he would never live again as he had with Francisca. The following thirty-eight bullets shredded her body until she was unrecognizable.

Michelangelo collapsed on top of her bloodied corpse. He lifted her up in his arms and begged God to save her.

Just then, Herman fell over on the stage, dead.

*

Michelangelo buried the father and daughter Matias outside the ranch house next to the bones of Julius Caesar. He placed her corpse into a coffin lined with leather and filled with all of the flowers she had pinned to the walls.

From that day on, he lived in the ranch house as a hermit.

Michelangelo passed the year of grieving by sitting on the broken furniture and lying on the beds still wet with perspiration. The discomforts gave him a constant reminder of his passionate days spent with Francisca. He shed tears every time his dinner slid off the kitchen table. His beard finally grew without patches. He maintained its shape with rushed strokes from a pocketknife, giving him the look of a bandit. Gabriel dared to journey out to the ranch house on several occasions, twice accompanied by Barto, to try and coax Michelangelo back into civilization.

"Mother would like to see you," Gabriel said, standing on the porch. "She's all alone now that I live at the mission."

Michelangelo leaned against the doorway in his long red underwear, chewing on a piece of tree bark.

"This is my home now."

“You cannot be happy here. The memories must haunt you.”

It was true. He had been antagonized by memories both real and imaginary. He tried to recall the events of the morning she was shot by the soldiers. If only he had made it clear that Brother Herman was an outright liar, she might have remained at the ranch house to make love. Had he anticipated Francisca taking the pistol to the ceremony, he could have secretly unloaded the bullets. Michelangelo walked in circles in the middle of the night, dreading the whispers that claimed he killed her. Four times he flipped a coin to determine if he would go on living, and four times the fates taunted him with another day.

“If I go back to town, I’ll have to see the place where they shot her down.”

“She murdered Brother Herman. People must pay for the crimes they choose to commit.”

“She did the whole world a favor and they killed her for it.”

Gabriel sighed and placed a hand on his brother’s shoulder. He would never be able to express the deep cavity that Herman’s death dug into his own heart. In some ways, he could relate to love parted by death. That man coaxed him into the church and encouraged him every step along the way to his righteousness. Now Herman lay six feet deep in the ground, buried beneath the most lavish tombstone in the cemetery.

“We will welcome you back with open arms. Everyone is ready to forgive you. I have watched you fall further and further away from grace. I cannot in good conscience allow you to continue to do so.”

Michelangelo mourned Francisca’s death for an entire year.

On the morning of the one-year anniversary, Barto traveled out to the house with a basket of fruit in one hand and leading a diseased mule with the other. He knocked on the door and waited.

Michelangelo opened the door wearing the long red underwear which defined him during those days of solitary suffering.

“I’ve come to bring you fruit and tell you it’s time to move on.”

“I know that.”

“Starting today, you must replace her in your heart with something else. She’s no longer here on earth, Michelangelo. She is in heaven with the Lord.”

“No, she’s buried in the ground around the corner.”

His seclusion squashed all belief in heaven and hell. If there was a heaven, he believed God to be so burdened by the millions of dead bodies knocking on His door in the middle of the night that He had been forced to become inhospitable. If God existed, he wished they could agree to ignore one another.

“Replace her in your heart,” Barto said. “This madness must come to an end. Enjoy your fruit and put on some clothes.”

Barto hopped on the back of the mule and ran it up into the mountains, where he camped for weeks at a time to draw nearer to the Lord. Michelangelo sat on the porch for many hours eating grapefruits and considering how he could overcome his bondage to grief. He collected the seeds of the fruit and then scattered them across the yard, wondering if they would ever take root.

*

Michelangelo’s fortunes changed on the day an anonymous letter arrived on the porch of the ranch house, delivered under the cover of night. He picked up the letter the next morning and read the single line: “Come and claim your new lover. Lacy Ranch, after midnight.”

Venus Lacy, the sister to Sylvester and the daughter of Ricardo, wrote the letter on the same day Francisca was butchered. She had always loved Michelangelo, even when he was still a child and she in the prime of her womanly beauty. The roots of her love were nourished by the mythology of his birth and the widely held notion that he was some kind of king. She lived as a great matriarch who never birthed a family. From afar, she watched Michelangelo grow into a man, complete with firm shoulders and his bandit beard, and she sketched pictures of him in her private notebooks. Each Christmas, she asked her father to buy her a special gift from the tannery, demanding it be Michelangelo who both made and delivered

the gift.

Michelangelo was never blind to her affections. But he knew a woman so beautiful, and so alone, must be suffering from insanity. Despite his doubts, he could never deny how well she had been preserved by both time and the nurturing hands of her father, Ricardo. She was still the beautiful woman adored by suitors who Ricardo drove away with his whip made of horsehair.

“So this is the way it was always supposed to be,” Michelangelo said, reading over the letter. “Today, I bear the sins of the world.”

He washed his pants by the well so they would not smell like the sweat of another woman, and he rubbed sugar beneath his armpits to make himself aromatically irresistible. Just before leaving, he picked a flower to present to Venus. Michelangelo left the ranch at midnight and crossed the Orange River beneath a full moon, riding into town at breakneck speed.

When he arrived at the Lacy Ranch, he crawled through an open window and noticed a figure beneath the blankets of the nearby bed. He slipped under the covers and took hold of the body exuding such magnificent heat next to him.

To his immense surprise, Ricardo Lacy began talking in his sleep.

“Sylvester, my boy. Have you come home at last?”

Old man Lacy no longer resembled the vigorous founder of yesteryear. The dreams of his life had been ravaged by a series of disappointments. His illusions of palaces and lordships remained archived in the journals kept beneath his bed. From the day Ricardo arrived in Hueco, he sketched diagrams of how he would expand the city on a system of grids. The world was not yet ready for the revolution. The rulers of Hueco never adopted his plans, causing him to sink into seclusion. The birth of Gabriel and Michelangelo put the final nails in the coffin of his anonymity.

Michelangelo pried himself out of Ricardo’s grasp and backed toward the window to escape. A whisper pierced through the darkness.

“Hail, King Michelangelo!”

Venus stood naked in the doorway, holding a candle and wearing a tiara made

of imitation silver. Michelangelo followed her down the hallway and into her quarters. She shut the door and turned around to show him all she had to offer. He thought she looked like a well-preserved porcelain doll, dusted each day on the mantelpiece. She outweighed Francisca by thirty pounds, with thighs powerful enough to crush a man.

Michelangelo wasted no time. He spun her onto the bed and wedged himself between her legs like a wild rabbit.

“Don’t say a word,” he instructed. “Time doesn’t care about us.”

*

Michelangelo wandered onto King Street by accident.

The lures of whores and gambling had never called to his passions, but now, he stood in the epicenter of Hueco’s sinfulness. The entanglement of streets and shelters of King Street had been born around the same time as Michelangelo, when the wilderness vagabonds wandered into Hueco to prey on the miracle seekers. They laid a road and put up some roofs to protect the whores from sunburn. The unofficial architect of the project was T.Q. Rafferty, a man who believed that in all aspects of life, speed was more important than quality. He gathered whatever building materials he could find—sheets of metal, poles, discarded wood, bent nails—and organized a campaign to erect the maze of streets where men could seek to erect their passions. None were surprised when news came that T.Q. was killed by a chunk of adobe that fell from the wall above his bed and crushed his skull. His legacy was upheld by a world of clotheslines draped between second-story windows, streets with no names or numbers, and a weathervane that did not turn due to the rust in its hinges.

As soon as Michelangelo stepped onto the main thoroughfare, he bumped into a half-naked man running from a whore who carried a butcher’s knife. Michelangelo leapt out of the way as the man escaped into an alley. The prostitute hurled the blade into a wall.

“What are you staring at?” she asked Michelangelo.

He liked her at once. She had natural curls in her hair and almond eyes too large for her face. Not a trace of fat could be found on her body, and she had all the marks of poverty, with meager breasts and a misshapen buttock.

“This is no place for boys like you. This is the place where people come to lose their souls.”

“Lucky for me, I have no soul,” Michelangelo replied.

She examined him for a moment.

“Very well. Come along.”

She led Michelangelo through darkened corridors, beneath endless lines of wet underpants drying in the warm air. Michelangelo could taste infection in the air. He could not tell where one building ended and another began. The whore finally stopped at a door painted bright red and guarded by a dwarf named Earl who carried a pistol in his belt. She led Michelangelo into a den of a dozen harlots. Half of them were asleep, and the other half stumbled around drunk trying to sort their earnings into the jars kept beside their beds of rags. The women separated their beds with hanging curtains of velvet. Two blind men played violins in the corner. The sad melodies they wove sucked the eroticism from the air and replaced it with melancholia.

When they arrived at Emilia’s space, she tore a piece of stale bread off a loaf and handed it to Michelangelo.

“My name is Emilia.”

“I’m Michelangelo.”

“Yes, I know. Brother to the prophet Gabriel.”

“Brothers by blood alone.”

Emilia lay down on the bed and patted the space beside her.

“If you want, we can do some business.”

“I don’t have any money.”

“Then come back tomorrow with money. I don’t work for free unless I’m in love.”

Michelangelo explained to her the tragic tale of his lost love and made clear the impossibility of him ever loving someone else. He assured Emilia that his needs were purely carnal. His need for inner fulfillment had been squashed by thirty-nine bullets in the body of his beloved Francisca. The magnetic lure of tragedy drew the other whores from their beds. By the time Michelangelo reached the pinnacle of the story, when he placed the wreath of flowers around Francisca's head before lowering her into the earth, he was so crowded by tearful whores that he could scarcely move. They hung about his shoulders and longed for what he had once known: true love.

"If that's the case, then you can come out back with me right now," Emilia said. "I will make you forget every sad thing in the world."

She led Michelangelo into an alley filled with trash and discarded clothing and worked tricks on his body he had never imagined possible. She invited him to stay the night in the den of harlots to regain his strength, and he slept with his arm draped over Emilia's bosom throughout the night.

He would lay his head on the same pillow for the next year.

During his days, Michelangelo enchanted the whores with tales about his miraculous childbirth. He also befriended the blind musicians, and more than once was featured as the singer of their melancholy songs. The women grew to love him as a brother and sought him for protection and comfort when the darkness of doubt assailed them. He collected debts on their behalf and fashioned leather bags to store their belongings. In turn, they provided him with an endless rotation of sexual partners, never once requiring him to pay for their favors.

Emilia never grew jealous from sharing Michelangelo's body. She did, however, hold a special place for him in her heart. It was not unusual for her to ambush him in a dark alley and whisper how much she loved him while they kissed passionately beneath the midnight moon. Other nights, he snuck off to the Lacy Ranch to practice his new tricks on Venus, who believed that one day she would marry Michelangelo and they would become the King and Queen of Hueco.

One night, as Michelangelo dressed in a velvet robe sewn together by Venus,

Ricardo burst into the room, swinging his whip of horsehair. The first strike slashed Michelangelo across the face, forever leaving a scar and marring the purity of his youth.

“I’ll kill you!” Ricardo shouted, cornering Michelangelo.

Michelangelo met the old man’s eyes. Ricardo’s rage melted into confusion.

“Sylvester?” he asked. “Have you come home to me?”

Michelangelo struggled to his feet.

“Speak to me, Sylvester.” Ricardo dropped the whip. He wrapped his rancher’s hands around Michelangelo’s face. “Oh my boy, restored from the flames. Come down from your mountains of shame!”

“I’m not who you think I am,” Michelangelo said. “Your boy is dead, and I am alive.”

He dashed out the front door and ran all the way back to the Matias Ranch. He crossed the front porch and opened the unlocked door.

II

Gabriel awoke one morning with an epiphany. He swung his legs off the side of the bed and kissed his hands.

“Teach the city how to die so that they can finally know how to live.”

After this revelation, he did not leave his chamber for a week as he fasted and prepared a comprehensive plan to teach everyone how to die. The outline called for daily readings of the crucifixion, paired with stories of the deaths of saints in faraway lands. Gabriel would also display two dying cornstalks outside the labyrinth so that all who dared enter mass would have their attention focused on death. Absolute confession of sin would be essential. Every parishioner must disclose their deepest failures. The plan would culminate in a religious ceremony in which Gabriel himself, after fasting for a period of forty days, would be buried under a thin layer of dirt and rise up in a service riveting with symbolism.

As he put the final touches on his plan, he could not help but think Brother Herman would be proud.

Gabriel gathered the other brothers outside the horse stables to announce the plan. Lately, attendance had dipped. Gabriel attributed the waning enthusiasm on the mosquitoes. The reality of the decreasing numbers had nothing to do with flying bugs and everything to do with a cultural insurrection. A Native movement began only a few weeks before under the leadership of Bearpaw, a charismatic teenager who was blind in his left eye, to try and coax the tribesmen back into the wild to live in the ways of their forefathers. The Natives had not been so divided since the founding of Hueco. Gabriel blew a bugle over the fields and drew in the other brothers like cattle coming to feed. Barto arrived last, as usual.

“What’s the excuse this time, old one?” Gabriel demanded.

“I was cleaning my wounds. Forgive my tardiness.”

Barto had been attacked by a mountain lion two days before on his weekly walk to bring good tidings to the poor living on the outskirts of town. The mountain lion leapt on his back, believing Barto to be an easy meal. The old monk fell to the ground limp and in prayer. The lion mauled him badly, but when he opened his eyes, the cat lay dead with its throat slashed. Many of the brothers laughed on hearing the story from the elder. They changed their tune when Barto rode into town dragging a dead lion through the dust.

“We have gathered to discuss a new vision for the mission. I was delivered an epiphany from the Lord about the direction we are to take. Our focus will shift to learning how to die so that we may know how to live. It will require the fullness of faith. Leave your tools on the ground. We will no longer work the crops. May they wither in the sun!”

Barto cleared his throat. “And what of those who depend on these crops for survival? Half of those who attend mass only do so in exchange for provision.”

“Then we will give them food so they never hunger again. We will fill their cups so they never thirst again.”

“And how will we eat? The Lord provides to those who provide for themselves.”

“I suggest you revisit the scriptures, old one, before proclaiming your wayward philosophies. We have no right to molest the Word.”

All but Barto dropped their tools and entered the mission, where they stripped their labor robes and put on their leisure robes. Some took siestas while others excused by horseback to the hot springs. Only Barto disobeyed the orders. He picked up a hoe and worked the crops until sunset.

That night, Barto snuck a meal of black beans and corn before studying scriptures about the responsibility of work. Everything he encountered contradicted Gabriel’s proclamations. He decided to take a pilgrimage into the wilderness so he could pray to God without distraction. Barto had no possessions but the clothes on his back and the black sombrero left from the suicidal founder

Ferris Cabrera, and so packing was not only unnecessary, but impossible.

He was stretching his legs for the journey when Gabriel appeared in the doorway.

"The others told me you stayed behind this evening to work the crops."

"Yes."

"I made it very clear that we must show our parishioners death so that they will have a new appreciation for life. This is a message from above. We must act in solidarity."

"I don't doubt the message," Barto said. "Only your interpretation."

Gabriel lifted his eyebrows, amused by the accusation. "I've come to ask you to go to confession. The others are signing up as we speak. I would like you to go first. A dark spirit moves within you, Barto."

After his embarrassing confession to Brother Herman so many years before, Barto had never returned to confession. The very idea of it brought confusing and humiliating images into his mind, and discouraged him from further evaluation of the tombs of his memory.

He shook his head. "I'm leaving tonight. On a pilgrimage. I will travel the wilderness, just as Christ traveled the wilderness prior to His ministry."

Gabriel could not have been more pleased at the news. His only adversary in the mission would be gone. He guided Barto down the hallway and interrupted the sign-up session to announce the departure of the only remaining man from the founding of the mission. The brothers snickered at the thought of Barto and his diseased mule surviving in the wilderness for more than a day.

*

The Native movement led by Bearpaw gained momentum on the following midnight when a band of painted warriors stormed into town on horseback and stole ten children. A vigilante party of twenty-five civilians tried to hunt down the warriors and rescue the children. Five returned alive. Bearpaw sent the five

survivors back into Hueco on a single horse with scalps hanging around their necks. They carried a note from Bearpaw that said, "If your Christ is to live here, He will also die here."

Gabriel posted a prophecy outside the labyrinth to pacify the fears of the civilians.

Bearpaw then twisted the nipples of public sentiment when he returned the ten children in the middle of the night and tied them to Ricardo Lacy's barbed wire fence. The Native revolutionaries had soaked the children's hands in blood and tattooed crosses on their chests. A sign hanging above them read, "The future rulers of Hueco. Bow before your Kings and Queens."

The following morning, fifty more Natives escaped into the wilderness to join the revolution.

"Enough is enough," Gabriel declared to the other brothers. "It's time to request help from the soldiers. Who will accompany me to the presidio?"

"I'll come along," Brother Gary Sullivan III announced. "I've always had a way with men in uniform."

Until then, the soldiers believed the conflict to be spiritual in nature and therefore the responsibility of the mission. Gabriel never trusted the soldiers. He believed if they spent half as much time protecting the town as they did frolicking with the whores on King Street, Hueco would be the safest town in the world. Gabriel and Gary Sullivan III walked the two miles to the presidio, a compound of barracks and prison cells hidden behind a six-foot wall that surrounded the entire property. The spartan building rose up like a child's building blocks, with each one smaller than the one before until it stopped with the smallest, which is where Captain Paul Jordan sat for hours at a time looking over the town and twirling his pistol around his finger.

The brothers approached the captain.

Captain Jordan listened to the request while spitting tobacco juice on his Persian rug. He lived on the outer rims of extremity and did nothing in moderation. He went to bed at sundown or stayed up all night. He ordered

chastity or orgies. He avoided alcohol for a week only to down an entire gallon of whiskey in a single sitting. One bullet or thirty-nine held little difference in his mind.

He agreed to Gabriel's request, but only if no one would complain when he brought back Bearpaw's head on a stick and burned it in the center of the city.

Gabriel agreed.

Captain Jordan and his soldiers rode off into the mountains, firing their pistols like madmen. The soldiers found the Natives napping under a grove of fruit trees, which Captain Jordan set aflame. Those who tried to escape into the mountains were run down and then dragged behind horses until dead. The rest of the revolutionaries, numbering close to seventy, were lined up and executed.

Captain Jordan returned to the labyrinth driving a wagon piled up with mangled bodies. At the sound of celebratory gunfire, Gabriel came out to identify Bearpaw among the dead. He sifted through the corpses.

"He isn't here."

"If he isn't here, then he wasn't there," Captain Jordan replied.

"No one is safe while that maniac is alive. You have failed us yet again, Captain."

Gabriel slammed his fist against the walls, begging for God to enhance his vision.

Deep in his heart he heard the whisper, "Teach them how to die so they will know how to live."

*

Michelangelo spent the following weeks searching the riverbed for the flowers he had never given to Francisca. Whenever he discovered a new species, he rushed back to Francisca's grave and planted it in the soil as an apology for his licentiousness.

One day as he returned from the river, he noticed the grapefruit trees growing

in the front yard. He recalled the fateful day so long ago when Barto brought him a basket of fruit, and he cast the seeds of a grapefruit into the yard. Now, it had blossomed into an orchard. He ate one of the fruits like the whores taught him to do on King Street—whole, and without peeling it. He wiped his hands on his trousers and belched.

“That was the best thing I have ever eaten,” he announced.

Michelangelo gathered the seeds from the fruit in a tin can and planted them ten paces apart from one another. He picked the rest of the ripened fruits and rode into town to share them with his mother.

She lived in the bottom of a valley on the far side of the mission, just past the crops. After the miraculous birth, Herman raised up the funds to build the virgin a place to rest and nurture the sons who would deliver Hueco from evil. The dwelling was simple, with a garden out back and great windows looking out toward the mission fields. She relished watching the brothers struggle in the heat of summer. Often she heckled them from her rooftop. When Michelangelo arrived to her house, a hot meal casserole had just been left on the front porch with a note requesting Arecelia to intercede on behalf of a dying chicken. Michelangelo brought the meal inside along with the fruits.

“How did you get that scar on your face?”

“Ricardo Lacy hit me with a whip.”

“I’ll talk to him. That’s no way to act.”

She was as beautiful as ever. Sylvester Lacy himself would have had trouble distinguishing her from the young maiden who enraptured his lusts from a bedroom window. She maintained her youthful physique by chasing rabbits and rearranging the furniture.

“You’ve brought me grapefruits,” she said.

“It’s why I’m here.”

Michelangelo cut up a fruit and offered it to his mother. She took a bite and spit it out the window.

“These are God’s grapefruits.”

“No. They’re mine. Growing in front of my house as we speak.”

Arecelia packed her socks in a bag. “I’m coming to live with you. That way I can eat the grapefruits and keep you from being hit by whips. I’ve let this go on for long enough.”

“Very well, so long as you stay out of my way. You should know by now that I am a busy man.”

By the time they arrived at the ranch, a red moon had risen over the house. Arecelia did not go to bed, as Michelangelo hoped she would, but walked through the house rearranging the furniture.

“It looks like two bulls got loose in this house,” she said. “Everything is broken. You ought to be ashamed of yourself.”

She then wandered outside and sprinkled water on the graves of the Matias family, believing it would quench the thirst of the dead. Arecelia stayed awake all night, calculating how many footsteps were required to walk to the perimeter of the property.

He disregarded her madness and spent the morning outlining plans for a grapefruit empire.

*

Michelangelo and Arecelia awoke each day at dawn to work the trees.

Arecelia’s experience maintaining her gardens proved to be beneficial, and Michelangelo could not keep up with her incomparable pace. She encouraged him to think of work as pleasure while they ate grapefruits for lunch in the shade. At night, she rubbed his aching shoulders with snakeskin oil. To his knowledge, she never slept. She floated through the house as a phantom and moved the furniture from place to place, just as she had while living at the mission.

Michelangelo eventually gathered enough fruits to haul them to town in a wagon. He stopped a half-mile short of the city and whipped the blankets off the covered fruits. The miraculous scent was carried on the back of the wind and into

every window of Hueco. Within the hour, a line of dying Natives stood beyond the wagon waiting on their turn to purchase fruits. They bargained with Michelangelo and showcased their emaciated children so he might show them mercy.

"If my child doesn't eat today, he will die. We already ate the dog. And the neighbor's dog, too," one woman explained. "What a shame that it's come to this."

He heard similar tales of carnivorous horror throughout the day. One thing became clear: the Natives would reject the decrees of the mission and resort to the immoralities of survival. In his most fiery sermon to date, Gabriel stood in the center of town on a box and promised everyone that abundance lay on the other side of suffering, despite the growing masses who pleaded with him to put an end to the madness and nurture the crops. Michelangelo had seen enough. He toppled the rest of the fruits on the ground and drove into Hueco at breakneck speeds as the Natives clambered for the abandoned fruits. He did not stop until he arrived at Gabriel's window.

"Gabriel! Come out here!" he shouted.

Gabriel emerged from the shadows of his bedroom in such a devastated physical state that Michelangelo hardly recognized him. His cheeks sunk in around the outline of his teeth. His gray eyes seemed pickled in their sockets.

"My God," Michelangelo said. "You're a carcass. You're a dead man."

"I'm a man of discipline. Flesh is of the world and I am of the spirit."

"I've come to ask you to stop starving your people. Just now I've seen a town full of skeletons."

"A man like you cannot be expected to understand. The brink of death is actually the brink of life."

"You've lost your way. Your only job is to feed the hungry."

Gabriel tapped on Michelangelo's chest with the chiseled tip of his fingernail.

"Revisit the scriptures so you don't pervert them. Christ spoke of living food. Not crops. Not bread. But the substance of life eternal. I am clear. I am of sound mind. This is the kingdom. And I am a willing worker for the harvest."

"If you don't feed them, then I will."

"With what? Tales of your debauchery?"

Michelangelo mounted the wagon. He spit in the palm of his hand and held it up at his brother.

"With grapefruits."

He whipped the reins and sped out of town in a cloud of dust.

*

Emilia the whore arrived at the Matias Ranch carrying a baby. She was in such a state of flummox that Arcelia had to stabilize her with warm milk. She took Emilia to the bedroom and laid her down.

"Where is he?" Emilia asked.

"How should I know? He's a wayward man."

"And now he will be the father of your granddaughter."

Arcelia's eyes lit up with joy.

Emilia realized she was pregnant with Michelangelo's child only days after he left King Street. The conception not only threatened the source of her livelihood, but also brought an unbearable sickness. The blind musicians told her the child was sour, and, thus, something to woe. The bulge appeared after a few months, and the soldiers abandoned her pleasures for fear she would claim them to be the father and bring scandal on their military careers. After nine months of destitution, Emilia birthed the baby in the same damp alley where she assaulted Michelangelo with her love. She returned to the den of harlots with the baby still attached to her umbilical cord. One of the blind musicians completed the procedure while the other played a melancholy waltz.

Emilia handed the baby to Arcelia.

"Tell him her name is Esther. And tell him I cannot stay in Hueco any longer, or else they'll string me up."

"Why's that?"

“Because I killed a man who owed me money. Not everyone escapes.”

Arecelia wished Emilia well as she guided her out the front door and pointed her in the direction of the mountain path.

“If you ever come back around, we’ll eat grapefruits together,” Arecelia said while waving goodbye and bouncing Esther on her knee.

Michelangelo returned to the ranch to find Arecelia sitting on the porch, allowing a baby to suckle on her breast. She wore nothing but a pair of trousers and whistled a hymn she wrote long ago to the Apostle Paul.

“What now?”

“Some whore brought her over. She said the child belongs to you. The name is Esther. Have a look at those eyes, and you’ll understand.”

With one glance he had no doubts. He picked up his daughter and headed out to the fields.

*

Neither Michelangelo nor Arecelia knew how difficult it would be to raise a child. When Arecelia birthed her twins, she was so occupied by the presence of pilgrims and other admirers that Barto nurtured the children and battled away their sicknesses with his fervent prayers. Even when they grew older, Arecelia never took on her motherly duties because those who still believed in the Immaculate Conception cooked them meals each week and made sure the twins were not run over in the street by wild horses. When Esther coughed for the first time, Michelangelo stuck his finger down her throat to find out why.

The fits of coughing were amateur sicknesses compared to what Esther would face in the decades to come. The sour belly of Emilia’s pregnancy promised a lifetime of health deficiencies for Esther. The medical realities pointed to the inheritance of a venereal disease she had contracted from Emilia, who contracted it from a soldier named Hubert, who contracted it from Ivana the Sensation, who contracted it from an unnamed suitor during a night of drunken festivities at the

hot springs. Each week, they expected the child to give up the ghost, and were mystified when she emerged from the sickness only to enter into another.

"I have to make a trip to the river," Arecelia claimed. "That's where to find all the smoothest stones."

"Why do you need a smooth stone?"

"So I can heat it over an open flame and put it on Esther's forehead. She can't see anymore because her brain is cold."

She returned that afternoon soaking wet and carrying a stone from the deepest bed of the river. Arecelia had come to the realization that the glowing orange stones at the bottom of the river held magical properties. All day she warmed the stone over a campfire while Michelangelo pruned the trees. That evening, they tested the stone on Esther's head and were relieved at the return of her sight.

"That's that," Arecelia said. "We had better get back to the trees."

The dedication to the trees paid off. They purchased extra wagons, crates, specialty bowls, and monogrammed tools. They surrounded the orchard with a wooden fence and placed traps throughout the fields to capture the varmints that bit chunks out of the fruits. In a year's time, everyone in Hueco knew of the great success of Michelangelo and his mother. They anticipated the one weekend a month when Michelangelo drove his wagon into town and hired the musicians of King Street to entertain the crowds while they waited to purchase their grapefruits.

After one such trip, Michelangelo returned to the ranch house to find the place empty, which was not unusual in those days because Arecelia took great pleasure in chasing the rabbits in the fields. He followed Esther's cry to the bedroom and opened the door to find Arecelia tied to the bed with a young Coahuiltecan holding a knife to her throat with one hand and eating a grapefruit with the other. The Native's hair was tied into a ponytail behind his back, and his cheeks were tattooed with war paint.

"Out of all the houses in Hueco, you chose the wrong one," Michelangelo declared, cracking his knuckles. "I'm going to rip out your heart."

"I need a place to hide."

The Native pressed the knife against Arecelia's neck, drawing out a line of blood. Michelangelo calmly lit another candle so everyone could see more clearly.

"Tell me, who are you hiding from?"

"Captain Jordan."

Michelangelo gulped. He would forever fill the chambers of his heart with hatred for that man who had ordered thirty-nine bullets fired into the body of his beloved Francisca. Many nights Michelangelo stumbled around the house fantasizing about hanging Captain Jordan by his feet and castrating him with the whole town in attendance.

"In that case, you can put your knife away. Have some dinner. Stay as long as you like, if you don't mind picking grapefruits. We can talk about that rotten son of a bitch Captain Jordan."

The young Native lowered the knife and followed Michelangelo into the kitchen. They stayed awake all night drinking coffee and recounting the reasons for their hatred. Michelangelo shared the story of his birth and the circus of his childhood, wept while telling the story of lost love, aroused himself with memories of the whores on King Street, and ate ten grapefruits as he summarized the miracles of plant life.

"Now it's your turn. Tell me everything I need to know about you."

"All you need to know is my name: Bearpaw."

Michelangelo had heard of the revolutionary who stole children in the middle of the night and was rumored to eat baby flesh in his secret cave. Even Michelangelo knew of the Native movement to return to the ways of their forefathers and roast the imperial dogs who impoverished them by demanding to help them. Michelangelo poured two fresh cups of coffee.

"I'm in the company of a wanted man."

"And if what you say about yourself is true, then your brother is Gabriel the prophet."

"Brothers by blood alone."

"You should know that I'll kill him if I ever have the chance."

Michelangelo sipped his coffee. "Be my guest."

*

Gabriel awoke with the premonition that the only reason no one had located the revolutionary Native, the bloodthirsty vulture who stirred up cultural divisions, was because someone in Hueco was harboring him. He knew the Matias Ranch had been checked in the past, but felt a strong sense in his heart that something was amiss. Michelangelo had been particularly silent of late and only interacted with other town members on his monthly trips to sell grapefruits.

Gabriel visited Captain Jordan in the presidio and made known his suspicions. Captain Jordan girded on his weapons without delay.

"Let's see what his insides smell like," the captain said, spitting tobacco juice on the rug.

He gathered a posse and rode onto the Matias Ranch to find Arcelia sitting in a dry bathtub in the yard, clipping Esther's fingernails.

"What's all this about?"

"We've come for Bearpaw," Captain Jordan replied. "Tell us where he's hiding so we don't spend all day and night looking."

Bearpaw leapt out of a tree with his knife drawn. He screeched and tackled Captain Jordan from the horse. The two crashed to the ground, nearly knocking Arcelia from the bathtub. Bearpaw sunk the knife into Captain Jordan's stomach and twisted the hilt. Rather than dying, the captain drew his pistol and fired a bullet into the center of Bearpaw's sternum. He fell over and died with one eye open.

Captain Jordan stood up with the blood bubbling out of his stomach and called for a rope.

"What a nuisance!" he declared, and then fainted.

They dragged Bearpaw's body through town. The children ran alongside him,

spitting on the carcass and practicing their curses. As promised, the captain cut off the revolutionary's head and placed it on a stake. Then, he doused it in kerosene and set it aflame. Captain Jordan watched the boy's skin boil as he sat down, removed his boots, and smoked a cigarette with his hand pressed against the wound in his stomach.

Later that night, Michelangelo walked in to Hueco and pulled down the mangled body of his companion. He strapped the headless corpse to his horse.

"Don't worry. Before it all ends, I'm going to kill every one of them with my bare hands. I'm going to bathe in their blood. You'll see."

The next morning, Arcelia awoke to find a fresh grave next to those of Francisca and Juan. The soil was soaked with tears and grapefruit juice.

*

Gabriel finally forfeited his plans to let the crops die when he realized men like Michelangelo could always plant seeds in the ground. None could have expected a novice farmer to produce such a bustling orchard. The people would continue to find food whether it came from the mission or not. He called an urgent meeting and entered the dining hall with the assistance of a cane. His frailty prevented him from standing on his own, as he had remained faithful to the call to abandon flesh in pursuit of the spirit. Outside the window he could see the crops bent over and trying to return to the dust from which they came.

"There is a time for everything," he said to the others. "A time for death, and a time for life. A time for sorrow, and a time for joy. The time has come now to let the crops grow again. Hueco will feast on the abundance of the earth, and we will praise God."

A moan of delight echoed throughout the dining hall. Many of the brothers were beginning to wonder if the madness would ever reach a conclusion. Only Brother Gary opposed the decision. He secretly dreamed of seeing everyone die so that he could stand outside the gates of heaven and take note of who was

admitted or turned away. The bitter old man had always suspected that over half of those professing to be Christians in Hueco would be devastated at the news of their eternal condemnation. He longed for proof.

“What of the ceremony, Brother Gabriel?” he pleaded.

Gabriel had certainly not overlooked the ceremony in which he would symbolically drop into the grave and rise again.

“Dig me a grave!” he declared.

The next day at noon, they lowered Gabriel’s stiffened body into a hole they dug outside the entrance to the labyrinth. Brother Reuben Clemente pronounced him dead, and sent out the brothers to spread the news to everyone in town. The mourning began without delay. None could remember the town without the guidance of Gabriel’s soft hand. The brothers walked the streets at their own peril. Carnivorous dogs had become a recent cause of public panic. No one had the means to feed pets, and so the dogs reverted back to the ways of their ancestors, just as the Natives had done under the leadership of Bearpaw. The brothers rallied a few hundred townsmen to the gravesite, all of them holding a candle and weeping onto the dust. The children were instructed to blow kisses into the air to ease Gabriel’s journey to heaven.

Brother Gary Sullivan stepped out before the crowd.

“The seed falls from the flower and must be buried in the ground before it can become a flower of its own. Nature teaches us that life must end before it can begin. Once, we were a people of plenty, and we thanked God. Then we were a people with nothing, and we still learned to thank God. Now, we will rise again from our graves, and God shall be glorified. Hark.”

The people of Hueco watched in a stupor as two hands gripped the ground outside the grave. Gabriel pulled himself up out of the ground. What amazed the people most was not the symbolism of the resurrection, but the fact that Gabriel’s body had been completely restored to its former state. He stood from the ground and allowed the people to touch his hands to prove that the miracle was no illusion. Even the brothers were befuddled.

"Gather your tools," Gabriel declared to the crowds. "Tonight, we are reborn."

*

Arecelia held Esther by the ankles and swung her in circles, trying to dislodge the lice that had colonized her scalp. Esther screamed with terror. Only a day before, Arecelia noticed all of the telltale signs pointing to an infestation. When she inspected the skin beneath Esther's hair, she realized an entire city of bugs was living on her granddaughter's scalp. She watched in awe as the lice carried on with advanced systems of trade and commerce, and conducted frivolous public ceremonies to honor their queen. She dipped Esther in the bathtub three different times and then squeezed grapefruit juice on her head.

"I won't have lice making a home on my granddaughter's head. This family has already been through enough."

Michelangelo watched the procedures with slight disinterest.

"You're going to kill her by trying to cure her."

"Shouldn't you be off selling your grapefruits?"

"The famine is over. Gabriel is working the crops as we speak. The only thing we can do now is to eat the rest of the fruits before they rot."

He strolled through the orchard that evening and did not return until after sunrise, waddling after a long night of gorging. The acids of one hundred grapefruits swelled in his stomach. He collapsed on the porch, lying in the fetal position until Arecelia discovered him the next morning with the juices dried to his face and his eyes wide open.

"My God," she declared. "Satan got a hold of you."

"Until he can eat one hundred grapefruits, I have a hold on him."

"Very well, my son. Me and Esther are going to chase the rabbits."

Michelangelo rolled over to see the orchard glistening in the morning sunlight. He never underestimated the great task of eating every fruit that had ripened. If he did nothing, the orchard would fall to armies of flies, or worse, to the packs of

dogs roaming the streets of Hueco. He went back to work, eating one hundred grapefruits a day for ten straight days. He ignored the armadillos caught in his traps. He disregarded the broken fence where the hogs had torn it down. All he cared about was eating the grapefruits. Arcelia warned that he would become fat and hairy from such insanity, but the exploits had the opposite effect. If he ate one hundred, he defecated one hundred and one. After ten days of gorging himself, he was on the verge of starvation. His ribs showed through his skin, and his elbows were as sharp as knives. The juices caused his lips to withdraw, exposing his gums. He resembled Gabriel at the height of the famine.

“This has to stop,” Arcelia proclaimed. “Grapefruits are no way for a man to die.”

He ignored her and staggered back to the fields. By the end of the night, he could no longer walk. He lay at the base of a tree, stuffing one final grapefruit into his mouth as thin films of skin peeled away from his gums and the enamel of his teeth fell onto his shirt like wood shavings. Such was his state when he lifted his eyes to see the ghost of Bearpaw.

“I can’t do this on my own.”

“Then don’t.”

“What kind of man grows one hundred grapefruit trees only to let them rot?”

“Any man crazy enough to grow a hundred grapefruit trees is crazy enough to let them rot.”

“What’s all this about? You’ve come to make a fool out of me?”

Bearpaw shook his head, no. “I’ve come to ask you a favor. I want you to kill Captain Jordan. Finish the war I started so long ago.”

“I’ll do what I must,” Michelangelo said.

III

When Gabriel first heard that Pope Genuine I was coming to visit Hueco, he walked the streets all night burning trash and euthanizing stray dogs with a sharpened pole. A few sleepless old men witnessed the spectacle and believed they were having a dream about Sylvester Lacy. Gabriel saw their faces looking down from the windows. He crossed himself with earnest before continuing into the darkness. Earlier that night, while sorting through the letters of his admirers, he noticed one letter that smelled of lavender and was written in formal calligraphy. Upon seeing the Pope's signature, he burst into laughter.

"You're clever, Brady, but not clever enough! Come out now, and try your pranks on someone else. You can come out too, Reuben."

He looked beneath his bed and behind his dressing table for the mission's two most rambunctious brothers, only to hear that Brother Reuben was out ministering to the Natives and Brother Brady was on one of his periodic visits to the hot springs.

"My God," Gabriel said. "Pope Genuine is on his way to Hueco."

The next morning, he gathered the brothers in the dining hall half an hour before sunrise. He demanded absolute silence as he read the papal letter to them. When finished, he folded the letter along its crisp lines.

"As you can see, there is much to be done. Pope Genuine will want to see miracles taking place here. He will desire to see how the Natives are experiencing the judgment and retribution of the Lord."

Gabriel planned an exhibition for the Natives to walk through the Stations of the Cross on the day of Genuine's arrival. He assigned the brothers to a variety of tasks: cleaning the streets of beggars, posting visually stimulating illustrations

outside the labyrinth, and advertising the Stations of the Cross to the families of Hueco. Once the brothers had dispersed from the mission, Gabriel packed a lunch and set off for the Matias Ranch.

The last thing he expected was to see the famed ranch in shambles. The stench of rotting grapefruits polluted the air for a mile in each direction. The fences had been torn down by wild beasts. The traps were now the resting places of the bones of varmints. The trees were overgrown and drooping to the ground, with the grass so tall that one could not walk without risking snakebite. Gabriel examined the wagon loaded down with tattered crates and the rusted farm equipment littering the field.

“What a shame. All of God’s gifts have gone to waste.”

A young girl Gabriel had never seen ran out of the orchard with fire ants crawling up and down her legs. She resembled a mouse with the pointed nose and oversized ears inherited from her mother. Gabriel knew at once that she belonged to his brother thanks to the jawline that made her look as durable as a mountain.

She bolted in front of Gabriel’s mule, causing the beast to rise on its hind legs.

“Arie! Arie! I’m on fire!”

Arecelia burst out of the house carrying a pail of hot water. She threw it on Esther’s legs, killing the ants on impact. She looked up to meet eyes with Gabriel.

“Hello, Mother. For a moment, I thought I was lost,” Gabriel said.

She ushered Esther into the house and stared out at her son with disappointment.

“If you’ve come to borrow money, we’re all out.”

Gabriel dismounted.

“I have no use for money. I am a man of God.”

“If you have no use for money, then you shouldn’t be asking about it,” she said.

“Come on inside and eat a plate of beans with your brother. He’s starting to lose his mind.”

Gabriel followed her through the house and saw Michelangelo sitting perfectly erect at the kitchen table. He did not turn his head when Gabriel sat down next to him.

"You're a long way from the mission," Michelangelo said.

"The child. What's her name?" Gabriel asked.

"Esther."

"Ah, how beautiful." Gabriel spooned himself some beans. "I saw the girl, but I am yet to see your wife. Will she be joining us?"

"My wife was murdered a long time ago. She's buried right outside that window."

Gabriel lifted a fork full of beans up to his mouth and blew out to cool them down.

"I should have known. Esther, the daughter of a whore."

Michelangelo slammed his knife down onto the table next to Gabriel's hand.

"You'd better have a good reason to be bothering me."

Gabriel wiped his mouth with a napkin and crossed himself. "Pope Genuine I is coming to visit Hueco."

Arecelia gasped in shock. She recalled the tales of papal heroism Barto instilled in her imagination when she was a child. The old holy man used to sit her on his knee and tell her how the pope slew dragons on the open sea and rescued the poor from the insatiable tyrants of the Far East.

"He'll want to see the three of us standing together with one purpose. The miracle of Hueco. For this reason, it is imperative to leave the bastard child at home."

Michelangelo put his brother in a stranglehold and squeezed until Gabriel's eyes rolled back in his head. Michelangelo toppled him over onto the floor, unconscious. Arecelia checked his pulse.

"He's still alive. Thank God we don't have to dig a grave in the dark."

Michelangelo finished his dinner and then dragged Gabriel across the floorboards and off the porch.

*

Pope Genuine I's vessel was preceded by a ferocious windstorm that rang the bells in the towers above the mission to the tune of "Ave Maria." Gabriel had just put the finishing touches on the Stations of the Cross when he heard the bells ringing. The scent of lavender drifted through the air.

"The pope has come!" he shouted, alerting the other brothers.

The brothers burst forth from their rooms, wide-eyed and terrified from the windstorm that haunted their dreams. They filed out of the mission one by one to corral the poor and start them on the stations. Brother Beltran Soto swept the labyrinth while Gabriel opened the scriptures to locate a prophecy to post for public consumption. He closed his eyes and opened the Bible at random, landing on the story of God striking down members of the early church for withholding funds for personal use.

"You are so good to me, Father," he declared. Gabriel hurriedly translated the passage onto a scroll. "The pope will know how seriously we take tithing. From now on, it is the official stance of this mission that those who withhold tithes should be killed."

He rushed out of the labyrinth and nailed the prophecy to the wall. As he did so, the brothers ushered flocks of bewildered citizens into the church. He stepped back and kneeled, looking up at the bell tower in prayer.

"You have brought me this far. Take me one step more."

*

Arecelia left a note for Michelangelo explaining that she had been on the riverbanks chasing rabbits when the pope's vessel anchored in all its heavenly glory. The chaotic note described a circus of international characters—a Swedish sailor with a mustache that drooped to the ground, a Parisian monk seven feet in

height, and an English bishop who tossed golden confetti on the ground behind the pope as he walked. In her excitement, Arecelia left Esther at home and rushed to the mission to witness the spectacle.

Michelangelo ripped the note in half.

“What a shame. Only a few of us see how this world really works.”

In those days, he was so poor that he considered reopening a tannery to rival the output of the brothers. The business could have been lucrative. No one in Hueco had produced high quality products of leather since the tragic and unexpected death of Abraham Alvarez. Brother Franco Lima, the master tanner at the mission, once tried to depict Samson killing a thousand Philistines onto a pair of leather chaps for Brother Reuben, but the final product was such an embarrassment that he filled the pockets with rocks and sunk the pants to the bottom of the river so no one would see his failed craftsmanship.

Michelangelo needed money.

The steady approach of poverty began in the rotting grapefruit orchards, and then crept toward the house in an unstoppable march. The next casualty was the front porch, which collapsed onto Esther and buried her in the rubble. Michelangelo had foreseen the event long ago when he noticed the cracks in the porch while lying beneath Francisca. Esther emerged unscathed, just as she had been doing her entire life. Everyone assumed God was trying to kill her.

Esther waltzed into the living room. She was sprouting like a weed. Her legs were long and dangerously thin. She still resembled a mouse with the pointed nose and oversized ears, but had recently lost her two front teeth. When she lost the teeth, Arecelia tied them together and buried them in the back yard for safekeeping. Esther looked more like Emilia with each passing day, forcing Michelangelo to consider whether his former lover had survived up in the mountains.

“Where’s Arie?” Esther asked.

“In town talking with the pope.”

“Who’s pope?”

"A man in a costume who thinks he's as good as God."

"Why?" Esther asked.

"Because that's the way it is."

"Why?"

"Because the people who run the world are too stupid to have it any other way."

"Why?"

Michelangelo withheld. He realized the futility of infecting his daughter with revolutionary ideas. He could have gone on for hours, as he used to do with Bearpaw, but smiled and kissed Esther's forehead.

"You go and take a nap," he said. "Dream of good things."

Michelangelo spent the afternoon at the kitchen table. He diagrammed a siege of Hueco not only to capture Captain Paul Jordan, but also to force the mission into permanent closure. Michelangelo envisioned an army of ten thousand strong, all carrying sharp sticks, pumping them into the air as he tied Captain Jordan to a pole in the center of town and sliced off his testicles. Then, and only then, could Hueco know true freedom. His feverish diagramming was interrupted several hours later by a knock at the door.

Standing on the porch was a man with a shaved head who wore a coarse robe of sheep's wool. He came in to Hueco as a part of Pope Genuine I's caravan, with his role being to sell ancient relics. A gold medallion dangled around his neck, engraved with the image of Abraham receiving the covenant of God.

"You, my good sir, are in need of salvation," the man announced. "I am St. Thomas. Through the lineage of Mother Mary, I am indirectly related to Jesus Christ. Here I am to offer absolution for your sins. Today is the day you can purchase blessed assurance and have your name penned into the book of saved souls by the steady hand of St. Peter."

He took out a piece of bark lined with red liquid.

"Take this, for example," St. Thomas said. "In my hand I hold a piece of the cross where Christ himself hung for our transgressions. You may touch it, for a

price. One touch will eliminate your sins from the past year. They shall be separated as the east is from the west. But if you make the decision to purchase this relic, all of your sins will be carried to the bottom of the sea.”

“I’m not the kind of man who believes in bullshit,” Michelangelo said. He tried to shut the door. St. Thomas wedged his foot in the doorway.

“Luckily, I have just the thing for you.” St. Thomas pulled a nail out of his pocket and juggled it along with two silver coins. “Behold the nail they drove into Peter’s left hand when they crucified him upside down. Whoever owns this will have their sins leave their soul through the process of urination.”

Michelangelo grabbed the medallion hanging around the neck of St. Thomas and twisted until the rope shut off his air supply. He wheezed for breath, swinging his arms in an attempt to be set free.

“I’m not interested in your trinkets,” Michelangelo explained. “Go back to the mission or I’m going to chop off your head and feed it to the coyotes.”

St. Thomas fled.

Michelangelo and Esther sat on the demolished porch that evening watching the sun sink to the end of the earth. The scent of rotting grapefruits lured them to sleep. They awoke the next morning to St. Thomas mumbling in the yard, with three sacks of relics slung over his shoulders. Michelangelo shielded the sun from his eyes.

“I warned you to stay away from here.”

“Rest easy, friend. I haven’t come to sell you anything, but to ask a favor. I need you to watch after my things.”

“Can’t you see I’m busy enough? Watch after them yourself.”

“I can’t. I’ve been excommunicated.”

He went on to explain how he had fallen into a misunderstanding with a one-legged prostitute on King Street over the payment required for a sack of St. Paul’s hair. She believed he was asking for a sexual favor, and whipped off his sheep’s wool robe. She screamed at the sight of the ambiguous sexual organ belonging to St. Thomas. He covered her mouth to muffle her outcry. Gabriel happened to be

turning the corner and witnessed St. Thomas with his robe removed, strangling a disabled whore. St. Thomas pleaded his case without success. Gabriel awoke Pope Genuine I from his daily nap to recount all he had seen. The pope sat up with halfhearted interest.

“Excommunication. If he wants to be let back in, he needs to go to the end of the earth and capture Solomon’s soul in a jar. My word is final.”

St. Thomas, scandalized, knew he could never leave the relics at the mission without them being stolen by the other Europeans. He considered taking the sacks with him. The journey would be arduous enough without extra weight. He thought of the one man in Hueco who had no interest in the workings of the church and hurried to the Matias Ranch.

“As you can see, I have no other options,” he said. “Watch them until I find the soul of Solomon. I will give you half of the profits when I return.”

“All of this is going to be like an invitation for Satan to bother my house.”

“On the contrary. There is nothing Satan fears more than the toenails of St. James, which are in one of the sacks. You will find them pickled in a glass jar.”

“The answer is no.”

“But money is the greatest thing in the world.”

“If that’s what you think, then you must be a virgin.”

“Sex is for sale. When I was a boy, I valued salvation above all else. But then I realized salvation could be purchased. Tell me, Michelangelo, what is your heart’s desire?”

“To start a war in this town and kill all of the men who have ruined it.”

“Then money is what you need. How else will you get guns and wagons and uniforms?”

St. Thomas shook Michelangelo’s hand and asked directions for the mountain path once taken by Barto and Emilia. If he could survive the bandits, Michelangelo was certain the little man would be devoured by mountain lions. He watched until St. Thomas disappeared amidst the horizon, and then emptied the sacks on the porch. He examined the bizarre relics.

"I guess we don't have a choice. Unless you'd rather die with an empty stomach."

*

His first customer was Venus Lacy.

She had always been one to believe in outlandish claims, such as the Immaculate Conception, or the notion that somehow she and her father were still destined for royalty. Michelangelo knew he would have no trouble convincing her that a sack of spoiled wheat or a piece of rusted metal might erase her sins.

When Venus opened the door, Michelangelo could scarcely believe how vicious the years had treated her. She was no longer the vivacious, porcelain beauty of ages past. Her skin was still the color of dust, but spoiled by the moles on her neck and arms. Michelangelo tried to remember what magic had lured him into her bed. He faintly recalled her mountainous thighs powerful enough to crush a man between them.

"I've been waiting for this moment the last ten years."

"And I've been avoiding this moment for the last ten years," Michelangelo replied.

"Come in. Let's get down to business."

He followed her inside and past the easy chair where Ricardo sat, bald, deaf, and blind. The man who once envisioned a kingdom of his own still clenched a whip in his right hand.

"Don't worry about him," Venus said. "He doesn't know right from left or day from night."

Venus led Michelangelo into the bedroom where they had once frolicked with muted gasps of pleasure. She lay down on the bed and traced one of her fingers down Michelangelo's hand.

"What do you say we get reacquainted?"

“Take a look at these religious things. I don’t have any use for them. Perhaps you’d like to buy them from me.”

Venus still attended mass and confessed her deepest sins to Brother Gabriel. Just yesterday, she had gone to see Pope Genuine I put on a healing display that confounded all in attendance. He stopped short of raising someone from the dead, which still had not been accomplished in Hueco.

“I’ve already attained salvation,” Venus said. “I want your seed inside of me. I want to give birth to a prince.”

“Don’t be so sure.” Michelangelo took out a tattered piece of cloth from the sack of relics. “Behold, a piece of the robe worn by Peter in prison.”

“If this is what it’s going to take, then I’ll buy it.”

She walked across the room and opened a dresser drawer, removing a linen sack of coins. She tossed it to Michelangelo.

“Here. Now, make love to me before I go crazy.”

Ricardo burst into the room, blind and frenzied, swinging his whip and slicing up the walls. Michelangelo dove out of the window with the money and the sack of relics, narrowly escaping a second scar from the whip wielded by the old rancher.

Two days later, while Ricardo sat in his chair recovering from the battle that he did not know was real or imagined, Venus snuck up behind him with a velvet scarf and suffocated him to death.

“Long live the king!” she cried out as tears rolled down her face. “Long live Michelangelo!”

She did not bury the body or announce the death to the church as was customary. Instead, she allowed her father’s corpse to rot. Each morning, she approached the body and said, “That’s what you get for trying to whip the son of God.”

*

Pope Genuine I planned to leave Hueco by the end of the week. He could not have been more pleased with his findings. The Immaculate Conception produced not only a powerful Christian, but a new friendship. He and Gabriel had developed an unmatched intimacy. They sat up together late into the night revealing their deepest secrets and sharing classified insights about the kingdom of God. His only concern was the absence of Michelangelo. Gabriel told Genuine that Michelangelo had taken a forty-day journey up into the mountains to receive a new revelation. So the two of them walked the streets of Hueco in the middle of the night, blessing the ground upon which they tread and discussing their upcoming plans to deliver the poor into a final restoration.

The next morning, they called all of the brothers and the pope's entourage into the dining hall of the mission, where the portrait of Ferris Cabrera still loomed over all proceedings.

Gabriel lifted his hands and began, "For the final days of our great Pope's stay in Hueco, we will direct all of our efforts to the poor. Starting today, we will open the doors of the mission and allow anyone to plunder us. We have no possessions, and therefore shall not claim any. If you lock your door or hide any items, you will face a public whipping at the hands of Brother Beltran. On the second day, we will enter the houses of the rich and take from them what they do not need. These items will be distributed to the poor. And finally, on the day of resurrection, Pope Genuine I and myself will ride two asses from the outskirts of Hueco all the way to the labyrinth, offering our blessings to the parade of people along the way. Your job will be to lay palm trees on the ground as we enter the city."

Gabriel turned to Pope Genuine.

"Do you have anything to add?"

"Yes," the pope declared. "It's time for breakfast."

The doors of the mission were unlocked, and the brothers walked the streets of Hueco inviting the civilians to rob them.

The result was nothing short of chaos. Families emptied the brothers' rooms one by one, casting the blankets from the beds and disassembling the frames to fit

them out the window. Brother Reuben watched in horror as his own bed was lifted from the ground, revealing the many nude sketches he had purchased on King Street. The woman who uncovered the drawings, to his great relief, folded them into neat squares and stuffed them inside her waistband. The truly poor ignored the meager possessions of the brothers and ransacked the pantries, tying ropes to the necks of dogs so they could drag sacks of flour and dehydrated meats back to their dwellings.

One child sat watching the madness from outside the labyrinth. He tapped Gabriel on the shoulder and pointed at the mission.

"I'll have the whole thing," the boy said. "Every bit of it. This will be my family's new house."

"That belongs to God," Gabriel replied. "And he would never give children something they cannot understand."

Arecelia appeared in a doorway next to the pope and kissed the side of his neck.

"You taste just like you smell," she said.

"I hope it pleases you. Because everyone will smell this way in heaven."

Arecelia replied, "Then I hope I have my own room when I get there. Because I could never sleep next to someone who smells like you."

His face turned red as she whisked away, kissing the foreheads of babies and singing her hymns to the poor running through the mission. She eventually returned to her former room – the same room where she had made passionate and confusing love to Sylvester Lacy. She then wandered up the staircase leading to the bell tower, careful not to step on the bloodstains left by Ferris Cabrera on the night he committed suicide by diving into the cauldron of beef stew. She walked around the great bell and looked over the city before discovering the very pistol he once wore on his hip. It was the same pistol that was engraved by Rojo the impoverished Spanish artisan, and the same pistol given to Ferris by the king after he successfully put down a rebellion on the banks of the Mayo River. The engraving, though somewhat faded from the elements, still depicted Abel's

murder at the hands of his brother Cain. Arecelia tucked the pistol into her trousers, just as Francisca Matias was known to do, climbed down the stairs, and ran all the way back to the ranch.

*

Michelangelo had returned to Hueco each day to sell the relics left behind by St. Thomas, and each day he collected riches greater than any he had ever known. At night, he dumped his earnings on the bed and lay face down in the array of coins. He sold all three of the bags left by St. Thomas, and then filled up three more with items he received back in the days when he bartered with grapefruits. He spent his nights fabricating stories for each item. His most recent sales included the leather sandal straps of King David, a bundle of hay from the birth manger, a piece of stone used to build the church at Ephesus, the physician's kit carried by Luke, and part of a fishing net used by Peter that was promised to have caught fish that were roasted over an open flame by Jesus Christ Himself. The parishioners of Hueco paid everything they could muster. Michelangelo became so efficient with his dealings that he rarely knocked on a door without securing a sale.

As a result, Esther no longer had to eat rotten grapefruits to survive. Instead, her father brought home thin slices of choicest beef steak, which could be dipped in cream and eaten raw. He bought Esther a golden necklace and himself a silken robe that he wore about the house after his naps. He even wore the robe while he watched a dozen hired men paint the house bright blue and level its foundation.

"I'm off to Hueco," he said one morning as he trimmed his hair in the European fashion introduced by the pope's caravan. "I have only one bag of tricks left to sell."

"What will you do with all of this money?" Arecelia asked.

"Buy things."

“We’re running out of places to put them. We ought to take this money down to the river and let it wash away to the sea. These coins are cursed.”

Michelangelo ignored her. He took his final bag of relics to King Street, where his success rate was unparalleled. He arrived too early in the day, as all the girls were still sleeping off last night’s excess. He wandered into a dusty lounge buried in the maze of streets to wait for nightfall. Upon entering the lounge, he immediately recalled the place from his days of living amongst the whores and felt melancholy upon hearing the exact same song coming from the piano player in the corner. A chandelier hung from the ceiling, but only one of the candles was still lit from the previous night. Two tables were turned over and playing cards scattered among the glass and cigarettes on the dirt floor. In accordance with the other lounges of King Street, the place had no windows. It gave the men confidence to know that they couldn’t be seen from the outside world.

Other than the pianist and bartender, only one other man sat in the lounge. He sat in the far corner at a booth. An ashen cross marked his forehead. Hoping to make a sale, Michelangelo sat across from him.

“What’s in the bag?” the man asked.

Michelangelo untied the sack and opened it for the man to see inside.

“A sack of shit,” the man said. “Useless trinkets fit for the garbage can.”

“That’s your view of things. But I know plenty of people who will pay money for this.”

“Idiots. Their brains are mushed up from old books.”

Michelangelo called for the pianist to liven up the tune. The pianist, who knew no lively tunes, grunted and played the same song at a faster tempo.

“If we’re being truthful, then I don’t believe in these relics any more than you,” Michelangelo said. “But money is the greatest thing in the world.”

“You must be a virgin.”

“Hardly. But money can buy any girl you’d like.”

Michelangelo poured a drink for himself but left it on the table.

“You’d sell your soul for common vices?”

“No. I have more meaningful desires.”

The man held up his own glass and looked into some other time when he was happy. He emptied the liquid into his throat.

“Tell me. What do you seek?”

Michelangelo checked over both shoulders and then leaned forward over the table.

“Guns and ammunition.”

The man poured himself another drink without responding. He took a sip. “It sounds like you have a thirst for blood.”

“No, I have a hunger for revolution.”

The man leaned forward.

“Maybe we can help each other after all. I happen to know the kind of men who deal in such commodities. And for a small fee, I will bring your weapons up the river.”

Michelangelo inspected the man’s face for any sign of falsehood. The skin around his eyes was weathered from a lifetime of wandering, and his eyebrows grew without boundary. Michelangelo sensed a wildness of the spirit and felt kindred to the old fellow. He suspected that, like himself, this wanderer had known the joys and sorrows of lost love, and forged roads no one else dared to take.

“Very well, old man,” Michelangelo said. “Five miles north of Hueco on the Orange River, at the place where the birds nest. Be there in one week. I’ll bring my wagon, and you bring every weapon you can find.”

“We have a deal, amigo. But know this: when men start looking for the sword, the sword also starts looking for them.”

Michelangelo stood up from the table and pushed his glass toward the old wanderer. He lifted the sack of relics over his shoulder.

“Before I go, tell me your name.”

The man extended a disfigured hand, marred from flames. Michelangelo reluctantly shook the silky skin.

“My name is Sylvester. And that’s all you need to know. One week from today, ten minutes after sunset, I will meet you where the birds nest.”

*

A week later, Michelangelo parked his wagon on a precipice overlooking the Orange River. He gazed upon the soft waters that were famous for reflecting the color of the sunset and drew the poets out of hiding to inspire their verses. He played in these same waters as a young boy and saw one of his companions die from a snakebite. He scouted out sandbars to take the girls, and cut trails to those secret love beds with a machete and a mad desire in his eyes. He scrambled around the riverbanks in search of flowers to take Francisca. And now, so many years later, he awaited an arsenal of weapons.

Sylvester Lacy fulfilled his promise to Michelangelo when he paddled a canoe full of rifles around the bend and coasted into the shore, causing the birds to fly away in a panic. Michelangelo sat on the perch of his wagon holding a shotgun across his lap. He did not offer assistance as Sylvester unloaded the rifles onto the shore.

“I have enough for ten more trips if you’ve got the money,” Sylvester said.

Michelangelo tossed him a sack of gold.

“I’ll pay you for each load, one by one.”

Sylvester shrugged.

“I don’t care. But the men who I bought these guns from will come and chop your head off if you send me back one coin short.”

“Good,” Michelangelo said. “Because that’s the kind of man I am learning to become.”

Sylvester returned nine more times over the next few days, with his crowning achievement being the delivery of a small cannon. They loaded the final shipment onto Michelangelo’s wagon and tied the cannon down with ropes. As the sun

descended over the river, Sylvester turned and said, "It smells like grapefruits today."

"It smells like grapefruits every day," Michelangelo said. "That's the only thing you need to know about this town."

"I'll come and find you when you start up the revolution. Until then, keep the guns out of sight, and don't mention that you got them from me."

Michelangelo watched the disfigured wanderer navigate the canoe against the current and through the river mist, returning to the distant mountains from which he had come.

When Michelangelo made it back to the Matias Ranch, he carried the guns into the barn to lay alongside the others. Arcelia stood in the doorway watching as Michelangelo organized the weapons by caliber.

"It's not enough," he muttered. "What I need is more money. More money means more rifles, and more rifles means a better chance to set this town free when the time is right."

Arcelia had no understanding of weaponry. She was so terrified on the day Michelangelo tested the rifles that she lifted Esther off the ground and hid her beneath a bed.

"May the time never be right!" she declared.

"Don't say a thing like that. Worry about getting me some more money."

"Don't you have enough of that?"

"Never."

Arcelia then revealed the pistol she found in the bell tower of the mission. She handed it to Michelangelo, who inspected the ornate engravings with the keen eye he developed as the apprentice to Abraham Alvarez.

"I found this in the bell tower," she said. "Maybe it belongs to the pope."

"The pope doesn't carry a pistol," Michelangelo grumbled. "He has other people to carry it for him."

“He’s leaving tomorrow after the parade. If you want money so bad, you ought to go ask him for some. They say he has enough to pay for the world to start spinning in the opposite direction.”

An idea suddenly struck Michelangelo.

*

Three hours before sunrise, Pope Genuine I and Gabriel rode donkeys to the outskirts of Hueco. They stopped on the mountain road and looked back upon the sleepy town, with the mission visible by the lighted candles in the windows. The two were exhausted from the events of the previous day, when the rich were forced to open their houses to the poor, just as the church had been opened and plundered before. The poor, who salivated at the opportunity for economic revenge, stabbed each other with broken glass in alleyways over luxurious items and attacked the houses of the rich with such ferocity that many fled to the presidio for shelter. Captain Jordan protected them, for a fee. By day’s end, the rich were poor, and the poor were still poor, or dead.

As Gabriel and Pope Genuine I waited, they watched the sun rise over the horizon, setting the Orange River on fire. Gabriel then unveiled his final gift. He removed two matching crowns of thorns from his saddlebag to be worn as they traveled through town. The pope and Gabriel placed the crowns on one another’s heads, pulling them down so tightly that blood was drawn.

“Surely you are from God,” Pope Genuine I said. “Let’s ride! Alleluia!”

He kicked the donkey and entered Hueco at a gallop.

The civilians lined the streets and laid palm leaves on the ground as the duo passed, just as they had been instructed to do by the brothers. The poor cried out their basest needs with desperation, and Gabriel and Genuine prayed over them in the tongues of angels. The blessings grew so thick in the air that children found it difficult to breathe. Overwhelmed with emotion, Gabriel tore at his robes.

Meanwhile, Michelangelo stood in the crowd disguised as a shepherd, completing his costume with a coarse robe and a wooden crook. At the height of the frenzy, he jumped into the middle of the road and pulled Ferris Cabrera's pistol from his belt. He fired a shot into the ground near the pope's donkey, causing it to rise up on its hind legs. As it came down, Michelangelo leapt into the saddle and wrapped one arm around the pontiff's waist while holding the gun against his head.

"Nobody move!" he shouted to the chaotic crowd. "Pope Genuine is coming with me as a prisoner of war. Today, the world changes!"

His plan had been to ride back to the Matias Ranch, where he would hold the pistol to the pope's head until an official letter came to his doorstep declaring the dissolution of the mission, the immediate exodus of the soldiers, and the everlasting freedom of the people of Hueco from religion and government of any kind.

Gabriel jumped off his donkey and held out his hands.

"Put the gun down, brother. Don't get yourself killed over this."

"Listen to wise council," the pope added.

"Quiet down, Pope!" Michelangelo warned. He fired a shot into the air, and the crowds ducked in terror.

He placed his boot in the stirrup of the pope's saddle when another shot rang out. Michelangelo fell from the ass and collapsed onto the road, where the palm leaves softened his fall but were soon soaked in blood. As he faded out of consciousness, Captain Paul Jordan stood over him with a rifle in hand. The captain bent down and picked up the pistol that had fallen from Michelangelo's grip.

The captain smiled at Gabriel, revealing his rotten teeth.

"What do you want me to do with him?"

IV

The only other prisoner at the time of Michelangelo's incarceration was a former colonel named Castro Claudius. The shamed colonel had long wisps of white hair that came out every time he was allowed a bath. He collected the strands of hair and stuffed them into his pillow, softening it over time. His eyes, once enflamed with militaristic ambition, were reduced to a lifeless gray after years of daily whippings from Captain Jordan.

His body and mind had since withered in the darkness of the cell.

As the soldiers chanted in the square each morning outside his window, Castro recalled his former life as a man in uniform. He was thrown in prison twenty years before for his role in an unauthorized attempt to expand the empire to the northernmost territories of the American mainland, when he led forty new conscripts on horseback to a foreign outpost without permission. The renegade band snuck through a French camp at midnight, stealing three hundred horses and planting a flag in the soil before returning to Hueco. The horses escaped on the trip home. Castro returned half-dead and empty-handed, with war now on the horizon thanks to his antics.

By the time Michelangelo was thrown into the adjacent cell, Castro was a psychological shipwreck. He immediately stood to catch a glimpse of his new neighbor. Castro whistled at the soldiers carrying Michelangelo.

"You've come to let me out. Very well, I'm ready. I just need to pack all my suitcases."

One of the guards walked over to Castro's cell and jingled the keys. As Castro lunged for them, he met the butt of a rifle. The colonel fell backward and sang his mother's favorite song as blood ran down his cheeks.

“On second thought, I’ll stay a while longer,” Castro said. “I’m very happy here.”

The soldiers hurled Michelangelo into the cell and kicked his ribs until he coughed up pieces of his own lungs. The beating would not have been so severe had Michelangelo not bit the neck of the soldier who unlocked his chains. Even as they pounded their fists into his back, he made verbal assaults on their relatives. They finally shut him up by stomping a boot on the side of his face. The guard shut the door of the cell, and Captain Jordan walked into the room strutting as a victorious rooster.

“It looks like I’ll get to string you up, just like I did to the Native boy. I only wish I could drag you through town first. I only wish your brother would let me cut off your head and put it on a stick and set it on fire.” Captain Jordan pulled his saber out of its sheath and spun the tip around on the floor.

Michelangelo spit blood toward the captain. The bullet wound leaked through his bandages.

“I’m going to kill you,” he said. “And then cut off your balls with everyone there to see.”

“Of course you are,” the captain replied.

Moments later, Michelangelo lost consciousness and was serenaded into a realm of bizarre dreams by the tenor voice of Castro Claudius.

*

Three days later, caked in blood and dehydrated, Michelangelo awoke to the sound of Castro purring at the birds in the window.

“There you are. Welcome back to life. My name is Castro Claudius.”

Michelangelo scanned the room. A soldier slept in a chair by a stone staircase that rose up to the first floor of the presidio. He knew they were in a basement thanks to the dankness that came with every breath. The room was split in half, with one half used for the two cells and the other half for Captain Jordan to stroll

about while he mocked his prisoners. A small window provided the only light in the room. Sometimes the soldiers placed birdseed on the windowsill to give the prisoners entertainment. His own cell housed a narrow bed and a metal bucket buzzing with flies.

“What’s your name, friend?”

“Michelangelo.”

“Ah. Let me sing to you.”

Castro dove into a melancholy lyric about a woman who had died during childbirth and whose death was so tragic that the midwife was unable to rid herself of the memory and so leapt off a cliff. Castro sang the song as if he were watching the scene in the present tense, with his final verse an outcry of sorrow that drew the attention of the guards and earned him ten lashes. He continued humming through the punishment. Michelangelo remained silent.

“I’m going to sing until I am out of songs,” Castro promised. “Then it will be your turn. We’ll keep each other alive that way. Listen. I’ll go back to the beginning.”

Castro sang for the next three months.

He sang as he exercised, between mouthfuls of food, and even in the midst of his deepest dreams. Every song returned back to the numerous women to whom Castro had been wed, and who were each memorialized as a tattoo on his left arm. Castro sang with the same passion he had used to serve the flag.

One morning, as Michelangelo realized the bullet hole had closed in his chest, Castro stopped singing.

“That’s all I have to give,” Castro said. “The story of my love has been the story of my life. Now that you know everything about me, it’s your turn.”

Before Michelangelo began one of the songs he had learned under the tutelage of the blind musicians on King Street, they heard the doors open. Both he and Castro sat up in anticipation.

Gabriel emerged from the shadows, carrying a wooden cross as tall as his shoulders. In those days, Gabriel’s hair was thinning to the point where his scalp

was visible from all angles. His face had dimmed with the passing years. The tinted skin beneath his eyes was a testament to the late nights he spent memorizing the scriptures and resuscitating the forgotten attempt of Brother Herman to raise the dead.

Gabriel turned to Captain Jordan.

"You can leave me here."

"Don't get too close to him. He's no different than a wild animal," the captain said.

Gabriel rested his head on the bars of Michelangelo's cell, disregarding the captain's advice.

"I am so sorry, brother. So, so sorry that you have chosen to live so foolishly. You have thrown away all the treasures you've been given, and now you're here to pay the price."

"What brings you to see me?"

"I was told you made a fortune selling relics on King Street."

"Who knows. People say whatever they want."

"You don't even believe in miracles."

"I don't believe in anything. Especially miracles," Michelangelo said.

Gabriel closed his eyes and mouthed a short prayer for his brother's lost soul. Meanwhile, Michelangelo lay down on his cot and covered himself with a wool blanket.

"They also said you nearly died from eating grapefruits. I can only assume it's true."

Michelangelo rolled over, tightening the blanket around his frail body.

"Debauchery. Lechery. All true," Gabriel continued in disgust. "My own brother. I haven't even mentioned your embarrassment with the pope. Michelangelo, Michelangelo. I have tried and tried to draw you back to the grace of God, but you've done nothing to earn it. Nothing! Brother, I don't know why you've opened your heart to darkness and closed it to the light."

Michelangelo looked back over his shoulder.

“There is no difference between dark and light. They are one and the same.”

Gabriel slid the great wooden cross through the cell bars and leaned it against the wall.

“May this be a reminder to what is important in this life and the next.”

*

Gabriel was so stricken by Michelangelo’s blasphemous claims that he had no choice but to rest. He lightly traced his hand over the indented spot where Pope Genuine I once lay. Gabriel burst into tears, gaining the attention of Brother Kenneth Lowe and Brother Beltran Soto, who were walking down the hallway. Brother Beltran drew his whip. He kicked the door open to find Gabriel curled on the bed, weeping onto the sheets. The two brothers lifted Gabriel to stabilize him.

“You’ve been attacked by Satan,” Kenneth said.

“No,” Gabriel rebutted. “Just the opposite. I received another vision from God.”

“Tell us—”

Gabriel held up his finger and sniffed the air.

“What’s this?” he asked. “Grab your staffs. I caught the whiff of death.”

They followed the whiff of death all throughout Hueco, opening doors and crawling through windows to stay hot on the trail. The journey led them to the property of Ricardo and Venus Lacy. No one visited the ranch in those days, as the Lacy family no longer had anything to offer society. As Hueco continued to expand, the legacy of the Lacy family grew more opaque, until one day it was forgotten altogether. The new generations knew nothing of the great sacrifices taken by Ricardo when he rode miles ahead of the first caravan and fought away entire tribes of Natives without assistance.

Gabriel sensed the overwhelming presence of evil.

“Death has come upon this house,” Gabriel warned the other brothers. He shouted inside, “If no one answers this door, I shall unleash Brother Beltran.”

Venus cracked the door.

"Let's have a look around," Gabriel said.

"It's a bad time. We have a room full of dead rats. My father is sweeping them into a pile," Venus said.

"You're lying."

Gabriel rammed his shoulder into the door. Venus tumbled backward. Immediately, he noticed the corpse of Ricardo Lacy covered with a white sheet. He whipped it away to reveal the rotting body of the old rancher, the man who had once aspired to royalty and died in shame. Ricardo was already blackened with decay. Gabriel closed the eyes and kissed Ricardo's forehead.

"He's been murdered," Gabriel said. "By his own daughter. Unpardonable!"

Venus backed toward a doorway.

"Everything I've ever done has been because of love."

"You cannot commit murder out of love."

"Then you don't know anything about love."

Gabriel motioned for the others to surround her.

"Unfortunately, our only course of action is to take you to the presidio. Captain Jordan will decide your fate."

Venus bolted with thundering steps toward her bedroom. She hoped to escape out of her window like so many of the lovers scared away by Ricardo's whip. Gabriel threw his staff at the escaping woman while the other two brothers chased her from behind. Just as she tried to leap through the window, Beltran whipped her back and caused her to collapse. Kenneth jumped on top of her and squeezed his legs around her so she could not move.

*

By the time Venus arrived at the prison, Michelangelo had destroyed the wooden cross and hidden the splintered pieces beneath his bed. Captain Jordan

threw her into Michelangelo's cell. She fell into the corner, weary from being molested by the guards.

Captain Jordan whistled at Castro. "She's not to be married."

Castro stood up and dusted his pants. "I'm done with women. My heart has been broken one too many times."

"Good thing. Because you'll never know another woman's love."

"For the best. Now, I'll have a cigarette," Castro said.

Captain Jordan removed a tin box from his pocket and removed a cigarette. He lit it and blew smoke into Castro's face.

"And as for you, madman. I'm waiting on that day your brother Gabriel turns his back. The day he forgets about you. Then I'll feed you to my dogs."

"And one day I'll send your testicles in a package to your mother."

The door slammed to a close. Michelangelo returned to his work on the wooden shards of the cross. He had been forming them, with meticulous detail, into figurines and buildings.

"What's all this?" Venus asked.

"I'm preparing for war."

"And you are a one-man army."

"No," he said. "This whole world waits on a shot to be fired, and then picks its side. I'm going to be the one to fire the shot, and you'll see what happens."

Venus crossed the room and sat on the floor next to Michelangelo. She touched his arm.

"I'll fight with you."

"Yes, me too," Castro called.

Michelangelo dispersed the splintered wood to the other prisoners and prepared an invasion strategy.

*

Gabriel journeyed to the Matias Ranch one afternoon to make sure his mother and her illegitimate granddaughter were still alive. He led his mule to the front porch, where the scent of grapefruits still lingered on warm afternoons. He glanced over at Francisca's grave and knocked on the door.

None other than Brother Barto opened the door.

"My God," Gabriel said in shock. "I forgot you existed."

One day before, Arecelia was combing Esther's hair on the front porch when the birds circled the house in a mad fury. Arecelia peered through the blurred mass of flying birds to see Barto approaching the house while riding a mountain lion at a sprint. She thought the scene to be a fantastical imagining until Esther stood up and pointed at the old man.

"A magician!" she cried.

He released the lion a hundred yards from the house, and it loped into the surrounding mountains.

"Arecelia," Barto said, bowing low. "I need provision."

Barto had seen the world. His eyes glowed with strange fire. The years of solitary travel had forged him into the man he always sought to become. The scars on his hands spoke to the days when he sifted through shipwrecks at the bottom of the Mediterranean, and his legs had muscled from his participation in the Olympic Games. His chest bristled from his time spent mining diamonds in western Africa and building the longest bridge to date across the Amazon River. He even had a tattoo of a white lotus on his neck, forced upon him during his time in China.

"Gabriel, Gabriel," Barto said, kissing his cheeks. "Here I stand, alive and well."

"We thought you died in the mountains," Gabriel said. "We even lit a candle for you."

Barto invited Gabriel inside to recount his travels, which began in the mountains outside of Hueco and then proceeded into the heart of his boyhood home, where he revisited the church of his youth and patched the roof to protect

the pews from rain. God then called him to the southern tip of the Americas, where he was held hostage by a group of revolutionaries for failing to wear socks with his sandals. He escaped with the help of a girl named Jenanine and booked a passage on a scientist's exploration of Antarctica. He wrote a pamphlet explaining with irrefutable evidence that the continent did, in fact, exist, and sent it to the Vatican. From Antarctica, he paddled a canoe through the mating penguins and arrived at the southern tip of Africa. He made an accidental fortune mining diamonds while preaching to the slaves. His fortunes paid for the horse and buggy that carried him to Spain, where he entered Seville on the day they held a celebration honoring Ferris Cabrera, the vibrant explorer of ages past. He protested the festival and was deported to Paris. By accident, he joined the Austrian military as a monk to serve in their campaign against Russia. So began the new epoch of his life. Barto came to fame as an elderly wrestler who defeated the Czar in a match intended to highlight the Czar's virility. The fame was short-lived, as he fled to China to avoid execution. He arrived on the day that the Qing Dynasty fell, and wandered the forests of that vast nation until he arrived in Japan. He boarded a fishing vessel captained by a master of science and magic named Yuri Kawamoto, who claimed to be six thousand years old. The ship set sail for the islands of the Pacific. On that voyage, a seductress inebriated Barto with potent wine and stripped him of his virginity. The crewmembers dumped him on the western shores of America. Three years after that day, he rode in to Hueco on a mountain lion.

By the time the story ended, Esther was asleep in Arcelia's lap.

"That's quite a tale," Gabriel said. "You've seen the whole world, at the forfeit of your soul."

"On the contrary. I have deepened my relationship with the Creator of all things."

"If your faith is as deep as you claim, you wouldn't so easily confuse worldly experiences with spiritual ones. I cannot, as your spiritual authority, condone the trip you have taken."

“Nor do I need you to. I simply answered your question about where I have been.”

Arecelia swatted Gabriel on the back of his head with a spatula.

“Leave him alone, Gabriel. It’s bad luck to ask a traveler too many questions.” She turned to Barto and blew him a kiss. “Forgive my son. He doesn’t know the first thing about hospitality.”

“Tell me, when will Michelangelo be arriving? I’ve missed him dearly,” Barto said.

Gabriel ignored the question.

“Let’s put all of this aside. The reason I came here tonight was to invite this family to the monthly march around Hueco, that will take place once a month, on the seventh day of every month, for seven months, beginning at seven in the morning and ending at seven in the evening. The schedule has been posted on the labyrinth, but since no one in this household attends services, I thought I should tell you myself. I am certain you’re familiar with the story of Jericho?”

“Of course,” Barto answered. “But I’m uncertain of the purpose of this endeavor.”

“The purpose is to tear down the walls of King Street.”

“You ought to release termites at the base of the buildings. They’ll be sure to fall down,” Arecelia said.

“You’ve missed the point. I want to see God drop the dwellings of debauchery into the flaming pits of Hell.”

“Perhaps we have misinterpreted your intentions,” Barto clarified.

“In three days you will see my intentions. Now it is dark and I am breaking my own rules to be home before nightfall. Farewell, and pray that I am not overtaken by bandits on the journey home.”

*

Three days later, Gabriel and the other brothers gathered at the entrance of King Street. Gabriel stood at the front of the pack and shouted his prayers at the top of his lungs, begging God to shake the whores and drunkards into righteousness. His shouting created a scene. Before long, a gathering of half-dressed and furious whores assembled at the entrance of King Street and returned curses upon the brothers.

Gabriel had been anticipating the moment for years. He stepped forward just as the sun peeked over the horizon. He used his staff to draw a line in the sand across the entrance.

“He who is not with me is against me. Let whoever is not guilty cast the first stone!”

Brother Beltran took the command literally. He bent down and picked up a stone, then hurled it with all his might into the forehead of an adolescent whore. The stone killed her on impact. She fell to the dust with blood pouring forth from her skull.

So began the Holy Whore War.

Despite their fury, the whores refused to cross Gabriel’s line in the sand and admit their need for salvation. Seeing an opportunity to escape, the brothers fled the scene, leaving the whores in a state of suspended hatred.

They did not stop until they arrived out of breath and sprinkled with blood at precisely seven in the morning at the gravestone of Brother Herman, where they had instructed all of the parishioners to meet for the march. Gabriel kissed his hand and placed it on the gravestone of his mentor.

“We will march until the walls fall down,” he announced to the crowd. “We will march until sin is eradicated from this town. We will march until sin is eradicated from the earth!”

He raised his staff up to the heavens. The believers began the slow procession around the city.

"I've already shown you a hundred times," Michelangelo said as he lay on his cot. "After we take Hueco, we march to the next town, and then the next. Pay attention from now on if you'd like to help."

Venus lay on her stomach on the floor, marching the figurines around in formations.

"And when we win, you will be king, and I will be your queen. Just like it was always supposed to be."

He sighed with despair.

Ever since Michelangelo agreed to let Venus help in the war effort, she had tormented him with unanswerable questions and psychotic ideas that could only work in fairy tales. Most of her strategies were plagiarized straight from the Bible. It all began when she claimed the rebels should simply sail across the ocean and start crucifying people in Jerusalem. Castro explained the foolishness of the idea. Crucifixion was outdated and barbaric. Not to mention, they had no enemies living in Jerusalem. She then planned to arm the soldiers with slingshots in case Captain Jordan was hiding a giant. She crossed the line when she offered to unleash the twelve plagues on their enemies. Michelangelo slammed his fist against the wall in rage.

"No! We're going to cut their throats and put bullets in their chests! We're going to dip our hands into the blood of our enemies!"

Castro saluted.

After months, Michelangelo finalized a plan that involved militarizing the whores and vagrants. They would set the labyrinth on fire before marching on the presidio, where they would capture Captain Jordan. Then, at the pinnacle of their celebration, Michelangelo would castrate his enemy and send the leftovers in a package to his mother.

Just then, a pair of birds landed on the windowsill.

Captain Jordan scribbled a note on his dinner napkin and then walked down the stairs, through the caverns, and into the cells where his most dangerous prisoners were kept. He walked into the room and handed the napkin to Michelangelo, which read, "You're never getting out of here."

Michelangelo cast the napkin on the ground.

Captain Jordan then handed a second note to Castro, which read, "You sing like a duck."

Castro's spirit was crushed immediately. From that day on he remained silent and downtrodden. Michelangelo had no trouble disregarding the captain's first attack on his spirit. The captain, however, was diligent in providing the exact same note three times a day for the next month. He delivered them at uncommon hours and through uncommon sources. Sometimes he recruited children from the orphanage to deliver the note. On another occasion, he hired an old woman to sit in the darkness outside the cell at midnight. When Michelangelo awoke, she handed him the note and said, "You're never getting out of here."

The captain resolved to break Michelangelo's spirit. Eventually, the message ran through his mind every day and infiltrated his nightmares, causing him to stare at the wall for hours at a time. One day, when Castro asked him if he was sick, Michelangelo said, "I'm never getting out of here."

"Don't believe it," Venus said. "He's trying to break your spirit because that's the only thing you have left."

Michelangelo lay in bed for a week. Venus watched him as a mother watching her sick child.

"Castro," she called. "Tell Michelangelo to get up and move around. He's going to paralyze himself."

Castro remained silent, just as he had been since Captain Jordan crushed his dreams of musical glory.

Michelangelo groaned, "Nothing matters anymore. I'm never getting out of here. This is my grave."

"You'll have to get up and eat or you'll starve to death."

"I'm already dead."

"This is what he wants. You're giving in."

"No. I'm giving up," Michelangelo said.

The following morning, after holding his feces and urine for a week, Michelangelo awoke the other prisoners with a foul explosion of refuse, which he made no attempt to conceal or clean. He lay in bed as if nothing occurred and returned to sleep.

"It was only a matter of time," Castro said.

"Don't just lay there like an infant."

"Why not? I'm dead."

Venus came to the difficult realization that her hero had reverted back to infancy. She took it upon herself to raise Michelangelo as if he were a newborn baby. She lifted him out of bed and balanced him against the wall. She wiped him clean and patted his back until he burped. She then moved his legs, one step at a time, to stop the atrophy of the muscles in his legs.

"You're wasting your time," Michelangelo whispered as she moved him about the room. "I'm dead. I'm never getting out of here."

"Not if I have anything to do with it."

The process continued over the next few months. Venus became the mother she had always dreamed of being. She cradled Michelangelo each night as he slept, and then rocked him in the mornings. Venus then soaked bread in water and forced it down Michelangelo's quivering throat.

One day, Gabriel made a surprise visit to the cell at midnight.

He was in the finest physical condition of his life, as he had completed six of the seven marches around the city and devoted himself to a strenuous exercise regimen in the time between. The marches had grown larger and more militaristic each time. By the sixth march all but the whores of King Street joined in the festivities. The women were responsible for fifteen murders since the outset of the Holy Whore War. The murders took place in the middle of the night on patrons

who were in some way connected with the church, and then the bodies left at Gabriel's line in the sand for the birds of prey to feast upon.

The catastrophic war reached a new level of brutality when a child named Mercy was walking close to the famous street and was lured into the recesses of the seductive maze with a freshly baked pastry. The child stepped over the line, only to be taken captive. The whores tied her to the roof of a building visible from the mission. The brothers watched as the child starved to death over the next three weeks. They never gathered the courage to raid the street and end the theatrics of the whores' challenge.

Brother Eduardo Olivera appealed to Captain Jordan to intercede.

"If you think my men are going to upset the women who make them happiest, then you are mistaken," the captain replied. "Go milk a cow."

Mercy died the following morning, and the buzzards reduced her to bones by midday. The whores made a mockery of the skeleton by tying soiled underpants to the child's ankles.

Gabriel took it upon himself to bring the war to an end. He crossed the line in the sand, but was immediately attacked on all sides by ferocious whores who had grown out their fingernails to sink them into the necks of men and launch biological warfare by spreading their diseases. Gabriel narrowly escaped. From that day on, the war had been at a stalemate.

Now, as Gabriel stood outside the cell looking upon his brother, he could not help but feel disgust for the man who once fed an entire town with grapefruits.

"Get up, Michelangelo. I'd like to see your face," Gabriel said.

Michelangelo urinated in the bed, wetting the side of Venus's pants. She stood up with a wearied sigh and began to change him.

Captain Jordan stepped up behind Gabriel and placed a hand on his shoulder.

"I told you. He's broken on the inside."

"How long has he been this way?"

Michelangelo gurgled a soft response. Venus leaned in to decipher the words.

“He says that you should stop worrying about him, because he’s already dead. Also, you should go lay some eggs because you’re a chicken.”

Gabriel’s face flushed with embarrassment. He straightened his robe and took a deep breath.

“Very well. I’ve come to announce that your precious whores are on the brink of extinction. We march tomorrow for the final time, and we fully expect the buildings of King Street to collapse. I came today to offer you temporary release so that you could walk alongside me. But I was foolish. It’s a mistake I’ll never make again. You’re right, Michelangelo. You are dead.”

*

Everyone in Hueco gathered for the historic march, all wearing some shade of purple as they had been instructed. Nothing had brought so many people to Hueco since the Immaculate Conception and subsequent birth of the twins so many years before. Gabriel stood on the gravestone of Brother Herman, and whistled over the crowd.

“We have fulfilled the vision I received seven months ago. Today, we will see the dark heart of Hueco crumble into the dust of history. Remember the pagans of Jericho, and how the Israelites slaughtered their children. Today, we are the Israelites, and I am your Joshua. Today, we will slaughter the children of darkness!” Gabriel paused until the cheering subsided. “As usual, Brother Reuben will lead you in a round of calisthenics before we depart. However, before he does, we have a surprise. If you could all look this way.”

He pointed across the field at a row of covered wagons. At the cue, Brother Reuben whipped the canvases off the back of the wagons. The people were awestruck at the gleaming sight of golden trumpets in the morning sun. Gabriel had secretly ordered them from Europe months before. Pope Genuine I served as a middleman in the transaction. In a night of sleeplessness, Gabriel realized the walls of evil would never fall unless trumpets were blown at the culmination of

the march, just as it occurred in the scriptures. He consulted the instrument dealers on his own continent, but was disappointed to find that none sold trumpets.

“What kind of musical shop doesn’t sell trumpets?” he asked.

“We have guitars. That is close enough.”

“I’ve never read of a guitar in the Holy Scriptures. Therefore, I have no interest in them.”

“They sound much nicer than trumpets.”

He rushed a letter to Pope Genuine I, sealed with a kiss, of his predicament. The trumpets arrived in no time.

The march lasted from seven in the morning until seven in the evening, making a full loop around the city. In the meantime, a few of the bravest brothers snuck down to King Street and laid out the explosives that had arrived with the trumpets. Ernest Dermitt, a converted soldier, organized the operation and directed the other brothers on how to set off dynamite. They laid the explosive around the center of King Street, careful not to awaken the whores from their late afternoon naps.

Once the march came to its conclusion, Gabriel pointed down at King Street.

“Prepare the song! Raise the trumpets!” he shouted, waving his hand down at Ernest Dermitt who held a burning match up in the air. “One, two, three!”

The trumpets blew with such tremendous force that Gabriel was knocked off his feet. He gathered himself just in time to see the charges explode, which created a suction more torrential than a tornado. The chaotic song of trumpets blew over the river, swept past the mission, knocked down the front doors of homes where abusive husbands lived, flipped the business stands of dishonest lenders, demolished the dwellings of the sinful, cracked the mirrors of the vain, slaughtered the livestock of the drunkards, and caused such destruction in the area surrounding King Street that none could doubt God’s vengeance had finally arrived. The explosions dismantled King Street into tiny pieces, ripping bed sheets down the middle, cracking bottles of liquor, sweeping the roofs off buildings, whisking the skeleton of Mercy into heaven, casting the gambling chips into the abyss, and lighting the walls on fire. Within half an hour, King Street was no more.

Many of the whores died, while others managed to escape, crossing the line in the sand and symbolically repenting of their sins to avoid being burned alive.

“Victory belongs to Christ alone!” Gabriel declared.

*

The apocalyptic sound of trumpets and fire gained momentum as it blew toward the presidio. Michelangelo heard the sound in the distance as he lay on the bed with his mouth dripping saliva and Venus wiping at his lips.

“It’s picking up speed,” he declared. “We’ll be ripped in half.”

The sound barreled toward the prison and did not weaken as it tore through the cement walls, bent the iron bars, and left an opening large enough for even Venus to crawl to freedom. Castro was the first one out, carrying Michelangelo in his arms.

“To freedom!” he cried.

They escaped around the backside of the presidio and into the narrow streets of Hueco, lit faintly by the flaming walls of King Street.

V

Arecelia awoke the following morning to the scent of charred corpses. She knew her son had completed his mad plan to exterminate the local sinners. She closed the window to her bedroom to avoid the stench of dead whores, then walked through the house with the intention of cooking biscuits for breakfast. What she did not expect, however, was that Barto would be sitting at the kitchen table with Venus and Castro, looking over the languid body of her dying son.

Michelangelo lay flat on his back on top of the table, his arms crossed over his chest.

"He's going to die," Castro said. "Unless, of course, he changes his mind and decides to live."

Arecelia glanced at Michelangelo and made her way to the kitchen. The sight of her in a nightgown was too much for Barto to bear. He recalled the day so long ago when he saw her in the nude. Visions of almond-colored nipples and slender legs assaulted his imagination. He stood up from the table with his eyes averted and burst out the back door, red-faced, and fed the horses handfuls of grass.

"If you'll give me time, I'll make the biscuits. There's no reason to wait around like buzzards."

"We'll all feel better after biscuits," Castro said.

Just then, Esther walked through the front door after strolling the orchard. She walked over to her father and poked his chest.

"You look like death got a hold of you."

"He did," Michelangelo whispered. "But what he doesn't know is that I'm about to chop his hands off and dip them in blood."

"I will help you," Esther said.

“And I will help with the biscuits,” Venus said, leaving the child with her father. She looked upon Esther with the hot fires of jealousy. Not only was she envious of the way Michelangelo looked at his daughter with genuine love, but also that he no longer needed a motherly figure in his life. In her adolescence, Ricardo always promised that Venus would bear an heir to the throne from the seed of Michelangelo. Instead, he had given that precious gift to some whore named Emilia who fled to the mountains.

Just then, Barto ran through the back door and slammed it closed, turning the bolt.

“Take cover! Everyone, beneath the beds!”

He ran through the house babbling for the others to find weapons and brace for war.

Castro pushed aside a curtain and glanced out the window. A mass of half-burned whores walked toward the Matias Ranch with metal poles and sharpened sticks in their hands as spears.

“They must think Gabriel is hiding here.”

“I hope they aren’t here for biscuits. I only made so many,” Arecelia said.

“It’s revenge they want. Not biscuits.”

“Who could know for sure?”

Arecelia removed them from the oven and placed them on the table, maneuvering around Michelangelo. She dragged him off the table and into a chair so his body would not defile the food.

“You’re going to have to sit up, Michelangelo, or we’ll all lose our appetite.”

For the first time in months, Michelangelo sat up and reached for a fork. Barto scrambled about for a hiding place while the whores closed in on the house with lit torches. Their eyes burned like coals behind their ashen faces. They carried barbaric clubs and poles pulled from the wreckage of King Street, with a handful of them wielding weapons stripped off dead soldiers.

“Don’t mind them, Barto. They’ll leave us alone if they think no one is home,” Arecelia cried. “Now come eat! Don’t insult me by letting the food grow cold.”

Arecelia placed a biscuit on the table in front of Michelangelo. He fed himself and demanded another.

A shot rang out. The bullet ripped through the window, only missing Esther because she had bent down to scratch the mosquito bites on her ankles.

"Come out, Gabriel, or we'll burn you down!" a voice called out.

Michelangelo unhooked the napkin from his shirt and folded it on the table. To everyone's surprise, he exclaimed, "A man like me can only take so much."

He stood from the table, pushed his chair beneath it, and was transformed. The prodding hands of fate rekindled the dead fires in his eyes. The heat produced in those fires spread through his bloodstream, reaching all parts of his body and resuscitating them to former glory.

"There's my firstborn son," Arecelia said, chewing a biscuit.

Michelangelo located a butcher's knife in the kitchen, walked into the bedroom he occupied years before, sliced the mattress open, and pulled out a loaded pistol. He tucked it into his belt, just as Francisca once did. He then walked out the front door, located the shouting whore, and shot her in the center of the forehead without a moment's hesitation. Blood poured forth from her head as she blinked her eyes in confusion, then fell into the dust. The other whores stepped back, terrified by the bony madman who walked toward them without a hint of fear. Michelangelo stopped over the body of the dead whore and unloaded his pistol into her chest.

All was silent when he looked up to address the others.

"You're interrupting our breakfast."

"We came for Gabriel."

"He isn't here. But if you want trouble, you'll have more than you can handle," Michelangelo said.

Just then, Castro stepped outside with a pair of throwing knives.

"Mother of Mary, it's Castro Claudius," one of the older whores named Bee called out. "Captain Jordan told me you killed yourself over twenty years ago."

Castro recognized Bee's face, but had to search the tattoos down his arm before remembering her name. When she was told decades before of her husband's mad invasion of the northern territory, and his supposed usurping of lands, and the skirmish he instigated between his band of juveniles and the king's son, and the failed cattle drive back to Hueco, she expected him to return as a conquering hero. She awaited Castro's return each night, even refusing customers on King Street so Castro would have the first go of the week. Captain Jordan shattered her illusions during a personal visit to her bedroom. He revealed that Castro had committed suicide by jumping from a cliff in the nude.

The captain tossed a handful of coins on the bed and unlaced his boots.

"There, there. Don't cry," the captain said. "The best way to get over him is to get on top of me."

Only then did Michelangelo realize that he and the whores wanted the same thing.

"You don't know it yet, but I'm about to set this town free so that we can all breathe easy for a change. If you follow me, we can help each other," Michelangelo said.

"If we follow you long enough, we'll wind up in Hell."

"At least we'll know what freedom feels like before we get there."

The whores convened in the grapefruit orchard. They recalled the days when the Matias Ranch Grapefruit Company kept them alive during the great famine. They sat in a circle around the centermost tree and proposed items for a vote, democratically deciding to partake in the war by luring the soldiers from their posts and slicing their throats with knives tied up in their hair. They sent the decision back to the house with Esther.

Upon hearing the news, Michelangelo sat up in bed and cracked his neck.

"Have them set up some tents," he ordered Venus and Arcelia. "And limit them to three grapefruits per person per day. Anything they catch, they can eat."

"What do you plan to do with an army of whores? If you want to win a war, you had better find some men."

Michelangelo pulled a pistol out of his pants and spun it around his finger.
“Don’t be stupid. Sylvester will be here soon.”

*

Barto returned to Hueco to be reinstated into the workings of the church. After witnessing one catastrophe after another, he felt it was finally time to return to the mission and resume his duties as the Official of Lighting and Ambience. He escaped the ranch in secret, bidding none but Esther a farewell. He lifted her up in the air and kissed her forehead.

“You’re an angel,” he said. “Don’t ever be anything else.”

He then stole a horse from the stables and rode home bareback, outrunning the bandits that chased him through the outlands. He forded the Orange River and meandered back into town for the first time since he had journeyed into the mountains so many years before. Few citizens recognized the old stalwart, and even the poor with whom he had worked intimately did not recognize him as he galloped by. Just as the city did not remember him, he did not remember the city. Much had changed in Hueco. Barto realized, after traveling the entirety of the world, that while everyone else was trying to move ahead into the future, Hueco had backtracked into the past. A beggar tried to sell him a chicken with one wing. Children lay in the alleys with treatable diseases. The eyes of the people were sunken with the despair of hopelessness. Gabriel had burned down King Street only to have the city transformed into something much worse.

“We could be living three hundred years ago. No one would know the difference,” Barto murmured.

He arrived at the mission to see Gabriel posting a new prophecy. A small group of maidens adored him from afar, hoping that one day he would renounce his vows and pursue their hand in marriage. The women swooned over his every move, gasping with delight each time he struck a hammer against the wall to nail the prophecy. He had maintained his physique from the season of marching, and

the illusion of his virility was only shattered by the slight limp he still carried from his boyhood when the scaffolding collapsed on top of him.

Gabriel turned to see his fellow brother, back at the mission for the first time in many years.

"I see you found your way home," Gabriel said. "Come inside and we'll put you back to work. I hope you're here to stay for good."

"Until the Lord takes me home," Barto said.

"While you're here, you may work indoors. This heat is too much for an old man. Follow me."

Barto followed Gabriel through the dank labyrinth and into the church.

"From all that I have just seen, the work of Hueco needs to be done outside of the church."

Gabriel abruptly turned and tapped his finger on Barto's chest.

"How long have you been gone?"

"Many years."

"Yes. And all of those years while you were vacationing at the ocean, I was here in Hueco. If anyone knows what this town needs most, it's me," Gabriel replied. "And the work that needs to be done is inside the mission. Here, now, we will address our doctrinal disagreements before we advance this relationship any further. You believe the church should pour out, while I believe the church must draw in. You see, the church is the living water, and those who thirst may be quenched by coming inside. Think of the animals and how they must go to the stream to survive. It's better to maintain the health of the stream than to labor endlessly with carrying water to every animal's cave."

"Of course, Brother Gabriel. It's just that—"

"Enough!" Gabriel shouted. "I am the Caretaker of Hueco. I am the one born of a virgin."

Barto gathered his courage.

"Little Gabriel, nine months before you were born, your mother was seeing a man by the name of Sylvester Lacy," he said. "A man who pushed a flaming can

and burned himself and three children. He entered her room at night, for many nights.”

Gabriel clenched his jaw.

“How dare you question the integrity of the Virgin! How dare you! I punish you to a week of silence!”

Gabriel led Barto through the mission. A thin layer of filth covered the floors. The candles had burned down to their bases. The sanctuary smelled of must and birds nested in the corners, having flown in through the visible holes of the rooftop. The Holy Water was stagnant. Christ Himself, who hung on a cross at the front of the room, needed His feet washed.

“You will resume your duties in silence. Now, I am preoccupied today. Hueco has a new mountain to climb but I am looking for revelation as to which mountain that is. God will light the way, and I will lead these people into His presence. In short, I will not be available to look after you.”

Barto nodded with a slight smile.

Gabriel stormed through the halls of the mission until he arrived at his own quarters. Earlier that day he had arranged for Kenneth Lowe to fill the room with purple pillows and sweets to welcome the presence of the Almighty. Kenneth had also left a table with bread and wine.

The meeting between Gabriel and God was inspired by a vision seen by Mickey Cherry, a regular parishioner considered insane by most, but prophetic by Gabriel. Mickey arrived outside of Gabriel’s window one night holding the bone of a dead heifer. He tapped on the frame of the window with his forehead until Gabriel lit a candle inside. Gabriel rushed to the window just in time to hear Mickey say, “He wants to meet with you, and he is coming, and he is coming! Oh praise God, for he is coming. The lion and the lamb! But not the lamb, and not the lion. He will come as a thief in the night! But not at night. And he will come riding on clouds! But on foot.”

“When, Mickey, when?”

“Two weeks from today. He will arrive in the afternoon to tell you what must be done, and what must not be done, so you won’t do what must not be done.”

Gabriel leaned out the window and kissed Mickey on the cheek.

When Gabriel entered the room prepared by Kenneth, he sat on one side of the communion table and waited on God’s arrival. There he would sit for the next three days, until he finally came to the conclusion that God changed plans, or that Mickey Cherry was, in fact, a madman. On the third day, Gabriel reached for the scriptures when he was blinded by an explosion of light.

A voice arose from the scriptures that said, “I am neither here nor there. It is on the River of Peace that I travel, and it does not run through Hueco, or through your heart.”

“Where is this river, O Lord?” Gabriel stammered.

“The river is where I am, and I am where the river is.”

“How do I find this river?”

“By finding me in the moment between yesterday and tomorrow. And that is Peace.”

At once, the book closed and the light rushed out the window and into the faraway galaxies. Gabriel opened his eyes to see a bite taken out of the bread and both wine glasses empty.

Gabriel ran to the dining hall.

“It is peace we have been missing!” he announced. “He rides on the River of Peace!”

*

After Michelangelo realized Barto had returned to Hueco, he no longer felt the need to filter his language or actions from the old man who had been the closest thing he had ever known to a father. The heavy burden of godliness left the Matias Ranch. A dark cloud took shape above the grapefruit orchard. Each morning, a drizzle of rain came down on the whores and dampened the soil. The rain also

stirred up the armadillos captured in the wire traps. When the creatures tried to rattle themselves free, the whores were awoken from their dreams of vengeance. It was in those days that Michelangelo could not sleep in the house without waking up next to a snake, which Arcelia told him represented the tormented soul of Francisca Matias, his dead lover from ages past who still owned his heart.

The first serpent slithered out of his bedsheets.

Michelangelo tied it in a knot around the bedpost, then went back to sleep.

The following days began in similar fashion, despite Michelangelo changing his sleeping locations. At last, he resorted to sleeping on the roof, but awoke with seven snakes circled around him.

"I think Barto was right. God wants no part of this war business," Arcelia said.

"God wants no part of anything these days. No one has seen or heard from him in decades. And even then, he was quiet as a mouse," Michelangelo replied.

Michelangelo then walked down to the grapefruit orchard to find Castro so they could start distributing the weapons. He found the songster performing his repertoire for the whores of King Street while being kissed on the neck by a pair of Native twins. The twins had once gained fame for their flexibility, but fell into anonymity when it became known that they carried a sexual disease more commonly found in feral hogs. Castro reclined against the base of a tree with whores surrounding him on all sides and hanging from tree branches.

Michelangelo interrupted the magic of the evening by firing a pistol into the air.

"If you want to taste freedom, we've got some work to do."

*

By the time Sylvester Lacy arrived at the Matias Ranch with one thousand of the vilest men in existence, the weapons had been removed from the barn and were prepared for distribution. The ranks of Sylvester's army were composed of limping beggars, slobbering drunkards, shameless murderers, copper thieves,

unsightly scoundrels, practitioners of massage, one-eyed rascals, animal fornicators, excommunicated hooligans, grave diggers, bloodstained rogues, Native revolutionaries in the tradition of Bearpaw, knife makers, scalawags, womanizers, unemployed musicians, weary bandits, failed assassins, backroom gamblers, and those of similar stature who Sylvester had dipped out of the stale rainwater buckets of society and poured into the army with the promise that they would be able to take over the entire world under the guiding hand of Michelangelo, the son born out of Immaculate Conception. No one brought guns, matching uniforms, horses, or any sense of purpose. The supply wagons that trailed behind the loose formation of men were filled with such oddities as nails, sharp rocks, and bottles of liquor stolen along the way from a merchant ship headed to South America.

Michelangelo looked upon his army with tremendous satisfaction. He saluted them from afar.

“You’re a man of your word,” Michelangelo said, greeting Sylvester.

“A man of my word, yes,” Sylvester agreed, offering his mutilated hand to be shaken. “Everybody is on the lookout for something new. The trick is to convince them that it’s worth spilling their own blood.”

The group of soldiers gathered around Michelangelo to receive orders. Many knelt, believing him to be some sort of god based on the legends they had heard during the march to Hueco. Others remained unconvinced and looked upon the frail and stern man with dismay. Frank Perkins, a mustached barman who sold hallucinogenic mushrooms, stood at the back of the crowd and tucked his greasy hair behind his ears.

“Great heavens,” he called out to the others. “We’re being led into battle by a bag of bones.”

Michelangelo shielded his eyes and looked to the back of the crowd, which opened around the naysayer.

“Is there a problem, friend?”

"I came all this way to join an army, and find out we're being led to our deaths behind a man who knows nothing of war. You are not the man I was promised you would be."

Without warning or change of expression, Michelangelo shot Frank in each of his kneecaps, causing the man to sink into a pool of blood and agony. He tried to crawl away, but Michelangelo fired upon his hands. Frank curled into a ball and prayed into the dirt.

"I only know two things about war," Michelangelo announced to the crowd. "That I would like to start one, and I would like to win one. I'll eat my vengeance like a pot of stew."

He left Frank for the wolves.

As the men quietly lined up to receive their weapons, Arcelia stepped outside. She stood on the front porch, using a hand to shield her eyes, and looked down upon the group of criminals and vagabonds with indifference, as if it were commonplace for the Matias Ranch to be a gathering place for armies. She scanned the crowd for Michelangelo, who she wished to consult about the newly arranged furniture. Then, she recognized Sylvester Lacy standing all alone in the field, silhouetted by fading sunlight and lightly rubbing the mangled hand which defined him. He seemed as if he had walked out of a dream. She recalled the days when he pushed around a flaming bucket of garbage. In her mind, it seemed like only yesterday that the wide-eyed boy crawled into the mission window and rubbed his hot skin against hers.

She waved down at him.

"Come inside, my friend! The window is still open!"

Sylvester fled to the grapefruit orchard for solitude, believing her to be one of the many ghosts that terrorized his mind and forever left him teetering on the brink of insanity. He dug a hole and buried a rock.

Only Esther, who had been sitting on the roof, realized the oddity of their interaction.

"So that's my grandfather," she said. "He's the saddest man I've ever seen."

Arecelia took several steps forward and hollered up at her.

“Don’t lose your balance, little one. You’ll never get it back.”

*

The heat grew to such an extreme temperature that the Orange River began to evaporate. Steam spread over the entirety of Hueco. Dark clouds spanned the entirety of the heavens and a trickle of rain did nothing but increase the humidity. The captured armadillos shrieked at the coming of dawn. Michelangelo awoke, soaking wet from mist, and with a thirst for blood like he had never known. His sleep was brief and filled with dreams of Francisca butchering the dead horse named Julius Caesar. At sunrise, Michelangelo strapped on his holster and walked the perimeter of the house half-naked with his boots on, muttering to himself the narrative of the day she was gunned down. Arecelia emerged from an open window and gasped at the impenetrable steam.

“It seems the world has come to an end. Now all we can do is wait around for God to come and rescue us.”

“God is too busy to bother with us.”

Arecelia handed a package out the window. Inside was a uniform woven out of green wool and laced with golden silk. The uniform smelled of herbs and bitter roots. Arecelia had washed the cloth in a remedial bath from a recipe believed to make clothing bulletproof. Michelangelo noticed that a flower was pinned to one of the collars as a tribute to Francisca’s life and the source of his vengeance. He slipped into the uniform, pulling down on the cap with the pendant of crossed pistols.

“Before you’re covered in the blood of your enemies, you ought to have someone make a painting of you. You look like you could be in a book one day,” Arecelia said.

Michelangelo bowed to his mother, then strolled down to the orchard. He fired his pistol into the air.

“Get your asses up! We have a war to fight.”

*

In the madness of the steam, Gabriel ascended the staircase to the bell tower that had once served as a suicide platform for Ferris Cabrera, the maniacal founder of Hueco. He wished for a wider vantage point, as reports were flooding the mission that children had gone missing in the steam. Gabriel maintained faith that the children would return. He sat at the edge of the tower and allowed his feet to dangle off the side, just as he had done as a child. The city spread before his eyes, an empire forged out of his own spirit and indefatigable will.

“My God,” he said softly. “None can understand Your mysterious ways.”

He kissed his hand and held it up in honor of Ferris Cabrera.

Just then, he noticed a flicker from the river. Through the steam, he could make out dozens of torches and heard the beating of hooves rising up the riverbanks. A shot rang out, and seconds later lodged itself in the wall next to his cheek. He touched the wall, then smelled the gunpowder on his finger. No sooner had he done so than another bullet split the rope that suspended the bell, and caused it to fall through the tower and crash into the mission below.

“Father Moses,” Gabriel said. “The shadow moves.”

The brothers leapt into action at the sound of the crashing bell. Those working the crops gathered the sharpest tools and fled for the mission walls. No one had attacked Hueco since the Natives and Ferris Cabrera disagreed over how to salt the beef stew. Beltran appeared in a doorway, armed with his legendary whip.

“What evil approaches, Gabriel?”

“Demons are upon us, old friend. Get to the presidio and tell Captain Jordan it’s time to earn his wages.”

Gabriel waved his arms in great circles as he warned everyone to take cover and prepare to defend the church. Some of the braver brothers, led by Barto, ran out of the mission and filled the streets with the treacherous tidings, ushering

women and children into basements. Many disregarded the warnings as another of Gabriel's religious tricks, but understood the direness of their plight when gunfire filled the air. The men of Hueco armed themselves with rudimentary muskets and cooking utensils, then crouched over their families to protect them from whatever madness approached.

The brothers failed to clear the streets in time. The deaf, the mute, the crippled, the lonely, the homeless, and the blind, whose populations had grown in mass since the departure of Barto many years before, were so confused by the madness of the morning that they ran in circles, banging their fists against bolted doors.

Very few of them would survive.

But the first casualty in the war for independence was suffered by none other than Michelangelo's cannon operator. The old man attempted to fire one round at the mission, but the ball exploded inside the cannon and ripped open his entrails, leaving him to die alone on the banks of the Orange River. None would stop to wish him well on his journey to the other side of life. He died admiring the colors of the sunrise reflecting off the waters of the river. The next casualties took place in the farmer's market outside of town, in the same location where Michelangelo once sold his grapefruits and hired musicians to entertain the crowds. Michelangelo called for a torch. He cast it into one of the parked wagons.

"Let it all burn! Every inch! And kill whoever stands against us!"

All but one vendor ran for safety, with that sole bull of a man being Leon Sweeney, a dwarf four feet and three inches in height—a descendant of Earl of King Street fame. Leon sold the turtles that he caught at the Orange River to children as birthday gifts. He stepped into the road, carrying a knife in each of his hands.

"This is where the road comes to an end!" he declared.

"Only for you," Michelangelo replied. "You'll be squashed."

Leon threw his knives and killed the men riding on each side of Michelangelo. Michelangelo could not have been more impressed. Rather than firing his pistol into Leon's chest, he extended a compliment.

“You have the heart of a lion.”

“And the balls of a bull!” Leon said.

“Take a horse and follow me. We’ll see to it that your turtles are looked after.”

Leon knew that his only chance for survival would be to ride alongside Michelangelo and abandon his turtle stand forever. He blew his turtles a soft kiss, mounted a pony, and shouted cries for independence he did not know he did not have.

Michelangelo’s army penetrated into the center of Hueco, firing their weapons at the buildings as they passed. Quintino the one-eyed beggar, who had for many years been prophesying about an army led by the Savior of the World that would come through Hueco and fill the streets with the blood of the guilty, was shot in the spinal cord and fell into the fountain. As he sank under the water, he wondered what crimes he had committed to be counted among the guilty. Others were impaled by spears and others run down by the warhorses. By the time Michelangelo and the army could see the presidio, forty-two dead bodies lay in their wake.

He had already sent the whores ahead to lure the soldiers away from their posts. The presidio was empty at the time of his arrival. Only Captain Jordan refused the services of the whores, and that due to his newfound disinterest in human sexuality. Michelangelo dismounted and walked through the bare courtyard, recalling the days when the soldiers gathered in a circle to watch him bathe, and when Castro used to collect his hair at the bottom of the tub to stuff in his pillow. Michelangelo knew the place by heart. He passed through the hallways as a ghost and climbed the stairs up to the captain’s lookout, his pistol drawn and his uniform covered in the blood of the slain. He approached the door to Captain Jordan’s quarters.

Michelangelo nudged the door open to see Captain Jordan sitting at his desk in a heated argument with Brother Beltran.

“You must do something,” Beltran pleaded. “We’ll be slaughtered as the fattened calf.”

Captain Jordan glanced up to see Michelangelo silhouetted in the doorway. He laughed at the misfortune and poured himself a tall glass of whiskey.

"Welcome home!" the captain said. "Put your guns away and take a seat. For a while, we'll act like old friends."

Beltran had no such intentions. He leapt forward and drew his famous whip.

"O mighty plague, may that I send you to Hell where you belong!"

As the monk charged Michelangelo, Captain Jordan fired two rounds into his back. Beltran skidded across the ground and died as he had lived: clutching his whip. The captain surrendered his pistol on the desk. Michelangelo watched as he finished off his drink and poured another before tossing the bottle into the corner of the room.

Captain Jordan motioned to the corpse. "Some of the others I can put up with. Not that one."

Michelangelo fixated his pistol on the captain.

"I told you it would come to this."

"I remember."

"I said I would avenge my friend and my wife."

"Yes. And you'll cut my balls off in the center of town, if I'm not mistaken."

Michelangelo led him out of the presidio and into the crowd of cheering revolutionaries and whores. They walked in slow procession through the blood-washed streets. The civilians stepped out of their shelters to see the slight smile on Captain Jordan's face. None could ever explain how he maintained such fortitude in the face of inevitable humiliation and death. Those who chronicled the history of that fateful day would look upon Captain Jordan with the warmest light, despite the tyranny he had imposed on the town for many decades of his rule.

As they walked to the square, Captain Jordan turned to Michelangelo.

"Why must men like us destroy everything we love?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about life. I make one bad decision after another, and you burn down the town that treated you like a Son of God and nurtured you into manhood. We're backwards. We're stupid mules, and we'll suffer in eternity."

Michelangelo considered the words before he replied, "I'm no mule."

"One way or another. We'll pay for everything we've done. In this life or the next. But the problem is that we were always meant to be this way. God put it in our blood. It was intentional."

Sylvester and the revolutionaries arrived outside the square, weary from winning a battle in which they fought without facing resistance. The inspirational cries that had motivated them prior to the invasion were now reduced to weary groans of indifference. Only Sylvester understood the significance of the victory.

"Everything has led to this. And still it's not enough," Sylvester said.

"It's more than enough," Michelangelo replied.

"Tomorrow we'll all be broken again and looking for the next war to fight. Come with me to the mountains where people can start all over. Where the truth of tomorrow is all that matters. We will live as a father and a son."

Michelangelo ignored Sylvester's musings and tied the captain to the same pole where Bearpaw had been humiliated so many years before. He then ordered everyone in Hueco to come to the center of town for the public execution. As horrified civilians and bewildered brothers trickled into town square, Michelangelo faced the realization that he no longer hated Captain Paul Jordan. Mad or not, the captain had always been more interesting than anyone else in Hueco. He lived with passion. He lived true to the unpredictable whimsies of his desire. The death of Paul Jordan, he knew, would be the death of the only other true man in the whole world.

Captain Jordan nudged Michelangelo. "Reach in my pocket. I have a gift for you."

Michelangelo found the tin of cigarettes the captain had once used to torment Castro.

“My only request is that you let me rot in my uniform. Don’t put me in the dirt.”

“I promise you nothing.”

Gabriel arrived holding a low-pitched hum. He led a line of brothers who followed his example. They spread out before Michelangelo and fell to their knees in unison, ashamed, forlorn, and shedding tears for the death of Hueco. The scent of dead bodies perfumed the square with a reminder of all that had been lost. Despite their collective hatred for Captain Jordan, they realized that he kept some semblance of peace in a town where they had thrived for over a hundred years.

Gabriel crossed himself and lifted his eyes to the melancholy heavens.

Michelangelo disregarded the theatrics and addressed the crowd.

“After all these years, you’re finally free. No more governance and no more religion. I am the man who fed you with grapefruits. I am the man who is offering you independence. No one owns your life any longer. Be whoever you want.”

Captain Jordan knew what came next. He addressed the populace one final time.

“I’ll see you all in Hell,” he declared with a nod. “Where things won’t be any different than they are here.”

Michelangelo unbuckled the captain’s pants and pulled them down to his ankles. To the great shock of all who watched, Michelangelo stripped the captain of his underpants as well. But none could have guessed that the captain would be without the accompaniment of penis or testicles.

“What’s this? Are you some kind of woman?”

Captain Jordan burst into laughter at his missing pieces.

While Michelangelo was still imprisoned, the captain was hunting a bandit in the outlands when he was captured by the bandit’s gang. They tied the captain to a tree two hundred yards away and took turns seeing if anyone could hit him. One bullet did the trick, separating Captain Paul Jordan from his prized anatomy. In time, he escaped, built a house, captured the bandits and their children, locked them in the house, and set the house on fire. As he watched the building go up in

flames, he patted a wooden box that now held his secret shame. He buried the box one hundred yards from the presidio, then lived under the fabrication that he contracted syphilis and needed time to heal before visiting any more whores.

"I told you," Captain Jordan snarled. "You would be mine forever. Your life is mine. Your heart is mine. Your soul is mine. You're never getting out of here!"

The captain burst into laughter.

In defeat, Michelangelo pressed the barrel of the gun up to the captain's throat and pulled the trigger. Blood splattered in a ten-foot radius, showering the brothers and ruining Michelangelo's new uniform. The event turned out to be the greatest disappointment of his life, as he had long dreamed of avenging the life of Francisca Matias. Such was his state when Gabriel stood up and walked until his nose pressed up against Michelangelo's. He could feel the warmth of the blood on Michelangelo's uniform.

"You're the biggest coward I've ever known," Gabriel said.

Michelangelo could not look his brother in the eyes. With blood dripping down his hands and onto the dust, he replied, "God made me this way."

"Leave Hueco. Never come back here."

Sylvester Lacy retreated into the crowd.

*

As they scoured the streets for survivors, Gabriel noticed a veiled man walking the perimeter of the Lacy property. He was far older than the other soldiers, and tucked one of his hands inside his loose-fitting tunic. Gabriel watched from afar as the man looked over at the Lacy house.

"Be gone!" Gabriel shouted. "Leave with the others!"

"Where am I going to go?"

"That's your business. But you can't wage war on a town and then hope to live in it."

The man nodded and blew a kiss to the Lacy house.

"Is the old man still alive? Ricardo Lacy?"

Gabriel crossed himself.

"He was murdered by his own daughter."

"We're always the most disappointed by the ones we love."

"He wasn't disappointed," Gabriel said. "He was suffocated."

"What's the difference?"

At this, the man removed his hand from the tunic. Gabriel fixed his eyes on the slick skin scarred from flames.

"You never mentioned your name," Gabriel said.

"My name isn't important."

"Yes, but you knew Ricardo Lacy."

"Of course I knew him. He was my father."

Gabriel suddenly recalled the blasphemous claim of Barto that he and Michelangelo were not born from the seed of God, but from the seed of a man who pushed around a flaming barrel of donkey shit. The entirety of Hueco's power rested in the truth of the Immaculate Conception. Any challenge to that miracle was a challenge to the very ability of Hueco to stand on its own two legs. If the miracle was discovered to be a fabrication, all of Gabriel's authority would be swept away by tornadoes of doubt.

"Sylvester?" Gabriel asked with a tremble.

"That is my name."

"My God. The same man who fled to the mountains? And burned up the children?"

"I don't need to make confessions about my life. No matter who you think you are," Sylvester said.

He turned to look over the smoking expanse of Hueco. Down the street, a group of brothers hauled the mangled bodies away from the stray dogs that had gathered to chew on their bloodied limbs.

Gabriel extended his hand toward the mission looming in the distance.

"I'd like to show you something. Please, follow me."

Gabriel led Sylvester through the labyrinth and up into the bell tower, where they could see the damage done by Michelangelo's band of renegades. The main thoroughfare of the city had been ravaged. A few pained cries echoed through the still air of the evening.

"Tell me, Sylvester, what do you see?"

Sylvester closed his eyes and breathed in the scent of his youth.

"I see that what could have been and what came to pass are two very different things."

"Do you remember the woman Arcelia?"

"Don't say that name to me. Only the wind and the stars are allowed to speak her name."

"Sylvester, I am going to ask you one more question. I demand that you answer truthfully." Gabriel took a deep breath. "Did you fornicate with her?"

Sylvester kissed his hand and held it up to the sky. "It is only the memory of those glorious nights that keeps me alive today. That is my only light in a dark world."

Gabriel nodded solemnly.

"I wish I had time to explain, and you had the ability to understand."

"Understand what?"

"Why."

Gabriel shoved his father off the bell tower and to the ground below. The body fell as a sack of horse feed and hit the ground with a louder thump than expected.

He watched Sylvester for a moment to make sure he didn't move, and then went down to the dining hall for a glass of water.

*

After the battle, Michelangelo followed in the tradition of great men and fled to the wilderness. He built himself a campfire in a cave and stared into the flames

until dawn. In his darkest hour, he considered the probability that everything he had ever experienced was an illusion.

"I am the only man in the world," he repeated. "Nothing is real."

He released a howl of madness that echoed into the depths of the cave, and eventually fell into a tormented sleep.

The next morning, he awoke to a man's light touch on his arm.

Leon Sweeney, the turtle salesman with the heart of a lion and the balls of a bull, stood above him eating a grapefruit.

"I followed you," he said.

"Yes."

"If it's all right, I'll stay with you."

"What use do I have for a companion? Especially in a world where everything is an illusion."

"I know a great secret that will help in your travels."

"What's that?"

"That time is bound by the cardinal directions."

It was the beginning of an inseparable friendship.

Leon cooked breakfast while he explained the phenomena that the farther one traveled south, the deeper they went into the past, and the farther one traveled north, the deeper they went into the future. He learned this knowledge from the turtles.

"Now, we have to decide which way to go. The choice is backwards or forwards."

Without looking up from the fire, Michelangelo pointed south.

"Very well," Leon said. "The past it is. Luckily, if we go far enough into the past, we'll wind up in the future. And if we keep going farther, we'll return to the present. All of this will be revealed in time."

The unlikely duo headed south, crossing mountain ranges and rushing rivers at the peril of losing their lives, until they were conscripted to fight in a local skirmish between two great families. Their side lost, and they were sent in chains

to the coast and held on a slave ship. Before leaving the bay, they escaped the ship by crushing through the wood with sledgehammers and swimming to safety with pockets full of the commodore's gold coins. They returned to the mainland to find portraits of their faces on posters with an amount for reward. They traveled by moonlight. Then, after a spat with a lover named Olivia, Michelangelo and Leon remained in a cave for two weeks to avoid the wrath of her father, who was a warlord with one arm and one leg. Instead of the warlord, they were attacked by a pair of panthers using the cave to mate. Wounded and facing death, they traveled farther south in search of medical assistance, but could not find any doctors trained in the methods of the eighteenth century. The farther south they went, the more Leon's philosophies proved true. They witnessed primitive peoples who walked on all fours and picked berries off of trees with their teeth. But nothing altered their journey like the night Michelangelo drank a bottle of tequila and shared the story of the virgin birth with the governor of Balibaba. Upon hearing the tale, the governor tried to crucify Michelangelo because he feared that the Christian story was incomplete if the Son of God was still living. They succeeded in raising him on the cross. Just before Michelangelo cried out "It is finished!" Leon arrived with dynamite and two ponies. He cast the dynamite into the crowd of onlookers and pulled his friend onto the second pony before riding for safety. Michelangelo would never be able to repay the bravery. Eventually, they wound up at the bottommost tip of South America and stole a fishing vessel to make their way through the remainder of the past and then enter into the future.

As they sailed away, Michelangelo lay back and stripped his shirt.

"It looks like our war is over, my friend. We've gained freedom at last."

"Yes." Leon looked up to the heavens with a wearied sigh. "But now we have to deal with the burden of independence."

VI

Years later, Esther was engaged to be married to Percival Thomas, a man who came to Hueco by mistake.

Percival's journey began with him looking for the lost and mythical city of El Dorado, and ended with him stumbling into Gabriel's labyrinth one night, half-dead and without possessions. He lost his shirt at the poker tables and wore a pair of skin-tight trousers stolen from a clothing line. His bare feet were caked in blood. In his hands he held an unreadable map hurriedly drawn centuries before.

Gabriel found him unconscious in the first rays of dawn light and believed the man was some kind of sign from God. Rather than sending him away, Gabriel dragged him to his bed and tucked him beneath the sheets. Such was his condition when Percival awoke in a terror to see Gabriel lying next to him. Percival peered around the room adorned with books of scientific experimentation and liturgical prayers, and feared he had been victimized by a rogue scientist. Percival examined his body for aberrations but found nothing out of the ordinary. He quietly lifted a pillow above Gabriel's face and tried to smother him to death.

Gabriel awoke, unable to free himself from the onslaught.

By chance, Barto heard the struggle and burst into the room, only to find the window open and the curtains fluttering. Gabriel clutched at his throat, fighting for air.

"I've been assailed!" he declared.

"Of course," Barto answered, then quietly shut the door.

Percival sprinted through the crop fields with the intention of leaving Hueco forever and setting fire to his treasure map. He swam across the Orange River and arrived at the Matias Ranch, where he had no choice but to stop and plead for water so he would not die of dehydration. Arcelia sat on the roof playing cards

and watched him coming from a long way off. She stood up and shielded her eyes, wondering if Michelangelo had returned at long last. Alas, the man was paler than Michelangelo and had a mane of curled hair most men could never grow.

“Who are you?” she asked.

“My name is Percival. I am a foreigner to this land. Right now, I am thirsty, and I am sunburned, and I am in need of assistance.”

“Just a minute, and I’ll come down.”

Castro then stepped out the front door of the house, whistling a song he had composed for Bee. Since the revolution, he had become the most noteworthy singer in Hueco, championed by the whores of King Street. He led the rebuilding process and earned respect as one who brought encouragement and joy to all who entered his presence.

“Hello, friend. Never in my life have I seen pants like those,” Castro said.

Percival tugged on the fabric in embarrassment.

“I was told by the woman on the roof that I can have clothing and water.”

“Come in. Take a seat and enjoy yourself.”

Just as Percival sat down in the living room, Esther arrived carrying a basket of roots. Esther and Arcelia had been experimenting for some time with roots to try and create a meal that, in one sitting, would nourish their bodies for an entire year, and thus rid themselves of the daily interruption of having to sit and eat. No one had the time for such a disturbance. They had succeeded in living for a three-month period with a concoction created by Esther, but did not allow the breakthrough to distract them from the ultimate goal of a single meal per year. Esther was now as beautiful as Arcelia had ever been. She had grown into the fullness of womanhood and no longer resembled the odd little girl who once upon a time looked more like the offspring of mice than man. Her hair was tied in a loose bun, her face without blemish, and her eyes blazing with the fires of a survival instinct. The only remnant of the sickly child was her slightly pointed ears. The curvature of her body was enough to make the most pious of men blush.

Percival fell in love at first sight.

"Percival, sing me the song of your life," Castro said.

Percival was too distraught for music. He covered his nipples to avoid the humiliation of being shirtless in front of such a mesmerizing woman, and combed through his ragged beard with his chipped fingernails. Castro knew the symptoms of being lovestruck.

"Ah, I see it now," he said aloud. "You're in love with her."

Esther, blushing and sheepish, took a seat next to Castro.

"Who's our visitor?" she asked.

"This man is in love with you," Castro declared. "I can see it as clearly as I can see the sun and the moon."

Percival was scandalized and speechless. The entire family awaited his confession of love, which he could not formulate into words. He began to speak but looked away in shame. The tension was released at the sound of a colossal groan from a nearby bedroom, where Venus wished to be rolled into the living room to join in the conversation.

She had grown so rotund in the years after Michelangelo's revolution that she could no longer walk and relied on a rolling chair for portability. After he fled to the wilderness, she wept without consolation. She tried to eat herself to death. In a twist of fate, the fat she accumulated prevented her from attempting other methods of suicide and thus imprisoned her in a life of obesity. She could not climb onto the roof to jump off of it, nor could she take a knife in one hand to slash the opposite wrist. She even snapped a hanging rope in half. Arecelia encouraged her to be kicked in the head by a horse to honor the death of Juan Matias. She could not reach the pastures without succumbing to fatigue. Only food eased her pain. Castro widened the doorway of her bedroom so she could be rolled about.

Arecelia walked into Venus's bedroom and rolled out the giant woman. Percival had seen similar attractions in circus shows.

"Make way. And watch your feet!" Arecelia warned.

Venus looked at Percival and Esther, then shook her head in disgust.

“Don’t bother yourselves with love,” she warned. “It’s a myth. Look what love has done to me. I’m ruined.”

“Don’t mind her,” Castro said. “Percival, we were waiting to hear how you feel about Esther.”

Percival looked up to meet the deep brown seas of Esther’s eyes. He was enraptured in ecstasy.

“As soon as I saw you, I knew that if we could not be together forever I would have to die. Forget El Dorado. Forget treasures. I’ve found it here.”

Esther smiled.

“Make use of yourself, and carry my basket.”

She stood up and motioned for Percival to follow her outside.

It was the beginning of an epic love.

*

Arecelia invited Percival to stay for as long as he wished, so long as he contributed to the well-being of the household by feeding the horses and catching fish in the Orange River. Arecelia could not have been more pleased with his angling skills. She had only recently discovered that fish could be caught with nets and poles, which she did for recreational purposes in the middle of the night once everyone else had gone to sleep. However, she had not yet mastered the art. She possessed an insatiable appetite for fish. Percival’s place among the family was solidified on the morning he returned with two baskets overflowing with river trout. Arecelia knew right then and there that Percival was the only man on earth who she would approve to marry Esther. He never fully understood Arecelia’s fascination with his talents.

During the day, Percival wooed Esther with the help of Castro. Their mission was to make Esther feel like the most beautiful woman in the world. Often, they succeeded. Percival and Esther strolled the grapefruit orchard, which had grown back and was producing at full force. He revealed his misfortunes in the foolish

search for El Dorado, when he devoted three years of his life to the poorly drawn map discovered amongst the ruins of his great-grandfather's dresser drawers. He stole a horse from one of his childhood friends and rode south, braving the hardships of loneliness and despair, which were not uncommon to treasure hunters. Then, he laid eyes on the girl who would forever alter the course of his life, and who would fulfill his mad desire to find something priceless.

One day, after walking to the Orange River and bathing in the nude with Esther, Percival returned to find Castro holding a sharpened blade over a campfire. On the ground near him was a bottle of ink.

"Let's make this official. I'll write her name on your arm," Castro said.

*

Gabriel had become such a great legend in those days that he could not travel anywhere without being met by cheers and pleas for his blessings. He had always been heralded as a sort of savior, but did not reach the status of icon until word returned of his worldwide acclaim. The news came from a traveling French poet named Sergi Aldaine, who came from Europe to write a collection of poems about the famed brother who was born of a virgin. Sergi clung to the adolescent charms of boyhood, both in body and in spirit. The whores of King Street scarcely believed him on the day he stood on top of the old piano and announced he was over fifty years old. He attributed his youth to the poetry and wine which preserved his youthful countenance and gave him uncommon stamina while making love. The whores ran him off King Street, however, when they realized his purpose in Hueco was to celebrate their most hated adversary: Brother Gabriel.

Gabriel had to account for his acclaim.

The only logical conclusion pointed back to the visit of Pope Genuine I. No one else could spread a single name across continents in such a short amount of time. When Pope Genuine I returned to Europe, he found that he missed Gabriel as men miss dead lovers. In turn, the pontiff ordered the famed poets and painters of

Rome to write books of poetry and paint murals to commemorate the Savior of Hueco. Gabriel's face ascended to international recognition when Pope Genuine I held an estate sale to raise funds to purchase a rare peacock. The public discovered the innumerable shrines to the unknown man. The mysterious works of art became the most coveted in all the world.

Gabriel's fame commanded a steep price. He lost all semblance of privacy and could scarcely go anywhere without being assailed by admirers. The populace asked him his opinion on both the trivial and the eternal, the meaning of the prophecies, when the Apocalypse was to be expected, where he preferred to place his spoon while dining, and how he and Michelangelo could have possibly come from the same womb. His window, which had always been left open in case of unexpected visits from Heavenly Beings, now remained closed for his own safety.

No one within the mission had addressed the potential pitfalls, until one day over lunch Barto made an offhanded remark about the parallel relationship of popularity and pride, the deadliest of all sins. Not even Gabriel looked up from his bowl of beans. The comment stung him deeply.

Late that night, Gabriel slipped out of the shadows as Barto was replacing the burned-out candles in the sanctuary. He removed the sharp hood of his cloak and lit a candle he carried in his hands, illuminating the threat in his eyes.

"Who runs this mission?" Gabriel asked softly.

Barto groaned as he attempted to stand.

"God runs the mission. Who else."

"You did not let me finish. Who runs this mission on behalf of God?" Gabriel asked.

"To suggest you run the mission on God's behalf is to suggest He cannot do it on His own."

"Hardly! I only mean to say that God gave this mission to me as a gift. To His son. I am the steward of His Kingdom."

"No, boy," Barto answered, weary from such discussions. "You are the son of Sylvester Lacy, and God gave this mission to the men, women, and children of this

town, and we are to administer His goodness and love to those in need. It's a very simple thing."

Gabriel grimaced.

"If you continue to interrupt me before I finish, I'm going to have you whipped for insolence."

"Stop confusing yourself with God, little Gabriel. You are not He."

"I am . . ."

"And do not confuse the cheers of this world with the cheers of heaven. This world celebrates what God finds disinteresting and meaningless."

Gabriel smiled.

"I see now, old man. You're jealous."

"No."

"You hate me because you are not me."

"I don't hate you. I am only concerned that the focus of Hueco has shifted away from God over these many years and toward things that will not satisfy. The applause in the streets must end. Redirect the people to greater things, both inside and outside the heart. Otherwise we are all guilty of what God detests most, and that is man's pride."

"As always, your theology is unsound, Barto. If I had the time, I'd correct you myself."

Gabriel placed the hood of his cloak over his head and extinguished the candle before disappearing into the shadows from whence he came. Upon returning to his room, he found the tapestry shielding his window torn to the ground and the floor covered in gifts and letters of adoration that had been tossed inside. He cleared a path and fell on his knees at the bedside.

At once, Sergi the French poet rolled out from beneath the bed with a pen in his hand.

"Pretend I'm not here," the Frenchman directed.

Gabriel proceeded to cry out in a great show of desperation. His animalistic prayers were heard all across Hueco.

*

After traveling through the past and the present and sweeping around the oceans of the world, Michelangelo finally found himself tying his sailboat to a tree on the banks of the Orange River. He gave Leon a helping hand onto the shores of their youth. Michelangelo gazed into the distance at the bell tower and sniffed the faint hint of sheep shit on the hot wind.

“This place hasn’t changed since the day I was born.”

“There is only one thing I have learned from living in the future and the past,” Leon said. “The only question to be answered is what one must do with the immediate present.”

“Now, we go to my house and try to start over.”

Michelangelo and Leon walked the mountain pass to the Matias Ranch, which he last saw on the day he laid siege to Hueco. The sight of healthy grapefruit trees brought him pleasure. He mounted the porch and walked inside the house, filled with people thanks to the upcoming festivities. Esther and Percival were set to be married on the roof under the authority of Barto, who was traveling by his diseased donkey and expected to arrive shortly. Arecelia inquired about using the church, but Gabriel refused after he learned Michelangelo’s bastard girl was the bride in question.

Arecelia cooked a stew of rabbit meat, while Castro and Bee prepared songs in their room. Venus was the first to lay eyes on Michelangelo, looking as if he had lived through ten whole lifetimes of hardship and desperation. He still had not shaved his beard from his days of sailing through the Arctic Past, and his military uniform was unrecognizable from the bloodstains and ripped seams. Only the crisscrossed pistols pendant on his cap gave him away.

“Michelangelo, my king,” Venus announced.

“Who are you?” Michelangelo asked.

“Venus Lacy.”

“My God. You’ve gained five hundred pounds.”

Arecelia rushed through the living room carrying a steaming cauldron of water.

“You could at least offer to help, Michelangelo,” she announced, making no show of his return. “Remember your manners.”

Time had once again slipped her mind. She had no notion of how long he had been gone. If asked, she would have said the revolution occurred a week ago, or ten thousand years ago. It was not the first time. Often she waited by the window for Sylvester to arrive, thinking she was still the young mission girl who rode him like a spirited bareback stallion. Other times she awoke believing Brother Herman wished to speak with her in private about his intentions to raise the dead. Michelangelo followed his mother into the kitchen and asked what had happened in the world since his departure.

“Your daughter is getting married. And you ought to be ashamed, because this is the most important day of her life.”

Michelangelo could scarcely believe the news. He stirred the rabbit stew, trying to navigate the labyrinth of months and years wherein he had become a revolutionary vagabond. He no longer knew his age, or the year, or north from south.

“Where have you been, my son?” Arecelia asked.

“Everywhere.”

“And here everyone is getting old while you’re missing it.”

Esther stepped into the room, shining in the morning sunlight and radiating the incomparable joy of a bride on her wedding day. She wore a white wedding dress Castro ordered from Europe with the help of a cohort on King Street who dealt in international imports.

Michelangelo did not recognize Esther as his own child until she tucked her hair behind her ears, exposing the pointed tips that still made her resemble her mother. Esther was remarkably beautiful, just as Arecelia had been. The fire of her mother the whore remained hidden somewhere in her soul, always peering

around the corner. Michelangelo felt overwhelming shame. She had grown into adulthood without his guidance.

“You made it just in time,” Esther said.

Michelangelo gulped and stirred the rabbit stew. Arcelia slapped him with a kitchen towel.

“Don’t stand there like a dumb mule. Tell your daughter that she looks beautiful.”

“Don’t worry, Arie,” Esther said. “It’s time to start the ceremony. We can deal with all of this another time.”

Barto and Esther were the last to climb onto the roof, partly to add to the suspense, and partly because Barto required so much assistance to reach the location. Only Venus would not be able to attend the ceremony, and that due to her physical handicaps. Leon stood next to her, holding her hand and revealing all his knowledge about turtles.

As they waited on the roof, Percival walked over and bowed before Michelangelo.

“I love her. There’s nothing you can do about that.”

“You have nothing to worry about.” Michelangelo leaned down and kissed the groom on the cheek. “If there is anyone in this world who I want to be happy, it’s Esther. From this day on, consider yourself my son.”

Castro burst into song with Bee providing the harmony, and Esther stepped onto the roof, beautiful and shimmering in white. She was a sight to behold with the Orange River flowing in the background. Barto blessed the marriage, and Arcelia blew herbal smoke in their faces said to make their love invincible. The two kissed.

Michelangelo led the applause himself.

*

It was a time of happiness and romance at the Matias Ranch, rivaled only by the days that Michelangelo and Francisca sat on the porch long after sunset kissing one another with their lemonade breath. What surprised everyone was the unlikely love between Leon and Venus. He loved her because of her weight, not in spite of it. He believed fat women would one day rule the world as queens, finally fulfilling Venus's dreams of royalty. Venus, on the other hand, loved Leon because of his miniature stature. Regardless of their unorthodox romance, the two were happy. Leon wheeled her about the property each morning, sharing with her the same wayward philosophies he once used to convince Michelangelo that time was bound by the cardinal directions and that all wisdom could be gained by observing turtles. In the afternoons, Leon devoted his time to harvesting the massive amounts of food needed to fuel her body. He, too, became fascinated by the efforts of Esther and Arcelia to cure hunger with a single meal.

Only Michelangelo found unhappiness at the Matias Ranch.

He awoke each morning to an empty house. Esther and Percival walked down to the river, where they made tender love beneath the rose bushes on the riverbank. Leon pushed Venus into Hueco so she could purchase a new set of clothes left behind by the elephant trainer Miguel Coronado. Castro and Bee never left their room except to enjoy a brief lunch, when they walked about the kitchen half-naked and discussed politics. Arcelia, of course, could never be located. No one inquired about her daily business.

One morning Michelangelo awoke with a tremendous urge to play cards in the kitchen. But he could find no willing partner. He waited until Castro cracked open the door of his bedroom.

"Old friend," Michelangelo said. "Sit with me a while."

Castro dipped his glass into the water bucket and emptied it down his throat. He was dehydrated from his endless romancing of Bee, who was an unconquerable beast after her years of employment on King Street.

"I have no friends these days," Michelangelo continued. "Give me some company, and we'll play cards like we did in the presidio."

"Not now, Michelangelo. Love comes first, and then games. You must understand that I have a woman in my bed as we speak."

"Call her out. She can play too."

Castro shook his head in polite refusal.

"At my age, when the oven is hot, you bake your bread."

*

The last time Michelangelo entered Hueco, he invaded with blazing guns and an army of criminals. Gabriel's warning to never return echoed on his heart, but he had reached a point of seclusion at the ranch that convinced him to brave the streets in search of companionship. He needed to be acknowledged. As soon as he crossed into town square, a child spit into his hand and held it up at Michelangelo.

"The conqueror!" the boy hollered. "Shame! Shame!"

Unbeknownst to Michelangelo, he had become a popular subject of Native folklore. Legends of his brutality amplified him into a villain. The child fled in terror, as did the rest of the civilians milling about the square. He looked down to see a stray dog chewing on his boots and kicked the creature away.

"I'm only looking for some company. Don't I at least deserve that?"

Across the square, he noticed no one had removed the skeletal frame of Captain Paul Jordan. The uniform remained intact, just as the captain had wished. The bones of the skeleton had been painted various colors by the bravest of the children, and broken glass lay scattered on the ground. The Natives maintained the belief that the bones came to life under the magic of a full moon and the captain rose to dig up the box he had buried. Michelangelo reached out and touched the skeleton's teeth.

"Hello, old friend," Michelangelo said.

Forlorn, he traveled to King Street, which was now fueled by twice the immorality after the dynamite reduced it to rubble. The street reopened under the great financial risk of a Caribbean investor named Kari who was nearly seven feet

tall. Michelangelo recognized nothing, save for the state of the ragged and glassy-eyed men who lounged about waiting for their turn at one of the girls. All of his favorite places had been renamed, or turned into something else, or polished up with bright paint. He inquired about the piano player, and the pistol-bearing dwarf who guarded the red door, and the melancholy musicians. They had not been seen in decades. He asked why the maze of alleyways had been turned into a lot for carriages. He asked why the walls had been straightened and the clotheslines torn down. He asked if anyone knew of a woman named Emilia, or a man named St. Thomas who went in search of Solomon's soul. No one knew what he was talking about. They pointed him to Kari, who sat on a throne at the end of the street wearing a long black robe.

"What's all this?" Michelangelo asked. "I don't know where I am."

"Welcome to King Street."

"I'm looking for the place where men get lost in the dark and come out five days later with a brand-new set of eyes."

Kari stepped off her throne and ran one of her fingernails down the side of Michelangelo's face.

"Things don't work that way anymore." Kari smiled. She wrapped her long and snakelike fingers around Michelangelo's face. "Tell me, what are you looking for?"

"All I want is someone to give me some company."

"Ah, then I know the girl for you. But you will have to wait your turn like everyone else. I can put you on the schedule."

"I'm not the kind of man who waits in line to see a woman."

"Then you won't see a woman."

Michelangelo left in a fury, shoving his way through the haggard beings waiting in line. He rushed through the market and tore down the stand of a vendor selling sour grapefruits. The crowds turned to see the famed invader, but more looked upon him with pity than with fear. They suddenly saw him not as the blood-covered general, but as the insane rebel with no past and no future driven

to the edges of the earth by some ethereal, spiritual madness. As he looked upon the faces of his fellow Huecoans, he realized that he could have long ago taken the reigns of the tannery from Abraham Alvarez. He could have married a fertile woman and offered children to the world. He could have become Gabriel, or Quintino the One-Eyed Beggar, or even Leon. Anything but Michelangelo the bewildered soul, the troublemaker who garnered pity.

He shrunk into himself.

"I once fed you all with grapefruits!" he shouted. "I grew them in my orchard, and I kept you alive! I'm the reason we are allowed to exist!"

No one stopped his descent into realms of the irrational. He knew with certainty that all of existence was a cruel trick of his subconscious, and his subconscious a cruel trick of God's mind, and God's mind a cruel trick of some other distant God living in a faraway paradise. No one could decipher Michelangelo's illogical mumblings.

A brawny man stepped forth from the crowd and placed his hand on Michelangelo's shoulder.

"Take a breath of fresh air. You've got nothing to worry about," he said.

Michelangelo's lips trembled beneath his beard of defeat.

"If only you were right," he said, and then made a path through the bewildered people of Hueco. Mothers drew their children into their bosoms as he passed betwixt them with his head hanging low.

*

Michelangelo returned to find the ranch house empty.

All of the horses were gone along with the saddles. He felt like time and space were slipping through his fingers, leaving him in some state of being no philosopher had ever named. He moved a chair to the center of the living room and faced the doorway, determined to have a meaningful discussion with

whoever returned first. No one came until after sundown. Two by two, they returned.

Michelangelo called out from the darkness, "Sit down and wait here. I have something to say when everyone arrives."

Arecelia came last. Michelangelo startled her by lighting a solitary candle in the darkness. She took a seat with the others and waited to hear the words of the shamed patriarch.

"It seems like I've been left in the past."

Arecelia cleared her throat. "Then we ought to send Leon back to find you. He's a time traveler."

"I'll go, if necessary," Leon said, always looking for an excuse to share his theories. "But you should know from our experiences that if you're stuck in the past, you need only to head north. Look to the turtles. You'll be back before you know it."

"You don't understand," Michelangelo said. "What I mean is that everyone else has settled down, and I still wake up in a bed all by myself."

"Find yourself a woman," Arecelia said.

"I'll have no one but Francisca. All I want is a little company, to sit at the table and play a hand or two."

Silence filled the room.

Percival cleared his throat. "I no longer play cards. I've had a string of bad luck."

"Then that's that. Excuses, excuses." Michelangelo extinguished the candle.

Later that night, after everyone had gone to bed, with the exception of Arecelia, who went to the river to catch fish, Michelangelo dressed himself in the clothes he wore during his romance with Francisca. He snuck into the bedroom of Percival and Esther, standing over their bed like a shadow as they slept. There he loomed for over an hour. Percival finally awoke to urinate. He was so startled by the presence of his father-in-law that he grew short of breath. Michelangelo left the room without a word.

"My God," Percival whispered to his bride. "I just had the dream of Death."

"It was only my father," Esther replied.

"I'm not sure there's a difference."

From there, Michelangelo snuck into the bedroom of Castro and Bee, standing over their bed in his ghostly silence. He sat between them and removed his shoes. Castro sat up several hours later and tapped Michelangelo on the shoulder.

"We'll make room, if that's what this is about."

"Don't bother," Michelangelo said. "I'm only watching."

"You're craving love. It's human."

"No," Michelangelo answered. "The only woman I will ever love is dead, and I am destined for solitude."

The nights of domestic terror continued for months. By day, Michelangelo sat in the living room with his wide-brimmed hat pulled low. He slept sitting up, his eyes shadowed, making it impossible to tell when he was awake or asleep. Whenever someone asked about his daily plans, he shrugged.

"I'll be here and there."

In those days he carried around a notepad to sketch images of his family in circumstances they thought had been private. If he felt the sketch deserving, he would lay it softly upon their pillows at night while they slept. Often, they awoke in a cold sweat. On more than one occasion, he trailed Esther and Percival to the river and hid in the bushes as they frolicked and skipped stones over the glassy waters at dawn. He also premeditated the walking destination of Castro and Bee. Michelangelo whistled in the distance so they knew they were being watched. He tampered with Venus's rolling chair so that when Leon pushed her through the grapefruit orchard, the wheels came loose and she crashed to the ground. Michelangelo watched the events unfold from the treetops, eating fruits and producing his sketches.

Arecelia was the first to confront him about his new antics. One day as he slept in the sombrero, she dumped a bucket of water in his lap.

"You need to learn what it means to have something to do."

"Don't be crazy. Here I'm resting and you've soaked me," he said.

"You watch everyone like a hawk. Percival hasn't slept in weeks. He says you've been looking through his windows."

"He's a liar. Why would I do that?"

"Because you want to be him. And you want to be Leon. And you want to be Castro. You want to be everyone but yourself."

Michelangelo pulled down on his hat.

"You shouldn't bother a man while he's trying to rest."

That night, Michelangelo took his theatrics to a new level. While Castro slept, Michelangelo lifted the old fellow out of the bed and laid him in the living room. He returned and crawled into the bed next to Bee, sleeping with her until the morning. She awoke before dawn and knew by the smell that Michelangelo lay next to her.

"You had better hope, for your sake, that you didn't touch me."

"Think whatever will make you happiest," he said, then cast the blankets aside and left the room.

He went into the living room and carried Castro back to bed. Michelangelo spent the remainder of the day sitting in his chair with the hat pulled low.

The following night, he moved Percival next to Venus and put Leon on the roof. He then lay in bed next to his daughter. Before dawn, he kissed her on the forehead and whispered, "There's nothing to worry about. It's just me." He retrieved Leon from the roof and carried Percival to his place next to Esther. The men of the Matias Ranch remained clueless to the nightly exploits of the patriarch. The women did not expose Michelangelo because they knew of his fragile state. Such a humiliation might send him to the grave.

He tired from moving the men and began to move the women. Percival awoke one morning and rolled over to see Michelangelo's somber face. Esther lay beneath the bed, softly snoring.

"You've gone too far," Percival said.

"I must have walked in my sleep," Michelangelo said. "It won't happen again."

The following night he rolled Venus into the stables and moved Leon into his chair, even placing the sombrero on his head. He moved Esther into Venus's bed, Bee into Percival's bed, and then settled in next to Castro. The plan took an unexpected turn when Castro awoke with the urgency of lovemaking. He draped his leg over Michelangelo with a tender groan.

"You've got the wrong idea," Michelangelo warned.

"No, I have the right idea, just the wrong person," Castro said, his eyes bulging.

Michelangelo was so humiliated the next morning that he left the sombrero in his chair and vanished. He stripped all of the beds of their blankets, vowing to never again sleep where he was uninvited. He carried the blankets across the yard and toward the well, where Arcelia had strung a clothesline. He felt lost, terrified of the man he had become. If the world was only in his imagination, as he suspected more than ever, and he could still not make it a place of happiness, then there was no use in living. He approached the well and pulled on the rope, but some object obstructed the bucket from rising. He tied the rope to a saddle horn and dragged it upward.

When the bucket surfaced, he saw Arcelia sitting on top of it, dead.

While fishing in the Orange River, she had noticed one of the glowing orange stones at the bottom of a waterfall. Thinking it to be of magical properties, she treaded the waterfall and dove for the stone. The undercurrent swept her through a tunnel and all the way back to the well on the Matias Ranch. Her last effort was to sit up straight on the water bucket so that her death would be less humiliating. She died at dawn, her lungs filled with water and the orange stone clenched in her hands.

Michelangelo toppled her to the ground and lay next to her for many hours, never so alone.

VII

Sergi the French poet arrived at Arcelia's funeral procession two hours early. He received special permission from Brother Gabriel, who was heartbroken over his mother's death, to climb the bell tower of the mission so he could look over all of Hueco and capture the fullness of the event in a poem that would be the final in his collection about the Savior of Hueco and the miraculous happenings of his homeland. Tens of thousands were expected to attend from Hueco and beyond. Even Pope Genuine I sent a letter stating humble tribute to the woman who immaculately conceived his most cherished friend.

The sun rose upon the melancholy crowds stuffed into the narrow and dusty streets of Hueco. They lined the pathway from the labyrinth to the cemetery, where the gravestone chiseled for Arcelia rose higher than that of Brother Herman, the posthumous saint. The ceremony would take place in the church with family and close friends. After much deliberation, Gabriel agreed to Michelangelo's attendance. Arcelia's journals demanded the two brothers lead her coffin. An hour before dawn, Brother Ernest guided the inhabitants of the Matias Ranch through the labyrinth and into the church, illuminated by the fresh candles supplied by Barto. The old man wept and mumbled outdated prayers in the corner.

Michelangelo then appeared in the back of the sanctuary, ragged, filthy, and smelling of liquor. He wore the uniform Arcelia sewed for him prior to the revolution and carried the grief-stricken look of a child who had never encountered death. He passed by the other mourners and fell to his knees next to the coffin, pressing his wet lips against pearl inlays and slobbering onto the donated floral arrangements.

Gabriel placed a tender hand on his brother's shoulder.

“Take comfort, Michelangelo. The price of death has already been paid.”

“Not yet, Gabriel. The hour has not yet come.”

Gabriel would not understand those words for many years.

The streets overflowed with mourners, forcing people onto rooftops to witness the procession. Onlookers came from as far as Asia, including Yuri Kawamoto, the miserable magician and scientist who was over six thousand years old. Everyone remembered Arcelia’s name from the tales told by Barto during his international travels. Others came from South America in honor of Michelangelo the wandering revolutionary who passed through their continent in a haze. Hueco owed all of its successes and failures to Arcelia, as she bore the miraculous twins of world renown. Children unfamiliar with the tale were enlightened by their parents, who were enlightened by their grandparents, many of whom were outside the mission the day Brother Gary Sullivan III announced the virgin had birthed not one, but two baby boys.

When the coffin emerged from the labyrinth, all of Hueco fell silent. Gabriel and Michelangelo walked ahead of the coffin holding hands in accordance with Arcelia’s will. The procession took Arcelia through the streets and up the hill to the cemetery, where a plot awaited her beneath the extravagant tombstone carved by the local sculptor Victor Ruby. The tombstone itself would be a controversy for years to come. Instead of fulfilling Gabriel’s order to depict the virgin birth, Victor took a bold step back in the timeline and depicted the conception.

When the procession arrived at the grave, Gabriel stepped forth to provide one final word.

“Death is only the beginning. We should all envy her, because now she is alive with God.”

Esther pointed at the coffin, shaking her head.

“She’s still in there, dead.”

“But her soul is in heaven with God.”

“Who let her soul loose?” Esther asked. She possessed the same impenetrable logic as Arcelia, which would be her only inheritance.

*

After the funeral, Michelangelo remained at the gravesite. He could scarcely move or breathe. In the distance, he saw the figure of Death approaching with his great flowing cloak.

"Hurry it up!" Michelangelo called. "I've been waiting on you all my life."

He watched as the figure ambled forward and revealed himself to be a short Asian with bronzed spectacles. The fellow was bent and unsymmetrical, carrying a spyglass, and draped in silk.

"You're not who I expected," Michelangelo said.

"I'm Yuri Kawamoto." Yuri bowed before Michelangelo, revealing a tattoo of a tree on the crown of his head. "And you must be Michelangelo."

"What does it matter to you?"

Yuri squatted down so that his eyes were level with those of Michelangelo.

"It matters enough to me that I crossed the ocean to see you."

"You've come at a bad time. Here I was hoping to die and you've interrupted me."

"No. You lack the courage to die. And perhaps the ability."

"Please, go on your way and bother someone else."

Yuri sat on the ground and took Michelangelo's hand into his own.

"I'm a sort of collector. Of history. Ancient and important things. I suppose you could say that I am collecting trophies from the history of the world. And I've done quite well for myself these past six thousand four hundred and twenty-eight years."

Michelangelo breathed in the scent of sheep shit wafting over from the mission fields.

"You're wasting your time here, Yuri Kawamoto. All you'll find in this town is dust and skeletons and liars in robes."

“No. Hueco is the center-point of all existence. You are a Son of God, and I would like to take you along with my collection. You will be my featured exhibit because you are the reason the world keeps spinning. Everything I have collected so far – Tutankhamen’s chalice, the lost books of Plato the Philosopher, the golden coins of Sir Francis Drake, the petrified fingers of Xerxes, the ceremonial sword of George Washington, the oracle bones of Shang – all of it falls second to you. Only you are the savior of the world. I’ve been looking for you my entire life.”

“You’re a lunatic,” Michelangelo said. “No one believes in those fairy tales anymore, except for my brother.”

“I’d like to tell you a story,” Yuri said.

For the next hour, Yuri shared the story of his rise. Doomed from the beginning, Yuri was born of a starving adolescent who had been raped by her father, a madman who had claimed since his childhood that he possessed the rare ability to produce angels from the wombs of humans. Yuri was born in a puddle and left to pickle in the September winds coming off the Pacific Ocean. He lay in the puddle for three days before a stray dog lifted him by the back of his neck and carried him to its den, where a passel of puppies waited to devour him as their breakfast. The puppies, however hungry, would not feed on the child because of the strange odor he emitted. He smelled of the putrid and stagnant water that had served as his home. Even the dogs knew it would be fatal to feed upon his flesh.

Days later, the rebellious daughter of a Shaman found the boy. She stole her father’s trinkets to practice her own magical concoctions on the newfound baby. The results were disastrous. Hidden beneath the girl’s bed, Yuri began to grow wings. When the Shaman’s daughter saw the budding and feathery tips, she knew her experiments had gone astray, and dropped the boy into the middle of the ocean. Yuri sank to the bottom of the sea and passed through a hole in the ocean floor, which pushed him out into the Atlantic Ocean, where he rose to the surface unscathed and with a full set of angel’s wings. He was then snagged by a fishing hook and pulled onto the hardwood deck of a fishing vessel captained by Glorietta the Wondrous. She held acclaim not only as an angler but also as a medic. She took

Yuri into her quarters and gently cut away his wings. They grew back longer than before.

“That’s that,” she said, and tossed him into the air, thinking he would fly off into the sky. He crashed to the deck, unable to utilize the wings that defined him.

For years, the wings had to be tied to his legs and covered by heavy coats.

On the eve of his fiftieth birthday, however, he awoke to find that his wings were gone. Instead, he glowed with a bright white light that filled the room. The glow lasted another fifty years, limiting him to a solitary and indoor life. When the glow faded, he grew locks of hair that could not be sheared by the sharpest scissors. Fifty years later, the locks fell to the ground.

After a thousand years of cycling through angelic attributes, he finally evolved into a human being. He became obsessed with dying, seeking to terminate his life in all its forms. Unfortunately, he was immune to mortality. Knives could not pierce his skin. He joined armies as a mercenary, picking the side certain to lose. Even when his comrades were slaughtered, the enemy chose him as a prisoner. The towering cliffs from which he jumped always ended with a soft landing.

Life refused to release its grasp on Yuri. So he began to wander the earth, and over six thousand years he learned everything worth knowing. He had tested every profession, from crafting rudimentary farming tools in Mesopotamia to turning iron into gold as an alchemist in the unforgiving forests of the Balkans. He could think and speak in every language. He mastered the cultures of the world and knew the intricacies of their evolutions. He rubbed shoulders with the Czar, climbed the Acacia trees in Jerusalem to have a look at Jesus of Nazareth, and exchanged kisses with Anne Boleyn.

Yet, he could not conquer his misery.

So he began to collect the history of the world, trying in vain to make sense of mankind.

Years before, when a monk named Barto traveled through Japan on his journey around the world, Yuri shared a cup of tea with the old man and listened to him tell a tale of a virgin birth in a place called Hueco. Yuri listened with fascination

and believed that Gabriel and Michelangelo had the potential to be the next great turning point in human history. A pair of saviors would also elevate his collection to new heights. He knew if the brothers were not, in fact, gods, then he could turn them into gods. In his experience, manufactured gods held just as much sway over the humans who Yuri loathed with such intensity. When he saw Gabriel's portraits painted under the patronage of Pope Genuine I, he booked a ship to Hueco and arrived just in time for Arecelia's funeral.

"As you can see, I was born to find you," Yuri said.

"I can see."

"Now I have the task of explaining the truth of humanity, and you are the final piece. Are you coming along with me or not?"

"Where are we going?"

Yuri leaned forward. Michelangelo could feel the chill of his breath.

"To the ends of the earth."

*

Ten years later, Gabriel was growing old and looking for a successor to shepherd the mission. Hueco would always need an authority on matters civil and spiritual. He, like Brother Herman, sought to mentor someone into holiness and cultivate them as a precious garden until they were ready to serve the Kingdom with the same vivacity with which he had given his entire life. The possibilities were limited as fewer and fewer young men devoted their lives to the church. Of those who did, none showed the potential for miraculous works or the capacity to inspire the parishioners. The glory of the mission towns had largely been swept into the dustbins of history. Hueco alone was the shining light, a reminder of a forgotten century. The surrounding towns had long ago been trampled by Protestants and technology. Julian Calmus, a quiet young man who resembled Barto both in appearance and character, was the only legitimate contender within the confines of the mission.

Gabriel called Julian into his chamber one day.

“What would you do with all the power in the world?”

“Give it back,” Julian said.

“Try again. What would you do with all the power in the world?”

Julian thought for a moment.

“Give it back.”

Gabriel sighed in disappointment. He knew Julian lacked the passion needed to steer Hueco into the future.

“If only I could live this life all over again,” Gabriel lamented.

Julian retreated from the chamber, unwilling to change his response. Gabriel suffered. He prayed without ceasing for God to reveal a plan for his death and to raise a leader in whose hands he could leave the reigns of Hueco’s destiny. The brothers who built the foundations of Hueco were all dead. Ernest could no longer dig graves due to the arthritis that left him bedridden and belligerent. Eduardo fell asleep in the wilderness and awoke with the certainty that God was illusory, leaving his legacy in a cloud of suspicion. Ben and John-Mark became enslaved to the sin of reading fictional stories purchased from King Street. Barto, on the other hand, thrived when he should have died. His age, though unknown, spanned two centuries. His body and mind worked as fluidly as they had a hundred years before. He and Gabriel lived on two sides of a spiritual chasm that would forever separate their relationship.

Gabriel knew of only one other with the charisma needed to take his place, although the boy was not a Christian and perhaps was enslaved by the dark arts. His name was Zachariah, the son of Percival and Esther.

*

Zachariah inherited the combined powers of his lineage. Esther never knew she was pregnant until the day he fell out of her womb while she was toileting in the orchard. He weighed four pounds.

"Who are you?" she screamed, pulling on the umbilical cord like a rope.

She carried the child into the house, where Castro and Bee stood over a pot of beef stew.

"My God," Castro said, in shock. "Where did he come from?"

The baby had calico eyes, one being brown and the other blue. Esther reared him on goat milk, which she fed to him at exactly midnight, and which she claimed was the reason the boy could walk after one month. In a year, he spoke as eloquently as Leon. In two years, he held political debates with Castro. At three, he broke the wild stallions, and at four he took full responsibility for the grapefruit orchard. At five, he developed a mathematical system so revolutionary it required an entirely new set of numbers to support it, and at six he opened the Matias Ranch Fishery in honor of Arcelia. At seven, he traveled into Hueco with Castro to display his tender singing voice, and at eight he traveled through time with Leon, composing a book about turtle migration. By nine, everyone in Hueco had heard of the prodigy who lived amongst the psychotics of the Matias Ranch.

Gabriel journeyed there one afternoon to inquire of Zachariah's ambitions and to convince the boy that the perfect platform for his powers was the pulpit. Gabriel believed that with a detailed training regimen, the boy could lift the church back into prominence. He knocked on the door. Zachariah himself answered, staring out with the mismatched eyes.

"You're wasting your time," the boy said without delay. "Pick Julian. He's a man of God."

"You've just proven to me that he is wrong and you are right."

"Yes. But I have plans of my own. My grandfather conquered Hueco. I'm going to conquer the world."

"Your grandfather is dead. Thank the Lord."

"No. He's just gone for a while. He'll be back," Zachariah said.

Gabriel gulped, his worst fear spoken aloud.

"Tell me, what's in it for me?" Zachariah asked.

“With the church behind you, you will have power beyond all imagination. I will guide you into holiness. If you accept, I will announce you as my successor at the Black Tooth Festival.”

“I already have everything I’ll ever need.”

“We both know you are unique. But unlike me, you can only control your own circumstances. I, on the other hand, can control others. I tell my people to work harder and they work harder. I preach abstinence and they practice abstinence. I tell the world to turn and it turns. Understand me, child. You are unique, but I am powerful.”

Out of pure curiosity, the boy agreed to the proposition with a light shrug.

*

The upcoming Black Tooth Festival, which would commemorate the famous Coahuiltecan Native who never really existed, was anticipated to be the best yet. The people of Hueco sensed a stirring in the air and thus poured their energies into the planning of the festival like never before. Julian had been in contact with entertainers all over the world, seeking their services for the event. His acquisitions included a magician by the name of Lucius the Invisible, who lived a solitary existence off the coast of Australia. They said he was the greatest magician in the world, thanks to his unique ability to disappear, and chose only one performance a year to display his talent. The acquisition of a magician did not come without controversy. Many feared opening the doors wide enough for magic would also leave enough room for Satan. The other acts included an Irishman who could lift six women into the air at once, an Indian woman who tamed tigers with her collection of feathers, and, perhaps most anticipated by all, an American working on a device that flew through the air like a bird.

Gabriel kept a secret of his own.

After so many years of scientific and religious study, he would attempt to raise the dead and succeed where Brother Herman had failed. A successful resurrection,

he knew, would not only fill the pews of the church, but also create an unshakeable legacy to propel him into eternity. Such an achievement would be the crown jewel of an already-immaculate career.

He shared the secret with Zachariah over breakfast. The boy took a bite of his eggs.

“Then we’ll raise Arecelia.”

“I’m afraid that’s impossible. Based on my studies, resurrection is limited to men.”

“Then your studies are limited,” Zachariah said. “But we will need a power greater than God.”

Gabriel slapped him.

“Don’t forget your place in this world, little one. There is no power greater than God.”

Gabriel realized he would never eradicate the influences of Arecelia and Esther from his new pupil. He observed the boy closely and saw the habits inherited from his nine years at the Matias Ranch. Zachariah adopted the unusual sleeping habits of his great-grandmother, sleeping during the middle of the day or not at all. At night, he moved the furniture within the mission at his discretion. The other brothers believed the ghost of Arecelia had returned to torment them. Zachariah turned the chairs to face into corners. Some mornings he arrived to breakfast with poisonous snakes twisted around his wrists and threw them on the ground beneath the tables.

When he and Gabriel were not working on the resurrection, Zachariah visited King Street to entertain the whores and free himself from the watchful eyes of his new master. He fascinated the whores when they discovered he could play the piano and sing improvisational lyrics that touched their hearts, all the while balancing a glass of beer on his head.

Barto often traveled with him. The two became fast friends. Barto attended the performances and used the opportunity to spread the love of God by offering to pray for those in need. Even Kari the giant sat on the front row to hear the boy

play his original tunes. She offered him a full-time position with access to the finest girls available.

“First I need to raise a dead woman to life,” he said. “Then we’ll see.”

With the Black Tooth Festival only a week away and the streets filling with the booths of artisans and entertainers, Gabriel took Zachariah up to the cemetery. They spent an entire morning digging up Arcelia’s coffin. Zachariah made a point to walk over to the tombstone of Brother Herman and urinate all over the grass. Gabriel watched in a stupor.

They returned to the mission with Arcelia’s coffin dragging behind their skinny mules, only to encounter Barto blocking the road with his arms outstretched. For some time he suspected such antics from Gabriel, as he heard the hissing chemicals and foul stench of herbs within his chamber that reminded him of Herman’s earliest days at the mission. He then saw the coffin with the pearl inlay.

“Turn back,” he warned. “God will have no part of this.”

Gabriel grimaced.

“When are you going to die and get out of my way once and for all?”

“This is an outrage!”

“You are a disease on the people of Hueco. God has forgotten to kill you.”

“And you’ve forgotten to submit to His authority. You’re a madman. A murderer!”

“Damn you!” Gabriel hissed. “You will not stand in the way of providence. I was born to raise the dead. Move aside before I order you whipped for insolence.”

Barto knew the futility of his pleas. Gabriel had become a tyrant. He not only ordered a strict schedule of laborious workdays, but also limited leisure time. It began on the day he burned everyone’s silk leisure robes in a bonfire, along with other items deemed unnecessary. Even when diarrhea plagued the mission, Gabriel refused to change the dietary options because he remained unaffected.

“Let it be anyone but her,” Barto said. “Don’t defile her body for your pride.”

Gabriel kicked the ribs of his mule and brushed past the old man.

*

Percival had not stopped scheming murderous plans since Zachariah was abducted from the ranch. Castro broke the news, saying he saw Gabriel and the boy riding toward the Orange River. Percival grew so furious that he mounted a horse bareback and rode in circles, screaming out profanities. To Percival, joining the church equated to cutting off one's head and feeding it to roosters. The thought of his own son lighting candles to the saints of old lit the wicks of his fury. Esther heard the news and went to the bathtub in silence.

"What we ought to do is burn the mission to the ground," Percival said to her. "That's the one thing Michelangelo forgot to do."

When the sun rose on the first day of the Black Tooth Festival, the inhabitants of the Matias Ranch were dressed and loaded in the wagon. Like every year, they would attend the festival to sell grapefruits, fish, and turtles to the children. Percival shook the reins with remorse and started the wagon for Hueco. Esther lay in Bee's lap as the wagon rolled toward the Orange River bridge. Bitterness filled her soul. She finally understood the resentment of her father. Castro and Leon sat on the bed of the wagon, dangling their feet off the back and stabilizing the containers of kerosene.

Hueco bustled with the dawn of the festival.

The brothers had already walked the streets with their hands outstretched to pray over the populace and uncork their kegs of beer. The Black Tooth Festival had expanded into an event incomparable to the primitive gatherings of yesteryear, when soldiers fired thirty-nine bullets into Francisca's body. The vendors came from miles away, fighting one another in the wee hours for rights to build their booths closest to the stage.

Meanwhile, Leon and Percival unloaded the containers of kerosene and carried them into the stables behind the mission. They inspected the premises and located the most critical point of entry: the labyrinth. Leon encircled the mission with

kerosene, summoning the days when he and Michelangelo wreaked havoc on an entire continent. He threw the empty containers into the grass and walked back to the festivities as if he had been there all along.

Leon looked back to see Percival at the entrance of the labyrinth, a match in his hand.

*

Gabriel took the stage to welcome the first performer. He silenced the crowds by lifting his hands to the heavens.

“Welcome to the annual Black Tooth Festival!”

Zachariah joined him on the stage, wearing white robes. Gabriel drew the boy beneath his arm.

“We strive each year to bring the best in entertainment. But let us not be quick to forget the Holy Spirit in which we are all gathered. Thanks to God alone, and my own vision, this event is possible year after year. Let us pray and give thanks as Lucius the Invisible takes the stage.”

As Gabriel started into his Latin muttering, none but Yuri Kawamoto appeared at the entrance to the labyrinth with poisonous vipers crawling out from beneath his robe.

“Welcome to Bethlehem!” he cried.

The civilians turned to look at the six-thousand-year-old man who had grown out a blue beard, braided into long strands and tied at the ends with glowing beads. His eyes were lined with dark paint.

“What business do you have here?” Gabriel shouted from the opposite end of the crowd.

“I’ve come to reveal the truth of mankind.”

“We are a Christian people. The truth has been made known in Hueco,” Gabriel said.

“I was here in the beginning. And now, I offer you the great hope for mankind: that one from among you is more than a man! Hark! The Alpha and Omega, God among us!”

Gabriel stood up straight.

Just then, Michelangelo, skinny and scarred with his eyes sunken in misery, stepped into view in the bell tower of the mission. The crowd looked up to see him in a coarse brown tunic, afraid and breathless and confused, as if under a spell. He was so dominated by the darkness of his heart that no one from the family recognized him. His hair shimmered beneath the spring sun from the oils Yuri rubbed on him, and tattoos decorated his arms with symbols of the occult. He had come to the ultimate conclusion, with Yuri’s help, that nothing was real except his own imagination, meaning that he was the God of the Universe.

Gabriel alone recognized his brother in the bell tower. He grew so infuriated at the mockery that he descended the stage and shoved the civilians out of the way on his path to confront Yuri.

“What’s all this about? Are you some kind of wizard?”

“I come here in the spirit of the Lord,” Yuri said. “I come with tidings of joy. For unto you a child has been born . . .”

“Stop it!”

“That you may call him the Christ . . .”

“Stop it! Do not mock my Lord!”

“And he will take on the transgressions of the world and be raised from the dead!”

Gabriel shoved Yuri against the walls of the mission. Yuri burst into laughter.

Gabriel stepped back and looked up at Michelangelo in the tower.

“Who do you think you are, brother? To come into Hueco like this!”

Michelangelo peered down at his brother.

“I am God,” he recited.

Gabriel crossed himself in shame.

Michelangelo stared over Hueco, the imaginary place that had imprisoned him for so many decades, just as Ferris Cabrera had once done and leapt to his death into the pot of beef stew.

Gabriel rushed to the nearest soldier and pointed up.

“Shoot him down! Kill him!”

The soldier pulled the flintlock and took aim.

Just then, Percival ran out of the labyrinth holding an empty container of kerosene.

A wall of raging flames followed shortly behind, as if it were some great beast he had awoken from deep sleep. The mission erupted into flames. The labyrinth roared behind Percival as he bolted past Yuri and into the crowd of stunned onlookers, many of whom rushed to draw water from the wells to stop the mission from burning to the ground.

Percival fled to the wagon brought up by Leon. He maneuvered into the driver’s perch as the soldiers fired wildly at the inhabitants of the Matias Ranch. Esther and Bee lay in the back of the wagon next to Zachariah. The renegade wagon sped through the hysterical crowd with Leon slapping the reins and shouting expletives at Gabriel, who could only look upon the scene in disbelief. The soldiers fired aimlessly through the smoke, wounding both Percival and Castro and leaving scattered bullet holes across the back of the wagon.

Gabriel’s vision blurred as civilians and brothers ran past with buckets of water. His life crumbled before him. He fell to his knees in despair and watched the tragedy unfold. He offered a slobbering kiss to the crucifix hanging around his neck, and rested his cheek on the dust of the road. He would have remained there had Barto not lifted him up and placed a bucket of water in his hands.

“You can’t extinguish the flames from your knees,” Barto said. “We from the sunrise walk a different path.”

Gabriel ambled toward the mission as if inebriated, and lazily dumped his pail of water on the place he had been posting the prophecies for decades.

He looked up at the bell tower, but Michelangelo was gone.

*

Michelangelo and Yuri could be seen riding toward the ranch on white longhorns. For the last decade, everyone but Zachariah suspected Michelangelo to be dead. Leon was particularly shaken by the reemergence of his old friend. He could only classify the event as yet another enigma of time and space. Michelangelo rode like a dead man, bouncing with every step of the longhorn.

The entire family waited in the living room when Yuri walked inside.

"Allow me to introduce the Savior of Humanity," he said, sweeping his arm to reveal Michelangelo.

Esther rolled her eyes.

"That's no savior. It's my father."

Yuri turned to Michelangelo with a slight smile.

"Who are you?"

"I am who you say I am," Michelangelo uttered.

"And I say you are the Creator of all things."

Esther grunted in frustration.

"Say whatever you'd like. But don't begin to think he's anything other than the wretch who screwed a hundred women and slaughtered a hundred men."

Castro prepared a meal as Yuri and Leon walked the orchards to share their theories of time and space. Yuri confirmed the philosophy that time was enslaved to the cardinal directions. He applauded Leon as being the only man he had ever met with the aptitude to come to such a conclusion based on his observances of the turtles. Leon blushed and hooked his thumbs into his waistband.

Meanwhile, Michelangelo lounged in the same chair from which he had once launched his nightly attacks on the sleeping lovers. Zachariah and Esther sat across from the old man, staring into the vacant eyes of a disappointing legend, growing more and more disinterested in his burdens. Zachariah stood up and tapped on Michelangelo's forehead.

“You have a great deal of nerve to bring the dark angel under this roof, grandfather. He came in sheep’s clothing, but I can smell his stench. I know who he is.”

Zachariah’s warning lingered with Michelangelo as the family sat down to a supper of black beans and fish. Each time Michelangelo looked across the table at his mentor, he felt a chill run down his spine.

“You’re more cunning than I imagined,” Zachariah said to Yuri. “I always figured you for a fool.”

Yuri continued eating without acknowledging the boy.

“I heard from Gabriel that you were cast out of heaven. That you couldn’t bear being second to God. And still here you are, not good enough. Never good enough. A creation of a lonely creator. A toy. A crippled nemesis. Always grasping for something out of your reach.”

Yuri grimaced, yet continued forking beans into his bearded mouth.

“And now you’ve got nothing to do but trick old men named Michelangelo. You should be ashamed of yourself!”

Yuri slammed his fork into the wooden table, causing the dishes to rattle before all of the diners. All fell silent as Esther picked up Yuri’s plate and scraped the food out the open window for the hogs. She returned to the table and placed the empty plate before him.

“I don’t know how you were raised, but we treat people with decency in this home.”

After dinner, Yuri walked outside and sat next to Michelangelo on the front porch, each of them mesmerized by the wondrous scent of the grapefruit orchard. The sky remained in a haze thanks to the burning mission. The two had spent many such nights together during the previous decade, traveling from town to town to spread the news of Michelangelo’s deity. Most nights, they were run out of town by angry mobs and escaped on the white longhorns.

“I once fed the whole town with these fruits,” Michelangelo said.

“I remember,” Yuri said. “I was here, too. I was always here.”

Yuri stood from the porch and walked into the orchard, slowly sinking into the darkness until he was indistinguishable save for the glowing beads in his beard.

*

Barto and Julian worked through the night to extinguish the remaining flames. The fire took a greater toll than they feared, leaving the mission as a smoking skeleton of some living creature from long ago. Barto dumped his meager pails of water in contracting circles around the building and salvaged what he could of the charred trinkets that had once adorned the most beautiful church in all the land. He worked until the darkness prevented him from being able to tell what was worth saving and what was not. Then, he collapsed and slept under a bush.

The following morning at dawn, Barto collected blackened rosaries, melted portraits of Christ, disfigured candelabras, and, miraculously, the gentleman's pistol that had once belonged to Ferris Cabrera, the suicidal founder of Hueco. He had not seen the pistol in nearly one hundred years. After the invasion of Hueco and the execution of Captain Jordan, the other brothers plundered the presidio for anything of value. Brother Manuelo Colorado found the pistol and never told anyone. The pistol was still as beautiful as the day it was forged. Barto lifted the weapon into the morning sun, admiring the handiwork. The scrolled image down the barrel of the pistol showed the Biblical tale of Cain murdering his brother Abel. Barto tossed the weapon alongside the other discoveries and continued dumping water in contracting circles.

Gabriel, on the other hand, could no longer withstand the emotional hurricane.

He had transitioned from disbelief into unbridled rage. The source of his anger was not, however, the burned-down mission, but Michelangelo's claim of deity. The proclamation could only be described as blasphemous and heretical. Gabriel walked the smoldering ruins of the mission, unable to see anything but his brother standing in the bell tower and undoing almost two centuries of holy work. He would never rid himself of the hatred planted in his heart, not only for the

spectacle of the bell tower, but for a lifetime of Michelangelo's infectious poison: whores, grapefruits, and the like. He was the snake that bit the ankles of children playing in the tall grass. He was the seed that sprouted into crops that gave everyone diarrhea. He was King Street. He was Captain Jordan's violent regime and the years of disrespect shown to the church. He was the death of Gary and Reuben and the others. He was the blood flowing through the streets. He was the flaming mission.

And most painfully, he was the failed attempt at love with Francisca Matias.

Yes.

Michelangelo had stolen Gabriel's fulfillment. His entire legacy had been taken away.

"If there's a God on this earth, and it is one of us, it isn't him," Gabriel whispered to the ruins.

Gabriel stopped next to a young girl who sat on a rock. A goat was tied to string wrapped around her wrist. She watched in contemplative silence, barefoot, reminding Gabriel of his mother's innocence.

"Don't fret," he said. "It will be rebuilt."

The girl turned to him after some time and said, "Can we build something else?"

"What would you have us build that is better than a church?"

"Who knows," she said. "Maybe we ought to ask God while he's still hanging around in town."

Gabriel gripped the girl's hand, squeezing so that she could not pull herself free.

"What are you talking about?"

"God."

"And who is God?"

She tried to withdraw her hand. She looked up at Gabriel gritting his teeth.

"The man in the bell tower," she said quietly. "He's going to save us from our sins."

Gabriel released his grasp and watched as the girl and goat fled down a dusty street. He weighed the damage of his brother's speech. If all of the children were so disillusioned, an entire generation would grow up with a perverted faith. He feared they would envision God as a madman standing on a precipice above the mission, brought to town by a six-thousand-year-old Japanese man who arrived accompanied by fireworks. Their God would be a man buried under the sins of humanity.

Gabriel rushed to the nearest soldier.

"Gather some men and meet me right back here."

"What for?"

"To crucify a criminal. Now go!"

Barto approached carrying a crucifix covered in soot.

"What's all this about?" Barto asked.

"It's about you and him and everyone else who has tried to slow me down."

"What would you have me do?"

"Help me find Michelangelo," Gabriel said in a hoarse whisper.

Barto wiped the soot from the crucifix.

"For what, Gabriel? We won't see him for another ten years."

"And it will take ten years to undo what he has done. You heard him."

"Gabriel, Gabriel, Gabriel," Barto said, imagining the small boy he used to bounce upon his knee. "You're always concerned about the insignificant. His claims are like the newborn child saying he is stronger than the father who nurtures him. God will deal with these things. Let it pass."

"I cannot. I will not. As the ruler of Hueco and Head of the Church, I cannot."

Barto tossed the crucifix amongst the other ruins.

"Men can only do so much. The rest is up to God."

Gabriel chanced to look upon the items Barto had gathered from the ruins. He rearranged them with his foot and sighed at all that had been lost. Just before leaving, Gabriel noticed the gentleman's pistol gleaming in the sunlight. He lifted it out of the pile and marveled at the prophetic craftsmanship.

"We're ready," a voice announced.

Gabriel turned to see a dozen soldiers armed and sitting atop horses.

"Very good," Gabriel said.

He tucked the pistol into his belt and climbed onto the horse they brought for him. As they rode toward the Orange River, Gabriel checked to make sure the pistol was still loaded.

It was.

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Michelangelo sat on the porch as stiff as a puppet. He gazed into the orchard where Yuri had disappeared the night before, realizing for the first time that Yuri had intentionally propped him up as a god. He finally understood Yuri to be perverse. Michelangelo climbed out of the chair and walked into the house. Everyone slept except a hallucination of Arcelia, who stood in the kitchen with her hands on her hips. Michelangelo bore too much shame to look in her eyes. He sat on the couch and wiped the tears from his cheeks.

"They told me that you think you're God," Arcelia said.

"I don't know what I am or am not," Michelangelo replied. "I'm only a creature of circumstances."

Arcelia said, "You're a man like everyone else. And you will die like everyone else."

"Everything I have ever done is deserving of death, but I'm still alive. Explain that."

"I can't."

"My heart has been gone since they took her from me."

He stood up and walked toward the door.

"That excuse only works for so long," Arcelia said.

Michelangelo walked down to the Orange River where he had spent so many lazy days, and sat on the riverbank throwing stones into the waters and recalling

the adventures and misfortunes that had built him into the defeated man he had become. He wished it was the season to pick flowers. Despite his sorrow, he still believed the world was a great fantasy of his imagination and of which he had lost control. Even if Yuri was Satan, it did not mean he was not the God of his own world. Even if his life had all taken place in one instant, in one speckle of the universe, or if he woke up from a dream at any moment as a leper child in a bedroom in a distant country, or if everything had been some great and untimely joke of God, and Ferris Cabrera built another church on top of the mission and kept building and building and building until the first mission could no longer bear the weight and collapsed, or if God was a giant mosquito, and Abraham Alvarez came riding on Him with his shirt stained, sitting on a custom leather saddle depicting the great flood, or if time and space were working backward and confused and he was the only one who knew it and Leon sailed past in their boat laughing and making marks on his stolen captain's book of latitude and longitude, or if the stars were about to collide into one another because of unresolved tensions over women and would shatter to pieces and land in Arcelia's bathtub as she was just beginning to prune, or if Christ Himself would come riding down from the clouds on a golden chariot of fire, or if the ground beneath him was about to dissolve and he would fall forever into a black hole alongside Brother Herman with the hole in his forehead, weeping and weeping and weeping with the tears never hitting the ground, and all of history was laid out in some book read by scholars and instructed by Gary Sullivan III who had forgot to put on pants, and all of the graves turned over and the dead began walking in circles and spitting up the truth of eternity at the whipping of Brother Beltran, or if the demons came up from fiery holes in the ground and chased him to the ends of the earth, where great beasts waited to devour him or hang him on their walls as a trophy, or if the Orange River turned black and the waters rose so high that all of Hueco was buried and stained and the pope's men could not clean it up in a thousand years of sorrowful toil, and Captain Jordan, castrated and insane, watched from the rooftops and laughed until he vomited blood, cleaned up by Barto, who walked

out of the sunrise, or if the men from the north infested all the world like locusts, and Esther was chased by God who carried a one-hundred-foot saber but could never cut off her head as she waltzed away from Him and giggled like she did when she was a little girl and looked like the offspring of mice, and her mother came back into town with her throat cut and her clothes filthy from hiding in the mountains, where she lived alongside Bearpaw's best friends and sat around campfires that burned blue, and Apocalyptical bandits with one arm and one leg rode into Hueco and took no prisoners and stole the sand from the ground and sold it for gold, and the mountains turned into valleys and the valleys into mountains, and Juan Matias went around kicking horses in the head and killing them and raising them from the dead to do it all over again, and Pope Genuine I swam underwater playing guitars in exchange for trumpets, or if the labyrinth was indestructible and spit fireballs on everyone who passed by who did not read the prophecy, and the glowing orange stone was so light that it defied gravity and flew into the heavens and battled the Sun to the death and took its place to warm and light the Earth, and Francisca walked around alive with thirty-nine bullet holes no one noticed because she wore a big white wedding dress, and Venus became the queen of some underground world of ancient worshipers and her blind and maniacal father was one of them and kept the order with his whip of horsehair, or if Castro sang his songs so eloquently that they turned into paintings and poems in midair and were so beautiful they melted people's hearts and killed them, and King Street was always in the center of natural disasters but it did not deter people from paying for a good long romp and drunkenness and lechery and all the filthy rotten evils that ran the world, or if windows shattered from the bullets of American rifles and our prettiest daughters walked around on their hands like monkeys begging for pesos, and Adam and Eve cut the snake's head off and roasted him over the fire, or if Zachariah became the dictator of some illusory country inhabited by madmen and unseen by anyone else, and the air grew so putrid in the future that to breathe was worse than to die, even if the local armadillos went on a tour of the world singing their songs in perfect harmony

accompanied by the two blind musicians who had once performed for Michelangelo when he lived in the den of prostitutes, or if God Himself came down from His throne with angels holding His hands and washing His feet as He lifted the faces of the poor and broken and oppressed and whispered phrases of comfort and joy to them in some bubbling language, but He looked at the rich and the powerful and the perfect and spoke to them in the harsh languages of this world and cut their tongues out and packed them in a bag – even then, if all these things occurred, nothing would make a bit of sense.

Whether reality was or was not a reality, Michelangelo concluded he knew nothing and could be anything.

“Stand up,” Gabriel said from behind him.

Michelangelo cast one final stone into the waters, scattering the beauty of the sun’s rippling reflection. He wept uncontrollably and touched his hands to make sure they were his own.

“Face me,” Gabriel said.

Michelangelo turned around to face his brother, who held out the gentleman’s pistol with a trembling hand. Twelve soldiers kneeled behind him in a line, all aiming at Michelangelo’s wrinkled and scarred body where he stood on the banks of the Orange River, the mission still smoking in the distance.

“What became of you, Michelangelo?”

Michelangelo hung his head and said a prayer to God above for the first time since he was a boy.

“Forgive him for all the things he has done, and all he is about to do.”

Gabriel overheard the belated plea for mercy.

“It’s too late, brother. You’ve done too much. The blood of Christ spreads wide, but not wide enough for you.” He pulled the flintlock on the pistol. “Who are you? Tell me, for your life depends on it.”

Michelangelo looked into the melancholy heavens as the past and present and future came together in a moment of clarity. Every breath fit into a picture, not of his deity, but of his raw existence as a human being alive and moving and thinking

and feeling and imperfect, destined for nothing and buried in the sins of humanity. He had become the embodiment of fallen man, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, and disintegrated them from the inside out until they no longer suffocated the souls of mankind and left them without hope.

Michelangelo looked out to meet the eyes of his brother.

“I AM.”

The pistol fired.

Gabriel was more surprised than anyone by the gunshot. The bullet traveled from the barrel of the gun and entered into Michelangelo’s heart. He looked at his brother as if in gratitude for ending the torture and fell to his knees, where he cupped his hands to catch the crimson blood pouring forth from his chest and over the open palms of his hands. He smiled as the clouds broke apart and the sun shone upon him.

He died with eyes open, staring at Gabriel, who was so struck by his brother’s final words that he had no choice but to look away.

One of the soldiers walked up from behind Gabriel.

“Surely this was a righteous man.”

And for the briefest of moments, Gabriel wondered if he was right.

A trumpet sounded among the clouds, causing Gabriel and the soldiers to recoil in terror. He watched as two hazy figures appeared in the sky, descending toward the riverbank. The birds escaped just in time, as the landing of the angels shook the earth. Gabriel watched in a terror as the angels took turns blowing breath into Michelangelo’s bloodied mouth, mending his wounds with the slightest touch. The angels spit into their hands and held them up at Gabriel, then lifted Michelangelo out of the dust. Michelangelo sat up, blinking in confusion as they stood him to his feet. He resembled the young boy all over again, the one who pursued Francisca Matias with his hot love and dreamed of a world in which men could go about their business without being bothered by religion or rules or expectations of any kind. Michelangelo waved at his brother, purified of the hatred that had brewed between them for so many decades. He had no recollection of

strife or unhappiness, leaving Gabriel to carry that poisonous weight, as he had always done.

Before Michelangelo could speak, the angels flew him toward the heavens and away from the earth, dragging all the sins of the past and present and future with him, never to return to the land of men.

Gabriel was consumed by the enigma of what he had just witnessed. The birds returned to their nesting place, and the waters continued to flow in the Orange River. He knew that, with the resurrection of Michelangelo, he had come to the disappointing end of a tragic life. No one had a use for his philosophies in such a world where sin and death could so easily be exchanged for new life. He knew his mouth was sealed, his heart enclosed as a tomb.

Gabriel collapsed to his knees, dropping the pistol in the sand.

He stared up at the clouds.

Gabriel then turned to the soldiers waiting behind him, who were on their knees crossing themselves and whispering the prayers they had been taught by their mothers so long ago.

“Take your men and go find Barto and Julian. Bring them to this place,” Gabriel said. “Tell them nothing of what you’ve seen.”

The soldiers left and did as they had been ordered.

When they returned with Barto and Julian, they discovered that Gabriel was gone. He had left a one-line letter, weighted down by the gentleman’s pistol.

Barto handed it to Julian, who read aloud, “It is finished.”

THE END