

CHAPTER 1

They finish the salt pork first. Then the jarred pickerel, flats of canned beans, strips of cured venison. Dried fruit, flattened like tongues, loosens their molars when they tear into it. In the last drum of corn-grit flour, they discover an infestation of weevils that they sift out and chew carefully, along with their nymphs, the beaded strings and fine-powdered clumps of their nests. By the time Cousin Paul gets orders to don topside gear—sand-coloured coveralls with sleeves, insulated gloves, UV hood—and laces up the Family’s last pair of boots, the rest having been unstitched and simmered for broth, all that remains in the food stores is a third of a barrel of mouldy oats. That, for eleven bellies.

Cousin Ruth walks the narrow tunnel with Paul. She shakes Father Ernst’s iron key ring, making a kind of tin music. They pause in the dark at the foot of the Mission Pole ladder. A pipe drips.

“Won’t last a month,” says Paul.

“We shall, God willing,” says Ruth.

She cleans the eye windows on his gas mask with the hem of her shirt. Sees his cheek tremor. He loves and hates to go. “Mind the heathens, the landmines.” She doesn’t mention last time or the previous provider.

“I’ll be fine.”

Paul takes the key ring and shoulders his rifle. He climbs twenty reinforced metal rungs up the riser hatch ahead of her. He inserts

one long key, grabs the pull handle, and slides the deadbolt on the interior blast lid. Ruth is halfway, dizzy from the shift in air pressure. Her palms slip with sweat. On the thirteenth rung, her puny biceps begin to shake. Paul breaks the seal on the riser lip and pushes the heavy door up, open. Keys jangle. Dust and silt rain down, coating Ruth's face and hair. She spits. Paul climbs over, he's out. She can't see him and panic blooms in her chest. His boots thud against the outer hatch, quiet thunder. Ruth's feet feel for rungs, her hand stretches.

"Help," she cries.

Paul reaches and pulls her the last bit. He says, "How'll you get back down?"

"God will carry me. That, or I'll jump."

Ruth kneels in the cramped cave to catch her breath while Paul checks the bunker's ventilation pipes—intake, outflow, septic drain pump—and the blast valves that protect their ears and internal organs from any nearby explosions.

"Check again when I get back," he says. "You okay?"

She nods. "Filters."

"Yep. Warfare gas carbon adsorbers. Can't scavenge those."

"Mayhap."

Paul peers through wide-angle viewer ports on the cave's external door, scans left to right and back. Ruth pushes and he lets her look. No jackals or wild dogs, no marauding bands of godless sinners. Just the relentless shock of sun and miles of burning sand, a boundless shimmer broken once, faraway, by a sharp white cliff, like bone puncturing skin.

TARRY THIS NIGHT

“Stay out of trouble, Ruth. Check on Rebekah?” Paul flattens her to his chest, squeezes air from her rattling lungs with thin arms.

“Call that a hug,” she says, but really, every inch of her body sings.

This is it. Paul adjusts his mask and slings the rifle. Ruth ties a rag over her nose and mouth. He inserts the largest key of all and cranks the outer bolt, loosens the cam latch that seals the blast shield to the frame. It sticks. Sticks. Gives.

A rapier of light stabs their underworld. Dust motes spark and swirl. Paul pushes the heavy door, and sun fills the widening gap. Sun heats the space between Ruth’s feet. Sun licks Ruth’s hands at her hips. One more heave and the door stands wide. Paul is a dazzled burst of soldier in military gear, blanched pure as God’s breath. Light blows Ruth’s retinas; she squints against the red-orange spirals that slice her eyelids. Paul’s shadow blankets her. Wind stirs her hair. This is a demon choir, temptation, an eruption of song on the body. She’s sun drunk and reckless, such that a furtive picture fills her—Cousin Paul returning with signs and portents for the Ascension and the Family rising to their due glory. Inside the nutshell of that dream, the meat: she and Paul betrothed, preparing the holy union ceremony.

If Father Ernst doesn’t claim her first.

Last thing—Father Ernst’s orders—she tosses Paul the box of ammo. He pockets it. Then Paul’s slow wave, and his shadow disappears. Nothing but dry heat, the burning spires of an infinite summer. The urge to hurtle herself after him, to let her flesh char to ash in the unforgiving sand, overwhelms. Paul shuts the outer

door, and that solemn blow is a belly punch. Ruth slides the bolt. The cam latch sucks to reseal. She tumbles the keys into her pocket. Must return them to Father Ernst, who waits.

She's blind, blinder than before, and desolate. The dark eats her.

Skin cools, breath slows, hands steady. Still, an ember glows inside: sun-dazzle legacy, the scorch. Yea, that wind and fire beget a yearning.

Ruth feels her way back down the tunnel, knife in hand. Anything could breach the bunker in those vulnerable moments. Last time Paul left at night, and a disoriented bat flew down the hatch, which Ruth hunted for days. The singularly outstanding adventure in her years below. There. Ruth intuits movement. Something holds and scampers in small bursts. Nowadays no one's ever sad to see a rat, but years ago Father Ernst went mad trying to locate their entry point. If rodents slipped in, so might disease, poison gas, infidels.

Ruth checks the first and second tunnel traps, ten feet apart: empty. Something snacked the bait, tiny fabric scraps soaked in her own blood. She fashioned the traps by nailing springs from a rusted-out cot to wooden platforms. Paul asked why she didn't set the bar on two of them, how she intended to catch anything if they weren't spring-loaded. She only smiled. Her third trap is tripped and wriggling. *Praise be!* Ruth holds the furred body and releases the hammer and spring bar, which has trapped the rat's face, crushing part of its soft skull. Whiskers twitch in her fingers and Ruth catches the shine from one desperate eye. Incredibly, it is still alive. "I've

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fed you twice,” she says, breaking its neck. “Now it’s your turn.” She tucks her knife back into the sturdy pouch that rides her belt. She guesses a two-pounder, and drops the carcass in her sack.

Meat in the gruel tonight.

Halfway between the Mission Pole and the Great Hall she kneels at the cairn. A dim light flickers above their communal headstone. She loves this lonely spot and not just because Paul built it. Here lie sacred cousin remains: cinders and dust, a handful of indigestible charred bits, twisted locks of hair. Everything else is purposed. Flesh to dry, organs to fry, and bones to nourish the broth.

She prays. “Holy Father in Heaven, watch over us. Especially Cousin Paul, wheresoever Your light finds him. Bring him back, righteous and safe, as You see fit. Cherish our martyrs, whose spirits tend the great garden, awaiting Your command, Amen.”

Ruth fingers the letters scratched into their piece of slate. Strange to see her own name spelled out on the cairn, as though she, too, is buried alongside her namesake, the original Mother. Her favourite, Memaw Ruth—Father Ernst’s first wife, eldest of the cousin mothers and still so much younger than him. Two other mothers died below, one from bad birthing and one shrieking from tumours while she pulled out her hair. A dozen tiny infants never made it past the first croupy months. Thomas never returned from foraging; his unblest bones lie topside among the heathens. Jeremiah, the subsequent provider who lorded over them, was so badly scorched that his parts, although shaved bit by bit in the infirmary, pussed and frothed until he eventually succumbed to his wounds.

KRISTYN DUNNION

Years ago, when Father Ernst bade him remove a section of tunnel wall to bury the remains, Paul asked why the bunker blueprints hadn't specified a cairn. "Was it an oversight?" Paul asked, causing Father Ernst to redden and roar. "Or were we never meant to lose kin below the earth?" Paul was whipped and shamed and sent to the chamber of contemplation. The Doctrine, as Father Ernst calmly discussed later, is simply not clear about how long the Family must wait.

"There will be signs, there will be portents," says Father Ernst. "There will be an alignment of events, a mystical and material coming together. God will speak to me and send forth a vision for our most glorious Ascension. Then, and only then, shall we rise in all our glory!"