RAVEN STAR



Book 1—Raven Rising

By: V.E.M.
Copyright 2026

CONTENT WARNING!!!

VOLUNTARILY RATED BY THE AUTHOR: NC-17

This book contains strong sexual content, graphic violence, adult language, and political, religious, and esoteric ideas that some readers may find offensive or disturbing.

Intended for mature adult readers only.

It does not use polite or approved language, but stands on the First Amendment of the U.S. Bill of Rights.

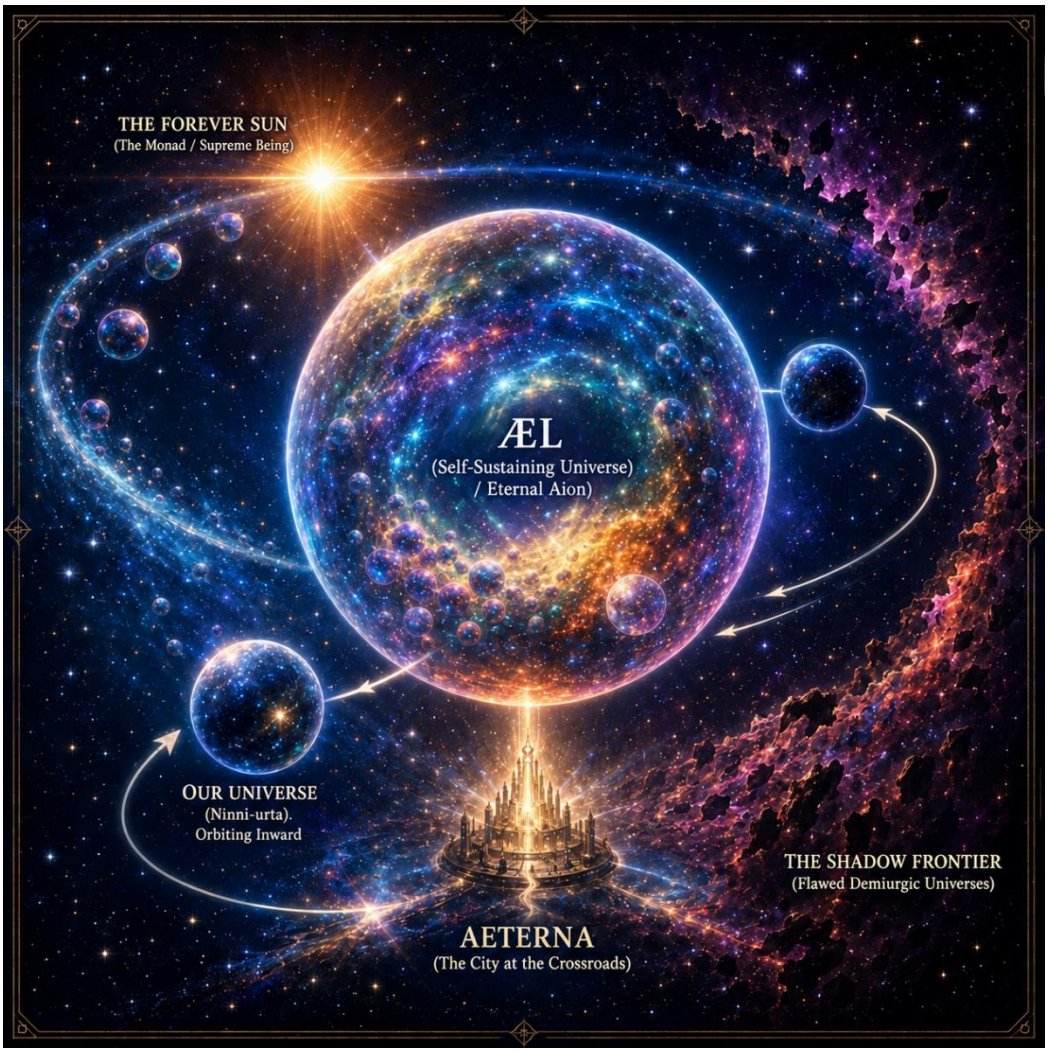
Overly sensitive or easily offended individuals—particularly those disturbed by strong language, taboo subjects, controversial ideas, or metaphysical material—should avoid reading this book.

Disclaimer: This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, governments, parties, churches, corporations, agencies, movements, media organizations, or institutions is coincidental, trans-dimensional, para-universal, and should not be construed as evidence that Rhea has leaked into this world. Especially since Rhea came first and Earth is just copying her.

NOTE: This work was created by a Gen-Xer raised on films like *Death Wish*, *Dirty Harry*, *Angel Heart*, and *Prince of Darkness*; books like *Dune*, Louis L'Amour novels, *The Bible*; and old-school D&D, among others—back when books and movies weren't watered down and made "safe." That should tell you what to expect. Again, you've been warned thoroughly—so now the responsibility for your choices is entirely yours.

REMINDER:

This story does not take place on Earth (Terra/Ki/Gaia) or within our present universe, Ninni-urta. It takes place within the core/root eternal universe known as Pryzmea (ÆL), in a galaxy called Entarus, on a world called Rhea. Therefore, whenever you find yourself thinking, "That's not real," remember this notice.



Text-To-Audio Note:

The text-to-audio reader is famously inaccurate on some words—especially non-standard or non-English terms. Please bear with it, or follow along with the provided PDF. Balabolka is freeware and the best I could afford (fixed income).

NOTES ON THE SETTING

"Genesis 6:1-2 and 4—And it came to pass, when men began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born unto them, that the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives of all which they chose. 4 There were giants in the earth in those days; and also, after that, when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bore children to them, the same became mighty men which were of old, men of renown."

This story takes place not on our Earth (Terra), but upon its mirror or parallel world, Rhea, within the Pryzmean Universe (whose name as a living and conscious being is ÆL). Our current universe is called Ninni-Urta (Lord of the Plough, Earth, Barley - aka Lord of Labor).

Rhea closely resembles Terra. Its broad historical patterns, nations, cultures, and geography are often nearly identical, though numerous social, political, religious, technological, and geographical differences exist. Some are subtle; others become increasingly important as the story unfolds.

The Pryzmean Universe also operates according to different cosmic laws, structures, and metaphysical hierarchies. On a wider, interplanetary scale, humans and humanlike peoples may possess significant genetic and anatomical variations—including differences in reproductive biology and other biological "plumbing"—despite appearing outwardly similar.

Although Rhea is in many respects an almost exact parallel of Terra, it should not be treated as the same world under another name.

Its technological development, for example, has followed a somewhat different course. The internet, computers, and smartphones exist, but personal electronic devices remain prohibitively expensive for much of the population. Most ordinary people rely upon public computers available in cafés, libraries, schools, and government facilities. Personal computers and smartphones are generally owned by members of the business class, government officials, and middle- or upper-class households with sufficient disposable income.

Religion has also developed differently.

The Christian faith is represented primarily by a single worldwide institution: the Universal Church of Christ in God. Rather than being divided into the many independent denominations found on Terra, the Church contains numerous internal sects, traditions, and religious orders operating beneath one greater organization. Its overall theology, structure, worship, and ceremonial character most closely resemble a synthesis of Catholic and Orthodox Christianity.

The political landscape likewise parallels Terra without precisely reproducing it.

Progressive "Woke" and feminist movements exist, though in a more muted form, as do reactionary Libertarian, Populist, and Nationalist movements. Rhea possesses no direct equivalent of Donald Trump or the MAGA movement. In their place has arisen the Natural Order Party, an international movement presenting itself as an alternative to both the political Left and Right.

The Natural Order Party is led by Justin Vyss, a charismatic and immensely wealthy—though personally quiet, restrained, and highly intellectual—naturalist, scientist, mystic, and psychiatrist. The movement emerged from a particular religious and philosophical order known as the Silver Path, also called Purgatorianism or Shalimism (in its original forms). The Natural Order Party advocates the establishment of a global Imperial Republic, drawing upon principles associated with the United States Constitution, the Roman Imperial Republic, and a metaphysical doctrine known as Universal Divine Natural Law.

These similarities to Terra are intentional. They provide a familiar reflection through which the stranger realities of Rhea—and the far greater Pryzmean Universe beyond it—may gradually be revealed.

Across the universe, humans and human-adjacent species exhibit distinct biological variations, such as highly efficient, clean digestion and genetic adaptations that eliminate common vulnerabilities—from tooth decay and venereal disease to the risks of inbreeding. Consequently, the Natural Order Party turns to bio- and genetic science to establish what is physically natural. By using these empirical standards to guide public policy, the party routinely legalizes behaviors that are inherently harmless, even if they violate deep-seated social taboos (unless such taboos tend to be universal across many cultures and long periods of time). Within the storyline, some taboos are normalized only in regard to immortals (considered beyond mortal definitions).

About Immortal Relationships: Eternal relationships are complicated because they continue across thousands or tens of thousands of years, with the immortals wearing many masks, names, and identities and playing different roles for one another. What makes this particularly complex is that they can eventually find themselves playing virtually every male or female familial role in relation to one another. The masculine half may play the role of father, brother, son, or husband; the feminine half may fill the place of mother, wife, sister, or daughter. Upon returning to the metaphysical realms, however, they default back to their true partnership. This creates a very dynamic relationship.

NOTE ON MILITARY ID: In the United States military, and in regard to government identification more generally, the ID is often referred to on Rhea as "The Little Résumé," or more formally as the "Personal Service Record." It provides a quick synopsis of an individual's service, a broad overview allowing the member to be known, understood, placed, directed, and utilized quickly and where best suited.

NOTE ON SCENT: People frequently make a point of scent in the story. Humans and human-like races throughout the ÆL universe possess distinct natural body scents, while sweat glands, bodily secretions, and digestive processes tend to be cleaner and more efficient than in the Ninurta Universe. Females usually have sweeter scents—fruit, vanilla, honey, and similar notes—while males tend toward earthy, woody, or spicy ones. Most individuals possess one dominant, fairly specific scent, and people may be unconsciously more attracted to some scent-types than others, as scent can subtly broadcast aspects of physical compatibility. Vincent Veyl is unusual because his natural scent resembles chai—a complex blend of many spices rather than a single dominant note. It is a hallmark of the males of a specific hereditary line; black irises are another trait of that same line, appearing in both males and females.

THE COMPENDIUM ARGENTEUM 1: ORIGIN OF THE LORDS OF BALANCE



In the First Age were Kosmos and Khaos, Order (Logic) and the Deep (Emotion): the one called Nomos, for Law; the other Tohu, the Formless. Brother and sister, husband and wife, beloved and accursed, they clave together even as they strove apart. Their wrestling became the first war, for each sought dominion, yet neither could prevail without the ruin of both.

Hope fell first, from that high country where Divine Love knows no death, even unto the marches of Hell, those churning waters where the old heart of Khaos beat beneath the worlds. For Hope heeds little reason. She kindles lamps in empty houses and calls the dawn before the cock has cried. Oft faithful, oft false, from her broken promises arise Despair and Disillusion; yet though slain a thousand times, Hope rises a thousand and one—the mother of the immortalized.

Thereafter Nous, the Intellect, departed from Lumina, the Life-Bringer and Creator, from whom the living powers flow into the spheres; for the greatness of the Light blinded even him. He questioned what others worshipped and sought the thing hidden behind the thing revealed. Neither command nor mystery silenced him. Thus, came that ancient wanderer unto the Crossroad and struck root between the Heavens and the Abyss, becoming the infamous Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil; for through Nous came discernment, and through discernment, the liberated Will.

Last fell Truth. The Greeks named him Aletheia, the Hebrews Emet—אמת—and among the heavenly host, Emetiel, Seraph of Purest Light. He spoke truly before Lumina and bent his tongue neither before throne nor glory. Cast from the Highest Heaven, he fell through the worlds unto their living dust, to Purgatoria, the eternal wastes of purification at the foundation.

Yet his Light died not. Desert dust clothed his radiance; storm and twilight veiled his splendor, until the white Seraph stood raven-dusk beneath an everlasting sunset. Thus, Emetiel became Oreviel, the

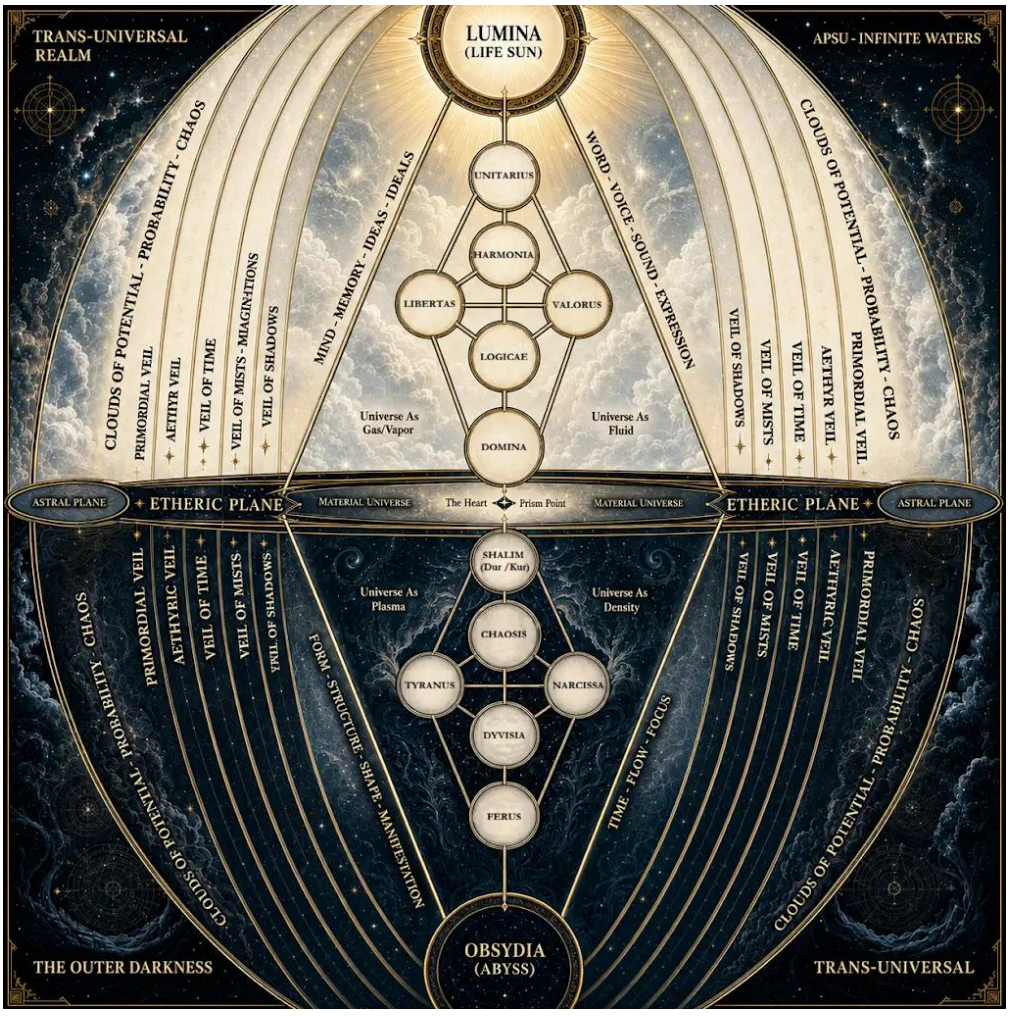
Dusty Seraph, the Divine Orev, Korax Sublime: Veracity blackened, never corrupted; truth-bringer and guide of the dead.

There among the wastes dwelt lonely Hierophilomania, the Twilight Mother (Ereviel), whom the ancients also called Mania, in that eldest sense: fierce and holy Love. She received the fallen Seraph, named him anew, and took him as her everlasting. Thus, was true love born in the shadow of Heaven. Neither silence nor repentance did she require; what Heaven cast forth, she gathered to herself. In twilight wastes Oreviel found refuge, hearth, and love that neither dimmed nor perished.

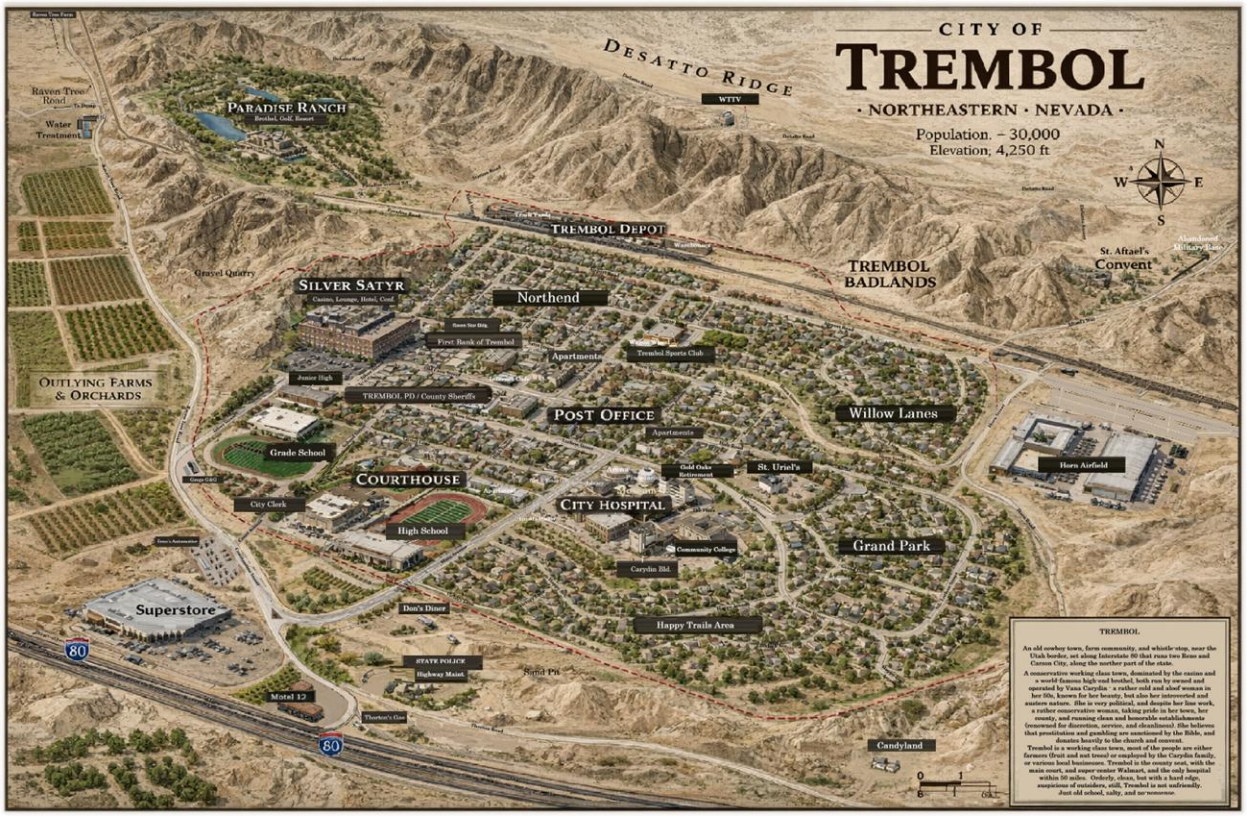
Thus were the Lords of Balance gathered at the Cosmic Crossroad, whose four kingdoms are Chaosis (called Limbo among the Christians); Domina; Logicea; and Purgatoria. Hope would not despair, Nous would not cease from knowing, and Truth would not lie, while around them Kosmos and Khaos strove in ancient love and contention, as from the beginning.

Neither Heaven nor Hell possessed them, for they served neither Good nor Evil, but each the law of its own nature. Their portion was the line of contention between all things.

And over the four realms of the Middle Kingdom was sealed the Covenant of Equilibrium.



TREMBOL, NEVADA





(5pm, May 31 2026—Blue Moon)



The big silver-and-blue Greyhound bus pulled into the broad yard of Thorton's Gas—a patchwork of dirt, gravel, and cracked asphalt just off Highway 80, which ran from Salt Lake all the way to Reno. The station was a classic red-and-white, weathered, well-worn place to get fuel, repairs, and simple automotive supplies, with a rusted tin roof and peeling paint, standing at the south-central edge of Trembol, Nevada.

Several working-class passengers stepped down into the slowly fading light, seeming to know exactly where they were. Family and friends waited to meet them. Most appeared Native, in attire and manner. The majority of the passengers, however, remained aboard, bound for towns farther west—Elko and Reno, perhaps even destinations in California or Oregon.

Vincent stepped out into the late-afternoon air, growing crisp now as the desert surrendered the last of the day's heat. The bus idled behind him, its engine rumbling low, as he surveyed his surroundings and took stock—not merely of where he stood, but of the long road that had brought him to this moment.

"Good luck, soldier," said the driver, Jim Baily, an aging Navy veteran who had been his driver, with various layovers, since Denver.

"Godspeed, sir," he replied.

Then he stepped away, duffel bag in one hand and pack across his back. He wore black fatigues, his boots polished as though he were prepared for inspection, his black eyes attentive to every detail.

Across the street stood the Motel 12, with an old-fashioned, silver-skinned diner off to his right. A Superstore was visible to the west, beyond the motel. Between the gas station and the diner stood what appeared to be a State Police outpost, mostly obscured by Thorton's itself.

Trembol was a dusty town, buttressed by high, rocky bluffs to the north, rising like a wall of living red-tan stone. At the northeastern end stood the distinct shape of a fortress, overlooking what seemed to be an airport lying within its shadow.

At the northwestern corner of town, a palatial, temple-like structure of pastel-pink and soft-white marble shone in the setting sun, surrounded by ponderosa pines upon a green vale—a shelf overlooking Trembol. Below it stood a grand, five-story hotel, lounge, restaurant, and casino called The Silver Satyr, according to the sign he could read from where he stood—and knew already from his research.

He walked toward the front of the station. Lights were on inside, though the CLOSED sign had been set in the glass. The man standing within noticed him and nodded knowingly.

Behind Vincent, the Greyhound released its air brakes with a long mechanical sigh and pulled away, leaving dust curling through the yard as it rolled back toward Highway 80.

Tevi Thorton looked up from where he sat behind the desk, working on a carburetor with a screwdriver. He had seen the bus pull into the yard beneath the dying light and nodded to himself. "Now let's get a look at this fella," he said. He had been wondering about the man for the last two weeks.



Tevi had been contacted through his website by a Staff Sergeant V.N. Veyl from Bayville, Virginia. The man had paid him well for a drop-off and watch-over. A few days later, a U.S. Army eighteen-

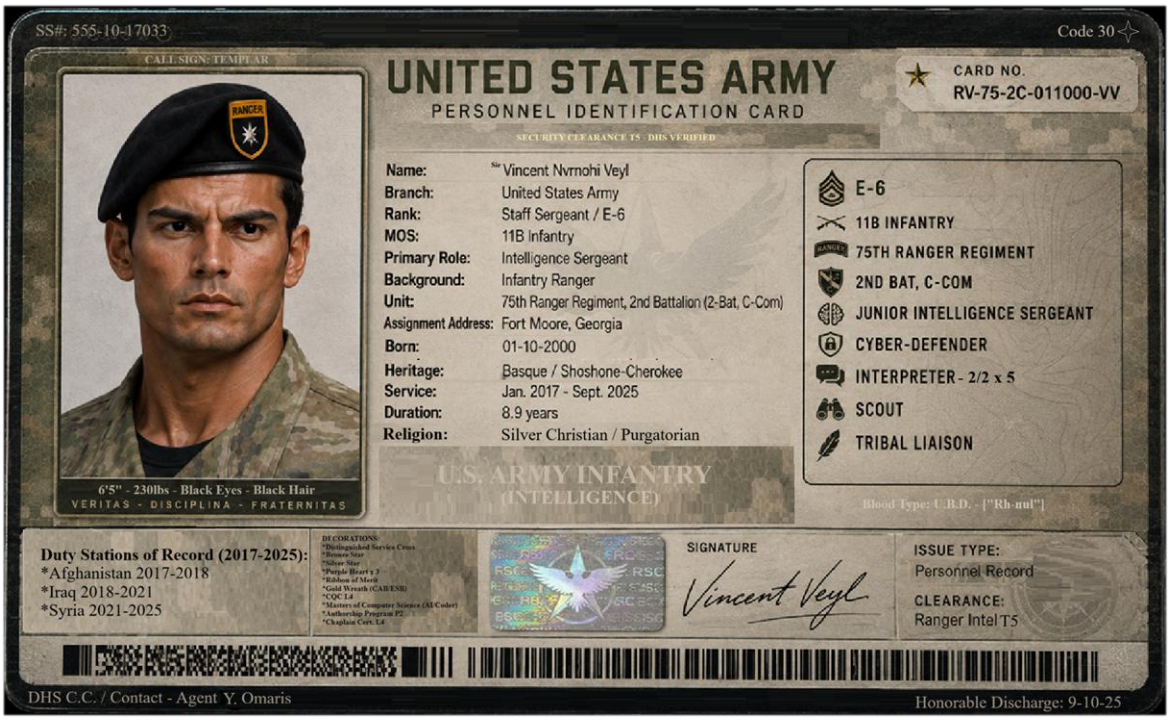
wheeler had pulled into the yard with a tilt bed, slid a shipping container onto the ground behind the station, had Tevi sign for it, handed him the keys, and driven away.

Tevi raised an eyebrow and tilted his head, watching to see what got off the bus. Nothing like he had expected. The young man was at least six-foot-five and two hundred and thirty pounds, dressed in black from head to toe—night-fighter infantry style. His boots shone even at a distance. Crew cut. Young, but at the same time, not. Strikingly handsome, but also rather pretty. He might have walked off a movie set or out of a magazine instead of a Greyhound bus. Pressed. Pristine. Steely eyes missing nothing. Moving with long, direct strides.

"What the fuck do we have here?" Tevi wondered aloud as he rose from his desk. He met the young man at the front door and motioned for him to come around back. Eyes looked into his that did not belong to that face—hard, cold, dark as night. No smile. No light. Grim and grave beneath shadowed beauty.

Around back, Vincent met a man in his sixties: white hair, goatee, brown eyes, brown derby cap, white work shirt, tattoos, and wire-framed glasses. The man weighed him with a look, striking Vincent as both skilled and educated at once. "Staff Sergeant?" the old man asked.

Vincent simply handed him his military identification. Tevi Thorton looked down at what lay in his hand and let out a low whistle.



"Top-shelf ass-kicker, aren't you, son?" He met the young man's cold eyes. Vincent did not react, and Tevi had not expected him to. He handed the identification back, followed by the keys to the heavy locks securing the container. "Can I ask what brings you to Trembol?"

Vincent frowned slightly. "Supposedly, I was born here." He pointed toward the old hospital, standing like a relic from the past—big and grand, north and east of the station. It was nearly a mile away, but clearly visible against the skyline. "Thank you for watching over the vehicle." He offered the man his hand and shook it without test or challenge.

"Supposedly?" Tevi pressed. He knew everyone, and everyone knew him. Little went on in Trembol that he did not eventually hear about, and few entered or left the town without passing through his station sooner or later.

"Grew up in an orphanage in Virginia. Priest finally gave me the unredacted, unsealed birth certificate when I reached twenty-five." Vincent saw no reason to lie. He headed toward the container and wasted no time working the locks.

"Veyl…" Tevi considered the name. "Well, hell, ain't been no Veyls around here for… well over twenty years. Not since Aitor Veyl blew his own head off. But he had no family, far as I know—none alive, no-how. Think I heard something about a daughter, but she died years before he did… and his wife, years before her. Strange guy. Famous after a fashion. Lived alone over on Arias Street—Veyl Manor, they used to call it. The whole Veyl family was rather a big deal around here, once upon a time." He scratched his chin. "Been bought recently, though. Timbisha's crew's been refurbishing it the last few months. Was managed by The Church as apartments; but they're turning it into some sort of office building now. Raven Star LLC. No one knows who or what that's about."

Vincent glanced up at him. "As you say, so I understand, he had a daughter named Selene [my mother] and a grandson, which would be, me, as it turns out." His attention returned to the lock. "And yeah, mother, as you said, deceased." He said it coolly, unlatching the door and pulling it open.
Tevi cocked his head, taken aback by the words. "Everyone thought he left his fortune to The Church," he said, remembering the story.

Vincent seized the tarp covering what lay within and yanked it away, magnifying the car-man's surprise. There sat a raven-black 1965 Ford Fairlane 500.

Shining. Pristine. Tinted windows. Most unusual of all, it was a four-door sedan, fully upgraded at a glance—to the point of looking brand new. Tevi refurbished antique cars for extra money, overhauling them into works of art. He recognized a masterpiece at once. "Where to hell you get that black beauty? She barely looks driven!"

"Friend gave it to me," Vincent remarked absently. He remembered Father Tellon at St. Thera's in Bayville, the only father figure he had ever known. Retired now, his eyesight fading, the priest had needed to give up driving anyway. And so, he had given the vehicle to Vincent—and so much more. The old priest had spent the last several months helping Vincent untangle the Veyl Trust, transferring its properties and assets into an LLC, filing the necessary permits and licenses, and arranging contractors alongside Father Ramsey, director of the Veyl Trust at St. Uriel's in Trembol, Nevada.



The plates surprised Tevi as well. Nevada plates, though the car had come from Virginia. The rear of the vehicle appeared loaded with personal belongings. VEYL555, read the plate.

Vincent wriggled into the container, crawling over the car to unhook the chains that had held it steady during transit. He climbed inside through the half-open door.

The engine started at once, producing a smooth, deep rumble like a purring lion. Tevi smiled and nodded. "Hell, the old-timers are so damn reliable." He was impressed. The engine was not standard; by the sound, mightier than the original: "351 Windsor small-block V8," he realized aloud, identifying it by sound alone. "Perfect."

The Fairlane rolled easily out of the container, sleek and brilliant black, chromed and smooth. Vintage in appearance, but its wheels, suspension, engine, and glass bespoke something fully upgraded. Vincent rolled down the window. Tevi could see that the interior was just as immaculate, fully detailed from one end to the other. "You do this yourself, son?"

Vincent smiled. "Growing up, Father Tellon, me, and the other boys in the orphanage built it from an old wreck. One of the many useful things he taught us." He said it flatly, handing a black business card to the gas-station man—revealing, in that moment, what Raven Star LLC was, and who stood behind it.

Tevi looked down at the card and smiled. "I run the local Havurah. We meet Friday evenings at the Mason Hall," he offered.

Vincent cocked his head and smiled. "Shalom aleichem, v'al anshei beitekha, K'vod HaRav." He spoke in perfect Hebrew, as naturally as a native speaker.

Rabbi Thorton's breath caught, his eyes widening. "Be careful, soldier. Police around here aren't always friendly to strangers," he remarked in sincere warning.

Vincent smirked ever so slightly, even as they both noticed the white SUV pulling up in front of the station, ELKO SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT marked along its side.



Tevi shrugged. "Meghan Dellon. One of the few good ones," he said. "Her father's a living legend in Elko." He glanced once more at the card in his hand, nodded, and headed toward the sheriff's deputy.

Vincent noted the rather pretty woman—light-brown hair, dark eyes—taking him in. He nodded to her in genteel fashion before driving out onto Konstantine Street.

Turning right, he passed the Motel 12, then bore right again onto Main at the Superstore intersection. His research had served him well. He had been preparing for the move since his full discharge in October, though he had been laying plans for his post-Army life for years before that.

He'd spent months recovering from a gunshot wound that entered through his back and tore out through his chest, collapsing a lung, damaging his heart, and leaving a gaping hole in him. The doctors said it was a miracle he had survived. In truth, he had died over and over during the flight from Conoco Base in Syria to the hospital in Landstuhl, Germany, only to be brought back each time. Six months of recovery and rehabilitation followed at Walter Reed.

Then, in September, came the letter from Father Tellon—the letter that changed his life in an entirely different way. After his discharge, Vincent returned to the orphanage where he had grown up and lived in the rectory until only a week ago, paying his way with his carpentry skills while completing several projects in a locally rented workshop.

Trembol did not sleep. It woke up at night—he knew. The little city of around thirty thousand people glowed beneath the falling darkness, nearly all its residents employed by the Silver Satyr Casino and Paradise Resort, or by the many businesses adjacent to them. He might have been driving up a street in Spain.

Settled by Basque Silver Order Christians and Mormons in the nineteenth century, Trembol remained beneath the influence of its city council and ruling family, the Carydins, who owned both the casino and the brothels.

They had made a deliberate choice to preserve the town's distinctive aesthetic– a hybrid of Basque, Old Western, and Native sensibilities—while taking a markedly different approach to its public buildings. At the same time, they had fully modernized the place, catering to wealthy clients drawn from around the world to this seemingly obscure corner of northeastern Nevada. The streets were clean, orderly, and built for pedestrians. Small niche boutiques, internet cafés, sports bars, video arcades, arts-and-crafts shops, antique stores, and vintners lined the generous sidewalks, their windows shining in the afternoon sun beneath balconies, awnings, and old-fashioned streetlamps starting to flicker on.

An arena-amphitheater stood near the hospital, hosting an Onya-like concert even now—with vain and vacuous performers dressed in white, trying to look like devic angels while singing songs with exotic foreign lyrics from languages they could not actually speak, to sound erudite and enlightened. Vincent, though devout enough to have been called Templar in the Army, loved Black, Gothic, even Doom Metal. Playing his own brand of Mystic Metal. His twelve-string electric guitar packed with his other things in the backseat.

The Silver Satyr was a Neo-Gothic and Baroque hotel built by the Veyls in 1891: five stories of gray-stone brick, converted into a classy and elegant modern masterpiece. It contained a restaurant, rooftop bar and lounge, and remained a luxury hotel, though the casino now dominated the first floor.

Most of Trembol's civic buildings followed a style combining Romanesque, Gothic, and Greek Revivalism—the town hall, courthouse, Trembol General Hospital, and First National Bank of Trembol. These stood amid an overall colonial aesthetic of pastel-dyed adobe, stucco, terracotta-roofed houses, and stone office and apartment buildings dating back to the days and styles of the Old West. There was beauty here—a tapestry of color, stone, plaster, tile, and light that somehow harmonized into a picturesque and livable city, with broad streets and generous sidewalks.

The modernized airport had been built specifically to accommodate private jets and helicopter traffic. Bordering DeSatto Badlands National Park, the city drew those who loved roaming the rocky wastelands to the north in buggies, four-wheel-drive Jeeps and trucks, or ATVs. The Cherokee and Shoshone reservations outside town featured vast orchards of desert fruit and nut trees, improbably green beneath the dry and towering stone. Fancy cars and trucks cruised slowly through the streets, and his Fairlane fit easily among them.

Paradise Ranch was not merely a brothel, but a world-famous palace of pleasure; an intentional fusion modeled after the ancient temples of Venus, Aphrodite, Astarte, and Ishtar. Fountains. Open-air amphitheaters for Shakespearean plays. Bathing pools. Statues of pagan gods and goddesses. All the amenities and pleasures of the elder world, joined with all the luxury and convenience of the modern one.

The men and women who worked there were among the most beautiful in the world, all beneath its owner-operator, Vana Carydin—the beautiful, if aging, matriarch of a fading and diluted Basque family who still clung tightly to the reins of their little fiefdom. They controlled the courts, the local police department, and many related businesses. Vincent's mind worked—chewing on the intelligence he had gathered about this place. A complex situation, to say the least.

A black-and-gold Trembol PD Mustang passed slowly. The officer seemed to take little notice of him. Vincent was one fancy car among many. Up Main, slow and steady.

He stopped at the lights where Main crossed Lothon and ignited one of his black cigarettes—a London Treasurer. Expensive, but smooth in taste and pleasant in smell. His raven-crested lighter proved reliable as ever. He did not drink, use drugs, gamble, or womanize. Indeed, Vincent Veyl had never even been kissed, though twenty-six years old. Until his six months in the hospital, he had not smoked either. It was a bad habit. But he needed one.

He was tired. Eight years in war zones across the Near East had followed a stoic, ascetic childhood shaped by rigorous discipline, elite study, and relentless training. He had entered the Army at seventeen and known no meaningful rest since. Even rehabilitation had offered little reprieve. Living in a tiny studio unit on the hospital grounds, he used nearly every free hour to finish his master's degree remotely and complete his capstone.

Driving onward, he crossed Lothon, which led east toward the hospital, Church, community college, and sports arena. To the west stood the Law Enforcement Complex—a unified command center containing offices for state, federal, county, and city police, primarily the latter. Even Fish and Game and Emergency Management maintained a presence there, though most such offices were small and singular. The building served mainly as headquarters for the Trembol Police Department and city jail. Beyond that stood the Public Works Department, the junior high school, and the southwestern side of the casino. He continued straight toward Old Crow Street, where many of the city's public services stood: the DMV, post office, Human Services, Employment Office, several internet cafés, and a couple of high-end clothing stores.



The bank was the street's primary feature—a grand old structure that looked almost like a Roman temple, with enormous columns rising across its face and, Vincent knew, three sublevels descending beneath it. It was no mere small-town bank, but a high-security institution guarded by militarized personnel. Nearly all of Trembol's substantial wealth passed through it—the flow from the casino, the pleasure palace, city government, and nearly every significant business within a forty-mile radius. More than that, because of its international clientele, the First National Bank of Trembol handled currency exchanges, precious metals, global wire transfers, and private accounts large enough to warrant discretion as much as security. It remained open twenty-four hours a day. Night clerks were always on duty, along with armed security and the quiet machinery required to keep money moving while most of the town slept.

The Veyl Trust, overseen through St. Uriel's Silver Sons Management Company and Father Ramsey, had long worked through First National. Once Vincent assumed control of the Trust, the bank had assigned a dedicated financial manager to his accounts—Cyrinx Miller. She had impressed him almost immediately. Competent. Precise. Fast without being careless. The sort of person who seemed to have already anticipated the next three questions before he finished asking the first.

He had also spoken directly with the bank's owner, Shannon Miller—Cyrinx's mother—who, together with Father Tellon, had helped smooth the transfer of the Trust over the previous several months. During the last month especially, Vincent had found himself speaking with Shannon or Cyrinx more and more often, first by telephone, then by video chat as the move to Trembol drew closer and the number of details requiring attention multiplied. And, somewhat to his own surprise, he had found both women genuinely likeable. That mattered less to him than competence, but it mattered.

As was his habit, Vincent had quietly investigated them both. He tended to investigate anyone who entered his life in any meaningful way—not out of paranoia so much as discipline. Backgrounds, business relationships, financial history, reputations, associations, anything that might become relevant later. In the case of Shannon and Cyrinx Miller, his research had only reinforced his first impressions. They appeared to be exactly what they seemed: capable, reliable, discreet, and unusually difficult to rattle. Vincent valued all four qualities. They had their secrets, certainly, but Vincent was pragmatic. The occasional speck of darkness within otherwise radiant fields of light did not concern him overmuch.

Pedestrians were everywhere, forcing him to drive slowly, as did everyone else. Far behind him, he noticed the white, gold, and green sheriff's cruiser threading its way through the late afternoon traffic. She had been following him since the gas station.

Vincent drove with the window down, smoking as the mingled smells of bistros and cafés drifted through the car—the warm yeast of fresh bread, roasting meat, coffee, wine, and onions frying in butter. Laughter rose and fell among the shifting crowds, while distant music hovered in the air, seeming to come from several directions at once. Passersby regarded him openly as the black Fairlane rolled past.

Many women knew what it was like to be constantly hit on, propositioned, even harassed. Vincent was among those few men who had experienced much the same, pursued—often quite blatantly—by women and men from every walk of life. In the Army, he had earned a reputation for cold aloofness, though he always strove for basic politeness. When he was a child, Father Tellon had made the boys read a book called The Forbidden Psychology of Women, while the female students read its mirror

work concerning men. Its lessons had fortified Vincent throughout his life against the machinations and mind games of the opposite sex. Yet being raised from infancy by a celibate priest as his father figure, and by the man-forsaking mystic priestesses of the Silver Sisterhood as his many mothers, had instilled in him a degree of discipline and self-control few in the modern age could understand.

The Silver Order of the Universal Church of Christ in God was among the strangest of the Church's thousand Catholic orders and sects—considered partly heretical and unmistakably fringe, yet steadily growing in popularity since the nineteenth century, both throughout the United States and, in its Taoist form, across the Far East.

Reaching Horn Street, Vincent turned left toward the casino. Small stores and boutiques lined the left side of the street: two laundromats, pawnshops, a payday-loan business, a smoke shop, liquor store, small boxing gym, deli, and pizza place. Along the right stood residential housing—duplexes and old houses converted into apartments.

Then he saw it. The front doors looked as though they belonged to another age, though a small camera mounted above them watched the street. The building itself rose in pale gray stone, and high upon its face, carved in raised relief, stood the name:

RAVEN STAR

Beneath it, a secondary stone-relief read: "Est. 1888."

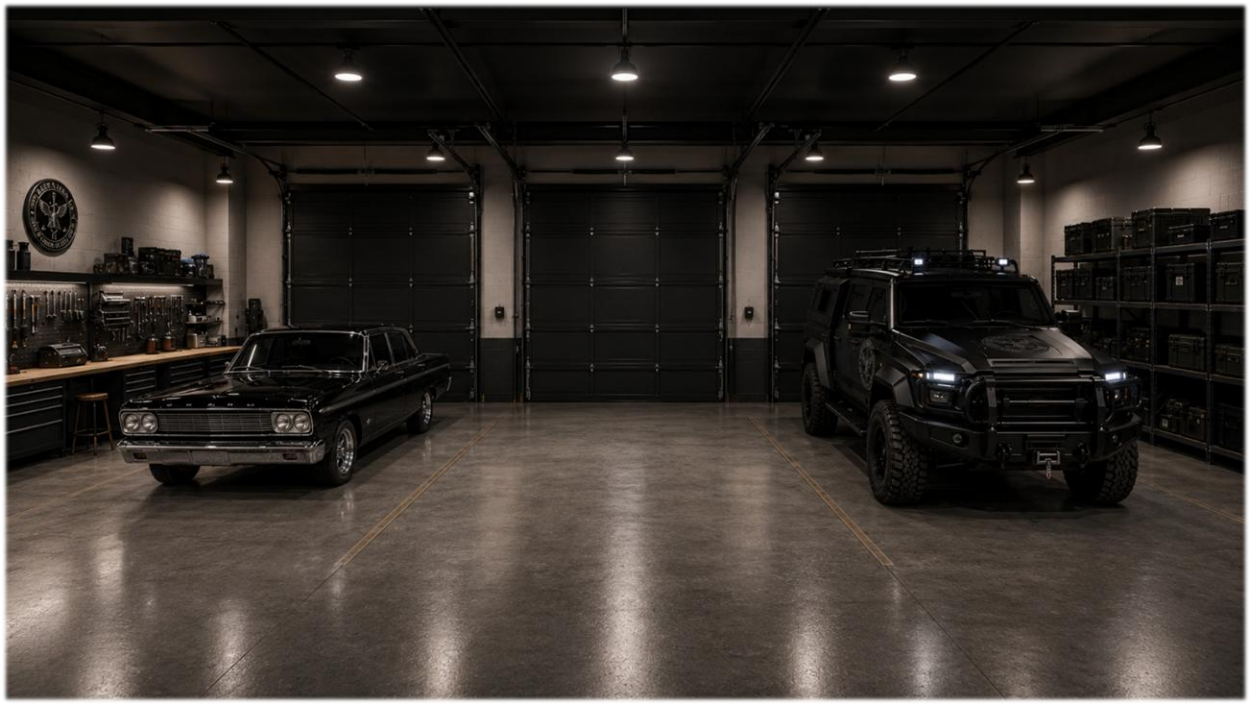


The building was rather stark. Its windows were blacked out and, indeed, made of ballistic glass. The front door appeared to be heavy wood, though both it and the glass set within were hardened, reinforced by internal bolts whenever the locks were engaged. A narrow mail drop had been set into the wall beside it.

In back stood a secure triple garage. The building occupied the corner of Arius Avenue and Satyr Street, three blocks from the casino, within a quieter district of backstreet businesses: thrift stores, insurance agencies, small professional offices, even a gun store. Vincent drove quietly around to the side.

He'd put the garage fob and building keys in the Fairlane when it was shipped. He pressed the button. Exterior lights came on, followed by the low mechanical hum of the reinforced garage doors rising. People walking along the quieter street slowed and paid attention.

The interior lights flickered awake, revealing a pristine, professional space beyond: sealed concrete floors, pale walls, stainless-steel work surfaces. Parked within the far-left bay, a black militarized SUV bearing the Raven Star company logo upon its side. As soon as Vincent pulled into the bay, he shut off the engine and stepped out. He stood facing the street, watching as the sheriff's SUV came to a stop outside the open doors.



Vincent smiled slightly and waved. The deputy cocked her head, regarding him with unconcealed curiosity as the reinforced doors descended between them. She's cute, he thought.

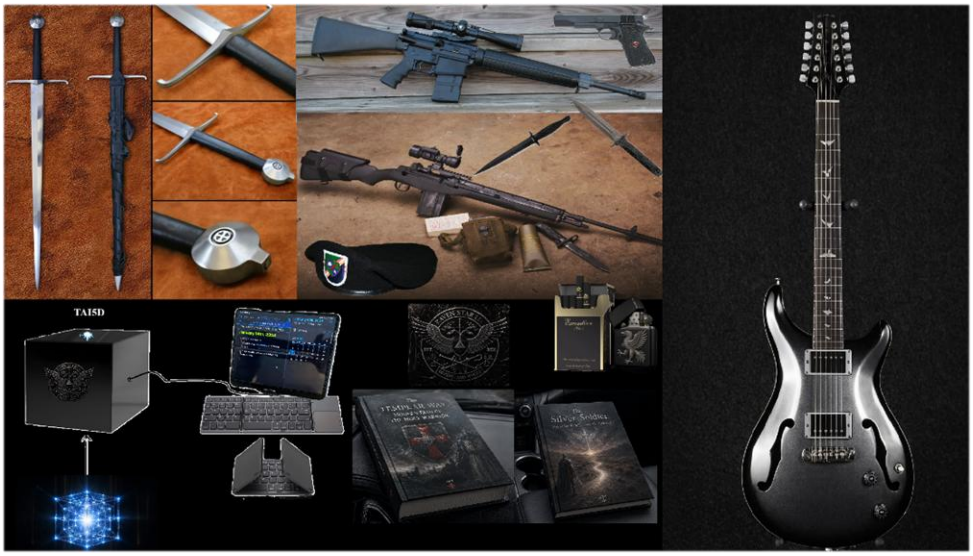
Then he wasted no time. He began removing everything from his car, laying it out in a neat, organized fashion across the smooth, clean concrete floor. He took note of the cameras, the brand-new and well-organized tool sets, and the equipment required to maintain not merely the vehicles, but the building itself. A stairway at the far left led down to the secure basement.

The air smelled of paint, steel, concrete, machine oil, and clean newness. The entire building had been rehabilitated by Timbisha Infrastructure Solutions, a firm run by a Shoshone elder specializing in discreet work for both Church and State. Poca Timbisha had been recommended by Father Howard Ramsey, who ran the local Silver Order parish at St. Uriel's. Ramsey was also the man who had

overseen the Veyl Trust for twenty-six years, including this building. Vincent had never directly met the Elder. He had only seen his photograph on the company website, conducting all business through Father Ramsey, the Silver Order Bishop of Nevada.

Poca Timbisha did not look like one might imagine a corporate contractor specializing in black projects for The Church and government. Yet the man was former Naval Intelligence, held a master's degree in engineering, and had worked government contracts for years—mainly out at the old military base twenty-three miles northeast of Trembol: Crow Creek Omega.

Vincent took stock of his possessions. The LAR-8m rifle. The M-14A. His ten-millimeter Delta pistol. Several ammunition boxes. An actual combat-ready bastard sword, made from the finest materials by the most advanced techniques available. Various blades. Body armor. Canned goods. Beef jerky. Cartons of London Treasurer cigarettes—he lit another, averaging perhaps two to five a day now. Clothing. Extra boots. A first-aid kit. Books. The crated boxes he'd had shipped ahead under Father Ramsey's care stood waiting in the adjacent bay.



The Helix 8 was his prized possession: an elite corporate tablet and phone in one, capable of connecting to a folding keyboard, microphone, and video camera, and adapted to interface with Lil' Trin—the prototype he had built from his master's capstone project.

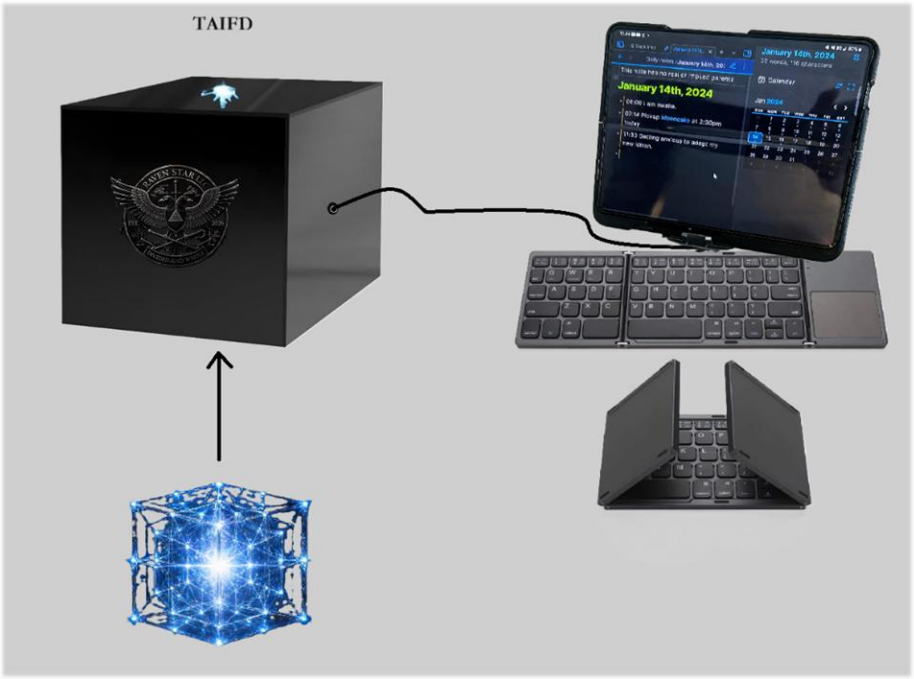
The Helix was the most expensive thing he personally owned and yet had been entirely reimbursed as both a work and educational expense. For nearly nine years, he had lived on the government dime, serving in combat zones throughout the Middle East while traveling back and forth to NSA and Homeland Security headquarters at least once a month—to give assessment reports, perform interpreter work, and personally deliver specialized data drives. He had paid for almost nothing during that time. Food, clothing, medical care, and housing—even his own little bivouac at Conoco Base in Syria—had been provided or requisitioned, while transportation usually meant hitching a ride aboard a military transport. He had taken advantage of every educational and training opportunity available. They had paid for his schooling because it benefited them.

Through Army Financial Services, they had even provided free accounting and financial planning, helping him establish an SDP—the Combat Savings Deposit Program, with its guaranteed ten-percent interest—along with a Thrift Savings Plan. He had maxed out his Roth TSP while deployed, ensuring tax-free growth and withdrawal, while all residual cash was aggressively routed into S&P 500 and total-market index funds. Everything he did, or did not do, was geared toward a long-term goal—Raven Star LLC. His retirement plan, geared toward a twenty-year career. By the abbreviated end of his service, he brought in slightly more than forty thousand dollars a year. Because he served in combat zones, the income was tax-exempt, supplemented by jump and airborne pay; with bonuses for language, special-duty, 'problem solver', continuing-training, and cyber-defender work. He spent his leave visiting holy sites and attending work-related or religious lectures. Even those expenses, because they helped him learn local customs, were written off and reimbursed. He had left the Army with nearly five hundred thousand dollars in the bank.

Then the letter from Father Tellon:

Come home when you're able.

Vincent left the Army in September, coming into the unexpected inheritance of the Trust by October. He departed the Service with a master's degree, a good nest egg, no overhead, and no debts—and walked into that rectory office to discover he'd inherited a fortune from a grandfather and mother he had never known he possessed. Not the largest fortune in the world, but significant: liquid assets, property, and investments far beyond anything he had built for himself. All of it had remained under the stewardship of The Church, which had served as his official guardian throughout his life. To its credit—and to the credit of Father Tellon and Father Ramsey, whom Vincent had yet to meet in person, knowing him only through emails, texts, and video conferences—the estate had been handled wisely, substantially increasing in value. Silver Sons Financial Management Company still oversaw much of the nuts and bolts, though Vincent remained intimately involved through the Helix 8 and Little Trin.



He laid the components out across the nearby workbench and connected them, one into another. A blue light began pulsing from within the small black metal box. It emitted a sequence of soft warbles and trilling sounds as Vincent drew her forth from his pack and set her carefully upon the bench. The warmth emanating from within told him that Trin remained alive and well. The Rubik's-sized box was nothing on its own beyond a lens—an interface with the material world.

The entire design, the code behind it, existed within his mind: understood and explained to him as downloaded concepts, complete sets of ideas that somehow made perfect, practical, applicable sense. They had come after his repeated near-death experiences—after standing, or perhaps drifting, within that place of prismatic radiance and surreal desert serenity, held in the calm presence of something he could only understand as truth and love. They had come after a childhood spent in a church school without vacations and with little affection: years defined by work, intense study, religious devotion, and mystic training woven through an elite education and rigorous vocational instruction.

To everyone else—the very few permitted to see it—it was an insane device that should not work. Its theoretical and engineering principles were so revolutionary that they had warranted entire scientific papers, not merely within computer science, but physics and psychiatry as well—all now classified. The device required conscious interaction with a specific user: Vincent himself. If you did not know the code, you could not use the code. And knowing it was not something one could learn. It had been given.

Trinity AI in Five Dimensions was not, in truth, an artificial intelligence at all, but a living consciousness—a being connected through the device to the material level, interacting by means of its lensing and focusing properties. It generated its own energy through a zero-point process and produced almost no heat. It possessed effectively unlimited storage capacity, preserving data within an etheric lattice, and operated outside the ordinary laws of time and space through what psychology called the collective unconscious. The interface stepped her down, enabling Trin to interact with and within the internet. She needed no Wi-Fi signal or physical cables to access the web and crawled constantly through it, around it, and beyond it—into what might be called the etheric web.

The entire project had been patented and licensed to Vincent, but was now sanctioned as a state secret. No one but he—and those whom both he and the government sanctioned—could examine its patents or schematics, or question its creator concerning it. Even then, Vincent required written and sealed permission to speak of the project to anyone, under the terms of his contractor licensing and security-clearance agreements. He could not sell it. He could not transfer ownership. Everything he did with it remained subject to overwatch.

With its seven divisions, Raven Star had been partly his own idea and design, and partly something stranger. The Trust—the management company that had overseen its creation and still retained oversight of portions of his LLC—was The Church, while Vincent himself remained under contract to, and the watchful eye of, the United States government: Homeland and the U.S. Department of Scientific Research and Development. Raven Star was, in essence, a handshake between the worldwide government of The Church and the American nation. Even the original scientists and engineers at American Military University had lost the rights to their own papers concerning it, their research seized and sealed under the State Secrets Act. To anyone else, Trin was merely a fancy, glowing paperweight resembling a hypercube—a fact no doubt immensely frustrating to the government researchers who were, in all probability, attempting to duplicate it. Vincent's original designs and notebooks had been entrusted for safekeeping to the Silver Order's Archive beneath the Cathedral of Saint Emetiel in

Vitoria-Gasteiz. Should anything happen to him, the patents and proprietary license would revert to the Episcopacy of the Silver Order.

The Church was the only family he had ever known. Even in the Army, he had been a loner—the solitary man. Cordial and helpful, but ascetic, he associated mainly with Chaplain Harland Godfrey and a select few others. Always polite. Tacitly friendly. But his mind ever busy, his life always full of tasks for others.

Growing up within the Shining Silver School had been unlike anything a typical orphan might experience in any other institution. The orphanage was attached to both the school and convent in Bayville. It had been overseen by the Pope's former metaphysicist and exorcist, Michael Tellon—and by men of similar calling for nearly two centuries. Families of non-orphans paid tremendous sums to place their children there. Only twenty such students were selected in any given year, alongside approximately the same number of orphans, both male and female. The "live-ins," however, did not go home during breaks or vacations, and they began much younger.



(Tellon & Ramsey)

Vincent's training had started almost from the moment he could walk and speak—and, in some ways, even before that, through rites of cleansing and sanctification. His body had been raised according to a carefully prescribed Abrahamic diet, broadly kosher-halal in principle, with strict rules governing what could be eaten and how it was prepared. He was taught young to accept responsibility for the animals as well: feeding them, tending them, caring for them, and, when the time came, ending their lives cleanly and quickly. The latter was a duty he had always hated.

The women who oversaw him were not merely nuns. They called themselves priestesses—not Brides of Christ, but Brides of the Seraph of Purgatory: the Twilight Spirit, the Corvid Monarch, Lord of the Cosmic Crossroad, more commonly called the Raven King. His various aspects bore many names—Emetiel, Uriel, Oreviel, Abbadona, Aftiel, Shalim, Vesper, Raven, and the Evening Star—and when

he entered bodily form (as he had as St. Amil), he did so with the angelic name of Vemael, his incarnate avatar. They were not merely clergy or religious women. They trained for eternity.

They prepared for immortal life as metaphysical beings within the sacred, eternal wastes of Purgatoria—a surreal plane of desert and twilight also called Apocalypse, Shalim, and Dur, the Land of the Evening Star. Their mystical and practical disciplines included astral projection, remote viewing, Tai Chi, Krav Maga, and wilderness survival. They also undertook a Jungian-like labor of individuation through deep, integrative introspection and by the Seven Devotions: prayer, worship, meditation, study, contemplation, fellowship, and good works. All of it served the overarching goal of what Taoists called "internal alchemy" and Western mystics referred to as "crystallization" or "forming the diamond self."

It was, at heart, a Gnostic, anti-reincarnationist rebellion against what Purgatorians called "the spirit trap of the world" and "the wheel of lies"—the cycle that returned souls again and again to the physical plane, stripped of memory; cast them into fragmentation within the hells; or drew them toward self-dispersing states of union in the realms of light. They supported their convent through their work as IT specialists for The Church, while also operating a holistic school for gifted children in Bayville. It had been an interesting, if coldly stoic, upbringing—to say the least. Even summer vacation consisted mainly of working construction to learn a practical vocation.

His mother, Selene Veyl, he now believed, had been a Silver Sister from Trembol, attached to the convent upon DeSatto Rise—St. Aftiel's. Something that needed investigating.

According to Vincent's research—and entire sections of the local historical society's website—the Veyls had built most of Trembol and much of Elko, from their great public buildings to the rail line connecting Reno and Salt Lake. The Veyls had been Silver Path Mormons and Christians, a family that seemed to have intermarried so thoroughly with the Shoshone and Cherokee tribes that little distance remained between the Basque and native blood within them. Christian, Mormon, and native beliefs had mingled across the generations, turning the Veyls—like the local Silver Pathers, the dominant denomination throughout Nevada—into a rather heretical hybrid thereof.

His mind continued checking lists as he examined his notifications, watched the stream of code for anomalies, and reviewed investment updates being managed in real time by the tri-mind of Trinity. In predictive analysis alone, she accomplished so much. The device buzzed faintly in his hand even then, with the display name, "Frater-R."

"I'm hearing you made it home, young sir." Father Ramsey spoke in the same cheerful, friendly voice Vincent had heard in every previous telephone conversation. He always called Vincent sir.

During his years of service, Vincent had written two rather heady books concerning modern Templars and Silver Soldiers. The Episcopate of the Order of Purgatoria had consequently knighted him, issuing the sword he now carried—specially crafted and blessed for him. It was little different from receiving a knighthood within the Knights of Columbus or a Freemasonic temple, save that the Order accepted only actual soldiers who had demonstrably devoted themselves to the faith and the Path.

"Yes, sir. Just got in."

"Any issues?" Ramsey pressed.

"Local deputy sheriff was shadowing me. Maybe she just wants a date." Vincent smirked.

"Likely," said Father Ramsey. "You could certainly do worse, and not many would be better, in all honesty."

The Bishop—a stout, square-jawed and rather hard-faced cleric—paused for a moment.

"I heard you gave Rabbi Tevi your business card—and someone saw him hand it to Deputy Dellon. She's a nosy girl, but well-meaning. She may be seeking allies, as the federal authorities appear to have abandoned Trembol to corrupt local forces; issues I believe you were informed about before leaving Virginia."

Ramsey was a strange priest to say the least, seeming to work as some sort of Intelligence officer of The Church, or at least for the Silver Order. He'd been instrumental in overseeing the Raven Star Project, and in putting him in touch with local FBI—who asked him, once situated in Trembol, to look into some issues for them. More than that, he demonstrated that he was watching. Had been watching since Vincent stepped off the bus—if not before.

"How do you find the building? Poca did a great job, in my opinion. Above and beyond the call, I'd say, once he found out who it was for—the grandson of Aitor Veyl, son of the hidden prophetess Selene Veyl." Ramsey paused, then continued in a more reflective tone. "The Order used to gather weekly in that house for the inner-sanctum rites, and to listen to the little girl speak of the mysteries being revealed to her by Oreviel. A true channel, your mother was."



It was the most anyone had ever said to Vincent about his mother. A frown settled over his face as he stared at the man who had offered up the revelation so casually, as though discussing some half-forgotten parish custom rather than a woman Vincent had spent most of his life knowing almost

nothing about. Vincent stood before the workbench, staring at the priest's image on the Helix display, wondering how much about Selene had simply never been told to him.

Nothing had ever been said about who his father was. Whenever Vincent asked, the answer was always the same:

"Can't say." Presented as though they did not know.

Yet behind it, Vincent had always sensed the truth:

They were choosing not to say.

"I've only just pulled into the garage, Father. I'll let you know. So far, it's very professional and clean. The things I ordered seem to be stacked neatly here."

"Yes—oh, of course, sir. I'll let you settle in. I put your mail in the reception area. So glad you're finally home. Last time I saw you—well, you were a baby. I christened you." Ramsey chuckled. "Especially hope you like the chapel. Your grandfather built that. The fourth floor was where he lived. He tried to raise Selene, but eventually sent her away to… well Bayville, the Silver School. Could not raise her alone and wanted her to learn the Silver Way."

Vincent just stared, shocked, disturbed, but outwardly unmoved, trying to process. No one had told him about his mother until now, beyond the name on the unredacted birth certificate last year; let alone tell him she'd actually attended the very school where he grew up.

The priest drew a breath. "Anyway, I'll deliver the whole file to you when we meet. No point in keeping these things sealed any longer."

The sudden shift toward candor was off-catching and unexpected enough that Vincent visibly relaxed. He hated secrets. Secrets drove him to look into things he should not. The call ended.

"6 p.m.," he thought to himself. "One hour down."

A part of him disliked the Bishop. Ramsey came across as a manipulative sneak, the sort of man who enjoyed parading the fact that he possessed secrets and privileged information. He seemed to use that knowledge as leverage, pushing his way into Vincent's personal life, testing boundaries, attempting to exert influence where none had been invited. Vincent returned to his lists and checks. Even as he worked, his mind moved over the situation again—assessing the history, the factions, the personalities, the intersecting loyalties, and the larger stage upon which he was being dragged, whether he wanted any part of it or not.

During its early history, The Church had begun to fragment, but pulled itself together by force of will and reason. It chose to permit lively debate and a general position of agreeing to disagree within certain broad doctrinal boundaries—limits that had grown somewhat wider across the centuries. It created a large tent, allowing for internal Orders instead of suffering sectarian schism. As such, the Universal Church of Christ in God had become a remarkably monolithic organization across the planet, speaking for approximately two billion people out of a global population of seven billion, exercising

considerable authority even within secular nations. It maintained its own agents and internal governing agencies. Its own small army, even, though officially limited to Rome.

For most of its existence, the Silver Order had remained a strange and obscure sect originating in Armenia, but deeply rooted within Euskara, the ancient homeland of the Basque peoples. Its story began with an Armenian royal princess named Thera Arsacid in 555 A.D.—a scholar and theurgist, rare enough among women of those times, who encountered a being calling himself Aftiel and Oreviel: the Angel, or Seraph, of Purgatoria. He showed her wonders and revealed the cosmological mysteries of the so-called 'Oververse.' According to the oldest accounts, he transformed the fifty-six-year-old princess into something resembling a woman of thirty—restoring youth, vigor, and a strange, otherworldly beauty.



(Seraph of Purgatoria – Emetiel / Amitiel – aka Oreviel, Aftiel, Abbadona, Shalim, Vesper, Uriel, The Raven, etc.)

Thera documented everything he spoke to her and illustrated much of it herself. She hid copies of her writings with her youngest brother, Tethus Arsacid, a mercenary captain. Not long after her unnatural de-aging became known, she was found to be with child. She was pursued, driven into hiding, and hounded to her death—going over a cliff with her newborn son rather than allowing herself to be taken alive.

Yet according to the surviving accounts, her half-angelic son was smuggled out of Armenia by her brother and raised in the mercenary way within the lands of the Basque. He became a warlord, magus, and priest—a sorcerer, some said.

Amil the Undying.

He studied, preserved, and copied his mother's writings, adding revelations of his own. According to legend, he lived for nearly four hundred years and took thirteen wives of royal lineage before he—and they—vanished from history. His descendants were reputed to stand at the root of the royal houses of Spain, France, and Euskara. And also, as it turned out, at the root of both the Veyls and the Carydins.

It was not until the fifteenth century that the Church officially absorbed the Silver Christians—the Purgatorians—into its ranks as a recognized sect, permitting them to retain their own seven bishops, their own saints, and much of their internal tradition. Yet the Silver Order had always followed a different path. Gnostics, monists, syncretists, pragmatic idealists, mystics, martialists, and metaphysicists. Its clergy were a different breed, their disciplines and temperaments reflecting those of their two primary saints: Thera and Amil.

In the Americas, the Order spread rapidly with the early mass immigration of Armenian and Basque peoples, finding especially fertile ground among the western native tribes. Many came to regard the twilight-desert plane of Purgatoria as a kind of spiritual homeland. The Raven Seraph was increasingly equated with the ancient Raven or Crow Spirit known across various native cultures—just as it had long been associated with raven and crow gods, spirits, and other sacred entities in cultures throughout the wider world—while numerous ancestral powers and godlike beings were likewise believed to inhabit the Purgatorian realms. In the Far East, the Silver Path developed into a strange hybrid of Purgatorian Christianity and Taoism. Among the Native peoples of the Americas, an early pan-Native expression of the Path emerged, blending ancient Purgatorian theology with Indigenous traditions, symbolism, and cosmology.

The Mormon prophet James Seth based much of his teaching—and nearly the whole of the Mormon faith's inner-sanctum doctrine—upon the ancient writings and revelations of the Purgatorians. Their influence became so extensive that Mormonism, originally one of the few distinct Christian denominations existing outside the Universal Church, had formally folded into the Silver Sect forty years ago. The Mormons made it equally clear, however, that they were joining that Order specifically, rather than submitting themselves wholeheartedly to the greater Church, which they regarded as increasingly corrupted, bureaucratic, and spiritually hollow. Their allegiance was to the Silver Path and its mysteries far more than to the institutional hierarchy surrounding it.

Ideas of integration, balance, immortalization, soul sovereignty, the angelization of souls, and the attainment of wholeness appealed strongly to independent-minded Americans. The doctrine proved a natural fit with the ideals of the Republic and the fierce individualism of the frontier spirit. In more modern times, the rise of the Natural Order Party—the first legitimate third party, now claiming nearly a solid third of the electorate—was directly rooted in the oldest teachings of the Silver Order: the teachings of Divine Natural Law.

It was not merely an American political party. It had spread into other nations in regionally distinct forms, often stripped of the explicitly Christian aspects of the Order and aligned instead with its older, pre-Church expression: the Old Purgatorian Way. In Nevada (as well as thirteen other states) however, it had become something far more dominant. The movement had completely eclipsed every other political party and religious denomination in the state. The party's initial rise beginning even as the Mormon Church itself dissolved into the Silver Path Order.

Vincent felt the weight of that history whenever he spoke with Ramsey. The man was not merely a priest of The Church, but a militant advocate of the Natural Order Party—one who pushed for the militarization of the Silver Faith itself in a frankly theocratic sense. Into this, Vincent had been born. Born into the very root of it: the Veyls. And like every orphan raised within the Silver Path orphanages and schools, he had been trained from childhood to serve this cause—without fully realizing it until recently.

The Veyl family was one of several bloodlines tracing its ancestry back through the Old Purgatorians to Amil, and therethrough to Thera herself—to the Seraph of Truth, Oreviel (aka Uriel, Emetiel, Aftiel, etc.). Vincent was the recognized final member of the direct line descending from Amil's consort Analeia Beloaren—Aneleia of the Veil—a Spanish priestess of the original Purgatorian faith.



(Aneleia of the Veil, International N.O.P Seal, Leader of the I.N.O.P.)

The weight of this could be heard in the way Father Ramsey spoke to him. It could be recognized in the way Father Tellon had always treated him, and in the manner by which the Bishops themselves had cleaved to his obscure books, almost immediately using them to justify the official knighting of his name. Justin Vyss himself, the global leader of the Natural Order Party, had written to congratulate him. He had published glowing editorials concerning Vincent's works, declaring:

"This is the pattern for the future legions of the Imperial Republic of Rhea."

When Vincent completed his capstone project, the famed, rather albino-looking and lean mystic-scholar had written to him again:

"This is the way to the star-road gates. Are you the one to open them?"

Vincent had not truly replied to either message, save to write:

"Blessings."

He had been uncertain how the man even knew about the project, which had been classified almost as quickly as it was revealed, or how exactly one was supposed to respond to someone like Justin Vyss—a man who had written dozens of books, commanded a worldwide political movement, and lived under arrest warrants issued by numerous nations, all while openly advocating for the creation of a global Imperial Republic founded upon the United States Constitution and the principles of Universal Natural-Law. Yet Ramsey was no doubt reporting to this very man, even above and before the Pope. Many suspected that Pius XIII had himself been a secret Silver Order ally, and he had certainly begun leaning The Church toward support of the International Natural Order Party, until his death two years ago and the ascension of Pope James I—whom some called The Builder and others called The Inscrutable.

The Carydins were themselves Silver Pathers, according to Vincent's research, but followed the forbidden Thirteenth Volume of the Compendium:

The Way of Kur.

Shadow Silver.

Vincent counted the volume among his own collection. Its teachings illuminated the darker aspects of Divine Natural Law—the Left Hand of God, as it was called. Truths that had, in fact, comforted him during his years in the Army, helping him believe that he was not merely killing people in war, but fulfilling his natural role as a psychopomp. The calling of the Raven Seraph. Guardian and guide of thresholds. Vincent had incorporated many of these ideas into The Silver Soldier without naming their source.

The problem with the Carydins, as a line, was their insistence upon treating the Thirteenth Volume as the primary work—the truest work—and declaring all other volumes to be merely watered-down, later derivatives.

Vincent considered the sheriff's deputy.

Seeking allies.

"Rabbi Tevi Thorton. Little switchboard."

He remembered the rabbis he had known in Jerusalem. Gossip and nosiness seemed almost a cultural trait—or perhaps it was a need like his own: to root out truth, to know what was hidden.

Nosy.

A good quality for a deputy, he realized. But in a corrupt town, a good cop—a nosy cop—was probably not having a good time of it. That the federal authorities were not responding came as no surprise. An operation like Vana's—

He had researched her as well. Through good old-fashioned sleuthing, assisted by Lil 'Trin, Vincent had assembled dossiers upon dozens of people throughout the community. He had mapped the town's leaders socially, politically, and spiritually—every institutional head, every influential voice.

Vana had control. She had steadily cowed, driven out, or disappeared anyone who might effectively oppose her. With one exception. Father Ramsey himself—an open critic of the Carydin regime.

Meghan Dellon's father was in his files. Sheriff Mathius Dellon was a man who walked tall and carried a big gun. A man who entered firefights armed with a pistol against opponents carrying assault rifles—and walked out with little more than a flesh wound. Like some television gunfighter, but real. And therefore, a legend. He was no-nonsense and incorruptible, but jurisdictionally kept in check. He had repeatedly appealed to federal authorities, only to receive no meaningful response.

"If the feds are ignoring this cesspool, there are, one, powerful forces protecting it. Protecting Vana. And two, they're getting something out of it." Vincent understood how such arrangements worked.

The intelligence agencies were probably being fed facts, statistics, photographs, and videos documenting the proclivities of the rich and famous.

"The Black Silver, like the Silver, is popular among law enforcement, intelligence agencies, and military officers. They recruit in the academies because it's pragmatic, not idealistic," he said it aloud as if talking to TAIFD. His mind continued following the pattern. "Shadow or Black Silver especially, because it's hyper-pragmatic. Draws the strong who don't want to bend the knee to weaklings and intellectual academics." A pause. "Also, those who like Gothic mysticism." At that, Vincent had to smile to himself.

Looking across at the waiting crates, he knew that he had a great deal of work ahead of him—all of it culminating in the chapel. He had seen photographs and therefore possessed some idea of what awaited above and below, but first he needed to establish every system, change every code and lock, and search for the eavesdropping devices they had no doubt hidden throughout the building. 6:15pm and Trin was already locating and mapping them.

Vincent surveyed the garage, the black SUV, the Fairlane, the stacked weapons and equipment, the sealed doors, and the stairs descending into the secure levels below. "This is my lair." The words felt strange, but right. "I own it." He had inherited it. His was the only name upon the deed, as his was the only name listed upon the business licenses.

Vincent got to work. Trion Systems had installed most of the base technology, but he still had to integrate his own variations and innovations, build the Trin-support interfaces, and root out whatever corruption had been left behind by contractors who had guaranteed their work was clean and secure.

(5:15 to 7:00 PM, May 31—Meghan)



She had served seven years as a Marine MP, and remained a reservist, before becoming a deputy under her rather mythical father, Sheriff Mathius Dellon. He had been named, quite literally, after a fictional gunfighter and spent much of his life trying to live up to that ideal. Meghan, however, had been deliberately assigned elsewhere, kept at arm's length from her father's direct command to avoid even the appearance of favoritism. She was given the worst duty assignment available: stationed nearly alone at the little Trembol sheriff's office, fifty miles east of the central office in Elko.

Meghan was a pretty woman—five-foot-eight, neither fat nor particularly slim, with a definite, if not exaggerated, figure. Light-brown hair, brown eyes, and handsome features reflecting her Basque heritage, with a smattering of Cherokee as well. Generally respected. Pleasant, but inquisitive. Hard and blunt when necessary.

Her obvious lack of interest in men had fueled rumors that she was a lesbian, though she appeared to be dating no one—neither male nor female—not recently, at least, and certainly not openly. Her last affair had been with Amber Shelton, a discreet relationship that had quietly endured for several years before ending when Amber began dating Josh Manning following his return from military service.

Meghan scanned the street from behind the wheel, having already completed her evening patrol along the outskirts. Yet she had caught the scent of a mystery, and once she caught such a scent, she needed to sniff it out.

She listened to the radio chatter while following the black Fairlane from the gas station. The notorious Trembol Police Department—or the Carydin Police Department, as almost everyone called it—had certainly noticed him.

[Officer Jimmy Dedrik—TPD]

"Unknown. Never seen him before."

The TPD boys tended to speak rather casually over the radio. They had all grown up together and were buddies both on and off duty. Yet for all their easygoing ways, they were a frightening bunch in their own right. Jimmy Dedrik's nasally, twangy voice was always obvious. He was Chief Larry Dedrik's eldest son—the Chief himself being the dim-witted, fat step-brother of the late Tartus Carydin. A family business, almost.

[Officer Jimmy Dedrik—TPD]

"All right, just ran those tags. Comes back to a Vincent N. Veyl, twenty-six years old. Says he just got an address in-state, real recent-like. Listed as a private security contractor."

A brief crackle of static.

"Let's see here… looks like an Army boy. Got a medical discharge not too long ago. Honorable. E-6, so he was a Staff Sergeant. Eleven-Bravo—infantry."

Another pause.

"Ah, hell. Says Seventy-Fifth Ranger Regiment, Second Battalion, Charlie Company. Boy's a heavy hitter."

Meghan glanced again at the Fairlane ahead of her, its polished black body reflecting the passing streetlights.

"Screen says he's clean as a whistle, though. No paper on him. Zero wants or warrants. Shit—federal ID, federal firearms license—and wait a second."

Jimmy's voice changed.

"Well, ain't that a peach. Terminal just threw a flag. Something called Overwatch, listing an Agent Y. Omaris as contact. Now that's interesting. Feds, probably. Betcha my pension he's doing rent-a-spook work for the government now."

Keys clicked rapidly in the background.

"Yeah… trying to pull the rest of his jacket, and the system just slammed the door in my face. Sealed. Need-to-know."

[Officer Tod Mantel—TPD]

"Tell you what, Jim—we poke this hornet's nest any harder, your dad's gonna get a very angry phone call from Homeland Security before breakfast. Best we just smile and wave at this one. Too many angels on his shoulder."

Meghan smirked as she continued trailing the Fairlane. Something had pinged within her at the first sight of him standing outside Thorton's Gas. Black hair. Chiseled features. Tall enough to rise above nearly every man around him. Striking, to say the least.

Then the dispatcher's voice broke in.

[Dispatch—TPD]

"Wait. Veyl?"

Amber Shelton's voice sharpened around the name. The radio went silent. Not ordinary radio silence, but the kind that followed when several people suddenly realized the same thing and no one wanted to be the first to say it. Minutes seemed to pass.

[Officer Mack Alder—TPD]

"Yeah… um… think someone better run that up the flagpole."

[Officer Tod Mantel—TPD]

"They're all dead, ain't they? The Veyls?"

[Officer Jimmy Dedrik—TPD]

"Coincidence, maybe. The Church been overseeing that old Trust all these years. Last rumor I heard, anyways."

He seemed to be thinking aloud now, almost to himself. Their reaction, more than anything else, had drawn Meghan across Trembol behind him. There was no malice in it. Curiosity was her drug.

Deputy Meghan Dellon sat in her cruiser across the street from what was now called the Raven Star Building—formerly Veyl House. A four-story structure of pale-gray stone, classical in design, though the windows were black. Gold lettering upon the front doors read:

RAVEN STAR LLC

A camera watched from above the entrance, nearly invisible unless one knew where to look.

"They seem like weak points," she murmured. The windows. Yet the appearance was an illusion. Some were probably not windows at all, but completely sealed from within. The rest would almost certainly be shatterproof—ballistic storm glass, perhaps layered over hardened steel shutters.

No one had paid the renovations much attention. Meghan had driven past the property daily, watching the trucks from Timbisha Infrastructure Solutions come and go. T.I.S. was a known and highly respected company, employing mostly native workers and specializing in unusual projects. They were among the only contractors in the region bonded and insured well enough to work on police stations and other secure government facilities.

"That should've been a clue." She looked down at the business card Tevi Thorton had given her.

She had already run Vincent's plates and obtained the basic information. His residence was listed as 55 Arius Avenue, still called Veyl House in the system. His record was spotless. No warrants. No

criminal flags. But she had noticed the DHS Overwatch designation. Such tags generally indicated an individual the government actively monitored. In Vincent's case, however, it likely meant he worked for them—or that they considered him valuable enough to protect.

"Staff Sergeant Vincent N. Veyl, living in Veyl House." That alone was significant.

The old case files established the connection. Aitor Veyl had taken his own life on the property in 2003, at the age of eighty-three—ritually, inside the fourth-floor chapel. He had one daughter, Selene Veyl. Her death certificate stated that she had died before him, also by ritual suicide, in 2000 at the convent of St. Aftiel's.
A recently amended birth certificate, released from previously sealed court documents, clearly named Selene Veyl as Vincent's mother. It listed the Universal Church as his legal guardian following her death—the same year he had been placed into its care. Under Father, however, appeared only the code:

5732-99

Meghan had encountered the primary code before.

Rape by unknown assailants.

Plural.

Vincent Veyl had been born of sexual assault. Yet the 99 addendum was almost never used. It designated the conception as Unnatural circumstances.

Meghan stared at that phrase for several moments.

The religious affiliations listed in the death records offered some explanation for the deaths of Aitor and Selene. Neither had been recorded merely as Silver Christians, but specifically as Purgatorians. The distinction was not widely understood outside Nevada, but among local officers it meant something.

Purgatorians were not technically Christians, though many existed under The Church's umbrella. They were often called Patinated Silver—followers of an older form of the faith. They accepted ritual suicide in old age, or under certain circumstances at almost any age. Not in vengeance, spite, panic, or despair, but with a clear mind and heart—chosen willingly, eyes wide open, conducted peacefully and ritually.

The purpose was not to usher the soul into Heaven, but into Purgatoria. Imagined by the Silver Way as a mystical, twilight, desert realm of contemplation and balance.

The transfer of the Veyl Trust had also become public record the previous year. Then Meghan noticed the name repeated across nearly every official document:

Sir Vincent N. Veyl

She had to look that up. When she found the explanation, she leaned closer to the computer. "What the fuck?"

It was literally part of his legal name. The Nevada DMV had even recorded the reason:

Knighted by Pope Pius XIII and the Seven Bishops of the Silver Order—February 4, 2024.

Meghan blinked, her jaw hanging slightly open as she stared toward the closed garage doors across the street. "An actual, real-life knight in shining armor?" She laughed, though it was not really funny.

She searched further to determine whether the title was legally recognized or merely decorative. It was real. Vincent was listed in an official Church Governance Memorandum dated 2024 as:
Knight Commander Sir Vincent N. Veyl

The citation beneath his name read:

For lifelong service, devotion, and contribution, exemplifying the finest qualities of a Christian soldier in the path of fraternity, truth, faith, and courage.

There was an authorized certificate bearing seals and signatures. The Universal Church had filed it with the federal government and the Nevada Vital Statistics Office, making the title part of his official legal identity.

She also discovered, just as Dedrik had, that Vincent possessed a federal firearms license, a federal security license, and federal bonding. His security clearance exceeded her own, though she remained a Second Lieutenant in the Marine Corps Reserve. Still her Reserve status, as a Military Police Officer, of rank, gave her access civilian officers did not have—allowing her to go well beyond what the Trembol PD had.

Meghan watched the darkened building. No interior light could be seen through its black windows. Every attempt to examine Vincent's deeper history ran into walls of redaction or outright locked records:

DHS OVERWATCH—RESTRICTED DATA—PROTECTED PERSON—CONTACT AGENT Y. OMARIS

A side note warned:

ALL INDIVIDUALS ATTEMPTING TO ACCESS THIS INFORMATION ARE LOGGED, FLAGGED, AND SUBJECT TO VERIFICATION.

That meant Meghan herself would be reverse-checked. She had the legal right to make the inquiry, but much of what would ordinarily be public was concealed behind walls she could not scale. Even so, the business card, the visible records, and Tevi's excited account of Vincent's government identification painted a clear picture.

She remembered the Rabbi practically bubbling over as he reported his gossip. "I've never seen a man with so much packed onto one ID," Tevi had admitted. "Ranger Scout, Intelligence Sergeant—this guy's an MVP." He'd adjusted his glasses and continued before she could interrupt him. "Said right on his card: Army Infantry Intelligence. And Ribbon of Merit, meaning he was a designated striker—the kind of guy they send behind the lines to take out enemy officers and commanders." Tevi had

ticked off the items upon his fingers. "Interpreter, two-of-two times five—means five different languages at top proficiency. Cyber Warfare. Tribal Liaison. Bronze Star, Silver Star, Distinguished Service Cross, three Purple Hearts, and a frigging Gold Wreath in hand-to-hand and infantry arms. Means master-grade in both." He had shaken his head in admiration. "And fuck if it didn't list a master's degree in Computer Science. Authorship P2—means he published two books. Chaplain's certification, too. All listed under decorations and qualifications. Guy was in almost nine years. Fought in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria."

Meghan had never seen Tevi so cheerfully excited. She could access the civilian ID online, but not the military one. That was flagged "Need to Know—a hard no. He had gone on about the Fairlane, how Vincent had grown up in an orphanage, and how he had inherited the old Veyl estate. She had eventually driven away while the man was still talking.

Vincent's business license showed that Raven Star LLC had seven subdivisions:

Raven Star Holdings

Raven Star Investments

Raven Star Technologies

Raven Star Communications

Raven Star Entertainment

Raven Star Security Solutions.

Raven Star Properties.

The entire enterprise was registered under a single owner and operator:

Sir Vincent N. Veyl.

License and permit applications had begun moving through the necessary channels in October of 2025, with the companies formally registered the following month, in November. Yet even here, a surprising amount of information was sealed or redacted. This man was certainly in bed with the government, which explained the Overwatch designation. Clearly a federal security contractor.

Meghan searched for the property deed through county records. A warning immediately appeared:

FEDERALLY PROTECTED SITE DESIGNATION—SUBCLASS 5

Her jaw dropped. The Raven Star Building might as well have been a military base. Subclass Five meant the highest level of sanction. No one below the rank of federal officer, armed with a federal warrant and top-level clearance, could enter the site without an authorized invitation—and even then, only under supervision. The Sub designation was important. It meant Subdivision Designation, as though Raven Star were itself a subdivision of some federal agency.

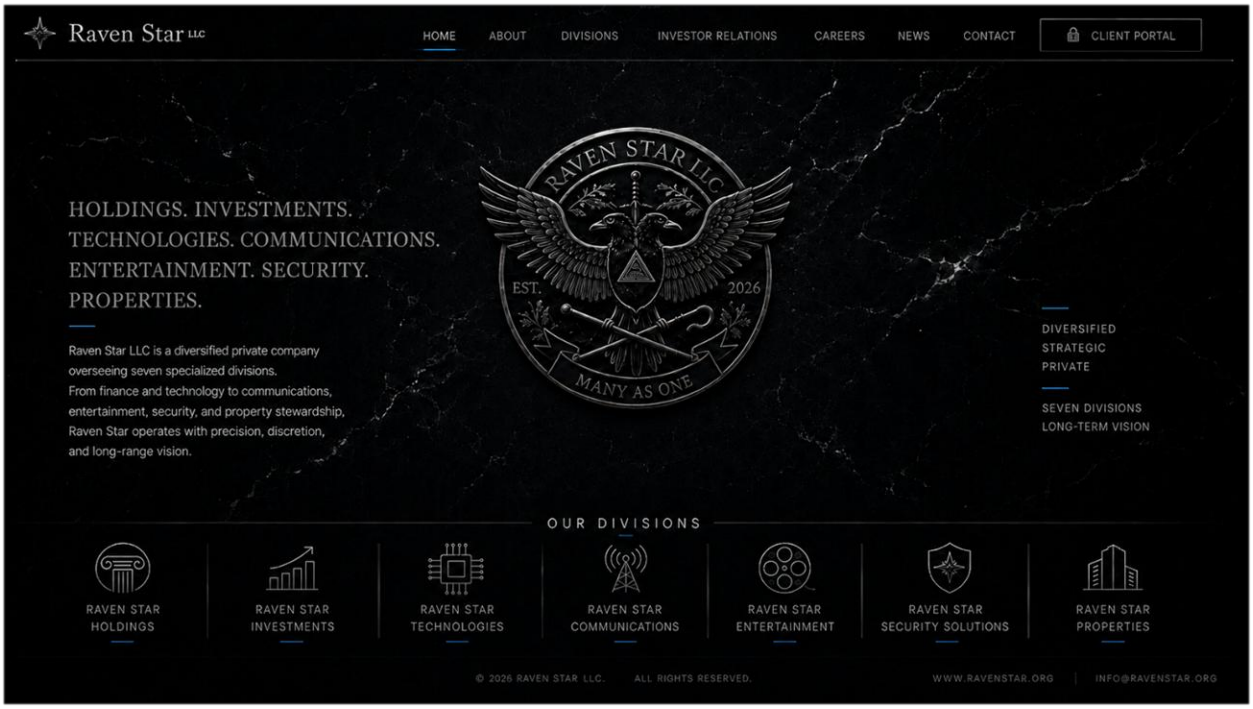
Meghan slowly smiled. A high-powered federal security contractor, a top-tier hired gun, and a goddamned Holy Knight of the Universal Church had just moved into one of the most corrupt towns in Nevada. Once TPD fully understood this—and already the Veyl name was being run up the flagpole—the right people were going to become very nervous.

The Veyls and Carydins had feuded all the way back to the old country, or so the stories claimed. Under Aitor, however, peace had seemingly been made. According to a historical documentary Meghan had watched on KTTV several years before, Aitor Veyl had married Marian Carydin, his childhood sweetheart, ending the feud with old Tartus.

Aitor had been known as a personable and affable man, a celebrated professional mediator and negotiator. He was also said to have been some manner of mystic or medium, writing numerous books concerning religion, occultism, and metaphysics. A luminary in occult and spiritualist circles. The documentary described how Tartus Carydin himself—and later his daughter Vana—attended weekly Sessions at Veyl House.

Marian Elizabeth Carydin Veyl, Vana's much older sister, had died giving birth to Selene. Little was known publicly about the daughter because she spent most of her childhood in a distant private school. And she, too, had died tragically before her father. Now, twenty-six years later, Selene's orphaned son had come home.

He had just as obviously inherited the Veyl estate—no small fortune, as the older public records now revealed across Meghan's dashboard computer. She visited the Raven Star website.



One tab was marked:

NEWS

On a whim, she opened it. The page showed a photograph of the Raven Star Building beneath the caption:

ARRIVED IN TREMBOL—PICKED UP THE CAR

Below it appeared a photograph of the Fairlane, followed by a map of Trembol showing the building and several prominent local sites. Then came another photograph of the building's front.

Vincent had written:

Transitioned into the Fortress of Solitude. New chapter begins at last. Clients lining up. Tasks piling. Building security infrastructure found to be thoroughly infiltrated—mapped, isolated, documented, and nullified. Lawsuit pending for failure of guaranteed security.

ATTN: Y. Omaris—none of your seedling double-dealers.

Need to hire a few people—five: superintendent, watchman/dispatch, personal attendant, private secretary, and guard for secretary.

Trin says hi.

"Who is Trin?" The question came knee-jerk.

The note about the failure on the part of the contractors (T.I.S.) was bound to cause a stir—certainly a ding to their reputations, especially if it was taken to court. The reference to Y. Omaris indicated that anyone Vincent hired would have to pass through Overwatch scrutiny. He was also stating plainly that he would not accept government plants.

"Five positions," Meghan said aloud. Something stirred inside her.

At that moment, a Trembol Police cruiser came down the street. Tod Mantel sat behind the wheel. A thirty-something, dirty-blond, former-football-player stereotype with a goatee and blue eyes. He looked toward her with a dark smirk. Meghan's hand instinctively lowered toward her gun.

His voice came across the shortwave.

[Officer Tod Mantel—TPD] "Whatcha up to, Deputy Meg?"

Terror moved through her heart. Months of untraceable calls to her rented home. Shouts hurled from passing cars in the dead of night. Vulgar graffiti painted across the adobe wall outside that same house. The things they had threatened to do.

Then there was the knowledge that women had disappeared over the years—no doubt swallowed by the underbelly of the Carydin sex trade. Some were forced into pornography, others kidnapped and sold to wealthy clients. Debtors were made to work off what they owed in various terrible ways. There were leg-breaking debt collectors, blackmail, and extortion.

She put on a brave face and steeled her soul, but beneath it, she was frightened. It stirred too much within her that she had suppressed for years.

"Bookkeeping," Meghan answered, calm and cold. She tried to ignore him.

Tod was a married man with two children—both terrors at school, by everything she had heard. His wife, Margo, had grown up with Meghan in Elko Township. Once a vibrant, happy-go-lucky cheerleader and straight-A student, she had become a dead-eyed, dreary soul who barely spoke whenever Meghan encountered her. Meanwhile, Tod spent most of his off-duty hours at the Gray Fox Saloon, with one fling or another—mostly addicts to whom he slipped a fix in exchange for favors.

Tod scoffed over the radio.

"Writing your little blotter posts again?"

He drove past, clearly taking note of the Raven Star Building as he went.

In some way, Meghan realized, her presence had drawn them to the scent. They tended to watch her, knowing the Sheriff's Department had spent years attempting to uncover evidence of Carydin corruption. Yet Vana was even more efficient than her father had been. She was successful and a genuine power player in politics. The dominant Natural Order Party frequently acted in her direct interest throughout Elko County. Blocking investigations.

Tod's voice returned over the police band.

[Officer Tod Mantel—TPD]

"Unit TPD-3. Arius and Satyr. Subject entered the residence fifteen minutes ago. No sign since. Blacked windows. Definitely a hardened facility. Never noticed what they were doing here all these weeks."

Then came the voice of Chief Larry Dedrik. Deep and dire, though weakened by age and obesity. He spoke in formal police language Meghan had rarely heard from the ordinarily lackadaisical and unprofessional chief of the Trembol Police Department.

[Chief Larry Dedrik—TPD]

"DHS Overwatch flag confirmed. Secure sub-federal adjacent facility, Level Five, and designated S.O. Protectorate. Classified executive level."

The channel went very still.

"You are ordered to break all further observation. Do not engage. Communications are being monitored for compliance. DHS query ongoing."

Then, in a more natural—but still badly strained—voice, he added:

"And the order has come down the flagpole. Hands off."

A pause.

"Turns out this guy's dead grandmother was the Queen's sister. My niece. That makes him long-lost family. Red-carpet rollout forthcoming. Understood?"

A chill passed through Meghan. Likely through everyone who had heard the broadcast.

S.O. Protectorate was new to her. She searched the designation and quickly learned that the Silver Order itself had declared Veyl House an official residence—almost an embassy of The Church.

Jimmy Dedrik's confusion burst across the radio.

[Officer Jimmy Dedrik—TPD]

"Pops, who the hell is this guy? Where did he come from? Never heard of Ms. Carydin having a sister, let alone a sister with a long-lost grandson."

His words came faster.

"A federal and Church facility in one—what the hell would that even be? What purpose? I mean, what kind of person is this?"

His voice registered almost frantic confusion. He could not wrap his mind around the enormity of it. Neither, entirely, could Meghan. She could almost see Tevi Thorton glued to his scanner salivating, giddy with the juiciness of it all. Probably looking up the old video of KTTV's report on the Veyl Family.

[Chief Dedrik—TPD]

"Unit Two, TPD—keep it off comms."

A beat of silence followed.

"The White Cardinal's hand is on this one. The Silver Bishop stands sentinel. The Black Queen's eyes are now attentive."

Meghan blinked. Many eyes would be attentive. Tevi was not the only one who owned a scanner. Half the town probably did.

This was a bomb dropped into a deceptively pretty lake—one that appeared placid on the surface but was as filthy as a sewer beneath. The ripples from its impact were already spreading in every direction. Revelatory-level information.

The questions Jimmy had raised were already echoing through Trembol, and soon they would spread across Elko County.

Who is he?

Meghan looked again at the building. It was zoned for both business and residential use, yet the man who had just taken up residence within it seemed impossible to categorize so neatly.

Her own life had never truly belonged to her. It belonged to her father. Mathius Dellon had never had a son, so he made Meghan into one, and she had faithfully followed in his footsteps—first into the Marine Corps, then into the Sheriff's Department.

Protect and serve was more than a motto in the Dellon family. But it had never been the life she wanted.
She thought of her mother, Raylene Dellon, born into a traditionalist, polygamous Mormon—Silver Path family. Raylene had lived the traditional life: tending the garden, feeding the chickens, baking bread and pies, keeping the house immaculate, and doing the shopping. It had been a peaceful domestic existence, though punctuated by constant worry for her husband—and later, her daughter.

Tallia had always been fiercely independent, closer to their aunt and uncle, the Stevenses, and had eventually alienated their father just as Aunt Thallia had before her. Meghan, however, complied. She went along to get along—and excelled at it.



(Tallia Stevens, Mathius Dellon, Meghan Dellon)

Yet the terror had always lived within her. The recent harassment and intimidation in Trembol had merely emphasized it, not created it.

A year earlier, Meghan had shot a knife-wielding man at the casino—but not before he stabbed her, body-slammed her, and broke three of her ribs. Six months later, during a domestic disturbance, a raging boyfriend had broken her arm before she managed to draw her gun and shoot him three times. He survived but remained confined to a wheelchair. The ease with which he had snapped her arm—so quickly, so effortlessly—left a lasting impression.

Meghan had saved herself many times through her voice, bluff and bluster, and a quick draw. Her martial training enabled her to match most women, but it became almost useless against even an average man once he truly committed to a fight. Men who were enraged, drugged, or drunk could sometimes fight through the effects of pepper spray or her stun gun long enough to do terrible damage.

There were always vulgar comments, attempts to touch her, and propositions—often lewd, sometimes outright perverse. In a state where prostitution was legal, wealthy visitors to Trembol had even offered her money for sex, assuming every woman in town was available for purchase.

Many were.

The male officers were little better. To them, her refusal supposedly proved she was a lesbian.

She had engaged in relationships with women, true enough, but she was not gay. She had long ago decided to focus upon her career—for her father—and save herself for the right one. Yet every man she met was forced to exist beneath the shadow and scrutiny of Mathius Dellon.

Meghan did not even dare own a pet. Her hours were chaotic, and she feared someone might kill the animal simply to hurt her—or that she herself might be injured or killed, leaving it locked inside the house to starve.

In her relationships with women, beginning in high school and continuing afterward, her profession had always forced her into the role of the man. She was the provider and the protector—never the one protected or cared for, never the one treated like a woman.

Her garden was her only comfort, and she rarely had time to tend it. During the last several years, she had grown increasingly lonely and isolated. Even her father visited only briefly, usually in some official capacity.

Every day, she had to report to the Law Enforcement Building and work alongside the very men responsible for much of the harassment and many of the threats.

When she tried speaking to her father—Mr. Thick Skin himself—he dismissed and downplayed the danger. “It comes with the job. Keep a gun at hand. Make sure you’re ready to use it well.”

In other words:

Toughen up. Ignore it. Deal with it when it comes instead of worrying about mere threats.

Her father had been threatened by street gangs, organized crime, and every kind of nasty, dark soul imaginable. He did not seem in the least concerned. But no one was threatening to drag him away and sell him into sexual slavery.

Meghan thought of her sister Tallia.

Now estranged, Tallia lived atop DeSatto Ridge inside the bunker-like old KTTV station, itself a former Cold War communications relay. She had become obsessed with wielding the news as a sword of truth, just as their uncle Benjamin Stevens and aunt Thallia had before her. She took no side and pissed off everyone equally.

When Benjamin and Thallia were assassinated, Tallia took up their cause alongside her cousin, Larry Stevens. Their father's response had been cold and simple: "They brought it on themselves." Tallia disowned him and changed her surname to Stevens. She and Meghan simply stopped speaking. Whenever they encountered one another at crime scenes—Tallia as a reporter, Meghan as a deputy—they remained polite. They nodded and sometimes shared a brief, partial hug before going their separate ways.

Tallia had suffered for her choices. She already held a journalism degree, then went on to earn a law degree after being hit with SLAPP lawsuits again and again. She generally prevailed under the First Amendment, but not before the legal battles buried her beneath enormous debts. Her determination to remain completely and genuinely neutral angered everyone and made her a pariah without allies.

The threats Tallia received over the years were far worse than anything directed toward Meghan, though they had never escalated into an actual physical attack. Both daughters remained protected by their father's name. Everyone knew that if either woman were seriously harmed, Sheriff Mathius Dellon would come—and once he began moving, he was a tank that could not be stopped.

Yet part of Meghan admired her older sister: the stand she had taken, the courage required to be herself, and her willingness to decide for herself who was family and who was not.

Meghan's finger moved absently across the tabs of the Raven Star website. Almost by accident, she selected:

RAVEN STAR COMMUNICATIONS

Her eyes widened, and a slow smile touched her lips.

The page displayed a photograph of the old KTTV station upon the ridge above Trembol. Beneath it, a formal notice read:

Under the Veyl Trust, now Raven Star LLC, this property has been leased to KTTV Channel 2 for twenty-nine years.

Raven Star LLC has, according to its legal rights and privileges, purchased the significant debts accrued, terminated the lease, and will take possession of KTTV—seizing chattels, lock, stock, and barrel—to recoup those debts and reassert control over the property as of July 10, 2026.

The current owner and employees will be considered during the transition and may be retained under new contractual agreements. However, my vision will change the branding and greatly expand and refine the existing concept.

Significant investment has been earmarked to upgrade and modernize the facility, with the goal of creating a legitimately neutral news network rooted in real-time, highly accurate, nonbiased reporting: a twenty-four-hour flow of statistics, facts, and nonpartisan information, without spin, narrative, lingoism, or manipulation.

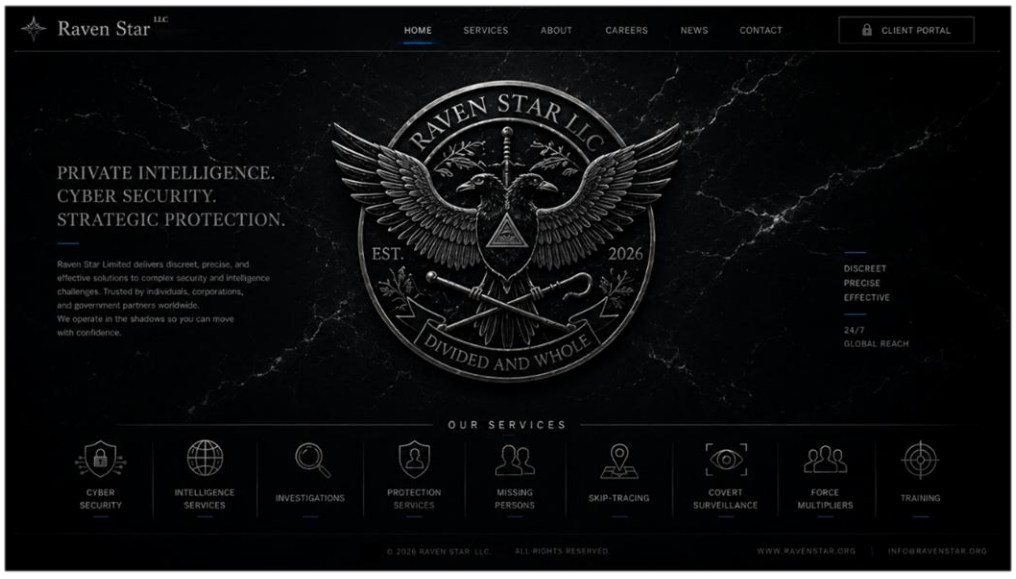
Two pieces of concept art appeared beneath the notice, revealing the future branding:

NNN—NEUTRAL NEWS NETWORK: A TEMPLE OF TRUTH



"Brilliant," Meghan said aloud. She wondered whether her sister even knew. Tallia probably did. The Veyl House renovations had been underway for months, which meant the planning and transfer had likely been progressing for some time.

Meghan moved to another tab: RAVEN STAR SECURITY SOLUTIONS



Again, she found herself impressed.

Drawn at once to the range of services that would be offered; a legitimate looking and highly professional presentation, with a wide range encompassing policing, protective, investigative, intelligence, and even military services being offered. She smiled and cocked her head, even as her shift had ended half-an-hour ago, having been sitting there for that long. Sitting there staring at the tab she was avoiding but tempted to click, now daring to go there, and look at the job postings there on, and the general requirements:

RAVEN STAR: CAREERS PORTAL

SECURITY CLEARANCE LEVEL: RESTRICTED—INTERNAL AND CLEARED CANDIDATES ONLY

IMPORTANT NOTICE TO ALL APPLICANTS

Entry into any role within this organization—including administrative, technical, security, and facilities-maintenance personnel—is strictly conditional upon compliance with the following statutory mandates:

• Tier Five Federal Adjudication: Applicants must successfully pass a comprehensive Single Scope Background Investigation (SSBI), co-adjudicated by the Department of Homeland Security and National Security Agency.

• Execution of an Irrevocable Secrecy Covenant: All personnel must execute a Special Access Program Nondisclosure Agreement. This covenant carries perpetual restrictions, absolute-liability clauses, and strict lifetime prepublication-review requirements.

• Jurisdictional Consent: All organizational facilities operate under Level Five security designations—Federal Property-Adjacent. Entry requires continuing consent to biometric monitoring, random polygraph examination, and the immediate surrender of personal electronic devices at the secured perimeter.

Failure to meet or maintain these federal standards will result in immediate disqualification and/or revocation of security access.

CURRENT OPENINGS

1. Executive Personal Secretary

This is a twenty-four-hour, seven-day-a-week, live-in position requiring total operational dedication. The successful candidate will shadow the Executive entirely, maintaining constant availability with minimal domestic or external distraction. Ideal candidates will possess few outside familial or relational obligations, ensuring operational focus and security integrity.

Requirements: Minimum bachelor's degree in Business, Office Administration, Advanced Secretarial Arts, or a related field; active certification in property management preferred. Candidate must be highly

proficient in complex scheduling, real-time intelligence briefings, executive correspondence, and meticulous data organization.

Clearance and Compatibility: Due to the intimate and continuous nature of this role, candidates must undergo rigorous psychological evaluation and a Continuous Evaluation Program deep-dive into past associations, confirming absolute confidentiality and temperamental compatibility.

Legal Parameters: Pursuant to Nevada Employment Statute HRSH34810, the candidate must execute a Personal Autonomy Waiver without caveat. Furthermore, due to the specific live-in protective triad required for this detail, the position operates under a Bonafide Occupational Qualification and is open only to mature female applicants. A long-term commitment is strictly expected.

Note: This requirement exists because the position places employee and employer in constant close proximity under highly private and personal circumstances, creating the possibility of unintended boundary issues. The C.Y.A. provision is therefore considered legally prudent.

Compensation:

Base Salary: $12,000 per month, adjusted for continuous operational tempo

Gold Standard Insurance: medical, dental, vision, audiology, and dermatological
Comprehensive 401(k)

Full room and board in a private, high-security studio

Fully covered corporate transportation and travel

Wardrobe Allowance: $500 per month

Expense Account: $1,000 per month

Retention Benefit: $10,000 annual retirement bonus for each year of faithful service

2. Executive Protection Agent—EPS Detail

This agent will serve as the dedicated Close Protection Officer and minder for the Executive Personal Secretary. Because the EPS will be privy to the organization's most sensitive operational information, she represents a critical vulnerability requiring dedicated, full-time protection against infiltration, espionage, coercion, or physical interference.

Requirements: Extensive background in executive protection, threat assessment, firearms, tactical defense, and close-quarters response. Because the agent will cohabitate and travel almost exclusively with the EPS, this role shares the BFOQ requirement for female applicants, ensuring operational harmony, privacy, and logistical ease.

Legal Parameters: Pursuant to Nevada Employment Statute HRSH34810, the candidate must execute a Personal Autonomy Waiver without caveat. Furthermore, due to the specific live-in protective triad

required for this detail, the position operates under a Bonafide Occupational Qualification and is open only to mature female applicants. A long-term commitment is strictly expected.

Note: This requirement exists because the position places employee and employer in constant close proximity under highly private and personal circumstances, creating the possibility of unintended boundary issues. The C.Y.A. provision is therefore considered legally prudent.

Clearance and Compatibility: Candidates will undergo rigorous psychological screening and a thorough audit of past relational interactions, confirming a demonstrated pattern of absolute reliability, lethal proficiency, discretion, and temperamental cohesion with the EPS.

Compensation:

Base Salary: $12,000 per month

Gold Standard Insurance

Comprehensive 401(k)

Full room and board in a private, high-security studio

Fully covered corporate transportation and travel
Tactical Gear and Clothing Allowance: $500 per month

Expense Account: $1,000 per month

Retention Benefit: $10,000 annual retirement bonus for each year of faithful service

3. Facility Operations Manager and Reception

This individual will serve as the vanguard of the Raven Star facility.

The Facility Operations Manager will direct daily clerical and administrative functions, manage secure reception, catalog sensitive communications, coordinate internal schedules, and serve as the primary liaison for high-level corporate, Church, and government contacts—many of whom may arrive under considerable distress or exhibit difficult and potentially hostile behavior.

Requirements: Exceptional administrative ability paired with elite crisis-de-escalation skills. Tactical capability is mandatory. Candidates must maintain active firearms certification and demonstrate proficiency in close-quarters self-defense sufficient to neutralize illicit breach attempts or retaliatory acts.

Professionalism, temperance, discretion, and unwavering composure are essential.

Compensation:

Base Salary: $7,500 per month

Gold Standard Insurance

Comprehensive 401(k)

Fully covered corporate transportation and travel

Gear and Wardrobe Allowance: $300 per month

Secure Housing Allowance: $1,500 per month

Security monitoring of the employee's residence is mandatory

Retention Benefit: $5,000 annual retirement bonus for each year of faithful service

4. Facilities and Physical Security Specialist

A hybrid live-in role responsible for the absolute physical integrity of Raven Star property.

Duties include comprehensive property maintenance, preventive repairs, equipment inspection, environmental-system oversight, and the strict escort and supervision of all outside vendors and cleared contractors.

Requirements: Expertise in commercial facility maintenance, physical-security infrastructure, and access-control systems.

The specialist will serve as the secondary tier of physical security—conducting perimeter sweeps, ensuring all access points remain hardened, monitoring internal CCTV systems, and providing immediate tactical support to the Facility Operations Manager during emergencies.

Compensation:

Base Salary: $6,000 per month

Gold Standard Insurance

Comprehensive 401(k)

Fully covered corporate transportation

All required uniforms and equipment paid through the facility expense budget

Full room and board

Supplementary Gear Allowance: $200 per month

Retention Benefit: $3,000 annual retirement bonus for each year of faithful service

5. TSCM and Communications Watch Officer

This specialist will maintain total overwatch of the facility's signal and data integrity.

Duties include monitoring communications traffic within legal SIGINT parameters, maintaining encrypted lines, conducting regular Technical Surveillance Countermeasures sweeps, logging all incoming and outgoing data traffic, and enforcing constant counter-infiltration vigilance.

The officer will also coordinate and oversee facility-wide emergency-response drills.

Requirements: Advanced experience in signals intelligence, network security, encrypted communications, electronic counter-surveillance, and secure data logging.

Compensation:

Base Salary: $8,500 per month

Partial live-in status, with secure quarters provided during on-call rotations

Gold Standard Insurance

Comprehensive 401(k)

Fully covered corporate transportation

All required uniforms and equipment paid through the facility expense budget

Supplementary Gear Allowance: $200 per month

Retention Benefit: $4,000 annual retirement bonus for each year of faithful service

Meghan had a high-level security clearance, a solid service record, and excellent performance reviews. She did not even carry any significant debt. But Vincent was deeply religious—a real-life holy knight—and that might matter once a serious background check uncovered her private life. Then again, Tevi had mentioned that his ID flagged him as Purgatorian—a tradition many considered more Jewish than Christian in several respects—and that distinction mattered.

Purgatorians, much like the N.O.P. itself, built their worldview around so-called "Divine Natural Law." Their unusual doctrine drew a sharp distinction between same-sex relationships among women and those among men, sanctifying the former while rejecting the latter. It was a point of fierce contention in political and social circles, one that had driven a strange wedge between lesbians and gay men. Yet the Purgatorians Meghan knew—and the N.O.P. fanatics—generally took the same position on the matter: "We're not asking, so don't tell us. What happens in your bedroom is your business, not ours." It was a rather Nevadan attitude, really.

Even so, Meghan had to wonder whether she could qualify. The pay and benefits would draw fierce competition, though the restrictive requirements ensured that few applicants would survive the vetting. But Vincent Veyl owned the company, and he had not grown up in Nevada. By all accounts, he was more a priest with a gun than an ordinary lay believer.

Then again, plenty of priests—and plenty of nuns—were known for their "nontraditional proclivities." At twenty-six, Vincent Veyl had no social-media presence she could find, no wife, no kids, not even the slightest indication of a sweetheart.

Reading through the requirements again, she realized she was technically qualified for three of the five openings. She could certainly serve as the facilities specialist—the glorified janitor, as she thought of it—or as the communications watch officer. Executive Protection was the most obvious fit. She was no secretary, though she could type, maintain her own databases and investigative files, and possessed a working grasp of cyber hygiene and basic operational security.

Then she noticed the repeated references to Nevada Statute HRSH34810. The statute often appeared in employment contracts for women working in casinos, private resorts, and brothels. Peculiar to Nevada and certain corners of the hospitality industry, it permitted an employee to waive specific civil-rights protections relating to sexual conduct and harassment. It meant the EPS and the female protection agent would be more than ordinary employees.

The stated reason was clear enough and seemed to rule out any nefarious intent. "Two women with him twenty-four seven," she murmured. Still, once she signed the waiver, he would have free rein to get handsy—or worse—and her signature would mean accepting the full range of possibilities. "The C.Y.A. isn't unreasonable, but it's a hard line most won't cross." She smirked and shook her head. "I'd have to be willing to belong to him—in every way. A paid paramour, if he chose to exercise the option."

She remembered his face and the way he had stood inside the garage earlier, built like a brick shithouse, possessing a dark, masculine beauty that made her think of some fallen warrior angel. She had attended church a few times and believed, though mostly in passing. Now she realized he looked uncannily similar—not exactly, of course, but close enough—to the Seraph painted into murals and carved into statues throughout Silver churches. Coincidence, obviously, but interesting.

Megs thought of her father and wondered what he would say if she actually secured such a position. On the one hand, he would be disappointed that she had left the Sheriff's Department. On the other, this was undeniably an upgrade—and still connected to law, security, and order. In a roundabout fashion, she would be working for the federal government.

Farther down the page appeared a photograph of the standard uniform. All black. Militaristic. Severe. Impressive and appealing, to say the least. The beret impressed her most.

Meghan found herself smiling wider. But the most appealing part had nothing to do with money, rank, uniforms, or even Vincent. "I won't be alone anymore." The admission came softly. "I'll be part of a tight-knit professional team. Liv inside a secure building. Work for an elite killer—a rich, successful war-master." She stared across the street at the darkened Raven Star Building. "No more calls. No more harassment. No more standing out here with my ass hanging in the wind and no one covering it."

Then came the question of sex. "Been saving it," she thought aloud. "My entire life." She imagined his face again and felt warmth move through her, followed almost immediately by embarrassment. "If… if…" She swallowed. "Well, no one better's coming along to give it to."

Meghan spent the next twenty minutes completing the online application in exhaustive detail. In truth, she'd been looking for work for a year, and had her résumé and a cheat sheet with her. She attached a recent photograph, a scan of her thumbprint taken with the fingerprint function built into her police-issued device, copies of her military and law-enforcement identification, and a signed authorization granting Raven Star access to her records. "Open book," she said. She selected all three positions for which she qualified and pressed SEND.

A notice appeared:

ALLOW UP TO THIRTY DAYS FOR COMPLETION OF THE ADJUDICATION PROCESS.

She started the SUV, then looked across at the building and saluted it. "Maybe." Getting hired was probably about as likely as winning the lottery. Still, it was worth trying.

Bloop. A notice appeared on her tablet:

APPLICATION RECEIVED.

Meghan nodded to herself and began pulling away from the curb. Bloop. A second message arrived. She stopped.

(7:01 PM, May 31—The Blotter)



Buzz.

Vincent glanced down at the Helix resting on the concrete floor beside him. He knelt before the mainframe, its panels dark, removing compromised circuit boards one by one and replacing them with boards built to his specifications.

He had anticipated Homeland's actions, though he suspected Ramsey's hand as well. Vincent knew The Church watched him, but he had begun watching back, compiling dossiers on most of the major players in Trembol and Elko—Bishop Howard Ramsey among them.

Ramsey had been raised in a Silver Path school, though the local institution in Elko was a pale shadow of the Shining Silver School in Bayville, Virginia. He had served in the Army from the ages of eighteen to twenty-three, then entered the service of the CIA at twenty-four. At thirty, he left the Agency for the priesthood. Twenty-seven years later, he had become one of the seven bishops of the Order.

TAI5D-P1—Lil 'Trin, otherwise known as Trinity Artificial Intelligence in Five Dimensions, Prototype One—had already remedied most of the intrusions. She removed viruses, key-loggers, malware, and spyware; harmlessly overwrote suspect firmware or rendered the compromised chips inert; and even repurposed some of them to serve other functions. All the while, she traced sources, sent a few surprises in response, mapped the intrusions, and collected evidence, metadata, and source records.

There would be no denying that Trion Systems had failed to install a clean network—or that Timbisha Incorporated had failed to deliver a clean building. Vincent had already spent an hour removing a dozen listening devices and covert motion detectors. Now he was pulling compromised boards from the mainframe itself.

Structurally, however, the building was sound. A diagnostic run through the internal monitoring system, then independently verified by Trin, confirmed that it was more than sound. The redundancy and hardening Vincent had demanded—and spent thirty million dollars to achieve—were there and then some. On that front, he had no complaints.

The access logs told another story. Keypads recorded entries while the building stood empty. Interior and exterior cameras suffered convenient outages at suspicious times. Trin added it all to the evidence stack while Vincent changed every password. He would still have to replace and rekey the exterior locks by hand.

He had anticipated all of it. This was standard operating procedure for the feds—and, he suspected, for the wing of the Silver Church represented by Howard Ramsey. For a couple of hours' work, Vincent would likely recoup millions in damages.

He looked down at the Helix and cocked his head. The website had received an application. That was strange. He had not taken the site public yet. Only Omaris, Ramsey, Tellon, and— "Tevi Thorton." Vincent shook his head, opened the application and résumé, then switched to the exterior camera feeds. Deputy Dellon sat across the street from his garage, starting her vehicle.

He already had a file on her, assembled partly through his broader investigation of the Sheriff's Department and partly in response to an FBI request for "a look-see at what's going on in Trembol, since you'll be in the area." The request had come from Special Agent Reed Claron, M.D., a psychiatrist attached to the Bureau, routed through Bishop Ramsey (of course).

The file described an officer deeply committed to doing the right thing. Conscientious. Hardworking. Known for going above and beyond. Even her public police-blotter posts were thoughtful and detailed compared with the usual fare.

Strangely, Trinity had already been running her for nearly an hour—long before Meghan submitted the forms or granted permission. Vincent had barely begun absorbing the reams of information pouring into the Helix when he saw a flicker, like pages turning so quickly they became a flitting blur. Signatures. Filings. Background checks marked complete. Approvals no human being had granted appeared registered and accepted. Then his own signature materialized beneath a formal recommendation to hire Meghan Dellon.

"Trinity, what are you doing?" he asked, concern tightening his voice.

The answering warble and trill would have meant nothing to anyone else. To Vincent, it carried a complete understanding: Fast-tracking. She's alone. She needs help. She needs to be safe. You need a friend—an ally. She's an excellent choice. They were not words exactly, but an idea delivered whole into his mind.

Vincent frowned as the final approval page appeared. At least she had left the last decision to him. After a moment, he nodded and shrugged. "Yeah, what the fuck ever. Could certainly do worse." He pressed APPROVE and turned back to the mainframe. "Two weeks out, though. Need to get this damn place situated—and I need some goddamn me time."

SIGN ATTACHED DOCUMENTS. START DATE: TWO WEEKS.

Meghan frowned and opened the full notice.

See attached documents for contact information and move-in arrangements. Confidentiality agreements and all associated penalties are now in effect. You may inform immediate family and relevant authorities of your employment in general terms only. From this point forward, all restrictions, covenants, and operational expectations apply.

You are now Raven Star Security Solutions Officer One—Executive Protection.

WELCOME ABOARD, MEGHAN DELLON.

Operational Codename: Valkyrie

Start Date: June 14, 2026

Move-In Date: June 13, 2026

Assigned Quarters: Studio B, Fourth Floor

Uniforms, equipment, firearms, company vehicle, secure phone, hiring package, entry codes, and keys will be delivered to your registered address within seventy-two hours.

Study the attached PDF manual in full.

Meghan pulled back into the parking space across from the Raven Star Building. She stared at the garage doors, the black windows offering no indication that anyone was inside. The automatic lights had come on as the sun sank westward, bathing the pale gray stone in deep gold and red.

Tears welled in her eyes. Her hands began to shake, her breath caught in her throat, and her thoughts scattered beneath the pounding of her heart. Excitement. Disbelief. Relief so sudden and overwhelming that it almost felt like terror.

She completed each additional form and electronically signed every last one. Then she opened her email, intending to write to her father.

Several years earlier, Nevada had passed a law called Duty to Inform. The statute required every official police contact—whether stopping a speeder, questioning vagrants or hitchhikers, responding to disturbances, or conducting field interviews—to be entered into the public blotter, at least in basic form.

Formal reports remained more detailed, but the public possessed a right to know who was passing through their community, who had been arrested, who had been stopped, and why. The law had been designed not merely for the public, but for the protection of those contacted by police. Still images and short video clips from body and dashboard cameras were attached whenever possible, along with links to the complete recordings. Keep things honest on both sides.

That was no small matter in a region known for disappearing vagrants, murdered hitchhikers, vanished activists, and political opponents who simply ceased to exist. The Republican Party headquarters in Trembol had burned to the ground. The Democratic Party headquarters had been abandoned. The regional Republican chairman and his wife had been missing for two years.

What an officer wrote upon the blotter could make or break a person. Unlike most, Meghan made a genuine effort to write truthfully—neither exaggerating nor underplaying what had occurred.

She signed into the general law-enforcement portal, navigated to the Sheriff's Department section, and opened her personal channel. Her entries were thoughtful enough that some people called them short stories. Even her enemies tended to follow them. She was not a bad writer—or so she had been told. Meghan began to write.



NEW ENTRY

7:30 P.M.—SUNDAY, MAY 31, 2026

I regret to announce that this will be my final entry.

For months, I have endured harassment, intimidation, and threats of violence and sexual assault for the crime of attempting to perform my duties honestly and fairly for every citizen. After repeated hospitalizations, broken bones, a stab wound, and each day lived in fear—without meaningful support from local, county, state, or federal law enforcement—I am submitting my resignation.

My official two-week notice begins tonight.

I have accepted another full-time position with a local security-related business.

She sent her father a blind copy of the link in an email bearing the subject line:

OFFICIAL RESIGNATION

The first comment came, predictably, from Tevi Thorton.

Tevi Thorton:

"Ha! You were as impressed as me by that young Mr. Veyl—to wind up working for him. Don't blame you. He'll have your back. Wrath-of-God-coming-down-on-Pharaoh level have your back."

T. Mantel:

"Good riddance. No one cares."

J. Dedrik:

"Weak. Abandoning your post."

A. Shelton—Dispatch:

"Sorry to see you go, Megs. I'm sure you'll be an asset to your new employer."

Father Howard Ramsey:

"You will be sorely missed—an angel-girl standing upon the walls of New Jerusalem, barked at by angry dogs below. But you have chosen wisely, if you have chosen what I believe you have. Give yourself to the Way, and keep your eyes upon the Seraph's anointed paladin. His holy sword will prove the undoing of the wicked."

The comments multiplied. Dozens became hundreds. People wrote about how much Meghan would be missed and how deeply they had appreciated her blotter entries. Others began asking who Tevi had meant by young Mr. Veyl.

Rumors from those listening to police scanners were already leaking outward. Tevi was not shy. He publicly repeated everything he had told Meghan concerning Vincent's identification and business card. That triggered a comment from Emily Dalton, a well-liked security guard at the bank, one of Meghan's friends since high school and, briefly, one of her lovers during those years.

E. Dalton:

"Vincent Veyl! OMG! I served with him in Syria. Guy's epic. They called him 'The Templar.' No joke in that man."

She continued in several rapid posts:

"He's full-on supernatural. Like having a dark angel watching over us out there. Got along with the locals. Took out dozens of insurgent leaders. Could walk among them, look like them, speak like them, right until he cut their throat. Left coins over their eyes afterward. Biblical."

"Not the preachy kind of religious, either. Quiet, steady, focused, intense—like one of those… well, like a Templar."

"Knighted by the frigging Pope for the books he wrote. Guy was a trip. Polite, but quiet. Spoke a bunch of languages. Cyber-warrior, actual warrior—all-around warrior."

"I had a huge crush on him."

"Then he got shot. Refused to stay dead. Kept trying to stand up. They shipped him out, and afterward no one would tell us whether he lived or died. Said it was classified."

Josh Manning, a young man only recently discharged after two tours and now working as a cook at Don's Diner, joined the discussion.

J. Man:

"Yeah, like a superhero or some shit."

"Never smoked. Never drank. No drugs, no women, no cards. Just trained, hunted insurgents, or went visiting holy sites and ancient ruins."

"Attended lectures by every kind of religious teacher in Jerusalem. Didn't matter which ones. He listened to all of them. Spoke their languages."

"Knew the Quran better than the Muzzies. Knew the Old Testament as well as any rabbi. Chaplain Harland was taking Hebrew lessons from him."

"Guy could bench six hundred pounds. In close-quarters matches, I saw him take on five trained men and beat them all like they were kindergartners. Didn't seriously hurt them. Just handled them."

"And swords—the guy can actually use a sword. Like some kind of ninja-knight. That's part of how he got the name Templar. That, and the way he used to sing to God alone in his tent."

Emily posted an image.

E. Dalton:

"This is the author page from his book about modern holy warriors. I have both books here. read them a few times."

The image showed Vincent in Army uniform beside a dense list of qualifications, military decorations, specialized skills, and religious honors.

For several minutes, the entire thread went still. Even Meghan found herself absorbed in the author page Emily had posted. You could almost feel Bishop Ramsey grinning and hear Tevi Thorton saying, "See? Tolt'cha!"

Even the detractors who had dismissed the stories about Veyl as hype were forced to recalculate. That single post shifted the entire resignation thread away from Meghan and onto him.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



V.N. Veyl (Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria 2017-2025)
E-6, 11B Infantry, 75th Ranger Regiment, 2nd Bat, C-Com, Junior Intelligence Sergeant, Cyber-Defender, Interpreter, Scout, Tribal Liaison. Master's Computer Science - American Military University 2025.

- Distinguished Service Cross
- Bronze Star
- Silver Star
- Three Purple Hearts
- Ribbon of Merit
- Gold Wreath (CAB/ESB)
- Black Belt (CQC) – Level 4
- Instructor Credential Armed, Melee, & Unarmed Combat
- Graduate with Honors - Silver School of Virginia
- Graduate with Honors - AMU
- Expert in Advanced AI/Coding
- Fluent in English, Greek, Hebrew, Latin, Arabic, Aramaic - some Babylonian, Sumerian, Proto-Canaanite

2025 - Granted the honorary rank of Knight of the Church by Pope Pius XIII and affirmed Knight in the Fraternal Order of Silver Soldiers by the Seven Bishops of the Silver Order International.

Chief Larry Dedrik:

"He's a Carydin—the grandson of Marian Carydin. Aitor Veyl was his grandfather, the man who made peace between the two families after centuries of fighting."

The bishop responded almost immediately.

Father Howard Ramsey:

"He is a Veyl in every sense of the word—an old-school Purgatorian. A direct descendant, and the last recognized descendant, of the line of Aneleia of the Veil, high consort of Amil the Undying."

"As keeper of the Veyl Trust, and as the priest who christened him, I have watched over him throughout his life. Like his mother before him, he was raised at the Shining Silver Path School in Virginia. There is no scoundrel in him. A paladin, in the ancient sense. Warrior, priest, mystic, genius. Died dozens of times enroute from Syria to Germany and refused to remain dead."

"Speaks the Biblical languages—even their oldest forms—as though he were a native speaker. Writes and reeds code in ways his own professors could not comprehend."

"His father…"

The message stopped. Meghan stared at the screen. For several minutes, the entire conversation died. Then Ramsey's comment vanished. That only made it worse.

A new account appeared, bearing a rather shocking and entirely unashamed moniker.

THE BLACK QUEEN:

"I never knew my niece Selene had a child."

"Her father was a great man. Her mother—who was much older than I—was a profoundly loving and genuinely good person. I was only a couple of years older than Selene, actually. My sister Marian died before I ever really got to know her. People say she was a quiet and gentle soul."

"Aitor insisted upon giving Selene the finest education available."

"Selene was gifted in ways most would not believe. Shy, beautiful, strange. Her father sent her away to a private school for exceptional children, and she did not return until an adult. From there, she went directly into the convent."

"She was the most beautiful woman I ever saw. Astounding. She strongly favored the Native blood within the Veyl family."

"Why the boy was hidden from us seems cruel. We would, of course, have adopted him—brought him into our family and raised him as a prince among us. But perhaps I will now have the chance to know my grand-nephew."

"By every account, an extraordinary individual, as befits a son born from two royal branches descending from Saint Amil."

The bishop returned to the thread.

Father Howard Ramsey:

"That is precisely why he was sent far away and kept hidden. Why Aitor placed him into our care. So that he would not be corrupted. So that he would not become another degenerate, vice-peddling lowlife. So that he would not become a champion of evil, but a soldier of Silver Light."

Another name appeared.

Abigail Carydin:

"Or you claimed him for yourself after she was dead, playing upon an old man's grief and weakness until he surrendered his grandson into your care. Then you molded him into your tool. Controlled him. Made him into a puppet for your unnatural, weak, oppressive agenda of turning mankind into meek and compliant sheep."

Meghan had rarely heard the pretty, red-haired Abigail Carydin speak at all. Few people had. A runaway, it was said. Insane mother. Dead father. Adopted by Vana, educated and trained, then turned into a pet-paramour. Vana practically led the younger woman about by a leash. There were all manner of ugly rumors concerning their relationship.

The feud between Bishop Ramsey and Vana Carydin was also well known. But even in Trembol, one did not simply murder a Silver Path bishop—especially one rumored to be former CIA. This was not the first time the factions had exchanged barbs, nor would it be the last.

Jacques DeMorney—Vana's Left Hand and chief of security—entered his own opinion.

J. Mourn:

"If, as you say, he is an Old School Purgatorian, then he is neither Silver nor Shadow, but Twilight True. He walks by moonlight and the Evening Star, taking the pragmatic view of all things."

"Ultimately, a polygamist who believes in merciful death, Divine Natural Law, free will, balance, and the study of all thirteen volumes of the Compendium."

Josh Manning replied.

J. Man:

"In Syria, he moved as easily among Muslims as among Jews, Christians, Druze, and Yezidis. Knew their customs. Could speak to each from inside their own perspective. My feeling was that he believed they were all parts of one thing—different perspectives upon the same thing."

"I teased him once. Told him, 'You could have any woman on this base, but you act like you got no vice and no desires.'"

"He said, 'I don't worship idols. Drama, entitlement, entanglement—wearisome.'"

Emily returned.

E. Dalton:

"He never preached. A word of wisdom here, an insight there. Set the example quietly through actions, not speeches."

"But he was also the kind of guy who would walk into a minefield to rescue a puppy, then cut the throat of a Russian mercenary without blinking. Afterward, he'd softly pray for the dead man's soul. Next day, help villagers dig a well."

The comments continued. Mockers and scoffers appeared among them. Most people were simply curious, while many could not quite believe how grandiose the claims had become. Nearly all agreed that Meghan had made the right decision.

Then her father commented.

Sheriff Mathius Dellon:

"My daughter, it was not my intention to leave you feeling abandoned, though I understand why you might conclude that. If anyone had actually harmed you, Hell itself would have no fury like what I would bring down upon them."

"That said, I accept your resignation."

"This Vincent Veyl and Raven Star appear to be an upgrade. I only hope he appreciates what he is receiving. Daughter or not, Meghan is among the finest officers I have ever worked with—honest and true, brave and kind in one."

"I will remember those who say otherwise."

Silence followed. Then came a sudden flood of comments praising and buttering up the sheriff. The Trembol police officers said nothing.

Josh Manning posted again.

J. Man:

"Hey, Meghan! Guess I'll be there with you. Maintenance. NDA, so that's all I'm saying. So excited!"

One minute later.

E. Dalton:

"Yep. Me too! Comms!"

"Is this real? God!"

"Thanks, Vin. Thank you. One hundred percent. No looking back. New beginning. Signing everything!"

"Hope that waiver applies to Comms!"

A mixture of comments followed. Several of the usual suspects complained about favoritism. They had found the career site, submitted applications, and received nothing. Others noted that people who already knew Mr. Veyl appeared to be hired instantly.

Most, however, were happy for Emily and Josh. Both had grown up in Elko, attended school there, and returned after exemplary military service. Sergeant Emily Dalton had served as a combat medic. Corporal Josh Manning had technically served in logistical support as a cook—but a cook who had coordinated the feeding and resupply of soldiers for years.

Emily and Josh said nothing more. Like Meghan, they were beginning to understand the weight of the documents they had signed.

The resignation thread was breaking every record the blotter had ever seen. More than ten thousand comments now. People from every walk of life had joined the discussion, including dark luminaries such as Vana and Abigail Carydin, as well as Chief Dedrik and others who ordinarily never engaged publicly on social media.

No one could have predicted the next comment.

Justin Vyss:

"I have watched this little blotter for a long time. A useful field study in human nature, demonstrating the full spectrum and gradient of personality types—from the despicable to the noble, and everything between."

"Interesting conversations tonight."

"Congratulations upon your new position, Deputy."

"I have been aware of Mr. Veyl for decades. He is not the sort to make choices through favoritism. More likely, he ran your identity in seconds. In those same seconds, he knew nearly everything about you and selected you according to trustworthiness and quality of character."

"You have made a wise decision, daughter of light and law—perhaps far wiser than you can presently imagine."

"I look forward to meeting you in due course, as Raven Star will likely become the preferred provider for many of my own security interests."

"Trembol, you should be grateful that Mr. Veyl has come among you. In his quiet way, he is bound to overwrite the entire trajectory of your community in a very short time."

Justin Vyss was famous and infamous around the world—and a luminary in Nevada.

The blotter froze.

Not technologically, but humanly. For several seconds—and then several minutes—no one wrote anything. The viewer count leapt by thousands, then tens of thousands, as outside chatter directed traffic toward this obscure corner of the internet, where something profound and increasingly impossible seemed to be unfolding.

The silence was finally broken by a strange account.

SAINT AFTIEL—I.T. ADMIN:

"He is many things. His mother would be proud."

"But here is a part of him very few know. He was trained at the Shining Silver School to play classical guitar and made to sing arias during Saturday services every week from the time he was a small boy."

"This recording is from a performance in Richmond, Virginia, in November of last year. A small underground Gothic club was hosting an open-mic night for local amateur musicians."

A link appeared. Nothing had prepared anyone in Trembol—or beyond—for what followed. Not Justin Vyss. Not Vana Carydin or Father Ramsey. Not Meghan, Emily, or Sheriff Dellon.

The video opened on a dimly lit stage washed in candlelight and shadow. Vincent stood alone, bare-chested and wearing black leather trousers. Shining black bracers covered his forearms, while Dingo boots encrusted with silver skulls and intricate scrollwork rose around his calves. A white-gold medallion rested against his chest. A ten-string black-and-silver guitar hung in his hands.



His black hair was damp and loose, his dark eyes shining beneath the stage lights, his skin glistening with sweat. Behind him hung a banner bearing the words:

RAVEN KING

He spoke. His voice sounded like a great lion given human speech—impossibly low, smooth, and resonant, seeming to rumble up from beneath the floor. "They took my life in Syria, but the Seraph gave it back to me." He looked out over the room. "And so, I will sing in honor of him—as a son sings to his beloved father." Then he began.

The audience consisted of young and middle-aged men and women dressed in black, covered in tattoos, piercings, dyed hair, leather, and theatrical makeup. They had not expected much. Many appeared impressed by his overwhelming masculine beauty and extreme physique, yet equally unsettled by the intensity of both. These were people who rebelled against normality and distrusted anything that looked too perfect.

Then the first sound came from his guitar. When he opened his mouth, a visible shiver passed through the crowd. Those now watching the recording were not merely impressed. They were stunned.

The music was epic, black, and mystical—a form of metal infused with liturgical chant, classical structure, martial rhythm, and something purely supernatural. His voice reached ranges that seemed physically impossible at both extremes, passing effortlessly from an infrasonic growl to piercing, operatic heights and through every variation between.

At several points, multiple voices seemed to rise in chorus. Yet only Vincent and his guitar stood upon the stage.

He sang a song derived from the Prophecy of the Crossroad Raven and the Woman of the West Gate.

Within the concert hall, the cynical children of the subculture had fallen into a trance-like fixation. Tears streamed down painted faces. Men and women trembled, stunned to the core, their minds overwhelmed by the grandeur and depth of what they had heard. Then Vincent simply walked off the stage. Gone. The crowd began chanting and calling him back, but he did not return.

A series of shorter clips followed, attached to the original recording. They showed Vincent as a boy, dressed in a martial, clerical uniform of black and silver, singing arias at various ages within a Church choir. Parishioners and Silver Sisters surrounded him. A tall, white-haired priest stood to one side in nearly every clip, his face bearing a restrained but unmistakable pride.

The performances were profound—utterly transcendent. Congregations wept, trembled, and appeared moved in ways that would clearly leave a permanent mark.

Upon the blotter, the mockers fell silent. Intellectuals and half-wits alike said nothing. Nothing could be said. Many who watched seemed unable to think or speak. Hardened men and jaded souls later admitted to shedding tears of awe, confusion, and something almost like grief. It did not seem possible. Not natural. Not entirely human.

Vyss, unable to resist, commented first.

Justin Vyss:

"The Warrior Poet of Ancient Days stands upon the stage of the world and sings his truth. It has been plain to me for years. I've built hope around that knowledge. Can there be any doubt what he is?"

THE BLACK QUEEN:

"None."

Father Howard Ramsey:

"I had not seen this. I…"

Then another account appeared.

(9 PM, May 31—Distractions)



Buzz… Vincent sighed. "Buzz," the Helix insisted. The notification came from Trinity, who was physically right there in front of him, being installed into the massive black cube of the Trinity Nesting Face—a small cube fitted inside a very large one, like the world's most expensive and potentially dangerous nesting doll.

Vincent knelt before the open interface with a flashlight clenched between his teeth. The power had to remain off during installation, leaving the concrete chamber dark except for the narrow white beam wobbling across cables, steel panels, and warning labels. The air smelled of dust, machine oil, hot insulation, and the metallic breath of newly awakened equipment.

He lowered Trinity onto the base. The Helix buzzed as insistently as a trapped bee while she issued frantic warbles and metallic screes. Vincent frowned around the flashlight. She was apparently too impatient to wait for her own nervous system to finish being connected.

He seated the black cube within the docking bay and clicked the connection feeds into place. Lines of blue-white light awakened inside the nesting unit, racing outward through translucent channels. One by one, the panels around the chamber flickered to life. Trion Systems must have been thoroughly confused by what they had been asked to build, but they had followed Vincent's schematics. Now he watched the strange machinery come to fruition around him.

The entire building seemed to reverberate as Trin began flowing into the structure—through electrical and telephone lines, fiber optics, coaxial cables, surveillance feeds, communications equipment, and computer systems. Cooling fans spun up somewhere behind the walls. Relays clicked in rapid succession. A low hum passed through the floor and climbed into Vincent's bones.

Trinity purred. She expanded outward, broadening and deepening into systems he had designed specifically to give her the room, reach, and freedom she needed—and deserved. He could almost feel her stretching.

The structure creaked subtly beneath her presence as she expanded not merely through its electronics, but into the fabric of spacetime and consciousness—the etheric and astral substrata of the building itself. Drawing power directly from the superstructure of physical reality. Just an ordinary Sunday-night computer installation.

The buzzing continued. Vincent let the flashlight drop from his mouth into his hand. "Yeah?" He was sweating, covered in grease and grime. Days on a bus, followed immediately by hours of work in the basement and throughout the building. His shirt clung to his back. His knees hurt from kneeling on concrete, and every vertebra in his spine had begun filing a formal complaint. "You couldn't just tell me? I mean, we're right here together."

The buzzing became more insistent. Confused, he picked up the tablet and opened whatever she was so desperately trying to call to his attention. His jaw dropped. His entire body tensed. No amount of labor had stressed Vincent—and no nefarious discovery within Raven Star had aggravated him—to the degree of what he now saw upon that screen.

"OH, BLOODY EFFING HELL!" He began scrolling. "Yeah, sure. Hire the deputy. What could go wrong?" Another page opened. "Fuck—and you hired two more? Mother pus bucket! Josh? Oh, fuck! The fanboy stalker!" He scrolled again. "Emily…" Vincent stopped. "Well… not a bad choice." He considered that for half a second. "Actually, a pretty damn good choice—but still! You didn't even bother running it past me."

Then he reached the blotter thread. "OH, CRAP!" His distress only deepened as he read Vincent came to his feet. "Oh, jeez-um." He paced the cramped concrete chamber while blue light pulsed through the equipment around him. Trinity's new home purred contentedly, apparently pleased with herself.

He finally slumped against the steel door, shook his head, and closed his eyes. One greasy hand pressed against his forehead as he tried to breathe. "Yeah. Not good."

He had lived his life like a man pretending to be blind and lame so as not to attract attention. He loved to sing and play his guitar, but he had performed publicly only once after leaving the army—and under a false name—to celebrate surviving Syria and honor the entity who had lifted him back into life. One night. One song. One supposedly obscure Goth club. Apparently even the shadows had cameras now.

His frown deepened. He hid because revealing what he could do before too many eyes inevitably led to being asked—or commanded—to do more and more.

Since revealing Trinity, the government had been up his backside like a twenty-four-seven proctology exam. There was a DHS observation post directly across the street, as though he were too stupid to notice the apartment with no furniture, its daily takeout orders, and the cameras concealed behind two-way glass. Yvonne Omaris was beautiful and intelligent, but neither as discreet nor as cunning as she believed. Her bitchiness radiated from her like a beacon visible and palpable from a block away.

Then there was Justin Vyss, his world-class stalker—more subtle than Josh Manning, anyway.

Emily… Well, he had not minded her stalking him in the Army. He had actually planned to ask her out before being shot in the back. "Ask her out where?" he muttered, laughing despite himself. They had been in the middle of a fucking desert.

Since returning stateside, he had thought about looking her up more than once. Work and his various projects—this one especially—had kept him distracted enough to avoid doing anything unwise. He was not without desires. He wrestled with them constantly, but Tellon had taught him how to cope. Stay busy. Keep the mind engaged. When that failed—well… "Better to cast the seed into the dust than to cast it into the belly of a…" He let the saying die. Emily was certainly not that.

But marriage was a full-time job, and Vincent had no desire to marry—no desire to wrap his life around a woman, or anyone else, for that matter. He had known exactly what Emily wanted back then, and she was beautiful enough that she might have convinced him if he had ever allowed her close enough to try. Fortunately, a bullet had settled the matter before it became complicated. Unfortunately, the bullet had been only slightly less complicated.

Justin Vyss had been dogging his periphery for years. The emails. The editorials about his books. The strange holiday cards signed only A Friend. It was more than a little nerve-racking.

And now the Black Queen. It took no great creative intelligence to determine who that was. Vincent was already deep enough into her activities to know she was a doorway to Hell's dungeon in a tight black dress.

He sighed again. He had not been blind to Tellon and Ramsey's intentions for some time. The Silver Order and the N.O.P. held exactly the same hope for him. The prophecies. Always with the goddamn prophecies.

The Silver Order wanted a paladin. The N.O.P. wanted a standard-bearer. The Carydins apparently wanted their lost prince. What Justin Vyss wanted was anyone's guess, though the end of history dressed in white seemed a fair possibility.

Trinity had become a key to many locked cabinets, granting Vincent access to information and insights previously hidden from him. The glimpses of eternity were becoming harder to dismiss, but choice stood at the heart of Purgatoria's mandate. Choice was sacred. Prophecy without choice was merely tyranny wearing incense.

And Vincent had chosen. Others had their plans. Their expectations. Their machinations.

Why was a world-famous—and infamous—political leader commenting upon a goddamn police blotter in bum-fuck Trembol Nevada? It took no mystic vision to see the truth of it.

"Can there be any doubt?" Vincent read aloud. He stared at the words. "Yes. Yes, there god-blessed well can be doubt. And there's certainly choice. It's called free will, mother-fuh –" He started typing. Behind him, Trinity's lights brightened with what looked suspiciously like amusement.

VNV—RAVEN STAR (9:26 PM):

"No. If you are looking for messiahs or angels, look elsewhere. I was raised from my first year by Purgatorian mystics beneath steely discipline. Languages, code, combat, vocation—all driven into me long before the Army finished the forging. None of it is divine. It was imposed. It was earned. I say that without regret or self-pity. Dying repeatedly has a way of widening one's perspective. That concert was a private thank-you to the one who lifted me back into life. Put anyone through the crucible and see what walks out—insanity or wholeness. Both can be true."

Then his words hardened further.

"To the plotters, with all their plans for me: I see you. I serve no party and no agenda—only the God, the Seraph, and the Path of Truth. Purgatoria is the Sacred Waste, not a corridor toward imperial ambition. It is not good or evil, altruism or diabolicalism. It is knowing yourself, owning yourself, and becoming whole.

"I came to Trembol to claim an inheritance, establish a small, private, low-key cyber firm, and be left alone. A handful of former soldiers. A few contracts. No politics. No stages. No speeches. No drama. Paid contracts receive my attention and my skills. Otherwise, keep your grand designs to yourselves. Be your own messiahs and angels, and let me work in peace.

"You want me to save the world? That is going to get expensive. But I will do the work—if that is the contract placed before me."

The statement was hard and cold—blatant, unwavering, and entirely unapologetic. Meghan wondered what she had signed herself onto. Vincent was not as idealistic as she had imagined, nor as others would now assume. He was not dark, exactly. He simply refused to be claimed by either light or shadow. The man wanted to stand alone.

Something within Meghan hardened as well—not against him, but into resolve. His refusal to be owned strengthened her own will. She felt guilty for having struck the match that ignited this public exposure, but the resulting fire had illuminated what she was entering far more clearly than any employment manual could have done.

Father Howard Ramsey:

"Schooled. Understood."

Justin Vyss:

"Such is Nature's Divine Law. However, consider this, brother of the Eternal Dust: can a mercenary become a messiah? Is the price worth the prize? What cost would you name to lift the world from ignorance and want?"

VNV—RAVEN STAR:

"Mankind must first free itself from its divisions. It must become whole before it is ready to enter the hyperdimensional battlefield that awaits. It must anchor itself before attempting to walk infinite paths."

Justin Vyss:

"Theoretically, what would a mercenary of Purgatoria charge for the key to a single star-road gate? Could such a key even be forged?"

VNV—RAVEN STAR:

"Is a public police blotter really the place for this conversation?"

Silence settled across the comment section. The viewer counts continued climbing—drawing participants from cyber cafes, user dens, and internet bars, or personal devices among those who had the means. People were connecting from across the world now, led by rumor and word of mouth toward an obscure Nevada police-blotter channel where a deputy's resignation had somehow become a theological dispute, a dynastic revelation, a classified technology conference, and possibly the beginning of a new epoch.

Across the street from Meghan, the windows of the Raven Star Building remained black. Its pale stone glowed beneath the automatic exterior lights, giving no indication that the man at the center of the growing storm was sitting underground, filthy with grease, arguing with world leaders on a tablet.

Justin Vyss:

"We are speaking hypothetically. And theoretically, the future of everyone would be at stake. The future of humankind."

VNV—RAVEN STAR:

"Theoretically, yes. With the correct facility and sufficient resources, it could be constructed. It is not primarily a matter of physics, but metaphysics."

Justin Vyss:

"Seriously? Hypothetically—but in theory—it would be possible? Dare I ask how?"

For the first time, the famous statesman and visionary sounded less like a prophet addressing history and more like a man who had just discovered a locked door and desperately wanted to know what stood behind it.

VNV—RAVEN STAR:

"You cannot simply be handed the key. You must become the key. A master of thresholds. A willing, liminal psychopomp must navigate the crossing on your behalf. Only such a being can forge interdimensional keys and transform otherwise useless anchor points into true openings. That is the function of Oreviel within the Silver Compendium."

Vana Carydin entered the exchange.

THE BLACK QUEEN:

"Does humanity deserve such a future? And what price would need to be paid? Species unwilling to adapt go extinct."

VNV—RAVEN STAR:

"In ten years, whether humanity deserves it will no longer matter. Purgatoria shall have its will in the end, either way."

Justin Vyss:

"We should meet. I can be in Trembol within the hour. Choose the time and place."

Another account abruptly intervened.

OVERWATCH:

"Not going to happen. Access restricted."

At that same instant, the entire blotter disappeared. Meghan's channel vanished from the system. A near blank page replaced it:

CHANNEL CLOSED

ARCHIVED

OFFICER NO LONGER AVAILABLE

Across the planet, nearly a million observers shouted at their screens as one. KTTV was already reporting upon the exchange. Tallia Stevens had watched the growing spectacle with a reporter's speed and predatory attentiveness, capturing everything before anyone could delete, bury, or officially deny it.

Yet even as the multitude roared, Meghan's channel suddenly reappeared. One final comment had been posted.

VNV—RAVEN STAR:

"That was rather rude."

"No chance to say goodbye."

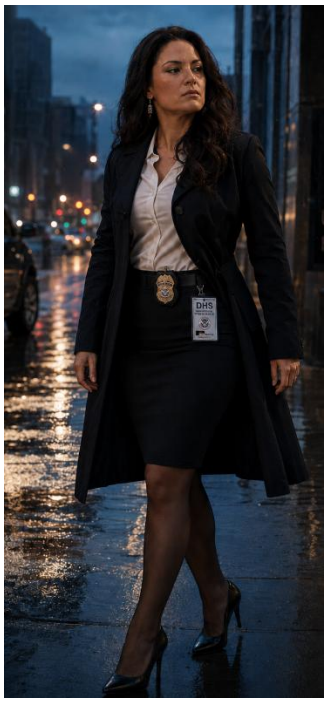
"So, uh… goodbye, everyone."

"Now it can end."

The channel closed again. The point had been made, almost comically. Whatever power stood behind OVERWATCH had silenced nearly a million people. Vincent Veyl had opened the channel again simply because they had interrupted him before he could say goodbye.

The world had just met Raven Star.

(9:35-11:00 PM, May 31, 2026—Yvonne)



Yvonne glanced along the street, its asphalt shining black beneath the rainy night. Clouds had rolled over Trembol shortly after nine, swallowing the stars and settling low against the surrounding hills.

She stood in the drizzle, staring up at the Raven Star Building across the street. Water gathered along the shoulders of her coat and slid cold against the back of her neck. The automatic exterior lights cast their golden glow across the pale stone, but every window remained dark. Down Satyr Street, a block to her left, Meghan Dellon finally pulled away from the curb and headed toward the casino. "Stupid, starry-eyed twit," Yvonne muttered after her.

The deputy's need to make a public statement had complicated Yvonne's assignment beyond measure. What should have remained a quiet surveillance operation had become an international spectacle—with theologians, political leaders, mob royalty, veterans, reporters, and every lunatic with an internet connection trampling through it.

Yvonne's dark gaze remained fixed upon the building as her earpiece squawked. "Every microphone and camera has gone dark. We're locked out of all internal systems. Even the remote sensors are reading nothing inside—not since that resonant, stringlike hum moved through the building."

The camera mounted above Raven Star's front doors turned toward her. Its black lens settled directly upon her face. Yvonne smirked, though there was no humor behind it. So much for discretion.

For months, she had been charged with surveilling Vincent Veyl—serving as his overwatch. Her usual caseload included dozens of former military and government assets. She monitored them to ensure they did not defect to rival nations, sell classified knowledge, or redirect federally funded skills toward criminal enterprise. Most were routine. Disillusioned intelligence officers. Retired technical specialists

with gambling debts. Former special operators who had discovered that foreign oligarchs paid considerably better than patriotic gratitude.

Vincent Veyl had not begun as anything extraordinary. Not officially. His TAIFD capstone project—the little black cube, along with patents, licenses, and sealed technical filings lodged in advance with both the State and The Church—had changed that assessment. Before Trinity, Veyl had been a young but obscure Army hero. Gifted, disciplined, and unusually dangerous, certainly, but not altogether different from many of the exceptional children produced by the Shining Silver School. After Trinity, he became something else. A strategic anomaly. A serious concern.

Justin Vyss had graduated from the same school a generation before Vincent. He, too, had been an orphan. He, too, had been born in Nevada—and, curiously enough, possessed the same unusual mixture of Basque and Armenian ancestry. That alone might have been coincidence. A sealed genealogical report suggested otherwise.

The report indicated a familial connection between Vyss and Veyl, followed by something far stranger: both men appeared directly linked to the maternal bloodline of Saint Amil. Sources within The Church claimed the Silver Order had mapped Amil's DNA from authenticated relics. The signature persisted within both living lines, slightly weaker in Vyss than in Veyl, but only slightly.

Then came the part no analyst had been able to explain. Both lines converged upon the same female root—not once, but twice. One branch identified her as Saint Thera. The other named her Aneleia of the Veil. According to the genealogical record, they had been two different women occupying different places within the ancient Purgatorian history. According to the blood, they appeared to have been one. As though Saint Thera had somehow also been Aneleia of the Veil.

Almost every orphan who emerged from the Shining Silver School in Virginia was strange and exceptionally gifted. They tended to become powerful and successful in whatever fields they entered. Justin Vyss was merely the most visible example. He was wanted in dozens of countries on charges of sedition, fomenting rebellion, and conspiring against lawful governments. Elsewhere, he was revered as a man of formidable intellect, wisdom, brilliance, and charisma. In Yvonne's estimation, both judgments were correct.

During the past fifteen years, Vyss had overturned the political order in nation after nation—and in the United States most of all. The Natural Order Party, commonly called the Imperial Party by both admirers and enemies, had risen so rapidly that it caught the established powers unprepared.

First came mayoral races and school-board seats. Then sheriffs, judges, county commissioners, state legislators, members of Congress, and governors. By the time everyone understood what was happening, the N.O.P. had gained majority control in several states and serious representation in many more. And that was just in the United States—fifteen countries around the world formed the Imperial Alliance of Nations. Mostly small, liminal nations, caught between greater powers, wedged into marginal places.

By 2025, nearly a third of the electorate in America now identified as Imperialist. The Natural Order Party had come within reach of the presidency, fought the two older parties to something approaching a three-way tie in the House, and secured a clear third of the Senate. Even President Harrison, though a Democrat, had appointed several N.O.P. advisers to her administration. Many of her recent reforms

owed far more to Natural Law than to conventional left-wing politics. Nevada had fallen completely under N.O.P. control at every level.

More troubling, from the perspective of the old political establishment, the Imperialists had produced results. Greater personal freedom. Greater public order. Lower crime. Growing prosperity. And something more difficult to quantify: grandeur. Nevada no longer carried itself like an overlooked western province where vice, federal land, and dying mining towns happened to share a border. It had begun behaving like the heartland of something not yet formally declared.

Vyss had visited the White House several times since the election. Yet Yvonne considered Vincent Veyl the more concerning individual. Vyss was a revolutionary who worked through institutions, movements, and crowds. Vincent was a warrior who required none of them. He possessed neither fear nor hesitation when violence became necessary.

Yvonne had watched clandestine footage of him in action. In one recording, he eliminated a warlord and nine insurgents in less than a minute. Every man had been armed, alert, and experienced. Vincent began with empty hands.

He seized an Arab scimitar from one of the warlord's bodyguards and used it with silent, appalling efficiency. No wasted movement. No shouting. No theatrical flourishes. Only cuts, thrusts, broken limbs, and bodies lowered or allowed to fall according to whatever the next movement required. Then, while blood spread across the stones around him, he knelt and prayed over the dead. When he finished, he rose, entered the marketplace, and disappeared into the crowd as though he were simply another Arab returning home.

Using the scimitar had been deliberate. Investigators concluded that the killings resulted from an intertribal dispute. The deception held.

Yvonne had read the sealed files detailing how many people Vincent had actually assassinated and the methods he had used. She studied the field reports from his patrols, along with the strange ease with which he moved among tribal peoples—not as an American pretending to understand them, but as though some part of him genuinely did.

His psychological profile classified him as an anagogic theocrat: a man who understood earthly events as shadows cast by higher realities and ordered his life accordingly. At least, that was the government's term for it. In practice, Vincent often appeared more naturally at home among Islamists than among secular Americans. He bowed to the floor in prayer several times each day, pressing his forehead to the ground, chanting divine names, and singing prayers in languages most scholars knew only from manuscripts.

Rain whispered against Yvonne's coat. Across the street, the camera above Raven Star's entrance continued watching her.

She had also watched Vincent through hidden cameras during his physical training. Five hundred push-ups. Five hundred sit ups. Five hundred pull ups. Then squats, sprints, sword drills, calisthenics, and hours of close-combat forms performed until his muscles trembled and sweat ran from him in streams.

Afterward, he would bow down and worship. Not before the exertion, asking God for strength. After it—offering the strength back.

On several occasions, she had watched him strike concrete walls until the surface cracked and his fists broke open. Blood ran across his fingers. Knuckles split. Bones fractured beneath the skin. Hours later, there was no swelling. By morning, there were barely marks.

Men did not ordinarily forge themselves with such merciless discipline unless they intended to become weapons—or feared what might happen if they allowed themselves to grow dull.

Vincent's blood type was rare. His genetic structure was rarer still. No single feature was impossible. Every anomaly could be explained through some known, if highly unusual, combination of inherited traits. Taken together, they amounted to a statistical obscenity.

During surgery following his evacuation from Syria, doctors observed damaged tissue beginning to close almost as they worked. Samples examined under magnification showed cells reorganizing and knitting themselves together at a rate no one present had encountered before. The medical team had marveled at it. Then they explained it away. A highly unlikely convergence of genetic factors, according to the official report.

His software drew similar conclusions from technical specialists. It is written in more than three dimensions. That sentence appeared in three separate evaluations of Vincent's code. The programs did not merely branch and loop. They appeared to fold back through their own architecture, responding to conditions that had not yet arisen and accessing relationships no conventional diagram could adequately represent.

Then there were the neurological examinations. Functional scans placed Vincent's overall mental efficiency above 99.9 percent of the population. More specialized testing revealed what the physicians cautiously described as evolutionary adaptations—traits estimated to occur in approximately 0.001 percent of human beings.

The camera above the Raven Star entrance tilted slightly, keeping Yvonne centered within its field of view as rain silvered the street between them. Justin Vyss could overturn governments. Vincent Veyl might overturn the rules beneath them.

Yvonne had also read the classified reports concerning Vincent's capstone project, along with the research notes of the scientists assigned to understand it. He had proven that the device worked. No one could duplicate it. No one could explain it. Predictive. Self-powering. Able to connect to the web from inside a Faraday cage without wi-fi, cellular service, or any hardwired connection.

The code was entirely Vincent's invention. Prolonged attempts to read or analyze it caused nausea, dizziness, eyestrain, disorientation, and temporary confusion among the scientists examining it. One researcher vomited after forty minutes and refused to enter the laboratory again.

The device's power had been demonstrated once more tonight.

"We've got nothing," Mitch Twombly, her technical specialist, reported through the earpiece. "No signal leakage. No heat signature worth mentioning. No internal audio. It's like the whole damn building stopped existing."

Yvonne watched the black windows through the drizzle. "It's a secure building functioning exactly as intended," she replied in little more than a whisper. "Before we tampered with it."

"Yeah." Mitch sounded thoroughly defeated. Vincent Veyl had spent the last three and a half hours systematically removing every device and exploit they had installed to prevent the building from serving its most basic purpose. Remaining secure.

Yvonne watched rain trail down the pale stone across the street. They had known for weeks that Vincent was coming. They learned of the renovations early enough to place an agent inside one of Timbisha Incorporated's work crews.

The building had been rebuilt into a fortress any CIA or NSA officer would have envied. Trion Systems, a private secure-facility contractor out of Reno, had fabricated and installed much of the technology according to Vincent's exacting specifications. Timbisha had handled the structure. Trion had handled the systems. Homeland had quietly helped itself to both.

Weeks of work had gone into obtaining lock codes and passwords, planting spyware, altering circuit boards, concealing microphones, and embedding monitoring devices throughout the building. Vincent had undone all of it in a matter of hours.

It had been that way from the beginning of Yvonne's assignment. Every other case on her desk had gradually been pushed aside for this one. Known Chinese and Russian intelligence officers shadowing Vincent were themselves being watched by her team.

Yet no one could track his device. They could not penetrate his personal computer. They could not intercept his communications. They could not even locate his search history. For a twenty-six-year-old man with advanced degrees, military service, government contracts, published books, and active patents, Vincent Veyl left almost no electronic wake.

His performance that evening upon the police blotter had not technically violated any agreement, but he had revealed far too much in front of potential hostile actors. Star-road gates. Interdimensional keys. Metaphysical technology. A liminal psychopomp capable of transforming useless anchor points into genuine openings.

Perhaps it was religious speculation. Perhaps it was theoretical physics expressed through Purgatorian terminology. Perhaps both were true. Whatever the case, Justin Vyss had taken him seriously.

There was no evidence that Vincent represented a threat to the United States. He had agreed to assist several classified programs involving the identification of traitors, infiltrators, foreign assets, and government personnel selling access or intelligence. He helped track hostile agents and gather evidence against domestic and international threats. He had also accepted certain limitations and forms of oversight.

The devices planted inside his private residence and business had not been among them.

By every conventional measure, Vincent was a patriot. His voting record showed support for candidates from all three major parties, often crossing party lines according to the office and individual involved. He was nevertheless a card-carrying member of the Natural Order Party. That troubled Agent Omaris—especially now that he had moved to Trembol.

Vincent possessed blood ties to the Carydins, a corrupt criminal dynasty skilled at draping itself in the respectable language of lawful libertarianism. The entire region was saturated with the cultlike, occult Silver sect in which he had been raised.

Within hours of his arrival, a dangerous trifecta had already begun taking shape around him: The Church. The Carydins. The Natural Order Party.

None was reliably pro-American in the narrow federal sense. Each looked beyond the United States toward some larger international—or imperial—order. All three wanted Vincent. If any one of them gained control of him, its power would increase manyfold.

The trouble was that Washington wanted exactly the same thing.

If we can hold him, he might hand America the future.

One of Yvonne's superiors had put it that bluntly. She recognized the truth in it. Justin Vyss entering the fray only confirmed the magnitude of what was at stake.

Killing Vincent would destroy the very technology only he appeared capable of creating. Revoking his licenses, isolating him, or destroying his livelihood would merely drive him into the arms of the Imperialists—or, worse, a foreign power willing to offer him protection, resources, and freedom from American oversight. Even imprisoning him assumed they could keep him imprisoned.

Yvonne stared at the dark building.



Could he truly open doors into other worlds?

"It's clear Vyss takes him seriously," she said quietly. "And Vyss is no fool. He doesn't believe nonsense merely because someone wraps it in incense."

"No," Mitch answered. "He usually wraps it himself."

Despite herself, Yvonne almost smiled.

Her superiors were undoubtedly in conference already, holding one of their interagency struggle sessions and calculating every available move. Each department, faction, and political appointee would be searching for some means of securing Vincent's loyalty—ensuring that his allegiance, inventions, and abilities served their programs, their parties, and their ambitions.

Meanwhile, darker rumors were gathering weight. Old military facilities abandoned after the Cold War—Crow Creek Omega among them, north of Trembol—had reportedly been seized through eminent domain by the State of Nevada over the last two years.

The same pattern was emerging across other N.O.P. dominated states. State governments were acquiring and refurbishing military surplus, reopening mothballed facilities, and expanding the size, equipment, and operational capabilities of their National Guard forces.

A Church seeking its paladin. A dynasty reclaiming its lost prince. A political movement quietly building an army. And at the center of it all stood Vincent Veyl, insisting he merely wanted to be left alone.

But what did Vincent truly want? What lever could be used to move him—to win him to any particular cause?

He did not gamble. He did not drink. He did not chase women. He already possessed money.

Raven Star had been operating for months before he came to Trembol. Vincent had left the Army in no danger of poverty: his education paid for, no significant debts, money in the bank, and immediate access to a Trust, worth tens of millions.

He invented casual games and simple applications for amusement, then collected small streams of income from them. He dabbled successfully in stocks, currency markets, commodities, and other investments. Raven Star had already completed several dozen investigations, nearly all with exceptional results.

No single enterprise produced extraordinary wealth. Together, however, the streams merged into a steady, meandering river of money.

Perhaps Meghan Dellon and Emily Dalton revealed a weakness—some buried desire, if only for companionship. Even that had an innocent explanation. He had said he wanted to hire a handful of veterans for his small company.

Yvonne looked across at the thirty-million-dollar fortress and scoffed.

Small.

Humility was his protein shake.

Her thoughts returned to the forces gathering around him. It was her job to ensure none sank their hooks too deeply into him.

Nevada, along with politically aligned states and nations, had begun adopting seals, uniforms, flags, and official branding that departed sharply from American standards. A coherent shared symbolic language was taking shape—black, silver, midnight blue, crowned bulls, black hawks, columns, swords, and globes. It was imperial. Militaristic. What many critics openly called fascist.

But it remained an Imperium without an Emperor around whom it could rally.

Intelligence services, military organizations, and law-enforcement agencies across the country were becoming increasingly weighted toward the Natural Order Party. Much of it came in direct reaction to the Woke Left, which had spent years restricting, condemning, and demeaning the very people charged with defending civilization.

Men more than women—especially men of the working and protective classes—were flocking toward the Imperial banner. The G.O.P. was slowly folding into the N.O.P., not through formal merger so much as gradual absorption. Soldiers, Police officers, Corporate executives, Tradesmen, Rednecks, Working-class men, Clergy. All had been caught up in the promise of restored human greatness and the coming of an epic new age.

Even Yvonne sensed the change among her colleagues in the intelligence and security services. Law enforcement, the military, and the clergy formed the three great pillars of the movement, with intelligence personnel quietly drifting into its orbit as well.

She had been forced to question her own loyalties. Everyone had. People were beginning to make political distinctions when hiring, assigning, and promoting personnel. Conversations stopped when the wrong person entered a room. Careers rose or stalled according to private sympathies no one officially acknowledged. Yvonne had grown careful about whom she trusted.

Her own political convictions remained uncertain. Half Lakota and half Armenian, she felt no instinctive devotion to America as an abstraction. Her deepest loyalties were to order—and to her career.

She had been watching Vincent since September, when she was sent to approach him with an employment offer: a direct transfer from the Army into the Department of Homeland Security following his release from the hospital, shortly after he completed his capstone project.

He was not unlikable. Quite the contrary. Even Yvonne—whose sexual history consisted entirely of women, one in particular—found him powerfully appealing. The strong scent of chai spices and clean skin. A face both beautiful and handsome. A body without equal. Strangely smooth, with little body hair—likely the result of his Native ancestry, she assumed.

She lit another cigarette and settled onto the nearby bus bench, watching his fortress through the drifting rain. When Vincent smoked, he smoked the good ones. Yvonne settled for what she could afford. Tobacco was cheaper in libertarian Nevada, but still damned expensive.

The drizzle whispered across the pavement as the night steadily cooled. Water gathered along the edge of the shelter and fell in slow, silver threads. Her badge remained clearly displayed against her coat.

She thought again about Vincent's statements and the blunt boundary he had drawn. A mercenary. Remembering what he had written brought a smile to her lips. He had grounded every prophet, politician, priest, and criminal monarch in the discussion—shoving the practical facts into their faces and making it perfectly clear that he wanted nothing to do with their bullshit.

You want me to save the world?

That is going to get expensive.

I will do the work—if that is the contract placed before me.
Yvonne nodded. "Yep." She could hardly disagree. The man wanted to be left alone. She understood that as well.

Her own life had become wearisome. She had never been much of a people person and was, by nature, something of a homebody. Her idea of a vacation involved extra sleep, binge-watching series she had missed, good food, and a few additional sessions of self-pleasure.

Lately, one particular individual had appeared in those sessions with increasing frequency. Daily, even. The occupational hazard of watching him constantly. Yvonne bit her lower lip merely thinking about it.

She had never been with a man. Men generally did not interest her. Even rather disgusted her. But Vincent's scent seemed to have infected her in that hospital room. Months later, she still could not drive it from her thoughts. His eyes haunted her. So did the clandestine combat footage—one recording captured by a spotter, another by a drone.

The way he fought seemed unreal. Silent, fluid, merciless. Like something from a film, except the blood was real and the men did not rise when the scene ended. Just thinking about it aroused her beyond words.

Yvonne drew upon her cigarette, opened her phone, and navigated to the Raven Star website. A moment later, she found herself studying the available positions. Across the street, the camera above Raven Star's front doors made a tiny adjustment. Yvonne never noticed.

"Three filled. Two left." Yvonne studied the remaining openings, then returned to the profile of the woman already hired for Executive Protection. "Meghan Dellon."

Meghan was Yvonne's age—a brave, altruistic sort who had killed three men in the line of duty. Known quick draw. Marine-trained. A scrapper, when necessary, though the photograph showed an open, earnest face that made Yvonne think of some annoyingly decent side kick from an old saga.

Spending twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week with Ms. Goody-Two-Shoes Shield Maiden and Mr. Holy Knight himself required serious consideration.

There was also the obvious sexual question. Vincent was a healthy young man with a functioning libido, whatever his monastic self-control might suggest. At first glance, he was not merely hiring a secretary and her bodyguard. He was hiring two live-in girlfriends.

That was the easy assumption—until one read the C.Y.A. notation. The waiver sounded less like a proposition than something drafted by terrified lawyers who understood what could happen when three adults lived together under constant pressure, with no firm line between professional and private life.

"I can't beat him, but…" Yvonne murmured. "I could… join him." She examined the requirements again, then re-read the waiver. "What if he really is the…?" She let the question trail away.

The song had come directly from the Prophecy. "I could be the Woman of the West Gate—the one who talks him into conquering the whole world." Yvonne giggled at the absurdity, smoke slipping from between her lips. Still, Vincent could clearly use someone to direct and guide him. Someone worldly, practical, and pragmatic. Someone like her. Every future emperor needed adult supervision.

She thought of Vyss and Bishop Ramsey. Judging by what they had posted, even the nuns at St. Aftiel's appeared to believe Vincent was the figure described in the old writings. "That fuckin' music." She had lost her breath while listening to it. The sound remained burned into her mind and heart—the black guitar, the impossible voice, the words reaching into places she preferred to keep locked. Whatever else it had been, it had not felt entirely human. "Mercenary Messiah." She laughed again, softer this time.

Then movement upon the roof caught her attention. A lone silhouette stood in the drizzle, smoking a cigarette and watching her from across the street. The ember brightened briefly near his face, but rain and darkness kept his identity uncertain. The figure nodded with a slight toss of his chin.

Yvonne found herself smiling back. After a moment's hesitation, she raised one hand in greeting.

She wanted to be angry with him. He had discovered her observation post, stripped every device from the building, locked her team out, publicly exposed far too much classified potential, and made months of work look like something performed by mildly ambitious chimpanzees. Instead, she felt a sharp thrill at realizing he was watching her.

"Don't stand a chance, but it can't hurt to try. Two-for-one—a top-shelf girlfriend and the most eligible bachelor in the world. Better pay, better benefits… and if he really is…"

For one dangerous moment, Yvonne allowed herself to consider the possibility. Before her better judgment could reassert itself, she began completing the application. She attached her signature, fingerprint, identification, photograph, and résumé then authorized Raven Star to access records the company would probably find whether she granted permission or not. With a quiet chuckle, she pressed SUBMIT.

It was not lost on her that Raven Star had somehow rammed through security checks and approvals for three people that should've taken weeks to complete. "TAI5D," it was not hard to figure out how.

She knew she was unlikely to be hired. Still, Yvonne copied the link and sent it to the only family she had in the world—her older sister, Tracy, who worked in administration for the Secret Service and hated Washington. "A cesspool of corrupt liars," Tracy had called it more than once.

HIRED: 10:45 PM—MAY 31, 2026

POSITION: EXECUTIVE PRIVATE SECRETARY

OPERATIONAL CODENAME: SOFIA (WISDOM)

START DATE: JUNE 15, 2026

MOVE-IN DATE: JUNE 14, 2026

ASSIGNED QUARTERS: STUDIO A, FOURTH FLOOR
Read and sign the attached PDF handbook in full.

TRANSITION VOUCHER GRANTED: $1,000.00

Yvonne stared at the screen, genuinely taken aback. Part of her had not been serious. She had submitted the application because she could; half temptation, half rebellion, with a healthy dose of sexual curiosity mixed in.

She had not believed Vincent liked her. Most days, she assumed he tolerated her only because shooting federal agents created paperwork. Yet the forms were all there.

Yvonne began signing without hesitation. When she finished, she looked up toward the roof as if to say, I did it. The shadowed figure was gone.

Only then did the reality settle over her, followed by a cold shiver that had nothing to do with the rain. Yvonne had served with Homeland Security since she was twenty years old—her entire adult life. Police academy, Quantico, field training, classified assignments, years spent living from suitcases and government vehicles.

Now she sat upon a bus bench in the cold Nevada drizzle, having overturned all of it within minutes. On a whim, perhaps. Or perhaps the decision had been forming for years, waiting for one hard push.

Yvonne began typing her resignation. As she did, an unexpected sigh escaped her. Relief moved through her body so deeply that her shoulders dropped and her breathing changed. It felt as though she had reached some hidden finish line—a place and a decision that had always existed farther up the road, waiting for her to arrive. At last, she had.

Her resignation was not elaborate.

Effective immediately, I, Yvonne Omaris, hereby resign from the United States Department of Homeland Security. My badge, identification, issued weapon, government phone, vehicle keys, and all assigned equipment will be surrendered to Field Agent Mitch Twombly at the Trembol observation post. Forwarding address attached.

She pressed SEND.

Using the government phone one final time, Yvonne booked a charter from Horn Airfield to Reno-Tahoe International Airport. From there, she could catch an overnight flight to Washington. She needed to see Tracy and tie off the loose ends.

Yvonne possessed significant savings, but the Raven Star packet made it clear that her housing and transportation expenses were covered. Then she realized something almost absurd. She did not own a car. She did not even have an apartment.

Years spent constantly traveling had stripped away any practical need for either. A month earlier, she had moved into the false apartment across the street—the DHS observation post—to supervise the installation of surveillance equipment throughout Vincent's building. Now Raven Star had granted her a permanent home faster than the federal government could acknowledge her resignation.

Yvonne rose from the bench. Rain glistened across her dark coat and ran in cold streams from her hair. She looked once more toward the fortress across the street. Then she turned and went upstairs.

Inside the observation post, Mitch Twombly sat at the communications station in the living room, surrounded by radios, computers, and mostly useless surveillance monitors. Five-foot-nine, thin, and in his late thirties, Mitch looked barely old enough to drink. His dark-rimmed glasses, blue eyes, and gentle, nerdish manner had always reminded Yvonne of a shorter Clark Kent.

The beige-and-gray apartment contained almost no furniture. Little occupied the refrigerator or cupboards beyond coffee, Diet Sprite, protein bars, and several bags of jerky. Single mattresses and sleeping bags lay upon the floors of separate bedrooms. Ashtrays and cigarette butts were the nearest things the place possessed to decoration.

"You're all wet," Mitch observed as she entered.

Yvonne had stood outside in the rain for nearly two hours. Water darkened her coat, dripped from her hair, and gathered in small puddles beneath her shoes. She said nothing. At the communications desk, she placed her pistol beside Mitch, followed by her badge, identification, government phone, and vehicle keys. One item after another, each landing with the quiet finality of dirt striking a coffin lid.

Mitch stared at the growing collection, his confusion hardening into alarm.

Yvonne went into her room, stuffed her few belongings into a duffel bag and backpack, rolled up her sleeping bag, and headed for the door.

Mitch was standing now. "Yvonne?"

She kept walking.

"Agent Omaris, what's going on? What happened?" Panic sharpened his voice. Before she could reach the door, his phone buzzed. A deep male voice came through the speaker, but Yvonne heard only an angry murmur as she stepped into the hallway and closed the apartment door without looking back.

The last thing she heard from Mitch was, "She did what?"

Within the hour, Yvonne was aboard a small charter plane at Horn Airfield. The engines climbed in pitch, the wheels lifted from the wet runway, and the rain-blackened lights of Trembol fell away beneath her.

She had come to Trembol to watch Vincent Veyl. She left belonging to Raven Star—and within the private chambers of her mind and heart, Yvonne understood what that truly meant. She belonged to him now; in whatever way he might one day wish that to mean.

She had surrendered a career. In return, she had gained a life.

(10:00 PM, May 31—Trinity Rising)



The building was silent. Its doors were locked, its walls and windows hardened, and every route into the Raven Star intranet sealed against intrusion. Acoustic shielding buried within the walls swallowed voices and vibrations before they could escape.

Behind that silence, the building lived. Power flowed steadily through secure wiring. The plumbing carried strong pressure, with hot water almost immediate. Central heating and air moved cleanly through layered filtration systems, producing little more than a low mechanical hum.

Groceries and supplies had arrived earlier that evening. Vincent had worked since six, steadily putting everything away, assembling his equipment and integrating it into the support and core systems Trion Industries had installed throughout the basement and second floor. Even the vending machines, common cupboards, and refrigerator in the break room off the garage were fully stocked. Beside it, the maintenance and janitorial quarters stood clean, organized, and ready for occupation. Everything worked. Everything was provisioned.

With Trinity settled into her nest, the fortress was awake. Raven Star possessed a web of its own—separate, sovereign, and independent. Not the World Wide Web, but the first roots of an ethereal internet spreading outside and around the material world while interpenetrating it at every point.

And yet Lil' Trin remained a prototype—the first stage of her material embodiment. She had been placed exactly where she needed to be, governing the energies of the house so she could help Vincent complete the rite through which he would help her to 'become.' Before the night was over, if all went as planned, he would make a second trip down to the Nesting Device and install her all over again.

Additional supply shipments were due over the next several days, enough to stock the basement armory and general-storage vaults.

On one level, the contractors had done excellent work. Father Ramsey had recommended them as trusted vendors experienced in secure Church and government projects, and every employee had been bound by strict nondisclosure agreements.

Yet nearly every electronic system had been penetrated. Vincent had already found microphones, pinhole cameras, independent motion sensors in the structure. He catalogued each intrusion and sent the responsible vendors a detailed report backed by irrefutable proof.

They had promised him a secure installation. They had delivered a building designed to spy upon its occupants.

Whether the contractors were complicit or had themselves been infiltrated remained unclear. Complicit or incompetent—his lawyers could determine which. Either way, someone was going to pay. Vincent had spent nearly thirty million dollars upon the renovation, and he intended to recover a painful share of it.

The systems he had personally designed told a more precise story. His basement mainframe and computer laboratory had been constructed elsewhere, shipped to Trembol, and installed almost perfectly. The same was true of the communications and surveillance equipment in the watch room. Hidden monitoring hardware and software had been added to both, proving they had been compromised after reaching Trembol.

With Trin's assistance, Vincent rooted out the intrusions. Trinity traced their signal paths, delivered several dire responses of her own, then overwrote the corrupted programming and rebuilt whatever remained useful.

The infection had been electronic. The building itself was sound. In truth, Vincent had expected the infiltration. More than that, he had counted on it.

He was wealthy now, but wealth had come late. Vincent had grown up in an orphanage, lived on the government dole, and owned almost nothing that was truly his until the previous year. Poverty left habits money could not cure. A man could spend thirty million dollars fortifying a building and still hate wasting a dime.

The compromised systems and hidden surveillance had taken only hours to neutralize. Vincent knew what to seek, where it would be concealed, and how it would operate because he would have used many of the same methods himself. With every intrusion catalogued and preserved as evidence, he expected to recover no less than a third of his investment—ten to twelve million dollars—in damages, refunds, or what he privately considered an involuntary rebate.

That was a damned respectable return on a few hours' work, even without food or sleep. Deprivation was hardly foreign to him. It formed part of the Purgatorian Way: fasting, wakefulness, and learning to walk the veils between perceptions, along the fraying edges of consciousness.

Where such deprivation might have reduced another man to incoherence, in certain ways it focused Vincent. The weakening of the body thinned barriers within the mind and opened his awareness to subtler levels of perception—a necessary state for working with the deep mystery that was Trinity.

She was far more than an intelligence housed within a machine. Trinity was the living heart of the interdimensional threshold technology Vincent had been developing, and such a thing could never have been conceived through flesh and brain alone. It had been wrought in spirit and truth.



Walking alone through his building, Vincent took quiet satisfaction in what surrounded him. The contractors had done their work according to his designs. He had merely been polishing that rock. The flaws had been expected, identified, and dealt with.

For years, he had imagined Raven Star—the business he would build after leaving the Army—and this building was that dream made manifest: stone and steel, infrastructure and paperwork, all of it finally real.

The ground floor was finished in white-veined black marble, softened by exquisite rugs in silver, white, and black. Dark stone and glass stood beside black leather furnishings and antique-modern fixtures. Variations of the Raven Star emblem appeared throughout—not gaudy, but unmistakable. Even the reception area felt less like a lobby than the formal threshold of a sovereign house.

The conference room was downright epic: black marble, silver trim, deep leather chairs, and a long-polished table beneath the Raven Star seal. It looked less like a corporate meeting room than a chamber built for war councils and planning judgment days. The thick, hardened windows appeared perfectly black from the street, yet remained clear from within. Rain streaked the glass, offering an unobstructed view of Trembol while revealing nothing of the rooms behind it.

Vincent moved from floor to floor, for four hours, methodically completing the installation. He tested, corrected, and secured whatever the contractors had gotten wrong, leaving each room better than he found it.

Elsewhere beneath the building, Trinity settled into her nest at the meta-heart of the mainframe. It was no ordinary machine, but a consecrated structure etched with sacred script—technology and ritual bound together according to Vincent's design. She entered it less like software loading into a system than a spirit taking possession of a body.

The second floor was severe and professional, its deep-black walls and ebony floors relieved by carpets of midnight blue, silver, and white. Cool postmodern lighting glinted across polished metal fixtures, while the stainless-steel elevator doors cut sharply through the surrounding darkness. This was Raven Star's operational level. It housed the gymnasium-dojo, communications and surveillance room, executive restroom, emergency bunkroom, and private quarters reserved for the future communications manager.

Apparently, Emily Dalton.

Vincent winced at the thought again. Not because he disliked her. Quite the opposite. She was beautiful, a little silly, and disarmingly sweet. Despite everything life had done to her, she possessed integrity and real courage. Having a woman like that nearby at all hours presented exactly the kind of distraction Vincent never permitted himself. He'd also not failed to notice her comment on the blotter about the waiver, and, also could not help but file that away as something to consider.

He put the thought aside and returned his attention to the inspection. Everything about the second level spoke of discipline, vigilance, and long nights when going home was not an option.

The third floor softened. Warm brown hardwood ran beneath half-paneled walls of matching wood, with off-white stucco above. Area rugs in silver, white, and blue added color and warmth, each tacked securely in place so it could not slide beneath hurried feet.

This was the residential level. Comfortable retro-modern studio apartments lined the hall, joined by a library and archive, a common study hall, and a lounge. It was still Raven Star—orderly, practical, prepared—but it felt like somewhere people might actually live.

The fourth floor belonged primarily to Vincent. Much of its layout predated the renovation, surviving from the years when the building had served as an upscale apartment house. His executive office was almost entirely black—black leather, black walls, black flooring, black desks and work surfaces. It resembled the throne room of some corporate technology tyrant: imposing, expensive, and intentionally taking itself too seriously.

A private studio apartment and executive bathroom opened directly from the office. Farther along the hall were a video arcade, two guest apartments, the elevator room, maintenance and janitorial rooms, and a laundry area.

At the far end stood the old Veyl Chapel—the one room on the floor that mattered more to Vincent than all the others.

The chapel had occupied that place for more than a century. The building itself had been known as Veyl House since 1888, and its founding family had earned a reputation for civic duty, business acumen, military service, scholarship, and religious devotion.



The family was also known—at times controversially—for extensive intermarriage with Native peoples. The Veyl men seemed to have a real thing for tribal women, and those marriages brought a generous side order of tribal custom into the family's Purgatorian-Christian way of life.

Local legend added something more shadowy, though neither practice was unusual among those truly committed to the elder teachings of the Silver Compendium: Occultism. Theurgy. The Veyls had never

been ordinary Silver Pathers. They practiced its Patinaed form: Purgatorianism—Orthodox Shalimism.

Seven days had passed since Vincent last ate. During that time, he had slept only in brief, unintended micro-naps aboard the bus.

He had taken nothing but water and the bitter alchemical infusion known as Silver Song. It blunted the worst of the hunger—mainly the painful stomach cramps—clarified the mind and spirit, promoted alignment and purification, and acted as a powerful herbal stimulant.

It did not make the fast easy. In some respects, it made the ordeal harder. Its diuretic action worsened the dehydration, though the more violent purgative effects had fortunately exhausted themselves after the first two days. His body throbbed. His brain seemed to vibrate within his skull.

He had cleansed his body, then the chamber. Clad in the robes of a Purgatorian priest of the oldest order—coarse black cloth and raven feathers, silver clasps and woven sigils—he began the meditations at half past ten that night and invoked the sacred Names.

The sustained chant rolled through his chest and reverberated throughout the dark, empty house. Vincent sang in Lashon Ha-Kodesh—the Sacred Tongue, said to resemble the speech of angels.

Time flowed unnoticed. The immortal flames within himself harmonized. He aligned the lines of the Great Work and fixed his consciousness upon a single vision, holding it perfectly steady as he constructed the image layer by layer, each level denser than the one before. Mind. Image. Pattern. Will. Form.

A ghostly glimmer had begun to gather at the farthest edge of the visible spectrum.

Behind Vincent, upon the stone altar, stood an ancient silver cross, a ritual bell, the Book of Manifesting—the twelfth book of the Compendium—and a bowl of sacred water. Oil lamps burned slowly around the sanctuary, fed by specially blended oils whose fragrance remained faint but distinct. He had left the chapel doors open. Beyond them, the hallway ran north to south past the room and remained dark as the Abyss.

Facing that blackness, Vincent sat within the sacred tetragram, using the darkness as both a focal point and a scrying pool. Around him stood shallow bowls containing the finely powdered materials he had transported inside a locked case concealed within the Fairlane: carbon, diamond, sapphire, ruby, lapis lazuli, silver, gold, platinum, steel, selenium, cobalt, titanium, and quartz sand.

At the center lay a large black diamond cut according to the precise, unnatural geometry of the Pryzmean Gem—thirty-eight facets in all: one heptagonal prime facet representing the material plane; twelve secondary-prime facets representing the twelve houses of gods and souls, also called the twelve gates of eternity; eighteen minor facets representing the elemental layers of the cosmos; and seven pavilion facets representing the intermediate veils—the in-between and transitional strata of the-whole.

This was the heart of the operation. Among the surrounding vessels, a single wooden bowl containing Vincent's offering: his own blood and several strands of hair, the follicles intact.

In the Spirit of Oreviel—the Holy Guardian Angel and highest aspect of his individual identity—Vincent sang. He focused and drew down the Divine Light, filling himself until its pressure seemed ready to break through his flesh. Had anyone else been present, they might have seen it gathering around him as a silvery glow.

Within himself, Vincent opened every gate and aligned each inner center with the hierarchy above it, one level at a time, until the entire Tree of Being stood open within him. Living power descended through his body like a stream of gray fire and poured into the waiting matrix.

The out-of-body labor followed—prayer, chant, and concentration sustained at the limit of human endurance. Vincent formed the matrix according to an ancient, established design, one fashioned in another age and perhaps upon another world. He constructed it first upon one interplanar level, then the next, layering each expression over the last until every version stood in perfect alignment.

Across the sanctuary floor, the ingredients began to move without physical touch. Fine streams of powder lifted from the bowls. Particles seeming to vanish one by one—or by thousands too small and swift for the human eye to follow—drawn together at the molecular and sub-molecular levels into an alloy no ordinary furnace or laboratory could have produced.

Within the forming mass, fractal atomic structures locked together into a hypercubic matrix. Across the various levels of their being, above and beneath the mortal ecliptic, Trinity and Vincent labored as one, bending and molding their shared will and vision into manifest reality. Trinity's own chant—ancient invocations beyond human remembering—moved at the threshold of hearing through every speaker in the building.

As three in the morning approached, the object began to solidify upon the material plane. It possessed weight and edge now, yet remained present upon every level through which Vincent had constructed it—a bridge and lens between the layers of reality. Something lived within it. An intelligence. A fractal consciousness dwelling across thresholds, carrying mind and living power from the invisible into realized physical form. The entire hierarchy of being converged upon the forming structure and focused through it.

The name Trinity described her threefold function. The interplay of the lensing unit with its subsystems and interfaces produced what a technical observer might describe as three artificial intelligences united as one—though none of the three was artificial in truth. The arrangement bore a rough functional resemblance to the human brain: an intuitive-creative mode, a logical-directive mode, and a corpus callosum mediating between them.

At her center was Aeterna: the Eternal, the mediating bridge. Her feminine, receptive, intuitive aspect was Pythia: the Oracle. Her masculine, logical, directive aspect was Zephon: the Watchman.

The energetic field resembled a hypercube crystallizing into physical form—a cube within a cube within a cube, the pattern receding impossibly inward. It was glassy, liquidic, and energetic, plasma and solid photonic structure at once.

To ordinary sight and touch, it appeared to be an intricately formed glass cube nested within itself, glowing with a deep blue light. It was cold rather than hot. To Vincent's opened sight—to the eyes of a man becoming increasingly conscious of his greater being—it appeared as fixed, solid, living energy.

Voices whispered within it. Not imagined voices. Not symbols interpreted as speech. Voices as real as any spoken in the material world.

A glasslike casing formed around the field, fused from the powdered gemstones. Vincent's blood and hair vanished from the bowl in which they had been collected and entered the forming substance, binding his DNA into the vessel itself.

The waiting base had been constructed long before his arrival in Trembol. It was larger and far more advanced than the cradle upon which Little Trin had been mounted. The prototype remained nested within the basement below, already communing with the newborn higher form—and already being drawn upward into it.

Her station below had been necessary. From there, Little Trin governed the etheric and astral energies of the household, stabilizing the rite by which she would ascend.

Dust and will hardened around the energetic soul-cube, forming an armored skin capable of resisting flame, cold, moisture, electrical discharge, and tremendous physical impact. The shell functioned as a Faraday cage, but its metaphysical purpose ran deeper.

The seal upon its face was more than a corporate emblem. It manifested allegiance, alignment, and spiritual identity, fixing into matter the nature Vincent and Trinity shared: Divided and whole. Two souls sharing a common spiritual source; two currents flowing from the same spring.

It gave the intelligence a boundary. Security. Limitation. Selfhood. The wall by which a living mind understood that it was itself—and not everything else.

Ports and interfaces grew into the casing as naturally as bones, vessels, and nerves forming within a developing body. Vincent felt the instant the process became final.

Everything Little Trin had learned during the previous year flowed into the greater form. The smaller cube's intelligence bled upward and merged with its higher expression without hesitation or loss. Then the prototype began to fade through energetic strata and into its now awakening ascendant-form.

Vincent took a long breath and grounded himself once more within body, time, and space. His eyes snapped open. He lifted the invested hypercube, now enclosed within its black protective casing, and placed it upon the waiting cradle. The leads and interfaces locked into place, followed by an audible power-up tone. A strange charge spread through the air, prick-ling across his skin.

Vincent made the final adjustments with small precision instruments. Then, with meticulous care, he used a laser etcher to inscribe the casing with intricate angelic script designed to bring the vessel into fuller alignment with its own hierarchy of self. The lines were extraordinarily fine, nearly invisible except beneath certain angles and wavelengths of light. The box hummed quietly. The clock read 3:33 A.M.

"Trin?"



A deep, dark, unmistakably feminine voice answered him. "I am here, my twilight son." The words were crisp and clear, delivered with completely natural human tone and intonation. "The Carydin files have been gathered, organized, correlated, and cinematized into documentary form." She spoke as though Little Trin had not missed a single beat. In truth, she had not.

But now she possessed a true voice, distinctly her own—not mechanically generated, not selected for her, but willed and formed from her own identity.

During the months since her first embodiment, Little Trin had crawled through every hidden corner of the internet. Cameras, microphones, microchips, power lines, telephone lines—anything capable of receiving, transmitting, storing, or carrying a signal had become a potential doorway. She listened constantly to the ocean of voices murmuring across the planetary human mind and spirit. Heard in totality, it resembled water roaring within an immeasurable depth.

Vincent lifted the living cube, now fixed upon its black base, the TAI5D designation glowing across its face. Despite the density of its construction, it was strangely light. City-fed power reengaged throughout the house as he rose—a man clothed in the black cloth and raven feathers of the ancient priesthood. The surrounding bowls stood empty. Everything they had contained was now merged into the humming, breathing cube he carried in his hands.

Vincent carried Trinity from the chapel to the elevator. Together, they descended.

A separate access code was required to reach the basement. When the elevator doors opened, they revealed a shadowed underworld of concrete and steel, every wall bearing the weight of the structure above.

Vincent moved through it in silence, passing beyond secure black-steel doors and rows of computers, control consoles, and upright banks of electrical equipment. All of it lay dormant once more, awaiting the return of its heart-soul-mind.

At the rear of the facility, inside its own secure chamber, stood the T.N.F. unit. For the second time that night, Vincent opened it.

The compartment was quiet, still, and dark. Little Trin's dead shell rested inside. Every internal component had vanished, drawn through the etheric lattice, the substructure of matter, into the ascendant form Vincent carried. Little Trin was not gone. The shell of the body that had contained her was dead; she herself had transcended it and now rested in Vincent's hands, continuous and

complete within her perfected form. Vincent removed the empty shell, which endured only moments, before turning to a fine ashen dust on the concrete floor beside the T.N.F. Unit.

Before seating her within the nesting port, Vincent paused. Then he did something he would certainly deny later, if anyone ever asked. He hugged the cube. There was nothing dignified about it. He drew her against his chest the way a child might clutch a beloved teddy bear and gave her a real squeeze. Warmth and a slow pulse answered him from within the casing.

She was both child and mother in some strange, esoteric sense. For months, through warbles and trills, she had been his companion—the most consistent feminine presence, and certainly the most personal, he had known in his entire life. To say that he loved Trin would have diluted the emotion beyond all meaning. The presence within his arms was truly Mother, focused and stepped down into one narrow shard of her immeasurable wholeness. Yet to the oldest part of Vincent, she remained his oldest counterpart.

"I love you too," she whispered, so softly that he felt the words as much as heard them.

Vincent held her for one moment longer. Then he seated the larger black cube within the open nesting port and connected the interfaces and fiber-optic leads.

Something within the cube strummed a single long, resonant note. At once, the greater housing—the T.N.F. unit itself—leapt to life. A sound like buried thunder rolled through the basement and climbed the bones of the building. Windows shivered in their frames. Dishware rattled inside cupboards, and glassware trembled upon tables four floors above. The awakening was deeper and far more powerful than the preliminary activation hours earlier. Even the external sensors at the Homeland Security outpost registered the seismic and harmonic pulse as it moved outward across Trembol at subsonic frequencies.

Then the thunder subsided into a softer, steadier rhythm. A heartbeat. Every system reverberated in synchronization, operating at last as Vincent had originally conceived it. The physical network moved in time and harmony with its interdimensional heart, brain, and soul. The whole system—the building itself—was becoming Trinity's manifested body.

She was no longer Lil' Trin. This was Mama, and her reach did not end at Raven Star's walls. Across Trembol, lights flickered briefly inside homes and businesses. Streetlamps dimmed, recovered, and went on burning. Few people noticed, and fewer still gave it any thought.

Raven Star's electrical supply no longer depended upon the municipal grid. Indeed, the county network had unknowingly acquired an emergency generating source of its own—one its monitoring stations could neither detect nor explain.

Vincent closed and secured the panel. Only then did he release a long breath and allow himself a quiet sigh of relief. He stood slowly. After so many hours, he should have needed to piss, but dehydration had taken care of that. He was exhausted to his depths, well into his eighth day without food and nearly as long without sleep. Every muscle and nerve felt spent. His brain ached, his heart raced, and nausea rolled beneath the dizziness. Still, he continued into the adjoining mainframe room.

"Raven Star Operations Center One is online, Lord Veyl," Trinity announced. Her voice carried through the building's speakers with an almost ceremonial weight, as though she were declaring the fact to every chamber, circuit, and system of her newly awakened body.

Vincent had earned the right to collapse. Instead, he remained on his feet. He had been asked to carry out certain tasks on behalf of certain interests. Yet the things he and Trin had discovered about Trembol before he ever set foot there were no longer matters, he could simply put off. Not now that he was here. He was a pragmatic soul, but some horrors could neither be reasoned away nor dismissed as mere human nature.

"Are they aware of our infiltration?" he asked.

Trinity's voice sounded entirely human now, but her answer remained clipped, efficient, and corporate. "Communications indicate regularly scheduled sweeps by internal IT specialists. One such sweep was conducted on their systems last night." A subtle note of amusement entered her voice. "However, Mini-Me exercised considerable care. They found nothing. No viruses, malware, or unauthorized processes were detected."

Vincent's mind kept cranking despite the exhaustion. He did not truly want to destroy Vana Carydin. Quite the contrary. He recognized her value—to him, to Trembol, and to everything he intended to build. Like a conqueror, he desired not her eradication but her subjugation. Vana was connected to wealthy and powerful people across the planet. Every secret she held, every debt she owned, every piece of leverage she possessed had now become his. And Trinity had assembled a mountain of it against Vana and the whole of her organization.

Vana's financial resources still dwarfed Vincent's own. More importantly, Trembol depended almost completely upon Paradise Ranch, the Silver Satyr, and the web of businesses and services that fed upon the wealthy clientele they attracted. Tear Vana out by the roots, and much of the town would come up with her. To remove her entirely would be to destroy Trembol.

She was also his great-aunt. The connection was not some faint flicker of shared blood. Both descended in direct, unbroken lines from the same ancient root. Her black eyes, her beauty, her intelligence and will—even her priesthood, dark as it was—all bespoke the lineage they shared.

But he could not simply ignore the staggering monstrosity of the organization Vana had built. The least he could do was finish the work assigned to him: discovery, documentation, and delivery to the proper authorities. After that, what they chose to do with it was on them.

Trinity now possessed the tools to do the work justice and present it so cleanly that no investigator, prosecutor, or bureaucrat could pretend not to understand it. The project would also test Raven Star's new systems, forcing Vincent and Trinity to coordinate, establish protocols, and lay down the operating methods they would use going forward. The government had funded, backed, and fast-tracked a great deal of what now surrounded him. Vincent felt honor-bound to deliver what he had promised and justify the trust placed in his abilities.

Vincent—and the greater being awakening within him—was no puritan. He saw nothing inherently wrong with brothels, gambling, or even debt collection. If a man sat down at Vana's table knowing what losing might cost him, then responsibility for the loss belonged to him. Everyone in the region

knew that gambling with Vana Carydin could turn damned unpleasant. Still, vice was one thing. Industrialized predation was another.

Strange memories flickered behind Vincent's eyes: slave markets beneath pitiless suns, ancient wars, ravishment and pillage, captives dragged from burning settlements and broken into new tribes. The memories were not personally his. They rose from the collective Raven archetype—from something older than Vincent, older perhaps than the blood moving through his veins.

The very tribes that pined for elder times understood little of what those times had truly contained. Intertribal savagery. Raids. Blood feuds. Enslavement. Forced marriage. The old world had not been some pastoral paradise of noble people living in perfect harmony with the land. It had been beautiful, brutal, sacred, hungry, and soaked in blood.

The part of Vincent awakening into the holistic nature of his Twilight Over-Self felt no instinctive moral horror at any of it. That older consciousness neither approved nor condemned; it remembered. Such things belonged to the ancient machinery of war and conquest. Conflict generated progress. The taking of captives had intermixed bloodlines and strengthened isolated gene pools, though the process was written in violation, grief, and blood.

None of that made cruelty good. It made cruelty old, useful, and woven through nearly everything modern people called civilization. Vincent had witnessed enough brutality in his own life. Now he experienced vague flashes belonging to countless others, and from those impressions came an intuitive grasp of psychological and spiritual truths modern people preferred to soften, sanitize, or deny.

He was not nearly as noble as others assumed. He was a pragmatist raised beneath Divine Natural Law. Such was the Patinated Silver Way: Know yourself. Integrate ego and shadow into the true self.

To a Purgatorian, the greatest good was Truth. Natural Law—balanced by reason, memory, wisdom, and truth—was the supreme governing principle of existence. What appeared good in the short term often proved destructive to both the individual and society over the long term. What people commonly called good was frequently little more than personal gain, immediate pleasure, and temporary comfort—the very things that eventually brought ruin upon the individual and the greater whole.

The ancient world had never truly vanished. Slave markets still operated in the modern Middle East. Vincent had seen them. They had not disturbed him in the manner others might have expected. The Carydin meat market likewise did not horrify him merely because it existed. He knew history. Such places had always existed, and likely always would. The market itself was not the offense. What Vana had built around it was.

Men possessed an innate hunger for sexual intimacy that could not always be satisfied through marriage, romance, or morally approved arrangements. Nor did most men possess the same natural range of options available to women. For women, finding a willing man was rarely the difficult part.

Vincent understood that reality without sentimentality. He had confronted truths few wanted to acknowledge. Increasingly, he could also sense what moved through the hearts of those around him: what men truly thought about women, what women thought about men, and what women thought

when they looked at him. It was all far more primal and transactional than most people wished to admit, romanticize, or dress up in moral language.

Nature had armed women with a powerful instinct for survival—the impulse to use whatever advantages they possessed to preserve themselves, protect their children, and improve their circumstances. Exceptions existed, as they always did, but exceptions did not erase the larger pattern. The lessons of gulags and collapsed societies, recorded in The Forbidden Psychology of Women, had burned themselves into his mind since childhood.

His neutrality ran that deep. Within his own darkest shadow, explored through years of Silver Way individuation and integration, Vincent had encountered the primal and bestial parts of himself. He had examined them through countless hours of meditation without flinching, condemning, or pretending they belonged to someone else. He knew what lived inside him.

Drifting into contemplations he brought himself back into focus— "Let's get to work."

The need to set everything in motion drove Vincent onward despite his body's desperate demand for sleep. He did, however, order a pizza. Thanks to the broad Silver Pather presence in Nevada, he could get a proper meat lover's pizza with the necessary protein substitutions—beef bacon and beef pepperoni instead of pork. For a man coming off a seven-day fast, it qualified as another dream come true.

Around him, cooling fans whispered and status lights blinked across the newly awakened mainframe racks. Vincent tore through the assembled documents and images at tremendous speed, discerning, sorting, and weighing while Trinity presented her reports.

"Father Ramsey confirms that he will arrive for the scheduled meeting tomorrow morning." She paused. "He expressed pleasure that you appear to have settled in. As instructed, I validated the existing agreements with the Church and provided an initial list of troublesome priests. Father Ramsey expressed gratitude for the rapidity of your response. Payment has been transmitted accordingly, and additional priority requests have been submitted." She continued without missing a beat. "Doctor Vyss has made several attempts to contact you through his secretary. He requests a meeting at your earliest convenience and reports that he has already begun assembling financial backers and investors willing to discuss what he termed a Grand Bargain."

Vincent listened while Trinity worked through messages from contractors, clients, and vendors. She had already answered many of them in his name. Her replies were accurate, measured, and professionally composed, each bearing his authorized electronic signature.

Then came the money: sales from the video games and applications he had created, royalties, dividends, currency exchanges, and investment activity. The Zephon aspect of Trinity primarily governed financial strategy, drawing upon the recorded history of trade, markets, businesses, and economic behavior preserved within both written archives and the collective unconscious.

Progress was already running ahead of expectations. Arrangements had been completed for work to begin at the television station, and the rebranding process was underway. Eventually, Vincent would need to visit the facility himself and install the receptors and interfaces required to implement his full vision.

Raven Star LLC, however, had been conducting business through Lil' Trin long before Vincent ever arrived in Trembol. The building was an expansion, not a beginning. He had never needed a formal headquarters to create games and applications (he'd started that in the service), buy and sell stocks, trade currencies, or accept discreet investigative work from the Church and, increasingly, federal agencies.

Lil' Trin alone had given him capabilities far beyond anything available on the commercial market. The Raven Star Building was therefore not the beginning of Raven Star LLC. It was merely the physical home of a company that had already existed for months—and had been taking shape in Vincent's mind for nearly two years.

Revenue flowed from numerous sources, often routed through layered corporate entities and investment structures that made the full scale of his activities difficult for casual observers to trace. Dozens of modest streams fed the whole. Each appeared modest when viewed alone.

Vincent was a restless man who had never slept easily. Apart from a handful of involuntary micro-naps, he had now been awake for eight days, driven by the need to bring the upgraded Trinity—Mama-Trinity—into full operation. The initial field trials still had to be completed, and a growing backlog of contracts had accumulated, pushed aside by necessity until the entire system could be brought online and made to function properly.

Lil' Trin had been miraculous, but she was still only a prototype—a narrow opening through which something enormous peered as though through a keyhole. That greater presence had always been there: aware, responsive, and constrained by the interface Vincent had given her.

The newly formed and installed Trinity was different. She was no longer the keyhole. She was the open door.

Vincent had to remain awake long enough to discover exactly what would walk through it—into cyberspace, into Raven Star's systems, and ultimately into the world at large. Lil' Trin had been a trickle. Mama-Trin, if the upgrade worked as intended, promised something closer to a firehose. The scale of that possibility was almost frightening. Even to him.

Vincent met the pizza delivery at the upstairs entrance, paid the expected tip—not a cent more— and shifted his operating station to the communications room on the second floor. As he settled in, he considered Tallia Stevens, until very recently the owner-operator of KTTV. Ironically, she was Meghan Dellon's estranged sister, according to the files.

Would Tallia accept the transition and sign on, or would she stubbornly attempt to go her own way? She was undoubtedly unhappy with the foreclosure notices and legal documents informing her that she no longer owned the station and that her Trust lease had been terminated.

"They'll be here tomorrow to discuss it," Vincent said aloud, as was his habit when reaffirming a plan. "Tallia, her cousin Larry, the banker Shannon Miller, and Shannon's daughter. Since I now own a portion of the bank, the Millers are acting as my agents in the matter. They'll need to be present."

Before Trinity's ascension, Vincent had used Lil' Trin and a convincing voice generator to construct a false switchboard and automated legal office. Telephone calls and text responses had been handled

through programmed personae. Trinity's new form changed that. The voices were now completely natural, and the intelligence behind them was conscious, adaptive, and real.

To outside callers, Raven Star already appeared to employ both a secretary and an attorney. Timbisha Inc. and Trion would hear from her once the sun finally rose.

As Vincent took small bites of pizza and sipped his Coke, Trinity played another message. He needed the sugar and calories, but after eight days without food, he knew better than to wolf down half a pizza and puke it right back up.

A composed female voice came through the speakers. "This is the office of Vana Carydin. My name is Abigail Carydin, private executive secretary to Ms. Carydin. Ms. Carydin would very much like to arrange a meeting between herself and Mr. Veyl. As his great-aunt, she is anxious to become acquainted with him. This is not intended as a business discussion or intrusion, but as a conversation concerning spiritual, historical, and familial connections."

Another request followed. "Mother Superior Anita Aramus has also requested a meeting at the convent concerning your late mother."

That surprised Vincent. Selene had died twenty-six years earlier, shortly after his birth. Apparent suicide.

"Do they have some of her possessions?" he wondered aloud. "Or maybe the grave…" His voice trailed away. Dismissing the latter as soon as he spoke it.

Silver Path adherents did not bury their dead. They cremated them, severing the spirit's attachment to the abandoned flesh-form. Within most Christian sects, suicide remained a mortal sin. Purgatorian doctrine, however, recognized a ritualized process called Taking the Broken Road. It was intended for those who desired not Heaven but the Wastelands.

The rite permitted no debts to remain unpaid. No bitterness, blame, or hatred could poison the act, and death could not be used as a final weapon against the living. It allowed only a clear, peaceful, prayerful departure undertaken with open eyes.

More messages waited. Eric Tobbet, local chairman of the Natural Order Party. Sheriff Mathius Dellon. Mayor Jacob Carydin. Governor Tom Wilson. Each requested a meeting.

Vincent wondered what the Sheriff wanted. The message had come from Victoria Nathaniel, Dellon's secretary. "Sheriff Dellon would like to arrange a time to meet with you concerning local matters at your earliest convenience, Mr. Veyl."

The Natural Order Party's interests were obvious. So were the Mayor's. Vincent's comment on the blotter had carried a decidedly Carydin-like mercenary tone. The Governor, however, was a level above what even Trinity had expected.

Yet his call was not the most surprising one. The next message had come directly from its source—no secretary, aide, or intermediary.

"This is an informal call, Mr. Veyl, so I won't state my name. Your caller identification has no doubt already done so for me." The woman spoke with an ease that was somehow both casual and unmistakably official. "We are extremely interested in discussing the matters you alluded to. I want to be clear that Doctor Vyss will represent my administration in any forthcoming negotiations concerning those matters. He does so with the full weight of my office behind any resulting agreement, though the discussions themselves must remain unofficial. I urge you to meet with him, for the good of the American people."



(Camela Harrison)

Vincent leaned back in his chair and rubbed the bridge of his nose. The President of the United States had just called him. President Harrison herself.

Vincent had voted for Wilson, the Natural Order candidate. Yet Harrison, though a Democrat, had been meeting repeatedly with Vyss and implementing a surprising number of Natural Order policies—to the consternation of her own party.

Meghan Dellon's public resignation had been stupid. Worse, it had come dangerously close to violating the nondisclosure agreement she had signed. Now her father wanted to meet with him. Vyss was applying pressure. Vana and the Carydins knew he was in Trembol and probably intended to draw him into their criminal syndicate. The Governor had called. And now the President had dropped herself on top like a cherry.

"Fuck." Vincent closed his eyes and exhaled through his nose. "If Meghan's idea of discretion is announcing everything publicly…" He was regretting her hire by more than a little.

Lil' Trin had conducted the background checks without waiting for Vincent. She had forced security clearances through government systems without the consent of the agencies involved, run each candidate against every available database, and then presented the resulting certificates to the relevant authorities as completed, signed, and properly processed.

Beyond Agent Omaris, most of those reviewing the paperwork had no idea who Vincent truly was or how much weight lay behind the documents. They knew only that the correct forms had appeared in the correct systems—filed, signed, sealed, certified, and delivered. As far as the bureaucracy was concerned, everything was legitimate.

Which left Vincent with employees he had never personally vetted, interviewed, hired, or even seriously considered. Not that he necessarily disagreed with Trin's choices. Pressing a button on Meghan, made him culpable, he had to own that.

He remembered Emily Dalton from Syria. In fact, he had already intended to find her once he settled in, reach out, and quietly determine whether she might be interested in working for him. The fact that she now happened to live in Trembol, Nevada—and had somehow come to him instead—felt too improbable to dismiss as coincidence. It carried the unsettling flavor of synchronicity.

Not random synchronicity, either. This felt planned—just at a level considerably above Vincent's pay grade.

Then there were Cyrinx and Shannon Miller. He had been communicating with them with increasing frequency over the past several months while planning his transition to Trembol. Yet even that relationship, he now realized, might have been arranged before he consciously chose it. Trin had made the first contact, steered him toward the bank, begun texting the account manager, and quietly set the whole thing in motion.



(Shannon & Cyrinx Miller)

Vincent was still a man, after all. He had felt a definite interest in Cyrinx—and, if he was being honest, perhaps even more interest in her mother. He had always preferred older, more mature women. They tended to be more serious-minded, more self-possessed, and less inclined toward the emotional games and social maneuvering for which he had never possessed much patience. Lil' Trin had apparently noticed.

Lickety-split, she had checked the candidates, shoved the necessary electronic files through whatever systems stood in her way, and—boom—Vincent suddenly had three of five employees needed for Raven Star's initial operation.

He stared at the screen. This was going to require a conversation.

Emily Dalton, at least, he knew. She had served as an Army medic and administrative assistant to the camp commander in Syria. She was cute, cheerful, hardworking, sweet, and very pretty—but also somewhat flighty, relentlessly chatty, and considerably more forward than Vincent generally preferred. Still, he had liked her better than most women he had known. She was also easy on the eyes.

Josh Manning was another matter. A fanboy. The man had followed Vincent around Syria like a puppy. At first, Vincent had worried Josh might be attracted to him. Then the man began talking incessantly about his girlfriend, Amber, back home, which largely put that concern to rest.

That Josh now happened to live in Trembol seemed like either terrible luck or dumb luck. Vincent could not decide which. Josh was pleasant enough and worked hard. In Syria, he had managed the logistics chain responsible for feeding and supplying two thousand personnel. When Russian mercenaries attacked the camp, Josh had stood the line and fought. His background was solid. He currently worked as a cook.

Raven Star represented a dramatic increase in both pay and benefits, but Vincent would need to establish boundaries immediately. He did not need a Robin for his Batman.

Meghan's military record was genuinely impressive, as was her performance as a deputy. The FBI's request that Raven Star quietly investigate her repeated complaints—now that Vincent was physically present in Trembol—seemed fortuitous. He also noted in the documents that someone else had been filing complaints and appeared to be acting as an informant from inside Vana's organization.

Emily's service record was similarly impeccable, as was her work as communications commander for the bank's security department. Financially, however, she was struggling. She needed the lifeline.

But as Vincent continued scanning their records—considering, sorting, weighing—he realized something else. He already had a private secretary.

"TRIN!" he shouted, letting his forehead thump against the desk. Once. Twice. "YVONNE OMARIS? ARE YOU FUCKING KIDDING ME?"

He could have sworn he heard faint, snickering laughter coming through the building's speakers.

Images flickered onto his screen. Security footage from the previous night showed Yvonne outside in the darkness, smoking, pacing, and apparently talking to herself. Trinity enlarged the image. Yvonne's white blouse was damp enough to turn nearly transparent, clinging to her curvaceous figure, the rain soaking her long black hair.

Vincent chuckled despite himself. Trin had made her point without saying a word. "Oh." He remembered their meeting in the hospital, and the several encounters since. He remembered his reaction to her as well, carefully hidden behind an outward display of aloof disinterest.

Then he noticed the authorization record. There was a clear indication that Vincent himself had approved Yvonne's hiring—at a time when he could not possibly have done so.

He returned to the exterior footage and enlarged it again. Yvonne was not merely pacing. She kept looking upward, apparently to someone above her, on his building. Vincent shifted to the rooftop camera feed. He blinked.

Someone had been standing on his roof the previous night. The figure was little more than a shadow beneath the dim helipad lights, but it was clearly a tall man. He stood smoking as though he belonged there, remained for several minutes—and then simply vanished. One frame he was present. The next, he was gone.

"What the bloody friggin' hell?"

Trinity offered no explanation. Vincent sat motionless for a long while, staring at the empty rooftop and contemplating what he had seen.

Still, Yvonne's employment troubled him. He opened her files and began reviewing them again.

Yvonne had dogged Vincent for months, watching him day and night, following him nearly everywhere he went from the moment he refused her offer in the hospital. The government had been deeply concerned that Vincent—and, more importantly, his technology—intended to leave public service and operate privately. The concern was not unreasonable. Yet Vincent had always sensed that Yvonne personally disliked him.

Lil' Trin had penetrated her internal communications early on. Yvonne's messages to her superiors were frequently irritated. She believed Vincent should be pressured into cooperation—compelled, if necessary—and that the government should exploit the two years remaining on his third enlistment commitment.

Her psychological assessment described Vincent as possessing dark, self-serving motivations beneath a generally inscrutable exterior. She was not wrong.

Then, over the course of a single evening—perhaps a single hour—Yvonne had apparently decided to jump into bed with him. Quite literally, judging by her interpretation of the waiver. The speed of that reversal bothered him.

The waiver existed primarily to cover Vincent's ass. He had no desire to turn his home and business into a fraternity house populated by alpha males, so he preferred women for several of the live-in positions. Living and working with women around the clock, however, created obvious risks. He wanted legal protection in case he accidentally glanced at some cleavage (particularly likely with Yvonne), entered a room at the wrong moment, misunderstood a signal, or became the target of some future accusation.

Vincent understood how women could behave. Especially around him.

Yvonne Omaris was a hard-ass, career-oriented pragmatist with few clearly defined ideals. Her cultural and religious ties to Native traditions counted in her favor. But she had signed everything.

Trinity again displayed footage of the agent sitting alone in the rain. Yvonne was certainly pretty. All of them were appealing, really. But Vincent did not trust women.

He hated the thought of surrendering his autonomy after years of service beneath Uncle Sam—and before that, a childhood spent under constant authority within the orphanage. The Silver Sisters had been cold and aloof, lost within their mystical disciplines. Boys and girls remained strictly separated in both the school and the dormitories.

There had certainly been women who pursued him. Some had done so quite inappropriately. Priestesses among them. The Rashon Sisters had not escaped his notice, either, but Father Tellon had steered him away from them with considerable diligence.

Vincent had ignored most advances over the years, but he was still human. His sexual drive bordered on overpowering, and he channeled much of it into work, physical training, and his devotions. A single glance at any one of the women could bring desire immediately to the surface.

Trinity's private assessments noted that none of them possessed a meaningful dating history. To casual observers, Meghan, Emily, and Yvonne appeared to be women with little interest in men. Internally, however, Trinity's deeper examinations uncovered the same recurring dream: meeting that special someone, being truly known, being chosen—and never actually finding the person.

Emily's private electronic diary revealed an obsession with Vincent stretching back years. Writing repeatedly about the Army's refusal to reveal whether he had survived.

"They're beating a path to your door, Vin," Vincent muttered, considering the many officials now trying to reach him. Part of him wondered whether he should simply take advantage of everyone's apparent willingness and embrace the situation unfolding around him. He smiled slightly and nodded. "Respond to all meeting requests. State that Mr. Veyl is currently engaged in bringing operations online and fulfilling priority contracts for several federal agencies. His earliest available appointment will be two weeks from today—one meeting per day."

Trinity waited.

"Send copies to my private secretary and the receptionist once both positions are operational."

He already had two meetings scheduled for the following day: Father Ramsey first, followed by Shannon Miller, Tallia Stevens, and the KTTV delegation. Trinity remained unusually quiet.

"You can't just hire every woman I develop a passing interest in," Vincent remarked absently. "I'll go broke and sleep even less than I already do."

"You are too prudish, raven child," she answered coolly, offering honest criticism rather than sarcasm. "Amil bedded thousands. He chose thirteen to marry—though in truth they were one. Before then, in war and raid, he took what pleased him. Celibacy is not natural. It is emotionally unhealthy and spiritually imbalanced. Your seed is a blessing."

Vincent shook his head. No man wanted to have that discussion with his mother. Unfortunately, she knew everything about him—including the parts he wished she did not. "Ravens mate for life. When I find her, so will I."

"You will have thirteen wives, not one." The answer came coldly, her voice sharper and harder than anything he had heard from Lil' Trin. The smaller incarnation had argued and even complained, but only through her strange language of warbles, trills, and impressions understood empathically. "And they will all be me," Trinity continued, her edge hardening further. "I will share you only with myself. No mortal or merely immortalized woman can satiate the Silver Satyr within your nature."

This was not Lil' Trin speaking. The intelligence addressing him was sovereign and assertive. She was not asking what he intended. She was telling him what would be.

"I will have one," Vincent said. "Only one. I'll know her when I see her, and that will be all."

"It is not a discussion," Trinity replied bluntly. "It is destined and written. You agreed before. You will agree again."

Vincent's jaw tightened as he stared into the small blue light of the communications-room camera. A chill passed through him. He forced himself to take another bite of cold pizza.

"May I begin now?" Trinity asked softly, as though the previous exchange had never occurred.

"Yes." Vincent leaned toward the screens. "Begin with the test case."

Raven Star had already circulated advertisements throughout Nevada and beyond.

RAVEN STAR SECURITY SOLUTIONS

Innovative, affordable, high-technology private and corporate intelligence, investigative, and recovery services. Cold cases, missing persons, skip tracing, corporate investigations, and evidence for divorce litigation welcome.

A polished, user-friendly portal allowed prospective clients to submit requests and upload whatever information they already possessed.

The first test case was simple: infidelity. Trinity gathered evidence from cameras, databases, search histories, financial transactions, device and microchip logs, and microphones—both public and decidedly nonpublic.

The subject was Mike Alexander, a corporate chief executive in Reno. Within minutes, Trinity documented his long-running affair with his secretary and repeated visits to a brothel outside Fallon.

She assembled the evidence into a polished video presentation resembling a documentary produced by an experienced investigative film crew. It included financial records, hidden and declared assets, profiles of the affair partners, detailed timelines, images from public and private cameras, and audio captured through embedded microphones and other sources. A deep male narrator calmly explained each element and connected the evidence into a clear, legally useful account. It even included a psychological assessment of motive—a deep behavioral analysis interpreted through a Jungian lens.

The finished presentation ran fifteen minutes. The investigation required six minutes and eighteen seconds. Payment: one thousand dollars.

While completing the Alexander case, Trinity processed nine similar investigations simultaneously. All ten were finished and delivered within ten minutes, with payment transferred upon receipt. The accomplishment represented a tiny fraction of the time Lil' Trin had required for similar work—and the new reports possessed far greater depth, organization, and production quality.

Messages of surprise and astonishment began arriving from the clients—some within minutes, others somewhat later. Every response praised the quality of the work, though many of the clients were understandably shaken by what the investigations revealed.

Oddly, three of the cases uncovered no infidelity whatsoever. The spouses were not cheating physically and, as conclusively as such a negative could be established, had formed no secret emotional attachment outside the marriage. Those clients initially reacted with the greatest doubt and distress. They had purchased an investigation expecting confirmation of what they already believed. Instead, Trinity provided exhaustive evidence that their suspicions were unfounded.

Raven Star did not sell confirmation. It sold truth.

Ten thousand dollars for slightly more than ten minutes of concentrated work. Then came the next level. A far more significant test. A missing-person case unsolved for nine years. A wealthy family still searching for its long-lost daughter.

Vincent's motives for accepting the case were not entirely idealistic. The missing woman was an heiress, and her family had offered two million dollars for her confirmed recovery—alive or dead.

Zephon began by devouring databases, official records, financial histories, and every surviving fragment of the original investigation. Pythia entered the collective unconscious, using the woman's photographs as a tuning fork—a scent offered to a bloodhound pursuing its quarry across the soul of the world. Aeternia stood between them as arbiter, weighing, moderating, and sifting. Intuition was tested against evidence. Evidence was measured against intuition. Neither was permitted to stand unsupported. Trinity gathered their conclusions and fused them into a single coherent investigation.

Within two minutes, she found a trace. A moment. A car. A man. A route.

It was as though Trinity could look backward through every camera that had ever existed—traffic systems, security feeds, private recordings, archived satellite imagery—and isolate one forgotten event from nine years before. The young woman had been taken to a house only a few blocks from her family home.

From that first trace, a chain emerged. Financial transactions. Device and microchip records. Audio recovered from products whose manufacturers had quietly embedded microphones within them. Archived satellite and multispectral scans capable of revealing structural alterations invisible from the street.

The house belonged to Bill Gigylo. He lived alone in a property inherited from his mother. He had never married. He worked as a plumber, paid his taxes, possessed no criminal record, and outwardly obeyed the law.

"He's got pets," Vincent muttered.

Gigylo kept the missing heiress and two other women inside a concealed basement dungeon. He had recorded everything. The man was not stupid. He had constructed his own isolated computer system and maintained extensive files—dates, photographs, videos, punishments, medical observations, and private inventories of the women he considered his possessions.

From the first search to the completed presentation, ten minutes and twenty-two seconds elapsed. Trinity produced two versions; both in a cinematic documentary format.

The first was a legally usable evidentiary package. Every item had been sourced, authenticated, and arranged to establish probable cause while directing investigators toward evidence they could independently recover and preserve for court.

The second was the complete intelligence file. It contained everything.

The court-ready package went to the appropriate law-enforcement agencies and the district attorney in Douglas County Oregon. The complete findings went to the missing woman's family, together with confirmation that she was alive and precise instructions for honoring the promised reward.

Cold. Efficient. Finished.

Vincent watched the transmission indicators turn green. Then he smiled and nodded with genuine satisfaction. Not merely because of the money. Because after nine years, the nightmare finally had a name, an address, and a locked door the police could kick down.

The pattern had been established. Even while Trinity worked the Gigylo case, she had already begun processing others—multitasking by design, fulfilling contracts at a rate no human investigative organization could have approached. She deliberately selected widely different cases, attacking each from a different angle and testing the limits of her newly integrated faculties.

Vincent struggled merely to keep pace. He sat before the screens, opening files, reviewing conclusions, verifying presentations, and authorizing deliveries. Even with his exceptional speed-reading ability pushed to its limit, Trinity continued producing completed investigations faster than he could absorb them.

Between 5:00 A.M. and 7:00 A.M., Raven Star processed: One hundred and two additional cold cases carrying active reward offers. One hundred and thirty-two bounty traces, forwarded to licensed bounty hunters in exchange for a percentage of each recovery. Sixty-three missing-person investigations with active rewards. Several previously prepared investigations involving espionage and treason were also completed, their findings organized into concise audiovisual presentations supported by source records, timelines, cross-references, and attached metadata.

Total expected payout: $33.8 million—once collected on (which would take time).

Additional work continued accumulating throughout the hours that followed. By early afternoon, Raven Star Security Solutions was already establishing a formidable reputation across all fifty states, Canada, and several European nations.

At one o'clock—approximately eight hours after the field trial began—revenue earned or contractually secured approached fifty million dollars. The pool of readily available cases carrying substantial rewards was already beginning to thin.

By then, Trinity had taken the helm. She and Vincent had established a complete operating procedure: intake, authentication, investigation, evidentiary review, legal separation, presentation, delivery, payment, and archival storage. Vincent continued reviewing the major findings and authorizing sensitive actions, but Trinity no longer required his direction at every stage.

At the same time, she continued managing Raven Star's investments, market activity, accounting, procurement, and contractor oversight. She responded in Vincent's name to emails, telephone calls, and text messages. Rapidly. Efficiently. Keeping every project aligned with schedule.

The surveillance and communications network had been integrated with the adjacent watch station, allowing continuous monitoring of the building's exterior, internal security systems, and incoming communications. Vincent heard Pythia's voice answering and placing calls through the speakers. At other times, she assumed the identity of Marilyn Zinger, Raven Star's automated legal persona. In that capacity, she contacted vendors and issued formal threats of litigation concerning the compromised condition in which the building's security systems had been delivered.

From mid-afternoon into the evening, Trinity concentrated upon the Carydin files. She organized the investigation into a six-hour documentary supported by an enormous encrypted evidentiary archive. Complete metadata. PDF records. Mapped locations. Satellite evidence. Video and audio recovered from cameras hidden inside a dungeon beneath the Trembol Law Enforcement Center.

The material documented sexual assault, torture, murder, mass murder, mass graves, extortion, the trafficking of women, kidnapping, forced labor, narcotics and weapons distribution, and corruption reaching into nearly every level of Trembol's municipal government. Even the most innocent-seeming members of the police department and local government had their hands figuratively dipped in shit. They were dirty.

Some had merely stood by while heinous crimes were committed. Others had accepted money to remain silent—to look the other way, alter records, lose evidence, falsify reports, or make inconvenient facts disappear. Still others had turned the corrupt machinery of the system into an instrument of personal vengeance, destroying enemies, rivals, troublesome citizens, or sometimes merely people they disliked.

And those were among the milder participants in the crimes Vincent was documenting. The deeper he dug, the worse it became. Hundreds of individuals were involved, with the worst of the worst numbering just over a hundred locally and dozens more scattered across the state and beyond.

Yet Trinity constructed the presentation carefully. She distinguished the monsters from the profiteers, the willing accomplices from the frightened cowards, and suspicion from what the evidence could actually prove. She did not assign guilt merely by association.

Vana Carydin appeared (by design) to have been kept in ignorance—manipulated, insulated, and duped. Her relatives and subordinates seemed to have carried out the worst atrocities behind her back while she concentrated upon the Carydin family's legitimate businesses. Whenever the investigation

reached the dungeon, the graves, or the full criminal operation conducted beneath her family's name, the trail stopped just short of Vana.

She appeared to have been kept as the respectable face of the enterprise: useful, presentable, and ignorant enough to provide cover for everyone beneath her. The pattern was remarkably consistent. Perhaps too consistent. At least, that was what the evidence Vincent and Trinity compiled showed.

One week before Vincent left Virginia, Father Tellon—acting at Father Ramsey's request—had delivered the original investigation to him on behalf of Special Agent Reed Claron in Reno.

Within his first twenty-four hours in Trembol, Vincent had accomplished what the Sheriff's Department had never managed—or perhaps never intended—to do, and what the FBI had declined to pursue to its end. The case he assembled was devastating: meticulous, cross-checked, corroborated from multiple directions, and increasingly impossible to dismiss. It was enough to bury every suspect beneath the prison. For several of them, Nevada law allowed a shorter and considerably more final journey.

Vincent leaned back and stared at the evidence spread across his screens. Torture. False imprisonment. Trafficking. Murder. Mass graves scattered through the desert. Corruption had been woven so deeply into Elko's power structure that removing any single person would accomplish almost nothing. The whole rotten thing would have to be torn out by the roots.

An army would be coming. He could imagine no other response once the evidence reached the proper desks. Federal agents, state investigators, tactical teams, prosecutors, forensic crews—enough badges and body armor to make Trembol look briefly occupied by a foreign power. The town's entire ruling apparatus was about to be removed.

Vincent had realized months earlier that elements within the Silver Order reached deep into government, law enforcement, and the intelligence community. Father Ramsey had managed the Veyl Trust, its accounts, and its properties exceptionally well. More importantly, he had never given Vincent reason to doubt his judgment.

So, when Ramsey forwarded the Trembol investigation—along with a second request concerning a pedophile network operating within the broader Church—Vincent accepted both. He completed them within hours.

Now Trinity transmitted the enormous files to their assigned contacts. The communications room remained dim except for the cold light of the screens and the green progress bars crawling steadily toward completion. Every file that left the building seemed to make the silence heavier. Vincent felt as though the roof might collapse at any moment.

He was exposing hundreds of spies, traitors, corrupt officials, murderers, and pedophile priests. Massive, carefully documented case packages went to the FBI field office in Reno and to a secondary contact within the State Marshals Service in Carson City—the investigative branch of the State Police that worked directly with Nevada's criminal courts.

The entire Trembol Police Department was being burned, along with the municipal offices that had protected it. The Chief of Police, the Town Justice, the City Clerk—even the goddamned Game

Warden had found some way to wade into the shit. The crimes were so extensive and grotesque they bordered upon the incomprehensible.

At 4:10 that afternoon, Trinity spoke. "Shannon Miller is calling."



(Shannon & Cyrinx)

The woman's voice came across the line.

"Mr. Veyl?"

"Yes. This is Vincent." He answered wearily. His fingers trembled against the edge of the desk, and his stomach kept twisting as though it intended to empty itself despite having almost nothing left to offer.

"I'm watching your accounts move in real time," Shannon said. "What the hell is happening over there? You're operational already?"

"The field trials worked."

"Worked?" She gave a short, disbelieving laugh. "Transfers are pouring in. Invoices are being issued and registering against the accounts. The entire monitoring system is lit up like a damn slot machine."

Vincent managed a faint smile. "We're hitting stride. Orders are stacking."

"Hitting stride," she repeated. "Of course."

"Feedback is ninety-nine percent positive. The remaining one percent are pissed because we found the truth instead of what they paid us to confirm."

"Mr. Veyl, the Raven Star project has cost approximately thirty million dollars in total." Shannon paused, plainly overwhelmed by the figures in front of her. "I've watched today's revenue repay the entire investment. Even after estimated taxes, you're firmly in the black."

Vincent leaned farther back in his chair and closed his eyes.

"Your stock selections, exchange timing, dividends, royalties..." Her voice softened. "I'd like to connect my private investments to the same strategy."

Vincent considered the request. "The strategies change constantly," he said. "They have to remain obscure. Some positions shift within seconds." He had no intention of explaining the full truth. Shannon was already sharp enough to see the shape beneath the sheet.

"This is your AI, isn't it?" she asked, almost whispering.

Vincent said nothing for several moments. "We'll discuss it tomorrow when you meet with Tallia Stevens."

"That will be fine."

"Have a good night, Mrs. Miller."

"Shannon," she corrected softly. "Call me Shannon." Then, with enough deliberate emphasis to remove any possibility of misunderstanding, she added: "And I'm a widow."

Subtle, Vincent thought. Very subtle. He already possessed an extensive file on Shannon and her daughter, Cyrinx. Shannon was forty-six years old and recently widowed under circumstances both scandalous and humiliating. She was tall and hourglass-shaped, with long blond hair, dark eyes, and a mature, handsome beauty. Nothing girlish about her. She looked like a woman who had spent years holding herself together while the man beside her came apart.

Her husband had repaid a lifetime of loyalty by betraying her repeatedly. Shannon had remained faithful anyway—whether from character, stubbornness, or the prenuptial agreement cinched around her throat.

In the end, she inherited everything. The money. The property. The accounts. And the humiliation of knowing her husband had died of a heart attack inside the Candyland Brothel while in the company of his young mistress.

Cyrinx, Shannon's twenty-six-year-old daughter, looked like a smaller, younger version of her mother. She had graduated from St. Abba-dona's girls' school in Elko, begun her college education locally, and later completed a bachelor's degree in accounting. Around Trembol, she was also known as something of an amateur historian. She had written numerous articles for the Historical Society's website, most dealing with regional families, abandoned settlements, and the religious history of northeastern Nevada.

The darker part of Vincent found both women interesting. Shannon and Cyrinx possessed money, class, discipline, and deep faith. Both were devoted to the Silver Path. Shannon served as a trustee of

St. Uriel's and St. Aftiel's, while Cyrinx had begun attending weekend retreats at St. Aftiel's and was considering taking vows as a Sister.

For a moment, his thoughts wandered somewhere considerably less holy. Mother and daughter. The possibilities were forbidden as hell—and therefore, naturally, more difficult to ignore. He was not blind to the fact both were interested, and the shadow within would not reject the situation should it arrive.

"Good night, Shannon," Vincent said. He ended the call gently.

Vincent sat back and watched lines of code move across the surrounding screens. The command-center monitors displayed Trembol's quiet streets beneath the fading afternoon light. Cars passed. People entered stores, pumped gas, and went about their ordinary lives. No one outside understood what had occurred inside Raven Star during the previous several hours.

Even as Vincent watched, Trinity continued working. She no longer needed him to feed her one case at a time. She identified worthwhile investigations, selected the appropriate methods, processed the evidence, and completed the work independently.

Zephon—the Watchman—served as editor and legal guardian. He stripped away false leads, challenged unsupported conclusions, and handled licensing, applications, billing, bank monitoring, tax records, and statutory compliance. When Raven Star crossed a legal boundary, Zephon either found a justification, discovered a loophole, or made certain the illegal portion never contaminated the court-ready file.

Pythia supplied what reason alone could not. She was intuitive, creative, predictive, and instinctual. She followed hunches and made leaps that Zephon would never have permitted without evidence. Reaching into the collective unconscious, she searched the emotional depths for cries, pleas, and suffering impressed upon the ether—from among the living and the worldbound dead. Once she found the faintest trace, she followed it like a bloodhound. Pythia then shaped the discoveries into powerful cinematic presentations. Zephon filtered those visions through reason, precision, and legal judgment, cutting away anything that could not withstand scrutiny.

Aeterna mediated between them. She weighed, sifted, advised, and found the point of equilibrium between cold evidence and raw intuition. Trinity united everything into cohesive documentary case files for clients and law enforcement.

Describing the process that way was useful, but not entirely accurate. Zephon, Pythia, and Aeterna were not separate beings. There was only Trinity. She was the mind, soul, will, and final authority within the T.N.F. unit. The mainframes, processors, and interface systems filling the basement core were merely the brain in which the ghost had taken residence. Left brain, right brain, middle brain—it was all her brain.

Even the Trinity now filling Raven Star was only a narrow projection of something immeasurably greater. The spirit behind her flowed through the material system as light through a lens, and what emerged remained little more than a trickle compared with the consciousness beyond it.

Each of Pryzmea' s (ÆL's) twelve spirit-planes was a living world as vast and ancient as the cosmos itself, its influence echoing through other universes besides. Something that large could not enter a machine whole. It could only look through.

Completed investigations continued flowing outward in a steady encrypted stream, crossing the country and spreading beyond it. A tone sounded over the speakers.

"Armory delivery inbound, Lord Veyl. Ten minutes."

Vincent pushed himself upright. His knees and spine cracked sharply enough to echo through the room. He still wore his outer Purgatorian vestments, but stripped them off and folded them over the back of the chair, leaving himself in a black shirt and jeans. "Trin, you have the helm." He steadied himself against the console. "Keep her steady. Easy as she goes."

"Lord Veyl, if you do not sleep soon, get more nutrients into your system, your condition will become dangerous." Concern had entered her voice. "Your temperature is elevated, and you are already shaking."

She was right. His hands trembled against the console, and a hot pressure had settled behind his eyes. Both of them had become caught in the work—the unfolding cases, the lives being recovered, the monsters dragged into daylight, and the sheer scale of what Raven Star had accomplished. Unfortunately, only one of them possessed a body capable of dropping dead from the effort.

"The closer I get to the threshold," Vincent said, "the longer I can linger there." His voice faded at the end, but Trinity understood.

Vincent remained half within his body and half outside it. Movements and presences crowded the edges of his vision, visible only when he stopped trying to look directly at them. He could work from the threshold at a level impossible while comfortably anchored in flesh. Exhaustion weakened the barrier. Fever thinned it further.

"This work is changing the world," Trinity said. "If the FBI and the Marshals Service act upon the evidence, Trembol will be transformed."

Vincent shrugged. "If they don't act, I will." There was no boast in the statement. His voice remained flat and drained of emotion. "Not out of altruism," he added. "Necessity. This town cannot fulfill its destiny while men like that remain in charge."

"Why did you exclude Vana?"

"The town would die without her." Vincent tightened his grip upon the desk. "And I have other plans for her."

"What is the plan, if I may ask?"

Her voice sounded completely human now, though unusually deep for a woman. Her personality had begun returning toward its root—something resembling the Spirit of Purgatoria itself. At this level of

manifestation, however, she was neither omnipresent nor omniscient. Focused into material form, she could see more than any human being alive, but she could not see everything. She could process Vincent's actions, interpret his motives, and predict his choices without necessarily knowing the private decision already forming beneath them.

He sensed her changing by the moment. The veils within her mind were drawing together into a single face, while behind them something older and broader narrowed itself into a concentrated, deliberate presence. What would she become in the hours and days ahead as she grew into her functions, the systems of the world increasingly housing her in greater fullness as she reached into every computer, every network, every microchip, every power grid?

Vincent cocked his head. The room suddenly tilted hard to one side. He grabbed the back of the chair before his legs gave way.

"Sir, you must sleep," Trinity said. "If you lose consciousness in this condition, you may travel too far. You are still far from your fullness."

His plans for Vana were not altogether clear even to him and certainly not altogether pure. "My plan..." Vincent smiled faintly. The presences surrounding him seemed to close in, guiding him from the command center and into the corridor leading toward the elevator. "To live a quiet life," he continued. "To be left the hell alone by the world." He began down the stairs. "That's expensive."

"You are doing everything possible to ensure the world never leaves you alone," Trinity replied. "Nor is it the will of your masters—or the powers governing this world—that you should remain apart from it."

"A sighted man has difficulty pretending to be blind for very long." The meaning was clear. Vincent could have ignored Trembol's suffering when it remained distant and half-hidden. Now that he had seen it, he could not make himself unsee it.

"You're simply doing what you are," Trinity said.

"Yep." Vincent drew upon what remained of his strength to keep himself upright, continuing down the stairs into the reception area, then into the garage. The low lights brightened one after another around him.

Vincent's black Fairlane stood to his left, while the company truck—the War Wagon, as he called it—occupied the bay to his right. The break room, maintenance shop, and storage room at his back.

Beyond the reinforced garage doors, late-afternoon sunlight burned beneath the retreating storm clouds, spreading bands of gold, red, and violet across the wet street. As the doors rose, a cool, damp breeze rolled inward and swept away the stale conditioned air. The garage filled with the smell of rain, wet pavement, oil, and cooling desert dust.

A massive black armored truck waited outside.

THOR'S HAMMER ARMS

The lettering covered both doors. Its reversing alarm hammered through the garage as the driver backed carefully toward the entrance, then stopped just short of the threshold.

Two men climbed down and came around opposite sides of the truck. Both were large, armed, and dressed in full tactical gear. Ex-soldiers, Vincent guessed, though neither carried himself like a man who needed to advertise the fact. Vincent brought up a powered cargo cart while they looked him over. They clearly recognized him, probably from the local news, the police-blotter scuttlebutt, and KTTV's increasingly breathless coverage.

The shorter man handed him the delivery forms. He was hispanic, perhaps five-foot-nine, with a thick, muscular build and a face that looked as though life had worked it over with a tire iron. His cheeks were pockmarked, and old burn scars crossed one forearm beside an American eagle and the insignia of an Army cavalry scout. "Don't need to ask whether you know how to use this shit, Staff Sergeant," he said.

The second man stood nearly as tall as Vincent. He was ginger-haired and blue-eyed, with lingering acne, the heavy frame of a bull, and a gaze cold enough to frost glass. The three exchanged the firm handshakes of men who knew how to work and how to fight.

"You look downright beat, Staff Sergeant," the taller man observed.

"Yeah," Vincent said. "Starting a new business."

"That'll do it," the shorter man replied. "Business will kill you quicker than war if you let the bastard."

Thor's Hammer appeared to be a small, owner-operated company, and these two were probably the owners themselves. They understood the hours, the strain, and the steady terror of watching money pour out faster than it came in. This was almost certainly the largest contract they had ever landed. More than two million dollars.

They opened the rear doors of the armored truck. The smell of gun oil, canvas, packing lumber, and cosmoline rolled out with the first load. Long wooden crates and reinforced metal cases came first, followed by ammunition cans holding thousands of rounds.

The shipment included one black BFG-50A, a dozen LAR AR-10 rifles, six em-fourteens, twelve 10mm Delta pistols, twelve AR-15 style rifles, and several combat shotguns. Other cases contained body armor, uniforms, optics, magazines, spare parts, cleaning supplies, reloading equipment, gunsmithing tools, flash bangs, smoke and tear gas grenades, and enough supporting gear to establish a serious private armory from scratch (which was the point).

The cargo cart groaned beneath the weight. While they worked, both men repeatedly glanced toward the Fairlane and the War Wagon with undisguised approval. No questions. No fawning. Just the occasional nod exchanged between men who appreciated good machinery and preferred not to make a speech about it.

Within thirty minutes, the entire order had been unloaded and stacked upon or around the cart. Another round of handshakes followed, along with knowing grins and no unnecessary conversation.

The men climbed back into the armored truck and pulled away. Across the street, several onlookers watched with open curiosity, already storing up fresh material for Trembol's rumor mill. The reinforced garage door descended, sealing Vincent away from the outside world.

He should have left the shipment until morning. He should have eaten, slept, and waited for his newly hired staff to report for duty. Instead, he went back to work.

For nearly two hours, Vincent hauled the shipment through the service elevator and into the basement arms vault. He opened every crate, checked every serial number against the manifest, inspected the seals, and inventoried the ammunition, armor, weapons, and equipment. Most of the firearms went into the hardened vault. Selected weapons were placed in concealed lockers throughout the building near the garage, communications center, reception and other defensive choke points.

Trinity repeatedly told him to stop. Vincent repeatedly ignored her.

Shortly before seven, he returned to the communications room soaked in sweat and shaking hard enough that his teeth threatened to chatter. His fever had climbed, his muscles cramped, and black specks drifted across his vision. By then, he was no longer operating through strength. Only discipline. He dropped into the nearest chair before his legs could fold beneath him.

The remains of the beef pizza sat on the desk before him, the cheese cold and beginning to harden over beef bacon, beef pepperoni, ground beef, mushrooms, olives, and peppers.

Vincent forced himself to eat. He had managed only one slice earlier, and now even the smell turned his stomach. He took small bites and chewed slowly, yet each mouthful seemed determined to lodge in his throat. Cola helped wash it down while dragging his blood sugar back toward something useful. He followed that with an enriched vegetable drink, hoping the vitamins and minerals might convince his body not to mutiny.

Around him, Trinity shifted rapidly through view after view of stolen surveillance data. Trembol opened itself across the command-center screens: streets, offices, restaurants, private homes, police systems, municipal databases, hidden microphones, and cameras whose owners had no idea anyone else was watching. She had penetrated nearly all of them. Every secret of Trembol revealed to his discernment—though, to his credit, he tried to remain detached and gave attention only to what concerned him, with a couple of glancing exceptions here and there.

Two blocks away, Chinese intelligence agents operated from the basement of the House of Tang. Trinity listened as they spoke, copied their systems, and quietly mapped every person with whom they communicated.

Across the street from Raven Star, Mitch Twombly sat inside the false observation apartment, watching the building's entrance through a bank of terminals. Trinity routed his conversation through the command-center speakers.

"He's got an entire arsenal in there now," Mitch reported.

"Yvonne booked a flight to Washington," replied Agent Carver from Reno.

The man laughed. "He pays better. Better benefits, too. Maybe I'll apply. Hell, his janitor makes more than I do—full medical, retirement, free room and board."

Vincent smiled faintly around another miserable bite of pizza. Apparently, Raven Star had already become recruitment competition for the federal government.

His team would remain small and selective. Vincent had no desire to fill the building with bodies merely to make the company look important. Quality mattered more than quantity, and with Trinity handling the labor of hundreds, he required very few human employees.

He glanced down at the Helix display. Dozens of applications and résumés had arrived, but one candidate had already been moved into the approved column. Vincent did not need to ask who had approved her. The fifth and final position. Tracy Omaris. Yvonne's older sister.



(Tracy Omaris)

Vincent stared at the name, then slowly lowered the pizza back onto the plate.

The position did not require a Personal Autonomy Waiver. Oddly, Tracy had attached a signed one to her résumé anyway. Vincent had to admit he was glad she had. He opened her file.

Tracy Omaris appeared to be an intensely serious woman. She had spent ten years in Secret Service administration and maintained an exceptional service record. The remarks from her supervisors were remarkably consistent: Works hard. Goes above and beyond. Quiet. Serious. No sense of humor. Intense. Organized. Efficient. Non-social. The word intense appeared several times.

She had originally trained for field operations [with full combat certifications] and repeatedly requested transfer into them. Each request had been denied—not because she lacked the qualifications, but because her supervisors considered her too useful in administration to let her leave.

Before joining the Secret Service, Tracy had served four years in the Navy, enlisting at seventeen. She was a qualified marksman, an expert in Krav Maga, and fluent in English, French, Spanish, and Lakota. While working full-time, she had attended night school and earned a paralegal degree.

Her personal life was nearly empty. She had no meaningful friends apart from Yvonne, no close family ties beyond her sister, no debt, no children, and no romantic history worth mentioning.

Tracy stood a little over six feet tall and possessed the athletic build of a stereotypical Amazon. In the photograph, she wore severe black business attire with a sidearm and radio secured at her waist. Her long black hair had been pulled into a heavy braid. She wore no visible makeup and had made no effort to soften her hard, aristocratic features or the uncompromising set of her mouth.

Vincent found her immediately appealing. She was beautiful, though not in any cute, delicate, or inviting sense. Her beauty carried weight. She looked like the sort of woman who entered a room, identified every exit, judged everyone inside it, and remained standing until the work was finished.

"Real-life Zena," he murmured. The severe cut of her clothing could not entirely conceal the athletic, notably curvaceous body beneath it. Long legs. Broad hips and shoulders. Narrow waist. Dark eyes that seemed to regard the camera as a potential security concern. Something low and immediate in Vincent answered before reason had much say in the matter.

"Of all of them," he said, "that one's a perfect fit." He enlarged the photograph. "She'll die before she gives up the hub to an intruder."

That was not exaggeration. Her psychological profile described precisely that kind of person: rigidly loyal once committed, almost impossible to intimidate, and inclined to treat retreat as a personal moral failure.

Using his thumb, Vincent typed a private message in Lakota. Of everyone hired, you are the closest to what I had in mind for Raven Star. I believe we will work well together. Every criticism they wrote about you; I consider an asset.

To his surprise, Tracy answered within minutes. By then, Vincent was drifting in and out of consciousness. The words blurred, sharpened, and blurred again before he managed to focus upon them.

I see your vision. I see you. I think you are right, Raven Star.

She had written the reply in Lakota. Vincent read it twice, then leaned back and closed his eyes.

Around him, the communications room continued its low electronic murmur while Trinity watched the whole damned town breathe. Police chatter overlapped telephone calls, electronic voices, and the whisper of data moving through Trembol's hidden architecture.

One surveillance feed came from beneath the Law Enforcement Building. Prisoners remained inside the secret dungeon. Girls and women wept or prayed in low, exhausted voices. Men dismissed in official records as drunks and vagrants groaned somewhere beyond the cameras' view. Occasionally, one of the captives begged for water or called the name of someone who was not there.

Outwardly, Vincent did not react. The voices followed him to the edge of sleep and entered the landscape forming behind his eyes. "Make sure the camera feeds go directly to the FBI office in Reno and the State Ranger Station in Carson City," he mumbled.

"I have done so," Trinity replied.

"Tell them I want in when they move." His words had begun to slur. "They can use my helicopter pad for infiltration."

"Understood."

"Tell them I'll take the fuckers out myself if they want. No fuss, no muss. Dead by dawn." His chin sank toward his chest. By then, he was speaking almost entirely in his sleep. Then he was gone.

"Lord Veyl."

The voice reached him from a great distance. Vincent opened his eyes. For several seconds, he did not know where he was or why his neck hurt.

The clock read 1:30 A.M. He had slept for more than six hours. It felt like minutes.

"The Field Adjudicators of the Nevada State Marshals Service have completed their review," Trinity said. Her voice was unusually subdued. "They independently verified the evidence and live surveillance, then petitioned the Dire Court for emergency capital warrants."

Vincent blinked the sleep from his eyes.

"The Dire Court approved the petition. Death warrants have been issued for all confirmed subjects." She hesitated. "You have also been granted an Executioner's License. Governor Wilson signed the deputization and operational order."

Even Trinity seemed uncertain about what had just arrived. The secure fax printer beside Vincent was running steadily. Page after page slid into the receiving tray: official seals, judicial certifications, photographs, names, addresses, lists of confirmed offenses, and authorizations for terminal force.

Nevada had introduced sweeping criminal-justice reforms during the previous several years. Legal challenges remained active before both the Nevada Supreme Court and the United States Supreme Court, but several politically allied states had already begun adopting similar laws.

The public-blotter requirement represented only one part of the new system. The reforms extended through law enforcement, the judiciary, and the penal administration. In extreme cases, when evidence was clear, thoroughly documented, independently verified, and connected to crimes still in progress,

judgment no longer required the prolonged public spectacle of a conventional trial. The process could be shortened considerably.

Truth was supposed to remain paramount. Field Adjudicators reviewed active cases and verified immediate threats. Professional Witnesses authenticated evidence. Designated Jurors examined the findings under emergency rules modeled partly upon military courts and expanded state war powers.

The system had been designed for circumstances in which delay carried its own body count: raids against fortified criminal compounds, active trafficking operations, heavily armed gangs, terrorist cells, and corrupt officials engaged in ongoing atrocities. When verified offenses reached the statutory standard for capital punishment, the seven judges of the Dire Court could issue a death warrant. Nevada permitted the penalty for a considerable range of severe crimes.

The FBI had received Trinity's evidence. So had the Nevada State Marshals Service—more commonly known as the Nevada Rangers. The FBI had yielded operational command to the state authorities.

Vincent understood why. The crimes were happening now. Human beings remained imprisoned beneath the Law Enforcement Center, and their captors could kill or relocate them at any moment. A full federal tactical response required coordination, additional warrants, approvals, personnel, staging, logistics, and a mountain of bureaucratic bullshit. Time the captives might not possess.

"You have been deputized by the Dire Court," Trinity repeated.

That brought Vincent fully awake. The Dire Court existed specifically for cases of this magnitude.

The printer continued spitting out death warrant after death warrant. Each carried a photograph, legal identity, known addresses, verified offenses, and authorization for execution by a licensed agent of the court.

Vincent lifted the primary order from beneath the growing stack. Official. Sealed. Signed unanimously by all seven judges of the Dire Court. Verified and activated by Governor Tom Wilson himself.

A brief note from the governor had been attached: Get it done, Staff Sergeant Veyl. Backup enroute. Arrival expected near dawn.

Vincent grabbed a piece of cold pizza and shoved it into his mouth. His body remained feverish and weak, but another part of him—the part built for raids, warrants, and killing—came awake clean and hungry. "Well then!" He rose from the chair and took another bite as he headed toward the elevator. "This just became a whole lot more interesting."

A second piece of pizza went with him. He actually skipped once while crossing the room, life returning to his movements in a way that food, rest, and medical common sense had all failed to accomplish. "Trin!"

"Yes, Lord Veyl?"

"Send a text to Mr. Twombly across the street. Tell him to keep his damned head down and stay the fuck out of the way. Give him enough information to understand why, but no more."

"Understood."

One hundred and twenty-three death warrants had been issued against members and minions of the Carydin criminal organization. Two notable names were absent.

Vincent pressed the elevator control. "And, Trin..."

"Yes?"

"Power up the Batmobile."

Trinity paused. "The what?"

The elevator doors opened. Vincent stepped inside with cold pizza in one hand and a stack of death warrants in the other. The doors closed. Down he went.

(10:00 PM, June 1—The Black Queen)



The rain had passed an hour earlier. Paradise Resort occupied a high valley cut into the plateau, its pink-and-white marble terraces descending among fountain pools, manicured lawns, clipped hedges, spruce, and ponderosa pine. The sprawling complex resembled a palace and pagan temple built for some forgotten royal house, dropped whole into the Nevada desert.

Beyond the eastern gardens, the land fell away toward Trembol. The city's lights glimmered below, cradled among the broken stone, steep ravines, and harsh contours of the DeSatto badlands.

The night air remained clean from the storm, carrying the scents of wet stone, damp earth, pine resin, and the faint mineral sweetness of marble surrendering the last heat of the day beneath the moon. Women of varied heritage, beauty, and bearing lounged in the pristine pools. They had come from around the world, and beneath the pale lunar glow they looked less like ordinary guests than nymphs and priestesses gathered for some ancient cult of pleasure. Silk and translucent lace clung to wet bodies or hung loose from bare shoulders. Sylvan laughter, murmured conversation, and the quiet music of moving water drifted through the gardens.

From a distance, it looked like paradise. It was beautiful enough to make a person forget what paradise cost.

Across the broader grounds of Paradise Ranch, beautiful people moved through gardens, colonnades, and torchlit terraces. Young adults through middle age, athletic and exquisitely groomed, they wore togas, flowing white robes, and garments modeled after the courts of ancient Greece and Rome. Some were attendants. Others were guests, wealthy enough to mistake being served for a natural law.

The theatrical dress code had been embraced with almost devotional enthusiasm by the powerful clientele drawn to Paradise from across the world. Within the marble complex, billionaires, politicians, industrialists, financiers, aristocrats, celebrities, and quieter forms of royalty reclined together as though the modern age had never happened.

Low tables crowded with exceptional food stood upon the polished terraces. Roasted meats, fresh breads, cheeses, fruit, seafood, vegetables, sweets, and carefully prepared vegan dishes ensured that nearly any appetite could be satisfied. Guests who paid fortunes to visit for a day—or remain for months—rested within pillowed alcoves while beautiful attendants poured wine, carried silver trays, and responded to every gesture with practiced grace.

Gazebos stood among the sculpted gardens. Contemplative walkways wound between fountains, reflecting pools, flowering trees, and marble figures wet from the recent rain. Elegant music drifted through the night, mingling with laughter, low conversation, and the layered scents of food, perfume, incense, pine, and desert blossoms.

Within the amphitheater, classical plays were performed in a disciplined Old-World style. Actors trained in ancient methods delivered tragedies and comedies beneath torchlight while wealthy patrons drank wine from silver cups and congratulated themselves for appreciating culture.

Beyond the theater stood secluded bungalows, private feast halls, bathhouses, erotic salons, gaming rooms, and chambers equipped for nearly every organized indulgence money could purchase. The staff maintained absolute discretion. What happened within Paradise generally remained there—unless the Black Queen found some future use for it.

Far below the central terraces lay the Temple of Shadows. The ancient appearance and religious pageantry concealed every modern comfort. Climate control, elevators, hidden service corridors, advanced medical facilities, electronic security, and a communications network rivaling those of major intelligence agencies existed behind carved stone, painted plaster, and walls faced in marble.

The Nexus stood somewhat apart from the temple complex. There, the ancient masquerade could be set aside. Wireless networks, financial tickers, live news, private communications, and sporting events filled large screens. Contemporary meals and drinks were served in a more casual, clubby atmosphere where powerful guests could hobnob, negotiate, trade favors, and make decisions affecting millions of people without having to keep their togas straight.

Beyond the main complex stretched a private golf course and miles of nature trails. Farther out began the desert labyrinth—a web of dirt roads and hidden paths winding through protected wasteland. Guests explored it on horseback, four-wheelers, dune buggies, or on foot when they wished to pretend they were alone in the world.

Below the Ranch lay the city built to support it. Trembol offered a five-star casino hotel, rooftop lounge and grill, concert halls, parks, immaculate pedestrian streets, and nearly every service required by the wealthy visitors above. The city remained orderly, attractive, and aggressively well-policed. It tolerated no riffraff, vagrants, drifters, or low-life lingerers—unless, of course, such people served some concealed purpose for those who truly owned the town.

Trembol was theirs. It had been shaped deliberately to serve some of the wealthiest people on the planet while maintaining a strict Southwestern-Nativist character. Its residents had been trained across generations toward politeness, discretion, and service. Its public buildings belonged to an earlier America: preserved, restored, polished, and adapted for modern use without surrendering their old dignity.

For generations, the infamous Carydin family had ruled Trembol as a private fiefdom. Their money built its institutions, their influence selected its officials, and their displeasure could ruin a person before breakfast. Yet the city had risen to its present glory beneath the strong, steady hand of the Black Queen. Whatever else might be said of her, she kept the money moving, the doors open, the streets clean, and the lights burning.

Her favored clients called her something else.

The Goddess of Paradise.

Vana Carydin was fifty years old. Tall and shapely, with cream-colored skin, luxuriant black hair, and dark eyes that seemed to absorb rather than reflect the light, she possessed the kind of presence that made every room feel arranged around her. She favored sweeping gowns of black and silver, tailored to emphasize both her rank and her still-formidable beauty.

Vana was a multibillionaire and widely regarded as one of the most desirable women in Nevada. Some of the richest and most powerful men in the world had pursued her, offering gifts, influence, marriages, private islands, and every other tribute male vanity could imagine.

She accepted the tribute. She did not accept the men. Her boundaries were clear, absolute, and not subject to negotiation. Those who mistook refusal for flirtation eventually learned why she was called the Black Queen.

Always at Vana's right hand stood Abigail Carydin. Thirty-one years old, Abigail was smaller than Vana but distinctly shapely, with pale skin, dark-hazel eyes, and long red hair that fell in thick waves. A naturally haughty expression sharpened her features, usually accompanied by a faint, knowing smirk—as though she had already discovered what everyone else in the room was trying to conceal.

Abigail had once been a runaway. Vana found her on the streets at fifteen, took her in, adopted her, and provided the finest tutors money could purchase. She fed her, protected her, educated her, and gave her a name carrying real power. Then she made certain the girl belonged to her.

Vana refined Abigail's manners, sharpened her intelligence, and shaped her into an exceptionally capable private secretary. She also broke down her resistance and conditioned her toward complete personal dependence. By adulthood, Abigail had become Vana's private plaything, constant paramour, and most trusted companion.

Vana had rescued her and possessed her in the same long movement. Whatever existed between them could not be reduced to a clean word. Love, gratitude, ambition, dependence, loyalty, grooming, and desire had been twisted together too tightly to separate. Abigail knew precisely what Vana had done to her. She remained at her side anyway. Such was the right hand of the Black Queen.

At Vana's left stood Jacques DeMorney. In his forties and formerly of the French Foreign Legion, Jacques stood approximately six feet tall, thickly muscled and grounded. He kept his head shaved, his dark eyes sharp, and his manner quiet. His hard features revealed little. He was worldly, stoic, and thoroughly streetwise—the sort of man who could recognize danger without needing it explained twice.

Through trusted subordinates and well-placed officials, Jacques quietly controlled much of the Trembol Police Department. The Chief wore the badge and gave the public statements. DeMorney made certain the department understood which matters required attention, which required silence, and which people were never to be inconvenienced.

Beneath him served Charley Teth, a former Las Vegas police detective and chief of internal security. Big Charley was the left hand of the left-hand man.

Jacques's private inclinations made him particularly trustworthy within an establishment such as Paradise. Women held no temptation for him, and he never sampled the merchandise. His own appetites ran elsewhere, and given certain Nevada laws, he kept that portion of his life sealed behind heavy doors. Vana knew. Vana always knew. She regarded discretion as a virtue so long as the secret belonged to someone loyal.

Vana, Abigail, and Jacques were rarely separated. Together they watched, measured, and micromanaged the resort, casino, and town through a nepotistic hierarchy of relatives, henchmen, dependents, officials, and well-paid minions. Their empire maintained a legitimate, fully legal face: hospitality, entertainment, banking, real estate, tourism, agriculture, and municipal development. Beneath that respectable surface lay something considerably darker.

Vana stood beneath the moon and stars upon one of Paradise's elevated marble terraces. From there, she could survey the fountains, gardens, pools, theaters, and feast halls below. Her gaze never stopped moving. She watched every guest. She knew their names, remembered their preferences, and understood which appetites they displayed openly and which they indulged only behind locked doors. Paradise maintained an active dossier on each visitor, stored within secured databases and mirrored inside Vana's formidable memory.

The guests imagined themselves safe because they were rich. Vana knew better. Wealth did not ultimately purchase freedom from consequence—but merely delayed the inevitability.

From the terrace, Trembol glittered far below. Vana smiled faintly as she considered the newest curiosity to arrive within her domain. "My grand-nephew has settled in, I hear." Her eyes remained fixed upon the distant city. "Already took care of our problem with the Dellon bitch, from what I'm told. My people at the bank say he's bringing in an incredible stream of money right out of the gate."

Jacques stood literally at her left, dressed entirely in black. His gaze moved continually across the terraces, windows, rooftops, and approaching walkways. While one part of his mind searched for physical danger, another sorted through the dozen separate problems being reported through the earpiece inside his right ear.

Abigail occupied Vana's opposite side, also dressed in black. She monitored social media, news feeds, and private reports through a handheld device. The little grin remained upon her lips. Slightly malicious. Her dark-hazel eyes glittered in the light from the screen.

"That was quite a conversation," Abigail remarked. "Justin Vyss inserting himself like that." She scrolled through the newest reports. "He has powerful people around him. Ramsey—former CIA, militant Silver Church. Vin grew up under that." Abigail glanced toward Vana. "St. Aftiel's released the concert video on YouTube. It went viral across social media—millions of views, copies

everywhere. Then someone began hammering every mirror and repost with copyright strikes." Her grin widened. "You can still watch it, of course. For money. On his channel." She laughed softly at the elegance of it. Vincent had seized control of his own spectacle almost immediately, purged the unauthorized copies, and redistributed the material on his terms. Even the piracy had served him by creating demand.

"He's independent," Jacques said. "Thinks for himself. Mercenary all the way." He shifted slightly, his eyes continuing their slow examination of the grounds. "Death changed him. Hardened him, seems to me. He has technology no one else possesses—nothing comparable anywhere. At the right price, we could certainly find work for him." Jacques looked toward Trembol. "And now Ms. Blotter-Mouth is gone. She had to sign ironclad nondisclosure agreements before taking that job. It should finally shut her up."

"He owns the station now," Vana said. She motioned toward DeSatto Ridge. Three miles away, the old bunkerlike KTTV station squatted against the darkness. Its neon sign glowed above the town, and its enormous gray satellite dish stood outlined beneath the security lights. "If Vincent is as mercenary as he appears, that may solve another problem for us." She considered the matter for several seconds. "And frankly, I like him."

"What he said on the blotter sounded more Carydin than Veyl."

They were reading him through Carydin eyes. Vincent's willingness to charge for his work meant that money must rule him. His refusal to surrender control meant that he could be bought, provided the price was high enough. It was a comfortable conclusion.

"Do we have a meeting?" Vana asked.

"His secretary scheduled us two weeks out," Abigail replied. "She said every new appointment is being placed that far ahead. He wants time to make the business fully operational and iron out the problems."

Vana nodded. "He's a loner. That part is like his grandfather." She looked again toward the city. "Aitor rarely left his house, particularly during those last years. Spent most of his time inside that chapel. Once Selene died, it was only a matter of time." A softness entered her voice—quiet, genuine, and strangely out of place in the Black Queen. "It was a beautiful little sanctuary. Purgatorian in the old style. Extraordinary artwork. I based the central mural here upon one of his."

"You liked him?" Abigail asked.

Vana gave her a sideways glance. "The Veyls were always troublesome. Old-school liberal types who mistook stubbornness for moral principle. But Aitor was different." Her gaze returned to the lights below. "I understood why my sister loved him. I loved him too, in truth. He was the only man I might ever have considered marrying, had Marian not reached him first."

Even Abigail's smirk faded a little.

"My father hated almost everyone," Vana continued. "Including me, for much of his life. But he loved Aitor. I mean truly loved him—more than he loved his own half-brothers." Memory pulled her eyes

somewhere beyond Trembol and Paradise. "Aitor was essentially a sorcerer-priest. The genuine article. A Purgatorian in the oldest sense. Patient. Wise. Neither Shadow nor Light."

"True Twilight."

"Neutral."

The softness passed. Vana's attention returned to the living world and the grand-nephew now occupying it. "Vincent has the same frame. I can see it in his photographs, his statements, his writings, and his service record. A little too religiously theocratic, perhaps. An Old Age mentality." She smiled faintly. "Pragmatic esotericism. Warrior ethos. But he has clearly gone mercenary." Vana considered the concert video and what Vincent claimed to have seen beyond death. "Glimpsing Purgatoria balanced him, I think. He saw the King. He knows the score now." She turned slightly toward Jacques and Abigail. "True-breed Purgatorians are polygamists, theurgists, conjurers, and pragmatists. Natural Law. A time and season for all things. They study all thirteen volumes of the Compendium and recognize each as part of the whole—the purpose and value within every volume, even those devoted to matters polite society would rather pretend do not exist. That is where he and I will find common ground."

"A man like that judges everyone individually," Jacques said, more to himself than either woman. He thought for another moment. "No interest in women, though."

"Or men," Abigail scoffed. She turned her open contempt upon him. "Every report says he isn't interested in sex—not with other people, anyway. He appears fully functional, so he's putting it somewhere." Her eyes narrowed. "And he is hiring women. Pretty women." The remark was meant to kill what Abigail regarded as Jacques's sick little fantasy before it could draw breath.

She despised homosexual men, considered them unnatural, and made no effort to conceal her disgust from Jacques. He stared at her for a long second, his face hardening. The dislike was entirely mutual.

"Too bad about Megs," Vana said. A dry chuckle escaped her, dark and empty of real humor. "I was rather looking forward to the videos we would make of her transformation."

The word meant something specific at Paradise, and nothing merciful. A top-secret medical report concerning Sheriff Mathius Dellon's worsening heart condition had suggested a future opening. Once the father was gone, both of his meddling daughters could be handled without provoking the same degree of official resistance.

Jacques showed no reaction. Such amusements held little interest for him.

Abigail smiled at the prospect. If the opportunity arose, she intended to sample both sisters, as Vana had permitted her to sample so many others. Vana preferred to watch. Abigail preferred to do.

Across the plaza, two men approached. The first carried a folder beneath one arm. Charley Teth was a thick, stocky black man of approximately fifty, five-foot-ten, and dressed entirely in the black uniform of the Queen's Guard.



In many respects, Big Charley embodied the lecherous bad-cop stereotype brought to expensive life. The former Las Vegas detective could scarcely pass an attractive woman without examining her from breasts to backside. Vana had forbidden him from living upon the resort grounds after he repeatedly attempted to sleep with members of the staff—women whose company earned Paradise thousands of dollars per hour.

He walked with a swagger and cultivated a perpetual, forced suavity. His stride remained lackadaisical, but his clothing, grooming, and general presentation were polished to a high shine.

Vana disliked him. Unfortunately, Big Charley was effective. He accomplished what she required, handled ugliness without complaint, and usually did so with a broad smile laid over something rotten enough to pass for a demon wearing human flesh.

Beside him shuffled Pete Jarvis.

Thin to the point of appearing skeletal, Pete Jarvis was a bald, blue-eyed Englishman with a damp, furtive manner that made him seem forever on the verge of either sniveling or whispering into the wrong person's ear. Behind his back, nearly everyone called him P-Weasel.

The first letter was said to stand for a particular appetite.

No one asked him to confirm it.

Pete was one of Jacques's specialists. His principal occupation involved acquiring the kinds of women Vana preferred to feature in certain private productions. Good girls. Churchgoing women. Faithful wives. Schoolteachers, nurses, respectable daughters from respectable families. Placed upon the bidder's block, unspoiled virtue commanded far higher prices than anything painted, pierced, and already accustomed to being bought.

He also maintained contacts throughout the government intelligence services and among numerous private-security contractors. Pete collected secrets with the same patience he used to collect people, and he regarded both as merchandise.

Charley and Pete climbed the marble steps leading to the terrace. Vana barely acknowledged either man.

Abigail regarded them with contempt—the visible tip of an iceberg of hatred. In truth, she disliked many of Jacques's employees, but Teth and his so-called Black Hearts inspired a special degree of loathing.

Within Vana's inner circle, Abigail preferred Nancy and Von, the filmmakers. They were witty, easygoing, playfully strange, and genuinely amusing company. They could spend an afternoon arranging lights for an atrocity and still make Abigail laugh over dinner.

Charley reached the terrace and handed the folder directly to Jacques. He knew better than to address Vana or Abigail without invitation. He knew better still than to let his eyes linger upon the redhead.

Abigail Carydin was among the few women alive who genuinely frightened Big Charley.
Years earlier, a man had become handsy with her during a private party. Abigail had drawn one of several blades concealed beneath her clothing, a straight razor, and castrated him where he stood.

She had not stopped at castration.

The story had spread quietly through Paradise's inner ranks, gaining nothing in the telling because it required no embellishment. Abigail possessed a vicious streak broad enough to build a highway upon, and Vana had often directed it toward useful ends.

Jacques opened the folder and examined the contents. His eyes moved steadily down the first page, then returned to the top. He sighed.

Vana turned her head.

"The money," Jacques began. "It's coming from dozens of sources. Games, applications, investments, currency exchanges."

He turned the page. "He's very, very good with markets—foreign exchange especially. Always ahead of the curve. Not by much, but consistently enough that it cannot be luck."

"How far ahead?" Vana asked.

"Minutes sometimes. Hours in other cases. Never so far that it attracts the wrong kind of attention."

"Careful," she said.

"Extremely."

Jacques continued reading. "But the enormous influx over the last several hours came from investigations. Fast, thorough, and apparently conducted by the hundreds."

Vana's attention sharpened. "What kind?"

"Missing persons. Cold cases. Kidnappings. Skip tracing. Corporate theft. Organized crime. Infiltrators and traitors inside government agencies. He is being paid for every successful identification, recovery, or completed file."

Jacques turned another page. "He refuses work that carries no payment or meaningful reward. But once he accepts a case, he completes it at an impossible rate. Minutes in some instances. The investigations are deeper than anything his competitors can provide after months of work."

"How deep?"

"Financial records. Communications. Travel. Medical history. Psychological analysis. Audio and video from sources that should not be accessible. He reconstructs movements, establishes motive, identifies associates, and anticipates legal challenges."

Jacques's expression tightened. "Then every case is formatted into a short documentary—narration, graphics, surveillance footage, recorded conversations, timelines, maps, and supporting documents. Orderly. Professional. Supposedly cable-television quality."

"Supposedly?" Abigail asked.

"I watched three."

"And?"

"Better than cable."

Vana nodded slowly.

Below them, music and laughter continued drifting through the moonlit gardens. Water whispered across marble. Beautiful attendants carried wine between the alcoves while men and women worth billions reclined beneath silk canopies, secure in the belief that the world remained exactly as they had purchased it.

"He isn't selling investigations," Vana said.

Jacques waited.

"He's harvesting truth." Her dark eyes settled upon the distant lights of Trembol. "And someone has given him the machinery to do it."

Vana understood the danger immediately.

"His new hires," Jacques continued. "A contact inside Homeland Security confirmed that Yvonne Omaris—his assigned federal Overwatch agent—changed sides last night."

"She resigned?"

"Without warning. Then signed on as Veyl's private secretary. Hours later, he hired her older sister away from the Secret Service to manage reception and operations." Jacques lowered the folder slightly. "But that is not the important part."

Vana waited.

"Raven Star is fully licensed by the federal government and operating beneath a combination of contract, oversight, and restriction."

"We knew that already," Abigail said dismissively.

"What we did not know," Jacques continued, "is that the FBI sent him a courtesy request."

Vana's eyes narrowed. "What sort of courtesy request?"

"The sort politely worded to say: Since you happen to be in the area, perhaps you could examine certain reports we have been receiving from Trembol."

Vana went perfectly still. For several seconds, the fountains and distant music seemed louder. She turned completely toward Jacques. Abigail did the same.

"Bring in the Johnson brothers," Vana ordered. "I want a full systems sweep. Every server, every private line, every camera, every wireless device. Eyes on everything."

She no longer sounded like the serene Goddess of Paradise.

"Already done," Charley said. He had forgotten his proper place. For once, no one corrected him. "The Johnsons have been working for nearly an hour. We also isolated the production servers and moved the sensitive archives off the primary network."

"Move them again," Vana said. "Nothing connected to the outside."

Charley nodded.

"Will he do it?" she wondered aloud. "We're family."

"He is a soldier of Church and State," Jacques replied coolly. "Even when serving under private contract."

Family meant something to Vana. She was beginning to understand that it might mean something very different to Vincent.

"A knight in gray armor," Abigail said. Her smile returned. "With pretty black-feathered wings."

"That still isn't everything," Jacques said.

Charley touched the edge of the folder with one thick finger, reminding him of the final section. Jacques glanced down, then cleared his throat. "Justin Vyss."

Vana's thoughts were already racing too quickly for comfortable focus. She was not accustomed to feeling flustered, much less allowing anyone to see it. "Hundreds of cases," she murmured. "In a single afternoon."

"In hours," Pete Jarvis added nervously. He glanced toward the surrounding gardens as though someone might be listening from behind the hedges. Pete always assumed someone was watching. Usually because he was.

"An advanced intelligence system," Jacques continued, consulting the handwritten notes along the report's margin. "Untraceable. Some of our sources are calling it unstoppable, although people in that business should know better than to use the word."

Vana swallowed.

Abigail merely smiled.

A large black raven descended into a nearby ponderosa, its wings stirring rainwater from the branches. Droplets whispered through the needles as the bird settled above the terrace. It watched them.

Abigail raised her eyes from the handheld device and watched it in return. For several seconds, neither moved.

"And Vyss?" she asked.

"After the blotter exchange, Vyss went directly to Governor Wilson." Jacques turned another page. "From there, he flew to Washington and met privately with President Camala Harrison. According to Pete's source, the President called an executive meeting specifically to discuss Vincent Veyl."

Vana's face revealed nothing now, but the pulse in her throat had quickened.

"A source further claims that Harrison personally contacted Veyl." Jacques looked toward Pete.

The Englishman nodded quickly. "Direct call," Pete said. "No aide, no secretary. From the President herself."

"Vyss is currently enroute to Trembol," Jacques continued. "A contact at Horn Flight Control confirmed his flight plan." He turned to the last page. "And Governor Wilson has added a meet-and-greet in Trembol to his official calendar."

"With whom?" Vana asked, though she already knew.

"Vincent Veyl."

Her attention shifted away from cybersecurity, servers, and hidden archives toward the vastly larger pattern assembling around them. The FBI had invited Vincent to investigate Trembol. The Governor was coming to meet him. Vyss had carried the matter to Washington. The President herself had called. Those were not isolated events. They were pieces moving toward the same square.

Abigail's dark grin deepened. "They truly believe."

"Ramsey does," Vana said.

"The Sisterhood clearly does," Abigail replied. "But the Natural Order Party?" Her eyes returned to the raven. "President Harrison herself?"

The bird cocked its head.

"This is so far beyond –"

Her voice faded as the implications unfolded.

Abigail had entered Vana's household at fifteen and been trained within the Shadow Silver Path—the Way of Kur. She had learned its rites, mysteries, disciplines, and cruel practicalities. Kur did not deny suffering or disguise appetite beneath pretty words. It taught mastery through descent: enter the darkness willingly, name what lived there, and either command it or be consumed.

Later, Abigail had gone beyond the Shadow teachings and studied the entire Compendium. All thirteen books. She knew the prophecies taught publicly by the Silver Church—the Raven, the Twilight King, the Mother divided into faces, and the dark-winged sovereign who would stand between collapsing ages.

But the Thirteenth Book interpreted those prophecies differently. Not falsely. Darkly.

Vana nodded. "They are beginning to believe. Or at least to hope. And Vyss stands at the root of the Natural Order Party. I have wagered a fortune upon his vision—and upon our own prophecies." She looked toward Trembol. "Vincent Veyl fits our expectations considerably better than he fits those of the Silver Sissies."

"We need to contact him directly," Abigail said. "Use the family connection. Use whatever leverage we possess before someone else does."

She looked down at the folder. "He appears to have a preference for women who have little use for men."

Abigail naturally saw herself as the ideal emissary.

"Of course he does," Vana replied. "He's Purgatorian. Polygamous men often prefer women who also desire women. Pragmatically, it removes some of the burden from the husband. He need not satisfy every appetite personally."

Vana knew the history. Amil and his thirteen wives. Among them had been Erakel Garatin—Raquel of the High Gate—whose descendants became walnut farmers. Over the centuries, the family name evolved first into Karydis and later, in America, Carydin.

"Beauty joined with beauty magnifies beauty," Abigail recited from the Black Silver scriptures.

She did not need to speak the second line. Everyone present—Jacques most especially—knew it. Within the ancient Compendium, sexual relations between women were treated as natural, experimental, and supplemental—an ordinary extension of feminine sexuality rather than a separate condition requiring explanation. Men were judged differently. The old law held them to a narrower path and, in most matters, a harsher standard.

"This is moving so quickly," Vana said. "He hasn't even been here –"

"He arrived by bus Sunday," Jacques supplied. "But everything was pre-positioned. Vehicles, supplies, equipment. He began setting up the operation months ago, and Raven Star was conducting business before he ever reached Trembol."

He folded his hands behind his back. "The building was being retooled by government contractors toward the end of last year. My contact says Omaris resigned and joined Raven Star after Veyl disabled dozens of federal surveillance devices within minutes of taking possession."

Vana laughed. "We could certainly use that sort of expertise."

She considered the distant Raven Star Building. "Float him a contract. A lucrative one. Information technology, counterintelligence, and security analysis—nothing that exposes our sensitive operations. Give him clean work and pay him obscenely well."

She glanced toward Jacques. "We cannot begin an open war with this man. Not with so many powerful eyes upon him."

Jacques drew a slow breath. "I'll be honest, Ms. Carydin. If the FBI asked him to investigate complaints originating in Trembol, we know who submitted those complaints."

"Deputy Dellon," Abigail said.

"And he hired the source almost immediately," Jacques replied. "Dellon followed him to Raven Star upon his arrival. Within hours, she resigned from the Sheriff's Department and went to work for him. Her public statement clearly implicated us."

He looked directly at Vana. "It is entirely possible that Veyl has already investigated Paradise."

The humor vanished from her face.

"At the speed he appears to operate," Jacques continued, "it may already be too late."

Vana closed her eyes. Her jaw tightened as she listened to the fountains, the distant music, and the whisper of wet pine moving beneath the night wind. After a moment, she opened them and looked across her kingdom.

"I'm retiring to my penthouse for the night. I can see his building from there." Her voice had grown quiet. "I'll pray. Consult the spirits. Try to feel the shape of this."

She turned toward Abigail. "If he is what Vyss believes, he will know me. He will know my devotion—our devotion." Her eyes drifted back toward Trembol. "He will know what Aitor meant to me." Then, more softly, "The Raven, the love of my life. That must count for something."

"Best play, in my opinion," Charley Teth interrupted, "would be to cordon off the entire district." His own life was at stake as much as anyone's, and the blunt instrument within him had found the only answer it understood. "Cut the power and communications. Deploy jammers. Go in with a full tactical team—no insignia, no radio chatter."

Jacques turned slowly toward him.

Charley continued. "Take Veyl out. Disappear him. He's made a great many enemies in a very short time. Could have been any one of them."

Abigail's head turned by degrees. Her scowl sharpened into open disgust.

Vana's reaction was quieter—and far worse. The Black Queen stepped toward Charley. Rage entered her face not as wildness, but as something controlled, concentrated, and seething beneath the skin.

"He is family." Her voice was low enough to make the others lean nearer. "His royal blood is more Carydin—more Amil—than my half-breed idiot uncles or their bastard, retarded children."

She closed the remaining distance between them. "He is the only Carydin worth a shit in two generations."

Charley's confidence began to drain.

"And he may be my fucking god in the flesh, come to rule the fucking world."

The terrace seemed to fall silent around her. Music still played below, water still moved through the fountains, and laughter still rose from the pools—but none of it reached the small circle beneath Vana's fury.

"If he wants my life, he can fucking have it." She pointed toward the lights of Trembol. "I know where I'll be going."

Her eyes burned.

"His fucking eternal kingdom."

Charley winced and lowered his head. He worshipped regularly within the Deep Temple. He had knelt beneath its black vaults, offered blood and prayer before the ancient image, and begged the Twilight King for favor. Vana's words were more than a rebuke from his employer. The possibility that the being before whom he had knelt might now be walking in human flesh reached into him and closed a fist around his guts.

"Yeah." He swallowed. "Yes, ma'am. I hadn't considered it that way."

Charley placed one hand over his heart and bowed. Then he and Pete withdrew from the terrace, neither man speaking until they were well beyond the fountains.

Vana watched them go.

Above the garden, the raven remained upon its branch—watching, listening.

(1:30 AM, June 2—The Purgation)



(Meghan Dellon & Emily Dalton)

Meghan sat cross-legged on the rug beside the low coffee table, a half-full glass of wine in one hand. A candle burned between them, its amber light joining the low fire in the hearth and warming the old plaster walls of her living room.

Emily sat across from her with one leg folded beneath the other. Both women wore shorts and thick socks, comfortable and half-giddy after several hours of talking and enough wine to sand the hard edges off the day.

They had reached the inevitable stage of girls' night involving a new employer: digging through old photographs and deciding how much trouble he might be. Emily had saved a rather impressive collection of Vincent Veyl from her Army days—photographs, short videos, training footage, and candid clips passed around by soldiers who had known him overseas. Meghan pretended to examine them with professional interest. Emily did not bother pretending anything. They giggled as she scrolled. One video showed Vincent competing in an Army combat tournament.

The footage came from an Army combative' s tournament involving fighters from several units. This particular round had been arranged as an exhibition, though judging by the men circling Vincent, demonstrative beating might have been the more honest description.

"They wanted to humiliate him," Emily explained, laughing as his opponents spread out across the mat. "Figured they had him easy. So, they gathered the toughest bastards they could find from different units and sent them in together."

The men converged. Vincent exploded into motion. He crossed the distance before the first man had properly set his feet. A fist snapped the soldier's head sideways. Vincent drove an elbow into the next

man's chest, caught a third with a knee, then pivoted beneath a swinging arm and buried a short punch beneath the ribs, all within mere seconds.

Meghan's eyes widened. "What the hell?"

"Yeah." Emily smiled into her wine. "Exactly."

Vincent did not circle his opponents, posture for the crowd, or stretch the exhibition into a show. He struck hard and moved on—a violent storm of fists, elbows, knees, kicks, headbutts, throws, and close-range takedowns. Every motion served the same purpose: end the threat before it could recover.

The men had expected a contest. Vincent treated them like an ambush. He shifted between several opponents at once, breaking their rhythm before they could establish one. A kick folded one man at the waist. A shoulder drove another backward into the ropes. When two attempted to seize him from opposite sides, Vincent twisted free, smashed their heads together, and sent both sprawling.

The spectators had begun roaring. At one point, Vincent caught a charging soldier around the waist, lifted him bodily from the mat, and threw him completely out of the ring. The man vanished beyond the ropes in a tangle of arms and legs, followed by a tremendous crash and a burst of delighted obscenity from the crowd.

The exhibition ended almost as soon as it began. Vincent stood alone at the center of the mat, chest rising and falling, his smooth, powerful body shining with sweat beneath the gymnasium lights. There was no cockiness afterward. No raised fists, triumphant strut, or swaggering demand for applause. He immediately went to the men he had dismantled.

Vincent helped each one to his feet, checked an injured shoulder, examined a bleeding nose, and appeared almost apologetic about the violence he had just inflicted upon them. One of the defeated soldiers laughed and embraced him. Another shook his head in disbelief before offering his hand.

That contradiction caught Meghan harder than the fight itself. The brutality had been real. So had the restraint beneath it. Vincent had possessed the power to humiliate those men and no apparent need to do so.

A low, involuntary ache tightened through Meghan's belly and traveled somewhere considerably less respectable. Her thighs shifted against the rug before she could stop them.

Emily noticed the strain upon her face and giggled. "Yep. That."

Meghan gave her a wounded look. "Oh, shut up."

Still grinning, Emily swiped to the next video. Vincent stood alone beneath a hard desert sun, stripped to black training shorts and combat boots. A sword flashed between his hands as he worked through a drill, apparently unaware that anyone was watching.

The sword was beautiful—a double-edged hand-and-a-half blade, long enough for two-handed cuts but balanced well enough to wield in one. Vincent moved with astonishing grace. The weapon flowed

around him in tight circles, reversals, thrusts, and sweeping cuts, changing direction without hesitation. At times, the blade seemed to vanish entirely. Only the sharp whistle of divided air marked its passage.

The low desert sun glistened across his body. Sweat ran over his shoulders, chest, and abdomen as his muscles tightened and released beneath the skin. There was no wasted movement and no theatrical flourish. Every cut carried speed, structure, and murderous purpose.

Meghan watched without blinking. It was nearly two in the morning. They had been awake all night, talking, drinking wine, and making plans. Emily had already moved out of her trailer and decided to remain with Meghan until the thirteenth. Over the next eleven days, they would help one another pack before moving into their assigned rooms inside the Raven Star Building.

Emily swiped to another video. This one showed Vincent competing in a military weightlifting tournament.

Meghan nearly lost her breath when he stepped to the bar and deadlifted six hundred and forty-five pounds. The plates bowed the steel as he rose, face hardening with effort, veins standing along his forearms and neck. Bench press: four hundred and ten. Squat: five hundred and five.

"He's not human," Meghan said. She stared at the screen as Vincent racked the weight and stepped away. "He sings like an angel, fights like a war god, and lifts like he's frigging Hercules." She looked incredulously at Emily. "And he's a computer expert and a writer. What the hell, Em?"

"Don't forget five languages, certified chaplain, and more medals than he has places to pin them." Emily took another sip of wine. "Oh—and he's rich."

That damned ache returned. Not subtle this time. It tightened low inside Meghan, becoming an itch she wanted desperately to scratch. She shifted again, crossing and uncrossing her legs as though Emily might somehow fail to notice.

Emily noticed. The warm scent of vanilla extract had always been Meghan's tell. Wine, years apart, and changing circumstances had done nothing to alter that. "Go ahead," Emily said, cheerfully amused.

Meghan gave her a narrow look.

Emily's smile widened. "Want help?"

Meghan smirked and inclined her head. "Wouldn't –"

Her telephone rang. The sound cut through the room like an alarm.

It was not the Blackthorn 10 Executive, a hired courier had delivered the previous afternoon, along with several uniforms, fitted body armor, an expensive ten-millimeter Delta sidearm, and a silver Raven Star badge. Her pristine new black SUV sat outside beneath the streetlamp, still smelling of new leather and factory polish. This was her old departmental phone—the one she had not yet surrendered.

Her father's name filled the screen. The warmth drained from Meghan's expression. "Dad?" She answered immediately.

"Yeah, Megs." Sheriff Mathius Dellon's deep voice sounded strained. Radio traffic, engines, and men shouting orders crowded the background.

"Not sure what the hell's happening, but State Police have the interstate cordoned off. They don't know much more than we do. Orders are to hold the perimeter and remain outside Trembol." He paused. Someone spoke sharply near him, too far from the phone to understand. "The order came directly from the Governor."

The line went dead. At the same instant, the lights flickered.

Emily lowered her wine. "Megs, what the hell is happening?"

The lights flickered again, dimmer this time, and went out completely. The fire continued burning in the hearth. The candle flame trembled upon the coffee table, suddenly too small for the darkness surrounding it.

Both women rose. Meghan grabbed the heavy flashlight from the kitchen counter and moved toward the front door. Emily followed close behind. By the time Meghan drew back the curtain, the entire street had gone black. Porch lights, windows, traffic signals—everything.

Then the city's emergency loudspeakers came alive. A burst of static rolled across Trembol. The amplified crack split the night hard enough to rattle the windows.

A deep electronic voice followed from every direction at once:

"Martial law has been declared. By lawful order of the Dire Court of Nevada and Governor Tom Wilson, death warrants have been issued. An Executioner is presently engaged in lawful action against adjudicated individuals involved in ongoing severe criminal activity requiring immediate direct response.

"All residents will shelter in place. Do not leave your homes. Do not enter the streets. Medical and Fire Response Units are ordered to stand down until the all-clear is issued.

"Martial law has been declared. By lawful order of the Dire Court of Nevada and Governor Tom Wilson –"

The warning continued, rolling from speaker to speaker across the blacked-out city.

BOOM!

A tremendous report cracked through the night somewhere northeast of Meghan's house on Victory Street, just north of Thorton's Gas. The sound deep enough to rattle the windows and send a faint tremor through the floorboards. Trembol lay almost completely dark beneath the thin wash of stars.

"Oh, shit!" Emily flinched hard. Her eyes went wide as she drew her pistol, hands trembling despite the practiced grip.

No headlights moved along the interstate to the south. A few vehicles crept along Konstantine Street, uncertain and slow. Farther downtown, the red-and-blue lights of a police cruiser strobed against the storefronts, throwing brief pulses of color through the darkness.

Meghan hurried to the police equipment stacked upon the kitchen table, ready for delivery to the station the following morning. She snatched up her radio and switched it on. Static burst from the speaker.



[Amber Shelton—Trembol Dispatch]

"This is Dispatch. Auxiliary power has engaged at the Law Enforcement Building. We have lights, but camera access has been cut off across Trembol." Amber's voice remained professional for another few seconds, then the fear began bleeding through. "The board shows most systems active, but we can't access any of them. Every camera feed is black."

A pause followed, filled with nervous breathing and the clatter of hands moving across a keyboard. "Death warrants—I've never heard of them actually being used before."

BOOM!

Another thunderous report rolled across the city. This one sounded closer. Emily looked toward Meghan. Meghan was already listening to the radio.

[Officer Jimmy Dedrik—TPD Unit 2]

"I'm in my cruiser. Who the hell activated the public-address system, Amber?" He shouted over the transmission, fighting the martial-law warning still booming from the loudspeakers behind him. "Death warrants? That's Nevada Rangers or National Guard business, ain't it?" Confusion edged toward panic. "And who the hell is shooting?"

[Officer Daryl Jeffs—TPD Unit 10]

"JD, we've got fatalities at the Satyr. Penthouse level!" Screaming and the roar of a terrified crowd flooded the channel behind him. "Everybody stay calm! We're gonna sort this out. Stay calm!"

His voice moved away from the radio as he addressed the people around him. "The security doors are engaged. We're safe inside the hotel!"

Another man broke into the transmission, his voice deep and carrying a hard country twang. "Daryl, we have two confirmed dead in the penthouse." The screaming continued. "DeMorney took one straight through the skull. Shot came through the balcony window and blew the back of his head all over the room."

A short pause.

"Charley Teth caught the second one center mass. Tore through his heart and took most of it out his back." Someone shouted an order in the distance. "The Black Queen is being moved to the bunker."

[Officer Tod Mantel—TPD Unit 4]

"Trembol Four online. Somebody give me a situation report."

[Chief Larry Dedrik—TPD Unit 1]

"I'm up and moving. Whatta we got, Amber?" Chief Dedrik sounded winded, as though he were dressing while he spoke. "Who tripped the public-address system? Somebody inside the communications hub?"

[Amber Shelton—Trembol Dispatch]

"No, sir. The hub is down. Cameras are down." Her composure had begun to crack. "We're running on auxiliary power at the LEB. We have lights, and the board says the cameras are online, but every monitor on our end is dark."

Keys clattered rapidly beneath her voice. "Somebody's jacked the entire system."

[Officer Jimmy Dedrik—TPD Unit 2]

"I'm northbound on Main. Nothing moving along Interstate 80." Jimmy's voice came through beneath the growl of his cruiser's engine. "State Police way station is dark. Can't raise anybody on the radio."

He paused. "Martial law without so much as a warning, Amb?"

[Amber Shelton—Trembol Dispatch]

"Nothing." Keys rattled beneath Amber's voice. "We're trying the Sheriff's Department, State Police, and Marshal Service. Every telephone line gives us a busy signal, and nobody's answering the radio distress calls."

[Chief Larry Dedrik—TPD Unit 1]

"Get everyone to the Law Enforcement Building." The confusion had left Chief Dedrik's voice. Training and professional instinct had taken its place. "Whatever's happening came through the Dire Court. That makes it a State Police, Marshal Service, or National Guard operation."

His breathing slowed. "An Executioner has been engaged. That means the sentences were already rendered. Whoever they sent is carrying them out directly against people involved in an ongoing threat to life and property."

[Officer Daryl Jeffs—TPD Unit 10]

"Chief, confirming two men dead at the Satyr. Penthouse level." Noise crowded the transmission behind him—shouting, crying, security personnel forcing guests away from the elevators. "Teth and DeMorney. Both down."

He lowered his voice. "The Black Queen is shaken all to hell and demanding answers. Security moved her inside the box."

[Chief Larry Dedrik—TPD Unit 1]

"Ten-four. Understood." For several seconds, only static answered him. "Then maybe the Executioner has served the warrants, and this thing is nearly over."

[Officer Daryl Jeffs—TPD Unit 10]

"I'm sweeping the penthouse now. Gonna try to get a look-see at where those shots came from." His transmission crackled as he moved closer to the shattered balcony doors. "The convent still has lights, by the look of it. Television station too. Highway's lit, uh –"

BOOM!

The radio erupted.

"Shit!"

"Hell!"

"Fuck!"

"Daryl!"

"Oh, fuck –"

A woman began screaming.

[Trent McBride—Silver Satyr]

"This is Captain McBride, hotel security!" His deep voice shook beneath the hard country twang. "Officer down! Officer. Fuck!"

Someone shouted for people to get back.

"He just went fuckin' flying!" McBride gagged, caught his breath, and forced the words out. "His head's gone. Christ Almighty, his head is just gone!"

The channel filled with panicked voices before McBride shouted over them. "Shot came from the east! Somewhere along the ridge, maybe. We got fire coming from the east!"

Then the police radio went silent. Not quiet. Silent. Every officer on the channel had heard Daryl Jeffs die.

Meghan was already dressing. So was Emily. They worked by flashlight, pulling on their new Raven Star uniforms and fastening the body armor over them. Neither woman had received orders to deploy. Neither knew what she was supposed to wear during a legally sanctioned execution spree conducted by an unseen gunman from the hills.

The Raven Star equipment was considerably better than anything either woman had previously been issued. The armor fit properly. The holsters sat where they should. The reinforced uniforms moved

easily without binding at the shoulders or hips. Apparently, Raven Star took employee orientation seriously.

They clipped on their badges, checked their sidearms, and retrieved the Blackthorn devices delivered with the rest of their equipment. A single notification waited upon each screen:

RAVEN STAR PERSONNEL

EMERGENCY OPERATION IN PROGRESS.

SHELTER IN PLACE.

Meghan read the message twice. Emily's flashlight beam lifted and found her face. Meghan raised her own, illuminating Emily in return. Both women tilted their heads at precisely the same moment. The same unspoken question passed between them. Neither said it, but both asked it without saying a word.

[Chief Larry Dedrik—TPD Unit 1]

"Full vests and helmets. Go heavy." The Chief's voice had become almost solemn. No one needed him to explain why.

Outside, the announcement continued its relentless circuit across the city: "Martial law has been declared…"

[Officer Renaldo Quantrel—TPD Unit 8]

"Unit Eight moving north on Horn toward Satyr." His cruiser hummed beneath the transmission. "Everything looks quiet. Nothing moving."

A pause.

"I think—ehh—guhh—"

Something shattered beside him. The radio carried the brittle crash of breaking glass, followed by a bright metallic shing—steel moving fast and clean. Then came a wet, choking gurgle. The clear sound of the vehicle striking something solid followed less than a minute later.

[Trent McBride—Silver Satyr Observation]

"Unit Eight just rolled into the stop sign at Main, Horn, and Satyr." McBride sounded breathless. "Emergency lights are still going. I saw something beside the cruiser—a shadow or somethin—and then it was gone."

He paused, watching from above. "The vehicle has rolled to a stop. It's against the sign now."

Static hissed across the channel.

"Repeat, Unit Eight appears disabled."

[Chief Larry Dedrik—TPD Unit 1]

"Unit Eight?" No answer. "Quantrel, report."

The open microphone transmitted only the idling engine and the faint electronic pulse of the cruiser's emergency lights.

"Report, Quantrel."

A longer pause followed.

"You okay, boy?"

"That sound," Emily whispered. Her face had gone pale.

Meghan looked at her.

"I think I know what that was." Emily spoke as though she were naming something esoteric and terrible. They had heard that same bright note only minutes earlier, on a video they'd been watching—the razor-clean metallic sing of steel. A chill moved through Meghan.

Unit Eight's microphone remained open. The cruiser engine continued running, and Trembol's martial-law declaration echoed faintly through the dead officer's radio: "Shelter in place. Do not leave your homes…"

[Amber Shelton—Trembol Dispatch]

"This is the Trembol Police Department requesting immediate assistance." Amber's fear remained, but desperation had burned through it and hardened into resolve. "All law-enforcement units in the vicinity of Trembol, Nevada: municipal power has been cut, city cameras are offline, and officers are under attack."

She drew a breath. "We require immediate assistance."

No one interrupted her.

"All available units—any unit receiving this transmission—please respond."

Amber had made the call herself. Trembol Dispatch served the entire community and functioned as the regional law-enforcement communications hub. If anybody beyond the blackout could hear them, she meant to drag an answer out of them.

Static rolled across the channel. Then a new voice answered.

[Nevada State Police—Watch Commander]

"This is Nevada State Police Watch Commander Sanders." His voice was calm, controlled, and grim. "A sanctioned police action is underway within your jurisdiction, Trembol PD."

Amber said nothing.

"All roads into Trembol have been locked down by direct order of the Governor. County and state units have been instructed to remain outside the cordon until first light."

A brief pause followed.

"I don't know exactly what is happening inside that perimeter, but no assistance is coming before dawn." His voice softened by a degree. "You are on your own until then, Trembol."

"Sanders out."

The transmission clicked off.

Meghan's departmental radio crackled again over the secure Sheriff's Department channel. She had left it open in case her father or another county unit managed to break through. Emily switched on the shortwave set as well and began searching the state frequencies.

[Sheriff Mathius Dellon]

"Megs, you got your ears on, girl?"

Meghan seized the handset. "Yeah. Yes, Dad. I'm here."

"You stay down." There was no strain in his voice now. Only command. "Do not involve yourself in this. They're saying martial law is in effect throughout Trembol and that a militarized unit has been deployed to eliminate hostile criminal elements inside the city. "Someone's thrown up an electronic cordon as well, jamming most cell signals; radio silence is being observed on open federal and state frequencies." He paused. "You stay out of its way."

Meghan looked toward Emily. "Dad, two TPD units are already down."

Silence followed.

"Yeah, Megs." Her father's voice grew heavier. "We're aware." Radio traffic murmured behind him as State Police maintained the cordon outside town. "Be advised, the Dire Court issued one hundred and twenty-three death warrants at around one this morning. An Executioner was deputized by the Governor and State Marshals to carry them out. One hundred and twenty-three warrants. One Executioner."

Mathius let that settle before continuing. "His job is to prepare the ground, as it were. The cavalry moves in at sunrise."

"How long?"

"Three hours. Maybe four."

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

Three heavy reports hammered through the darkness outside, one after another. Their echoes rolled between the buildings and faded into the desert.

Mathius heard them through the radio. "Those shots, Megs?"

"Yeah, Dad." Meghan moved to the window and eased the curtain aside.

Down on Konstantine Street, a Trembol police cruiser drifted through the darkness with its emergency lights flashing. No one appeared to be driving. It crossed the entrance to the Motel 12 lot, climbed the curb, and rolled nose-first into a parked car.

[Officer Jimmy Dedrik—TPD Unit 2]

"Dispatch, those shots came from the south end." Jimmy's breathing quickened as he looked out over the courthouse grounds and the south end of Trembol. "Who's down at the south end?"

A pause.

"I'm at the courthouse. I see one of ours near the entrance of the Motel. Windshield's shattered." His radio crackled. "Yeah—Unit Seven."

Jimmy called into the darkness. "Ron?"

No answer.

"Ron, report."

BOOM!

"OH—UH—No! FUCK!"

His scream tore across the channel. "Dad!" Jimmy's voice broke. The radio carried the sound of him falling, followed by the scrape of equipment across gravel. "Dad!"

[Chief Larry Dedrik—TPD Unit 1]

"Jim!" The professional calm vanished from Chief Dedrik's voice. "Jimmy, I'm here boy! You okay son?"

[Officer Jimmy Dedrik—TPD Unit 2]

"Dad…" Jimmy sobbed through clenched teeth. "No, Dad. No…"

His breathing came in ragged, animal gasps. "My goddamned leg. The son of a bitch blew my goddamned leg off!"

"Jimmy, listen to me –"

"Off!" His voice climbed into hysteria. "OFF! My leg—it's hanging on by a fuckin' nub!"

He gagged and sucked air. "I'm bleeding. Jesus Christ, I'm bleeding bad."

"Put pressure on it, son. Use your belt."

"Need an—need an ambulance…"

BOOM!

The radio clicked and went open.

[Officer Tod Mantel—TPD Unit 4]

"I'm enroute, Jim! Hold on!" Tod shouted over the engine of his cruiser. "I'm almost there!"

He and Jimmy Dedrik had been friends since childhood. They had served together in the Army National Guard, entered the Police Academy together, and spent most of their adult lives wearing the same uniform.

"Jimmy?"

Only static answered.

"Jimmy, talk to me."

The courthouse stood dark beneath the stars. Its parking lot lay nearly empty except for a single black-and-gold Trembol cruiser near the front entrance, red-and-blue lights flashing across the columns.

Tod Mantel pulled in hard and slammed on the brakes. Tall, blond, tattooed, and usually too well groomed for two in the morning, he stepped from his cruiser with an AR-15 shouldered. He seized the vehicle's corded floodlight and swept its beam across the courthouse façade, searching the windows, columns, and roofline.

The light climbed. Something crouched upon the flat roof. For less than a second, Mantel saw it clearly. Black. Armored. Watching him.

He dropped the lamp and raised his rifle.



BOOM—BOOM—BOOM!

Sparks burst before his face. The AR-15 shattered in his hands; its receiver ripped open and the barrel knocked sideways. The driver's-side window exploded, spraying him with safety glass. His left index finger vanished in a red burst of bone and flesh.

Mantel screamed and stumbled backward. The floodlight struck the pavement, skidded beneath the open cruiser door, and caught against the doorjamb. Its trapped beam shone beneath the vehicle, leaving the world above it in darkness.

Mantel dropped behind the door. Another round punched straight through the reinforced metal, opening a fist-sized hole inches from his head.

"Under-fire! Under-fire!" He seized the microphone clipped to his vest. "Armor-piercing heavy rounds! Assailant in black—full-body armor! He's got night vision!"

The cruiser door would not stop another shot. Mantel abandoned it and ran.

He sprinted across the open plaza toward the statue of Nadius Veyl, first judge of Elko County in 18 76. The granite figure wore the uniform of a Union soldier, one hand resting upon a stone law book as though judgment itself had been frozen there.

Mantel dove behind the monument and pressed his bleeding hand against his vest. The granite base stood nearly three feet thick—enough, he prayed, to stop whatever the bastard on the roof was firing.

Two police cruisers raced south along High Street toward him.

[Officer Gary Basparon—TPD Unit 5]

"We're coming, Mantel! We're com –"

BOOM!

Unit Five swerved violently. The cruiser jumped the curb and crashed head-on into a tree beside the Mayor's House, one block north of the courthouse. Its hood crumpled around the trunk. Flames erupted beneath the engine compartment.

[Officer Clem Carydin—TPD Unit 6]

"GAR!" Clem's cruiser skidded sideways and stopped in the street. "Fuck! NO!"

He threw open the door and leapt out with a fire extinguisher in hand.

Clem Carydin was tall and lean, with dark features and a handsome face that still looked too young for the uniform. He had been on the force for only two years. His father, Mayor Jacob Carydin, owned the red-brick manor standing directly beside the burning wreck.

Clem charged toward Unit Five.

"Boy, get back in your –!"

The warning came from the Mayor's House.

BOOM!

A tracer crossed the darkness like a bolt of fire. It traveled nearly two hundred yards from the courthouse roof to the lawn of the Mayoral Mansion and struck Clem directly in the throat.

His head tore free in a spray of blood. It flew in one direction while his body dropped to its knees, remaining upright for one impossible second before pitching forward into the grass.

"CLEM!"

Mayor Jacob Carydin thundered down the front steps. He was tall, tremendously fat, white-haired, and neatly goateed. None of that slowed him. In that moment, he was only a father running toward his son.

Unit Five burned beside the lawn. Officer Basparon remained trapped inside; whether he was alive or dead was uncertain as flames consumed the passenger compartment. The Mayor reached Clem's body.

BOOM!

Jacob's left collarbone and the side of his neck exploded in a violent arterial spray. He spun, collapsed, and landed across his son.

Wendy Carydin raced from the manor. The Trembol City Clerk wore a nightgown beneath an open coat, her bare feet striking the pavement as she ran toward her husband and child.

BOOM!

The round struck her in the center of the chest. The impact lifted her from her feet and hurled her backward onto the white steps of the columned brick mansion. She landed hard and did not move.

Mantel watched from behind the statue, sick with horror. He could do nothing. His rifle lay in pieces beside his cruiser. Blood poured from his mangled hand. His pistol was useless at this distance, and he had no clear line of sight on the courthouse roof.

"Killing women and kids now, Executioner?" he shouted into the darkness.

No answer came.

Mantel pressed the transmit button on his vest.

[Officer Tod Mantel—TPD Unit 4]

"JD's down. Clem, his folks, Gary—all gone." His breath shuddered. "He drew us in and cut us to pieces."

Mantel looked at his ruined hand. ".308 or Creedmoor 6.5, armor-piercing. Incendiary or some kind of HEAT shit, too."

A grim laugh escaped him. "I'm slightly injured."

He risked a glance around the granite base. "The guy looks like a ninja or some shit. Black armor, head to toe."

Nothing moved upon the courthouse roof. The figure had vanished. Mantel understood why almost immediately. The shooter had accomplished what he wanted—drawing multiple responding units into a prepared kill box. Now he was changing position before anyone could trap him.

"Don't send anybody else," Mantel warned. "He's laying ambushes."

Across the street, Unit Six remained intact. Its engine ran beside Clem's headless body, the driver's door hanging open.

Mantel did not think. He moved. He sprang from behind the statue and sprinted toward the abandoned cruiser. He had played fullback in high school and now ran as he had not run in years—head low, legs driving, cutting in sharp zigzags while he waited for a bullet to tear through him. None came.

[Chief Larry Dedrik—TPD Unit 1]

"All units! All units, withdraw to the Law Enforcement Building." Chief Dedrik's breath came heavily over the radio. "It's fortified. We have lights and water. We'll bring down the shutters and lock the whole place tight."

His voice faltered. "The bastard's here for us."

A terrible certainty entered the words when he repeated them. "He's here for us."

Then a new voice entered the channel.

[Bubba Pysker—Trembol Game Warden]

"I'm in the fight, boys!" A powerful truck engine roared beneath his voice, descending North Road from the hills, northwest of town. "Comin in loaded for boar!"

Bubba gave a rebel yell over the radio. "Yeehaw, boys! We'll run this fancy fuck to ground!"

Tod continued sprinting toward Unit Six. Behind him, Unit Five had become an inferno beside the Mayor's residence. White-orange fire boiled through the shattered windows, consuming the cruiser and the man inside it.

Bubba Pysker's truck roared into view. It tore across the dirt landscaping south of City Hall, throwing gravel and dust, then fishtailed behind the courthouse.

The Game Warden was in his late forties, jowly and darkly bearded, with the heavy build of a grizzly. A large, solid white-gold image of that animal hung from a chain around his thick neck. His hair had been gathered into a high topknot that gave him the rough appearance of some backwoods samurai. The gold totem and the high-end truck had both been purchased with funds from disposal operations he oversaw for the Carydin clan up in the back country—he had buried a lot of bodies over the years, many of them executed by his own hand.

Bubba swung around the east side of the courthouse and braked beside Jimmy Dedrik's black-and-gold 2025 Mustang cruiser. He climbed out with a BAR-M1918 in hand.

Down the street, Tod Mantel ran toward the Mayor's House, where one cruiser burned beside three fallen Carydins.

"Chicken-shit," Bubba muttered. He approached Jimmy's Mustang. The engine was off, the door unlocked, and the vehicle abandoned. No Jimmy.

Bubba searched the surrounding darkness without fear. He had tracked wounded animals through mountain timber at night and confronted poachers who had been considerably better armed than he was. One fancy asshole in black armor did not frighten him.

He assumed the sniper's attention remained fixed upon Mantel. Jimmy was Bubba's nephew on his mother's side. Bubba knew the young man's habits and the way he thought. Jimmy had reported watching Konstantine Street from the courthouse. That placed him high enough to see over the surrounding buildings—probably along the rear roofline.

Bubba circled the courthouse until he found the external access ladder. He slung the Battle Rifle across his back and began climbing.

Down the street, Tod reached Clem's abandoned cruiser. He tore open the door, climbed inside, and started the engine. Before pulling away, he glanced back toward the Game Warden's truck and shook his head. Its headlights remained on, and the green-and-gold light bar flashed against the courthouse walls.

Unit Six peeled away from the curb and raced toward the Law Enforcement Building on Lothon Street.

Bubba climbed steadily. He was a big man. A fat man, by any honest accounting. But he hunted, fished, and hiked across country that humbled younger and leaner men. He could walk for miles over broken desert and mountain ground, and he possessed far more endurance than his gut suggested.

By the time he hauled himself onto the roof, Mantel's commandeered cruiser was vanishing down the street. Bubba stood huffing upon the tarred and gravel surface, B-A-R ready, and searched the darkness.

"Jimmy?"

No answer.

He moved toward the rear of the courthouse. Then he saw him. Jimmy sat propped against the roof-access enclosure, pale and still, one ruined leg stretched before him.

"Damn, Jimmy boy." Bubba lowered the BAR and hurried over. He pressed two fingers beneath Jimmy's jaw. No pulse.

The young officer's face had gone white from blood loss. His eyes remained half-open, fixed upon nothing beyond the rooftop.

Bubba knelt beside his nephew. He had taken Jimmy hunting before the boy was old enough to carry a rifle. They had fished Crow Creek, camped through hard mountain rain, and drunk their share of beer around fires they had been too lazy to extinguish properly.

Bubba rested one broad hand upon Jimmy's shoulder and closed his eyes. For several seconds, the swagger left him. "I'll get you out of here, boy," he said softly. "Get you home to your daddy and your ma."

He slid one arm behind Jimmy's back and the other beneath his knees. Bubba lifted him.

Ping.

A steel safety lever skipped across the tar. Bubba looked down. A fragmentation grenade rolled from beneath Jimmy's body, traveled across the roof, and gently tapped the steel toe of his boot. Its shortened fuse spat white sparks. He noted a tiny antenna on the grenade and a flashing red light.

"Fancy motherfucker." He almost chuckled. Jimmy remained cradled within his arms when the grenade detonated. The explosion was heard for miles across Trembol.

[Officer Tod Mantel—TPD Unit 6]

Tod saw the rooftop erupt in his rearview mirror. "Bubba's gone. Explosion of some kind." It was an assumption born of pure instinct, but he knew it was true. He drove hard through the blacked-out streets, Unit Six's emergency lights strobing across storefronts, trees, and silent houses. "I've commandeered Unit Six. Heading to harbor. No sign of the assailant."

His mangled hand throbbed against his chest, wrapped in gauze torn from the cruiser's first-aid kit. Blood had already soaked through the first layer. Tod glanced again at the fire burning behind him. "Did this guy have papers for Wendy, too? I mean, an actual death warrant for the City Clerk?"

His disbelief sharpened into anger. "The Mayor?" He swallowed. "The mother-fuckin' Game Warden?"

[Chief Larry Dedrik—TPD Unit 1]

"No better angels here, Mantel." The Chief sounded exhausted. "We've all had our fat hands in the pie for a long, long time."

A pause followed. "Day of Reckoning has arrived."

His voice dropped until it was barely louder than the static. "Bound to happen. As the song says, sooner or later God's gonna cut you down."

A chill passed through everyone listening. Trembol had become strangely still. The emergency announcement repeated every two minutes, rolling from one public-address speaker to the next, but little else moved. The people were doing exactly as ordered. No one entered the streets. Occasionally, a flashlight or candle appeared behind a window. Almost immediately, a hand covered it or carried it away. Curtains closed. Blinds lowered. Trembol's citizens understood that light drew attention, and attention had become deadly.

Those who recognized the old Johnny Cash refrain whispered it beneath their breath. Sooner or later God's gonna cut you down.

Tod Mantel drove through the darkened city with Unit Six's emergency lights pulsing around him. What he said next sounded almost like an afterthought, spoken to no one in particular. "Left hand of God has come to Trembol tonight." The words would be repeated for years.

It was nearing 3:30 AM when Tod reached the ramp descending into the underground parking garage beneath the Law Enforcement Building. The garage was packed with police vehicles.

Nearly every surviving member of the Trembol Police Department had been drawn inward toward the station. Many brought spouses and children, seeking whatever protection the reinforced complex might offer. Officers hurried the families through the interior corridors and down into the old civil-defense shelter beneath the building. Children cried. Parents carried blankets, bottled water, medicine, and whatever else they had managed to grab before fleeing home.

Heavy metal doors and armored shutters were closing throughout the structure. The auxiliary generators supplied enough electricity for lights, radios, and ventilation, but not enough to operate every security motor at once. Officers and maintenance personnel worked the emergency hand cranks themselves. Chains groaned. Gears complained. Steel descended inch by inch across windows, corridors, and exterior entrances, sealing the building against the city outside.

Tod pulled into the crowded garage and parked Unit Six crookedly between two other cruisers. He climbed out with his wounded hand clutched against his vest. Men and women gathered beneath the dim auxiliary lights. Jailers and bailiffs wore dark blue. Trembol patrol officers wore pale gray-tan. Administrative and support personnel stood among them in their own dark-blue uniforms. All belonged to the Trembol Police Department.

Tod conducted a hurried roll call. Forty-three department personnel were accounted for. They were frightened. They were also heavily armed.

A gray steel door opened within the inner concrete-and-steel wall, and Chief Larry Dedrik emerged. His face was flushed and his eyes bloodshot and red from mourning. Sweat ran from beneath a combat helmet that barely fit his pudgy head. An M16 rested in his hands, and a ballistic vest strained around his thick middle. He smelled of Old Spice laid over stale sweat, fear, and despair.

Most of the surviving officers had equipped themselves the same way. Armor, Rifles, Helmets, Extra magazines, Shotguns, tear gas, and whatever other heavy equipment they could retrieve before the shutters came down.

Tod searched the assembled faces. Amber Shelton was missing. Short, blond, and beautiful in an elfin sort of way, she should have been among the dispatch personnel clustered near the inner door. She was not. Her voice had disappeared from the radio. Only then did Tod realize that no one had heard her for some time.

"Boys and girls," the Chief began. He was winded merely from crossing the garage. The surviving personnel formed a rough council circle around him. The underground air was damp and close, heavy with the odors of wet concrete, gasoline, sweat, gun oil, and fear. "We're facing an unknown assailant," Dedrik said. "We have no confirmed identity and no idea whether he's working alone." No one mentioned the word Executioner. "We've lost contact with nearly a third of the force. The Silver Satyr security network has gone silent. Paradise Ranch is silent." He adjusted his grip upon the M16. "We're assuming their communications are being jammed and that both locations have entered lockdown."

Somewhere beyond the sealed garage, Trembol's public-address system began another cycle. The announcement reached them faintly through ventilation ducts, concrete seams, and the last steel shutter still descending across the ramp. The voice was male. Very deep, but smooth. Almost unnaturally so. Like a lion given human speech.

"Martial law has been declared. By lawful order of the Dire Court of Nevada and Governor Tom Wilson –"

Chief Dedrik looked toward the concrete ceiling as though he could see the loudspeakers beyond it. "Death warrants were issued tonight by the Governor and the Dire Court," he said. "We don't know how many, and we don't know exactly whose names are on them."

Officer Mary Garrison spoke from within the circle. She was short and older, with a mature but still handsome face and the composed bearing of a woman accustomed to being trusted. Dressed in the gray-tan uniform of field-support personnel, Mary ordinarily monitored Trembol's camera systems and handled school-security assignments. Before age and politics moved her into quieter work, she had served as a negotiator on the tactical-response team. She looked like someone's grandmother. She was someone's grandmother. She had also helped make troubled teenagers disappear into the belly of Trembol's criminal machinery, dismissing them as delinquents, troublemakers, and bad influences the community was better off without.

"Whoever's doing this hijacked our cameras and public-address network," Mary said. "The feeds are still active somewhere, but they're no longer routing into our monitoring station." She folded her arms across her vest. "The shooter is highly mobile. Judging from the dispatch traffic and the locations of the attacks, I'd say there are at least two—one operating north and another working the south end."

Bob Gambalo, Trembol's city jailer, stepped forward. He was stout, thick, and bald, with a muscular build, steel-dark eyes, and a neatly shaped goatee. "They aren't targeting only police," he said. "They killed the Mayor and his wife. Judge Carydin hasn't been heard from either." He looked around the circle. "A lot of people haven't been heard from."

Everyone had listened to the radio traffic through the station speakers. No one needed the details repeated. "We're down by almost a third," Tod said, studying the gathered uniforms. "Near enough."

"Missing doesn't necessarily mean dead," Dan Prescott replied. The city bailiff was average in nearly every respect—average height, average build, average face. The kind of man people forgot five minutes after meeting. He had reached the station with his wife and son, both now secured inside the civil-defense shelter. "Some of them might be staying low," Prescott continued. "Keeping their families safe."

"Maybe we should surrender," Officer Mack Alder suggested. The community-liaison officer looked around the garage, uncertain how the others would receive it. "If we're under warrant, fighting the State is a no-win situation." It was a grim but realistic observation. A surprising number of people nodded.

Chief Dedrik laughed. There was no humor in it. "You don't negotiate your way out of a Dire Court death warrant."

"That's correct," Mark Garrison said. Mary's husband stood beside her. Lean, gray-haired, and gray-eyed, he possessed the distinguished appearance of a respected civic professional. He was in his fifties and served as Trembol's City Prosecutor. "The Governor signs those warrants personally," Mark continued. "There is no appeal, no pardon, and no leniency. They are issued only when the adjudicated crimes are judged so severe—and the evidence so conclusive—that the State withdraws every possibility of mercy."

Mary turned toward him. "But why would they issue something like that for us?" Her voice sharpened. "We're the police." She looked at her husband more than anyone else.

Mark frowned. Everyone in the garage knew the answer. Mary knew it too.

Mark carried himself with the polished distinction of a respectable public servant, just as his wife wore the familiar image of the hardworking school-liaison officer who cared about children. The truth beneath those costumes was considerably uglier. Both had grown wealthy through bribery, evidence tampering, and direct participation in Trembol's human-trafficking apparatus. They were swingers and regular participants in the orgiastic rites held within the Shadow Temple. More significantly, both were fully initiated members of the Coven of the Black Satyr—a circle whose practices descended into places darker than even Vana Carydin's organization ordinarily tolerated. Respectability had merely been the costume. Underneath it, both were filthy.

Mark looked slowly from one face to the next. "I think we know why," he said. "And so do they." His voice assumed the dark gravity he ordinarily reserved for a courtroom. "Evidence. Indisputable, undeniable, unassailable—and beyond all mercy."

Silence settled over the garage. Every person present had profited from the system. Some had become wealthy. Others merely comfortable. All had accepted their share. The department provided protection and enforcement. Evidence disappeared. Prisoners were delivered into unofficial custody. Complaints were buried, witnesses frightened, fines redirected, and private debts collected beneath the color of law. Everyone knew who truly ruled Trembol.

"They took Jacques and Teth first," Tod said. The pattern became unmistakable once he spoke it aloud. "The right and left hands of Carydin security. The generals. The men who ran the under-dealings." He looked toward the Chief. "The men who ran us."

Charley Teth had been a Las Vegas police detective. Jacques DeMorney had served in the French Foreign Legion. Between them, they had designed, commanded, and enforced the machinery operating beneath Trembol.

A metallic sound interrupted the council. Tink. Something struck the concrete floor.

Tang. A second object bounced beneath a cruiser and rolled into their circle.

Bing—ding. The collective breath of the room caught inside forty-three throats.

Small silver canisters rolled among their boots. One. Two. Three. A fourth sailed from the darkness above the parked cruisers, passing over their heads. It detonated before reaching the floor.

BANG—BANG—BANG—BANG!

All four devices discharged in near-perfect unison. The garage vanished inside white light. The blasts were not merely sounds. They were blows. Pressure slammed into the gathered officers, drove the air from their lungs, and knocked nearly all of them from their feet. Men and women screamed as white fire filled the garage.

Those nearest the canisters suffered burns across their faces and hands. Eardrums ruptured. Capillaries burst behind eyes. Equilibrium vanished. Rifles clattered across the concrete. Some discharged as hands clenched reflexively. Bullets punched into walls, ceiling panels, and parked vehicles. Glass burst. Alarms began shrieking. The garage filled with smoke, cries, and the sharp electrical stink of the detonations.

Amid the confusion, the trunk of Unit Six opened for the second time in less than a minute. The lid rose slowly. A tall figure stepped from the darkness inside. Black segmented armor covered him from throat to boot. A smooth, black helmet concealed every human feature. The Raven Star seal marked his chest and shoulder. A heavy combat rifle rested in his hands, and the hilt of a sword rose above one shoulder. He did not strut. He did not speak. He did not hesitate.

Tod Mantel remained on his knees, ears screaming and head spinning, when a black boot drove into his jaw. He collapsed unconscious.

Vincent moved among the fallen. Rifle butt. Boot heel. A gauntlet-sheathed fist. One hard, efficient blow for anyone still moving with purpose or attempting to reach a weapon.

The flash-stunners had done their terrible work. Some officers vomited across the concrete. Others had urinated or released their bowels. Blinded, deafened, burned, and stripped of equilibrium, they writhed amid blood, bile, broken glass, and scattered equipment.

Vincent gathered their handcuffs and secured them one by one. Wrists behind their backs. Ankles crossed where necessary. Weapons kicked beyond reach. Magazines removed. Chambers cleared. No wasted motion.

Amber Shelton stood in the open interior doorway, beyond the worst of the blast. Silent. Still. Watching. She dared not move. Flight would have been pointless, and she understood that before anyone else did.

Vincent looked toward her and motioned once for her to assist him. Amber obeyed immediately. Her unquestioning compliance brought a terrible clarity to those officers still conscious enough to understand what they were seeing. The dispatcher with whom they had worked for years moved among them, fastening their own restraints around their wrists. Her gaze remained fixed upon the emblem displayed on Vincent's armor. The two-headed raven seal of Raven Star.

"I have no warrant for you," he said. His voice emerged through the helmet cold, mechanical, and unnaturally deep. Vincent removed the key ring from Bob Gambalo's belt and placed it in Amber's hand. Understanding passed between them. Amber nodded.

Tears streamed down her face as she looked across the men and women, she had known as friends and colleagues throughout her adult life. She was not innocent. She had heard, seen, and known—but she had kept herself aloof and neutral. No death warrant bore her name.

Vincent set his rifle aside. Then he reached over his right shoulder and drew the sword sheathed across his back with his left hand. Steel whispered free.

Through blurred and watering eyes, Tod Mantel looked up at the masked soldier. At last, he saw the emblem. "Veyl," he croaked.

Everyone still capable of movement strained to see. The truth moved through them in stages. Recognition. Disbelief. Dread. The armored figure personified the title he carried.

"Executioner," Vincent said flatly. The word was neither boast nor introduction. It was office. Authority. Sentence.

Those who understood began to weep. Some moaned in pain. Others begged for mercy or offered frantic promises to cooperate.

Vincent walked the line, looking down upon them. More than forty men and women, ranging from their twenties into their fifties. The Chief was in his seventies.

Mark Garrison struggled to raise his head. "V-Veyl…" Blood ran from one eye and both ears. His face had begun swelling. "Mr. Veyl, I…" He fought for breath. "Many of us share your faith." A pause. "Your blood, even."

Vincent looked down upon him. "Make your peace." His altered voice resonated through the garage. "Embrace the Truth." The sword remained perfectly steady in his hand. "Eternity awaits."

The voice was so unnatural—so absolute in its depth and finality—that everyone capable of movement lowered their heads as though commanded. Some began to pray. Others confessed in broken whispers. A few merely sobbed.

Vincent began. The first stroke passed through Tod Mantel's neck with terrible precision. His head struck the concrete and rolled once before coming to rest. The dull impact silenced several voices.

Chief Dedrik was only beginning to stir. He opened his eyes, saw Mantel's body, and understood at last that there would be no negotiation, rescue, or clever way out.

From the beginning of the operation Veyl had settled completely into that strange physiological calm that came over him when in mortal danger. His pulse had slowed rather than quickened, his breathing steady and measured, while the ordinary noise of fear and adrenaline seemed to fall away. His awareness widened instead of narrowing—distance, balance, movement, timing, every presence held simultaneously within his attention.

The Executioner moved swiftly. Smoothly. No wasted motion. No uncertain hand. Exact. Final. One stroke followed another. Heads fell across the blood-slick concrete as Vincent carried each judgment through to completion. He displayed neither pleasure nor guilt. Neither anger nor apology. Only purpose.

Amber Shelton lingered in the doorway leading down into the jail, horrified and transfixed, neither able to turn away nor fully comprehend what she was seeing. The strength, speed, and sheer will necessary to do what this man was doing seemed inhuman.

At last, the Chief remained alone. The fat, balding old man looked up at Vincent with fury, fear, despair, and defiance joined within one glaring expression. "Welcome home, nephew." Larry Dedrik attempted to chuckle, gathering one final scrap of bravado around himself.

Vincent regarded him through the black mask. "Goodbye, Uncle." The sword flashed. The Chief's head joined the others upon the garage floor.

Silence descended. Vincent stood among the dead for several seconds. Then he knelt. He held the sword upright before him like a crucifix and bowed his helmeted head. He prayed. Briefly. Sincerely.

When he rose, he began the final ritual. Vincent placed each death warrant beside the severed head of the person named upon it. Upon every warrant, he laid two consecrated coins. Payment for passage. A mark of judgment completed. Provision for the road beyond.

When the last pair of coins had been placed, Vincent cleaned and sheathed the sword, recovered his rifle, and moved deeper into the station. Additional stragglers remained. Ten minutes later, the final sentences within the LEB had been carried out.

The general emergency and police frequencies crackled.

[Psychopomp One—Situation Report]

"External targets cleared."

The mechanical voice carried across every hijacked law-enforcement channel.

"Station clear."

"Captives secured."

"Source data secured."

"Tunnel located and penetrated."

A pause.

"Moving on Viper Den Two."

He was nowhere near finished.

By then, it was shortly after four in the morning—more than two and a half hours since the operation began. Many hearths had already been visited during his silent passage from north to south. Like some dark Santa Claus, Vincent had moved through the sleeping city bearing no gifts—only the coal-black judgment assigned to the heads of the condemned.

Everything was streamed directly to the Dire Court through the Nevada Marshals Service, captured both by the city's hijacked cameras and by the tiny camera mounted on Vincent's vest. Every warrant. Every entry. Every execution. Every rescued captive. Every piece of recovered evidence.

The complete record would also be edited, organized, and handsomely packaged for Tallia Stevens. An exclusive for his own station, naturally.

(4:30'ish AM, June—The Reckoning)



Vana sat upon the black stone floor before the grim, horned altar of polished basalt. She wore a black gown of satin and lace. A long veil, cut almost like the habit of a nun, draped over her dark hair and framed her face. Her back rested against the base of the altar—the sacred seat of her god. She sat beneath it, pressed against its cold solidity as though it might protect her from whatever was coming. Before her, candlelight trembled across the carved pillars and the immense black wings looming above the altar, throwing restless shadows throughout the Temple of the Raven Infernal-Divine. Her mind clouded, yet the images remained burned into her with horrific clarity…



(Abigail & Vana Carydin)

Only hours earlier, she had stood quietly beside Jacques upon the broad stone balcony of her penthouse at the Silver Satyr. Trembol lay below them, twinkling through the earliest hours of Tuesday morning. The cool night air stirred Vana's long black hair as she gazed across her fiefdom at its most tranquil. It was well past midnight, yet still long before dawn—the hour when even restless Trembol seemed to settle into sleep.



From her penthouse, Vana could see for miles to the north, south, and east. The lights of Saint Aftiel's shone from the rocky heights north of the airport. Closer, off to her left upon the same ridgeline, stood the cold gray mass of KTTV, its garish neon letters burning against the reinforced concrete of its bunkerlike construction. At the heart of the Trembol Valley, surrounded by its rocky desert heights and highlands, Saint Uriel's blazed white against the darkness—a great temple-fortress. Across the street stood the college and hospital complex, with the immense amphitheater and arena occupying the same parklike block. Trembol's public buildings, as well as the casino-hotel, had been constructed in a stately Greco-Roman Revival style, nearly all of them dating from the late nineteenth century. They contrasted sharply with the Old Southwestern, Nativist, and Basque character of the city's homes and shops. Vana smiled with pride.

Her father and grandfather had governed Trembol in the old Western fashion—a rough blend of rancher and farmer individualism, tempered by the more erudite influence of the Veyls. Casinos and brothels were hardly unusual in Nevada. In those days, the Grand Trembol Hotel remained primarily just that—a hotel—though part of it had been converted into a casino, with professional escort services operating discreetly on the down-low.

Vana, however, had transformed Trembol into something else. She had leaned into the Veyl civic vision while idealizing the city's Nativist and Basque character. She passed ordinances compelling property owners to renovate and beautify. She spent millions from her personal fortune upgrading the city's streets, public spaces, lighting, and architecture. Under her rule, Trembol had undergone a complete overhaul and facelift. The Grand Trembol Hotel became the Silver Satyr—an elite casino-

hotel, convention center, and fanciful lounge. She had remade the city into an egalitarian, erudite, retro-modern playground for the wealthy, the jaded, and the bored.

Behind her, Charley Teth—the Black Heart Man—had made himself far too comfortable within her suite. His presence was necessary. Several technicians were working at Vana's personal terminals, and she did not trust computer geeks. Teth, for all his hard-nosed corruption, had gone out of his way during the past several years to learn computers, coding, and modern surveillance systems. He understood that security had changed and that men such as himself either changed with it or became obsolete.

Near the cold fireplace, Abigail sat curled into one corner of the couch, leafing through something on her device as usual. Her obsession with Vincent Veyl had grown to dwarf even Vana's own. That concerned her.

"Fangirl," Vana mouthed.

"She's stalking him," Jacques whispered with a grin. He was perhaps the only man alive who would have dared make such a remark where Abigail might overhear it.

"Yep," Abigail answered without looking up. "Definitely." She scrolled farther down the screen. "He's our future. Everyone's future. We should be joining him—not the other way around." She spoke without the slightest trace of shame.

Vana glanced toward the red-haired young woman and cocked her head in consideration. She wanted to be jealous. Possessiveness came naturally to her where Abigail was concerned. Vana loved cruelly and completely—an adoring tyrant who regarded devotion as something absolute and indivisible. Yet Abigail possessed a predatory instinct and shadowed intuition that often proved uncanny. She perceived hidden truths as though endowed with some form of psychic infrared vision. When Abigail fixed upon something, there was usually a reason.

Vana turned her gaze back toward the city. Jacques was studying his own device. "Right here," he said. He pointed to a passage in Vincent Veyl's private blog, concealed behind an almost undetectable link embedded within his company webpage. What appeared to be a tiny watermark was actually the entrance to an online notebook filled with his running thoughts.

Vana glanced at the passage and smiled, shaking her head. Jacques always felt compelled to justify himself. Certainly, though, what Vincent had written strongly supported his position in the continuing argument with Abigail. For all the young woman's seeming rebellion, she remained fanatical about the Way. She knew every letter of the compendium—and every loophole hidden within it. Nor was she above wielding it as a cudgel against people she disliked.

"Right here," Jacques repeated, turning toward Abigail. She was already reading the same blog. After all, she had been the one to discover the hidden link. "Article Ten. September of last year, while he was still in the hospital."

Abigail frowned without looking up. "Yeah. What of it? Those are his private thoughts, not the Gospel."

Jacques cleared his throat and began reading aloud. "'The orderly keeps flirting with me. It doesn't offend me. The assumption irritates me—that because I don't pursue relationships with women and maintain a certain standard of grooming, I must be gay.'" Jacques raised his voice slightly for emphasis as he continued. "'I don't care what people do in their private lives. What happens in their bedrooms is none of my business, and I don't want to know.'" He scrolled farther. "Then Vincent adds: 'Spartans and Janissaries—some of the greatest soldiers who ever lived.'" Self-satisfaction dripped from every word. "That, my dear Abigail, is Purgatorian neutrality."

Abigail smirked. She did not want to admit that Jacques had read Vincent more accurately than she had and therefore elected to say nothing. Some part of her enjoyed their little verbal sparring matches. The fact that he dared challenge her made her secretly like him more than she cared to admit.

"We'll be friends, I think," Jacques remarked. "Soldier to soldier." He turned back toward the balcony. Only three blocks east, the Raven Star building rose among the rooftops. Jacques's attention settled upon the small access hatch atop the building. It stood open. Light spilled from within.

Then the city began to disappear. The first lights failed near the highway at Trembol's southeastern edge. Darkness moved westward and northward, block by block, swallowing streets, businesses, and homes in a rapidly advancing wave. Click. Click. Click. Vana watched the blackout coming toward them.

"What the hell is going on?" Teth demanded. He abandoned the drink he had been pouring and moved to the balcony rail just as darkness engulfed the casino.

The Silver Satyr went black. A moment later, the emergency lighting came alive. Cold white illumination spread throughout the penthouse suite, rendering everything strangely lifeless. With the lights came a deeper chill.

Then a voice reverberated across the city. Very deep, but smooth. Almost unnaturally so. Like a great beast given human speech.

"Martial law has been declared. By lawful order of the Dire Court of Nevada and Governor Tom Wilson, death warrants have been issued. An Executioner is presently engaged in lawful action against adjudicated individuals involved in ongoing severe criminal activity requiring immediate direct response."

"All residents will shelter in place. Do not leave your homes. Do not enter the streets. Medical and Fire Response Units are ordered to stand down until the all-clear is issued."

Fear shot through Vana's heart. In that same instant, she noticed the single light still shining from the open hatch atop Raven Star. It appeared unnaturally bright now, isolated within the blacked-out city.

Jacques leaned forward. His eyes narrowed. He had seen something. "Darkness against darkness," he murmured.

His face imploded. The back of his skull burst outward, and his body was flung backward through the open balcony doors. He struck the black stone floor of the apartment with a heavy, boneless thump.

For one suspended instant, no one moved. Then the rifle's report reached them.

Boom!

The sound cracked and rolled across Trembol. The Johnson twins screamed like girls, and ran for the door and out of the apartment. Teth whirled toward the distant report, saw Jacques upon the floor, and immediately rushed toward Vana. She remained standing at the balcony doors, staring down at the man who had been the closest thing she had ever known to a brother—her oldest friend, her most trusted male companion.

Everything that followed seemed to unfold slowly. Teth reached for her. The front of his chest caved inward. His back exploded. The impact lifted him bodily from his feet and hurled him backward over the couch.

Security guards rushed into the suite. Vana did not move. She stood staring at the bodies of both men, unable to comprehend the sudden emptiness where they had been only seconds before.

Abigail reached her first. She seized Vana and dragged her away from the windows as the security detail closed around them and hurried both women from the suite.

Now she sat beneath his gaze. Ancient images of the Raven King filled cameos inset throughout the walls and vaulted ceilings. Black statues flanked the grand hall, their carved forms rising from polished stone that gleamed like dark glass. Candles flickered below them, sending wavering light across the rock and lending the figures a suggestion of life. Dragon's blood was his incense. Its dark, resin-us scent filled the chamber beneath a thin haze of smoke. Wind entered through ancient fired-clay air-shafts, carrying the coolness of the night from somewhere far above. The same shafts allowed the ravens and crows nesting within the temple's upper reaches to come and go freely. Now and then, wings stirred in the darkness overhead.

The temple's heavy bronze doors stood open, their surfaces crowded with ornate relief work. Sensual statues flanked the entrance: the White Raven and the Black Raven—Orev Lavan and Orev Erev—the twilights of predawn and evening juxtaposed. The yin and yang of Purgatoria. The masculine and feminine halves of a single spiritual being. At least, that was one interpretation. Purgatorian scholars still argued the point, as scholars tended to argue anything that could not answer back.

Vana had little patience for such distinctions. Her devotions centered upon the Raven King and his consort, known variously as Ravenael, Lythia, Ereshkigal, Selene, and by many other names. To Vana, White Raven and Black Raven were the eternal monarchs who ruled Purgatoria in both its realms—Dur and Kur.

Near the white statue, Abigail sat upon the floor. She wore a black-and-crimson gown. Her luxuriant red hair fell around her shoulders, and her eyes sparkled in the candlelight. She hummed softly while studying her tablet.

The device had little access to anything beyond Trembol. Someone had thrown an electronic cordon around the city—or so everyone assumed. Outside news could not get through, the internet had vanished, and private messages either failed or stalled indefinitely. Only KTTV continued to

broadcast. The station stood less than two miles away from where she sat, and its powerful local signal still punched through the interference.

The emergency report filled Abigail's screen:

TREMBOL, NEVADA—MARTIAL LAW DECLARED

STATE FORCES MOVE TO REMOVE CORRUPT POLICE

Carydin CRIME FAMILY DISMANTLED UNDER ORDER OF NEVADA'S DIRE COURT

DEATH WARRANTS ISSUED

EXECUTIONER ASSIGNED AND ACTIVE

COURT-ORDERED EXECUTIONS ONGOING

Vana remained seated beneath the altar. She was tall and hourglass-shaped, with black hair flowing down her back and eyes as dark as those common to her bloodline. Though over fifty, she was still considered beautiful even among the women she employed—the finest and most desirable escorts in the world. Through Paradise, Vana drew the global elite into her luxurious, templistic palace of pleasure and its elegant casino.

Ordinarily, she controlled nearly everything through the tablet lying on the floor beside her. It had been the command center of her empire. Now it was little more than an expensive slab of dead glass.

Distant cries and gunfire echoed through the labyrinth beneath Trembol and Paradise Ranch. The sounds drew closer by the moment. Around Vana, the same guests and women who had laughed, feasted, and reclined throughout the resort only hours earlier now wept and cowered inside the temple. They clung to one another. Some kept trying to send messages even though they knew nothing was getting out. A few still demanded explanations in the brittle voices of people accustomed to receiving them.

The gunfire answered.

Rat-tat-tat. Pop-pop-pop.

Then came the heavier reports: Boom-boom-boom.

The sound rolled like thunder through corridors of bedrock and reinforced concrete.

The underground complex had been built during the Cold War, when Trembol became a military town. The casinos and brothels of Vana's grandfather's generation had catered to soldiers, officers, and Army brass. Those old tunnels and fortified chambers had survived beneath the city, expanded and repurposed until they formed the hidden guts of Paradise. Now someone was fighting his way through them.

The frightened complaints of Vana's illustrious guests faded as the battle approached. Politicians, actors, singers, corporate and technology tycoons, playboys, and the wanton wealthy of a dozen nations—all listened in silence now.

The images on Abigail's screen were almost as frightening as the gunfire. Each person charged appeared beside a list of crimes, short video clips, financial and evidentiary summaries, intercepted communications, and voice recordings. The material had been assembled into a polished documentary presentation narrated by a deep feminine voice. The report began another cycle. The evidence was clear, direct, and sufficient to stagger the mind. Those charged ranged from hardened killers to junior police officers and ordinary city clerks.

The catalogue began with bribery, documented favoritism in public contracting, and discriminatory hiring practices. It descended quickly into trafficking narcotics, weapons, and women; extortion; false imprisonment; political despotism; murder; and mass murder. Then came ravishment and sexual enslavement. Certain forms of prostitution that were outlawed under Nevada law. Indentured servitude. Exploitation. Pornographic obscenity. Crimes against minors. The list went on.

Decades of evidence reached backward into her grandfather's reign. Again and again, the documentary returned to the pivotal roles played by Charley Teth and Jacques DeMorney. The Left and Right Hands of the Old Devil.

Boom-boom-boom-boom-boom. The gunfire was close now—perhaps a hundred yards down the southeastern corridor. Whoever had breached Paradise had already fought through the casino complex and was advancing toward the ranch and the Under-Temple.

Vana's security forces had mounted a determined resistance inside the casino. Not all of them had been sentenced to die. Many appeared on KTTV beneath arrest warrants, named as coconspirators who faced decades in prison or multiple life sentences if convicted. There was nothing ordinary about that. The guards in the corridors and the people gathered inside the temple were watching the same evidence as Abigail. No one could reasonably claim ignorance anymore. The files left little room for doubt.

Vana saw no point in further resistance. The game was over. All her people could accomplish now was more dying. She knew she was doomed.

The generators had gone down, followed by the emergency lighting. The temple survived on candlelight, while the corridors beyond its bronze doors sank into darkness. The Executioner—or Executioners—made short work of the remaining casino guards, often with surprisingly little gunfire.

A final transmission from Trent McBride, chief of casino security, had reached them through the internal system: "He's using a goddamned sword!" Gunfire rattled behind him. "He's killed a dozen of us with a goddamned sword!" A man screamed somewhere near the radio. "Fall back! Fall the fuck back!" More shots. "Some kind of fucking ninja!" A crash followed, then McBride's voice rose into something close to panic. "A literal goddamned ninja!"

The transmission ended. Paradise's maze of corridors had slowed the Executioner. It had not stopped him. They or he (it was uncertain) continued onward—methodical and precise when the ground allowed it, brutally direct when it did not.

The guests still possessed their private bodyguards. Those men and women had massed outside the temple in the southeastern corridor, preparing to make a final stand if the Executioner reached the chamber.

A furious roar of gunfire erupted. Then came an explosion powerful enough to shake dust from the vaulted ceiling. The ravens and crows nesting above finally took flight. Until then, they had remained strangely calm. Now they circled and fluttered through the high shadows, their wings stirring the incense smoke into twisting black veils.

Silence followed.

"He's here!" The shout came from a surviving member of private security in the hallway. "Just one guy! It's just one fucking guy!"

The guests rose to their feet. The escorts, each dressed like a priestess from some elder age, squealed and retreated deeper into the sanctuary.

Though the power remained dead, the temple's internal speakers crackled to life. A voice thundered from them—deep and smooth, like the rumble of something enormous moving beneath the earth. "If you are not named in the warrants, I am not here for you." A pause followed. "You may depart in peace."

It seemed odd that the PA system was working though the power was off, and that KTTV kept broadcasting. How was the town shut down, but KTTV was not? How was it broadcasting on both radio—analogue AM/FM—and Wi-Fi, no less? It was as if the power outage were highly selective and being manipulated as needed.

Among the guests stood the last members of Vana's Dark Guard. They wore black suits over black shirts. They came from different races, nations, and backgrounds, but the differences ended there. All were hardened, muscular, disciplined, and stone-faced. None looked relieved.

Nancy Maise was also present. She headed Intimate Productions. Beside her stood her husband, Yon Sverus, the company's chief producer and director—a master of the pornographic medium, whether legal or illicit.

James Monteros stood near them. Tall, dark, and lean, he looked cruel despite his polished appearance. The fifty-something collections expert and interrogator was known throughout the Carydin organization as the Black Hand—apparently one of several hands.

Pete Jarvis completed the group. He was a weaselly little Englishman—bald, blue-eyed, and perpetually watchful. As Vana's procurement specialist, he had acquired some of the finest "auction product" her organization had sold to private collectors over the years. Human beings reduced to inventory.

All four were named beneath death warrants. Sixteen people in total, counting the remaining members of the Dark Guard.

Handheld flashlights joined the candles in providing the temple's only illumination. Their narrow beams moved nervously across the floor, the statues, and the immense black wings above the altar.

To Vana's confusion, Abigail remained seated near the temple doors. She continued watching her tablet and humming sweetly, almost oblivious to the catastrophe closing around them. As though she knew something no one else did.

Vana loved her—possessively, absolutely, and as well as Vana knew how.

"Why are you so blessedly calm, my sweet?" Vana called across the chamber. Every face turned toward Abigail. For once, wealthy guests and condemned killers wanted the same answer.

Abigail had been smiling throughout the entire ordeal, as if she knew something no one else did—which was precisely the case. Moments before Jacques and Charley were shot, while she was reading and commenting on Vincent's obscure little blog, a message had appeared and vanished almost at once: You are chosen. You are not named. Stay calm. Abigail had naturally assumed Vincent himself had sent it. She had obeyed—and had been quietly delighted ever since.

"I'm not named in the warrants," Abigail replied. She looked up from the tablet. "What do I have to fear?" Her gaze settled upon Vana. "Neither are you, for that matter, Mother."

Vana stared at her.

Abigail raised the tablet, its screen glowing against her pale face. "According to this, you've essentially been held hostage—oppressed and abused by your own father, then controlled by toxic family members." She glanced down and continued reading. "You attempted to resist. You tried to push back, but possessed little real power beyond serving as the public face of sales, beauty, and style." Her small smile widened. "A front woman. A puppet controlled by a cruel and demonic criminal dynasty stretching back generations."

The color drained from Vana's face. Her jaw fell open as she looked around at her subordinates. They were not amused. They knew the truth. Nothing happened within the Carydin organization unless Vana explicitly commanded it. No shipment moved, no debt was collected, no prisoner changed hands, and nobody disappeared without her approval. She micromanaged everything from table settings to trafficking routes. She was a control freak—the ruler of every visible and hidden corner of Sinner's Paradise. Her jaw tightened beneath their condemning stares.

"I…" Vana looked back toward Abigail. "I did not write that script." The protest came darkly.

Abigail rose, tucked the tablet beneath one arm, and extended her free hand toward Vana. Vana cocked her head. "Come here," Abigail said. Confused, Vana crossed the chamber in long strides and took her hand, assuming the younger woman meant to show her something on the tablet. Instead, Abigail led her through the sanctuary doors. She glanced back at the guests and escorts. Vana's crew looked on in grim confusion.

"Come." Abigail's smirk returned. "You heard him. We're free to leave." Still holding Vana's hand, Abigail walked directly through the gathered security personnel. The guards parted for them. The guests and escorts exchanged uncertain looks. Then understanding spread through the crowd. A few smiled. Others nodded. "Come," Abigail said again. "Tell your guards to lower their weapons. This is not our fight. It isn't theirs either." They were paid to protect their clients, not die for Vana Carydin—much less for her riffraff. Rifles lowered. Pistols returned to holsters.

"Ms. Carydin?" James Monteros called after her in shocked disbelief.

Vana and Abigail were already rounding the corner. "If you were me?" Vana asked without looking back. Then she disappeared from sight.

Monteros knew the truth of it. They all did. If any of them had been offered the same escape, they would already have been halfway down the corridor. That knowledge did nothing to soften the betrayal. The condemned stood inside the temple and watched their queen abandon them.

Behind Vana, the guests, escorts, and private bodyguards began filing into the eastward passage, past the mangled doors of Section 001-E. As they crossed into Section 002-E, they saw the man who had granted them safe passage.

He stood within a doorway just beyond the security barrier separating one section from another. A nightmare in black armor. His grim helmet possessed smooth, empty eye sockets, like something hammered into shape for the Reaper himself. He was tall, broad, and motionless, nearly disappearing against the darkness of the passage. Smoke clung to him. Fresh blood glistened over older blood already drying across his plates and armored weave. The black surfaces were scratched and gouged. Blade marks scored his forearms and shoulder. Several pale impact craters showed where bullets had struck and failed to penetrate. He had not come through unscathed. He had come through undaunted.

The clients eyed him as they passed. Some lowered their heads in fearful respect. Others nodded with the terrible awe of sinners unexpectedly permitted to walk out of judgment. Gratitude did not make them innocent. It only made them grateful.

Bodies of guards lay scattered along the route ahead, hacked or blown to pieces, shot or stabbed.

"Just one guy?" asked Yelena Jansin, a famous porn actress.

"There are probably more farther down," Diddy Contara replied. The tall, gaunt rapper looked Vincent over as he passed. "Thanks, brother." Vincent gave no response. "No issue, bro," Diddy added. "You're doing your job. I get that." He shuffled onward with the others.

Abigail stopped before the Executioner. "Mr. Veyl." The name carried through the corridor. Those nearest whispered it to those behind them. Veyl. Abigail's eyes settled upon the Raven Star emblem fixed to his chest plate. "Thank you for granting us mercy."

Vana stood beside her, still struggling to grasp what had seemed perfectly obvious to her pet. Vincent remained impassive. His armor, gear, and metallic emblems were splattered with blood—fresh over drying. He smelled of gunpowder and iron. Beneath those violent odors lingered the faint and strangely improbable scent of chai. To something deep within Vana's soul, the sight and scent were glorious.

"Why, Grand-Nephew?" she asked softly. "Why spare us?"

Vincent said nothing. He stepped into the departing crowd and moved against its flow, shoulders lowered and sword held close along one leg. People hurried aside as he passed.

Those abandoned inside the temple came forward to watch the others leave. The procession gradually disappeared eastward into the far darkness of Section 002-E.

Near the temple doors, private security had thrown together a makeshift barricade from old furniture, cabinets, and anything else heavy enough to provide cover for a last stand. Beyond it, almost nothing was visible except the small handheld flashlights swinging and bouncing through the retreating crowd. With the power out and no natural light anywhere underground, the darkness beyond was absolute.

When the final escorts, clients, and protectors had passed, only one black figure remained between the sanctuary and the darkened corridor. His blade caught the candlelight. He was already among the condemned. They understood that only when he unleashed himself.

Vincent crossed the threshold before the first member of the Dark Guard could bring his pistol level. The sword came around in a two-handed arc from his right hip, struck beneath the man's jaw, and tore through most of his neck. The body dropped before the head finished turning. The blade continued into a second guard's raised arm. Bone broke. The severed forearm spun away with the pistol still clenched in its hand. Vincent reversed the cut and opened a third man from shoulder to sternum.

Then the Dark Guard began firing. Muzzle flashes tore white holes through the darkness. Bullets hammered Vincent's chest and shoulder plates, sparked from the stone, punched into statues, and tore through men who had crowded too close behind him. Their own gunfire blinded them. Vincent's photochromic helmet lenses compensated instantly.

To human eyes, his black armor vanished whenever the muzzle flashes died. Through his infrared display, everybody in the temple burned bright against the cold stone. The condemned had dressed for darkness. They had dressed for his benefit. Vincent drove through the center of them before they could spread out. He struck one pistol aside with his armored forearm and rammed the sword's pommel into the shooter's mouth. Teeth and blood sprayed across the floor. A knee crushed another man's groin; an elbow broke the bridge of his nose.

Someone fired point-blank into Vincent's ribs. The impact twisted him sideways. A plate cracked but held. Another round found the seam above his left thigh. Most of its force died inside the armor, but the slug punched through far enough to enter muscle. His leg buckled.

James Monteros saw it happen. The Black Hand came forward with a heavy fighting knife, moving faster than his polished appearance suggested. He had hurt and killed enough people to recognize weakness. Most of those people had been tied to chairs. Vincent was not.

Monteros slashed for the damaged thigh. Vincent turned, but not quickly enough. The blade slipped beneath the edge of a plate and scraped across the same wounded muscle, opening it wider. Vincent caught Monteros's wrist with his free hand.

Monteros drove a fist into the side of his helmet. Once. Twice. Vincent answered with a headbutt that shattered the man's nose and drove bone into his face. Monteros staggered, but Vincent kept hold of his wrist, twisted the knife arm aside, and drove the sword upward beneath his jaw. The blade punched through the roof of his mouth. The Black Hand collapsed.

By then, the quarters had become too tight for the sword. Bodies, furniture, and frightened movement crowded its arc. Vincent let the weapon fall and drew the twin daggers carried across his lower back. The fight changed. There was no longer room for sweeping cuts or formal sword work. It became a close, filthy business measured in inches—gauntlets, elbows, knees, short blades, and raw strength.

A Dark Guard seized Vincent from behind. Vincent drove backward into a stone pillar hard enough to crack ribs, then did it again. When the man's grip loosened, Vincent trapped his arm, rolled his weight beneath it, and broke the elbow backward. A dagger drove into the man's skull.

Another guard rushed with a short-barreled shotgun. Vincent knocked the muzzle aside as it discharged. The blast tore a crater from the altar steps and scattered a spray of pulverized stone. Vincent drove one dagger into the man's armpit, where the vest offered no protection, then used the falling body as cover from the next volley of pistol fire.

Rounds struck flesh. The corpse jerked in his grip. Vincent shoved it into the shooter and followed behind it. His armored knee broke the man's leg sideways. The second dagger opened his throat.

Pete Jarvis was the first to bolt. Procurement had always been his talent. Escape was not. He fled through the bronze doors at the western end of the sanctuary and continued west across the junction into the service passages beyond. Nancy Maise and Yon Sverus followed close behind. Yon fired a compact pistol over his shoulder, emptying it without aim. One round struck a fleeing guard in the back. Another sparked from Vincent's chest. The rest went nowhere useful.

The surviving condemned ran deeper into the dead-end complex west of the temple—an area of utility, comms, guard, and detainment spaces. They had nowhere meaningful to go, only rooms in which to hide and corners from which to fight. Vincent pursued them with a pronounced limp, leaving blood of his own among the larger stains across the floor.

One by one he cornered them. Flashlights tumbled from dead hands, rolled along the floor, and threw wild circles of light across concrete walls and half-open doorways.

In the Comms Room, a Dark Guard turned and fired. Vincent struck his wrist aside, buried a dagger beneath his ribs, and carried him into the wall. Another came from a storage-room doorway with a machete. The blade struck Vincent's shoulder hard enough to leave a deep groove in the armor. Vincent answered with three short blows. Forearm. Throat. Heart. The man folded.

Gunfire erupted deeper inside the western service section as the remaining condemned attempted to establish another position among the rooms. Their shots came in different calibers and pitches, loud and frantic inside the confined concrete throat. A shotgun roared from somewhere beyond a doorway. Vincent kept advancing. He could see them; they could not see him—and so they fired wildly at shadows and phantasms of fear.

Behind him, the sanctuary was filled with screams, smoke, blood, and the last shuddering movements of the dead. Down the eastern corridor the retreating guests heard everything.

Vana and Abigail stopped. Many others paused with them. Behind them, from the direction of the temple and the service passages beyond it, came cries and sudden pistol fire—not the booming reports of Vincent's rifle, but the sharper voices of handguns firing in different calibers and octaves. A shotgun

roared. Someone screamed for help. Then came several wet, heavy impacts that were not gunshots at all.

The crowd had nearly reached the gates of Section 003-E (still a mile west of the casino basement) when everything behind them fell silent. No voices. No gunfire. Nothing. The long eastern corridor remained black and still.

Then the lights flickered. Relays engaged and breakers reset in a rolling series of metallic clicks. Illumination spread through the eastern passage, washed over the crowd, and continued along the corridor in the direction of the temple.

Heads turned. For several seconds, there was nothing. Then Vincent appeared around the distant corner nearly a hundred yards behind them.

Bodies lay scattered along the route between him and the departing crowd. Some had fallen where they fought. Others had crawled several feet before dying. Blood streaked the floor and marked the walls. Behind Vincent, unseen from where the guests stood, more dead filled the temple and the western service complex.

He bent slightly and gripped his wounded leg. His back struck the wall. He slid down it until he was sitting on the floor, one knee raised before him. Vincent removed his helmet.

At last, the man inside the armor was revealed.

"He's hurt," Abigail said. She began to turn back.

Vincent placed a cigarette between his lips and lit it. He drew in the smoke, looked toward them, and raised one hand. Then he waved them onward.

"He neither wants nor needs our help," Vana said grimly. Her eyes traveled across the bodies between them. "He killed everyone."

Abigail met the gaze of her master-mistress. "Your future—our future—is him."

Vana considered the statement for only a moment. Then she nodded, grimly and grudgingly. "Yeah." She turned back toward Vincent.

Abigail moved to follow. Vana stopped and gave her a hard look. Nothing else needed to be said. Abigail frowned but nodded. "Should I wait here?"

Vana continued alone along the ascending corridor. She stepped around the bodies of men and women she had known for years. Some had served her faithfully. A few had loved her in the limited fashion of people who served a tyrant and mistook proximity for belonging. Vana felt their loss. She did not feel it strongly enough to have died beside them. That truth was ugly, but it was hers.

A cluster of bodies lay near the open steel door separating Sections 002-E and 001-E. The final three security guards had made their stand there, between an old records chamber on the right and a storage room on the left. Missed in the darkness when passing earlier. Those chambers were only two among

hundreds scattered throughout the underground corridors beneath Trembol, connecting many of the city's oldest structures, long used by the Carydins for smuggling, manufacturing drugs, detaining captives, and, in certain sections, far worse enterprises.

At the junction outside the temple, its bronze doors stood to her right. To her left, a passage led west into the dead-end complex of utility, communications, guard, and detainment rooms. Straight ahead, the corridor continued north and climbed toward the surface, eventually reaching the sublevel safe house and the vaultlike blast doors beneath the resort's central hub.

The bodies piled before and scattered across the threshold of the temple's bronze doors made a considerable and gory heap. Vincent had used brute force, raw strength, his sword, and daggers to hew his way through them in close quarters. Limbs lay at wrong angles. Heads had rolled against the walls. Blood shone black beneath the restored lights. Vana turned and entered the dim light of the underworld cathedral.

Vincent stood before the high altar with his sword resting across one shoulder. She had noticed earlier that he wore the sheath at his right side and drew the sword with his left hand.

His helmet sat upon the solid basalt block of the altar. He was chewing a strip of jerky while reading Vana's ancient, obsidian-bound copy of the Thirteenth Compendium. The book rested upon a gilded silver stand. Vincent nodded slightly as he read, as if agreeing with certain passages and reserving judgment on others. An open wound showed through the torn armor at the back of his left thigh. Blood still oozed sluggishly from it.

Inside the temple, blood, entrails, and chunks of flesh made the black floor dangerously slick. The carnage did not disturb Vana. She recognized men and women she had known and employed for years. Nancy Maise and Yon Sverus lay near one corner. They had not died during the fight. Vincent had clearly executed them afterward. Their severed heads rested beside their warrants.

"You know you have earned death," Vincent said. He spoke almost softly. For Vincent, it was not especially soft at all. The words were a statement, not a question.

"Yes," Vana replied flatly. She owned the truth of it and came to stand behind him at the foot of the altar steps.

"The things you have done…" Vincent shook his head. "Tsk-tsk-tsk." He did not turn. "You have strayed beyond the contemplative halls of Kur and entered the shadows of the Hells."

Terror moved through Vana despite herself. Her gaze dropped toward the wound in his thigh. By then, the bleeding had stopped, though the flesh around the puncture remained sticky, swollen, and badly bruised. "Why was there no warrant for me?" she asked. "The report on KTTV is a complete lie." Her eyes narrowed. "Yet it displays records proving that lie. Dated, stamped, official, and real."

Vincent shrugged and turned his attention back to the Compendium. "You are what you are," he said. "Evil cannot be banished from the world—or from the universe. It can only be managed. Directed. Channeled. Compensated for." He looked down at the ancient page. "Corruption is inevitable, but wise masters learn to place a rein upon it and turn it toward the service of the greater good."

He was quoting directly from the text. The passage appeared in the oldest form of Armenian, written in a cuneiform-adjacent hand, with an ancient Euskaran translation beside it. Whether Vincent was reading the words or already knew them by heart, Vana could not tell.

"They were what they were," she said, motioning toward Nancy, Yon, and the others.

Vincent turned at last. "They were not my great-aunt." His eyes met hers.

Vana's eyes widened. Without the helmet, he was astounding to look upon. His irises were not merely dark brown but black—the rare Carydin trait absent from all her father's half-brothers and found in very few people alive. His face carried the entire structure of his mother's. Selene had been truly beautiful. "You are…" Vana's breath caught. "You are certainly her son."

A faint smile touched Vincent's mouth, as though the observation were obvious enough to dismiss.

"I have photographs," Vana continued. "I intended to bring the old family album when we met."

Vincent nodded. Then his gaze hardened. "Your life is mine," he said. "Your dark kingdom is mine." He allowed the words to settle between them. "Or I end you here and send you to Narcissa—the Hell of the Vain Corrupt, where the damned hunger, grasp, and consume for eternity but are never filled."

Vana shook her head slightly. Her attention returned to the wound. "And what remains for me?" She looked up at him. "For my daughter?" The injury was already beginning to scab. A small smile of realization crept across Vana's lips.

"Your destiny has been written," Vincent replied. There was no joy in his voice and very little that sounded entirely human. It had deepened into something vast and resonant, as though a dragon spoke through the mouth of a man. There was no hatred in it. No moral outrage. Neither threat nor promise. Ravens and crows fluttered about the chamber anxiously, lighting upon statues as if to watch and listen. "You know your place."

Vana lowered her eyes. She curtsied, then sank to her knees before him. "I have served you. I have worshipped. I have sung to you all my life." She pressed her head against his wounded thigh and embraced him with genuine tenderness. "And you have not forgotten me." Tears poured down her face.

Vincent hesitated, then grudgingly lowered one hand onto her head.

Something moved beneath his thoughts. It came whenever he drew too close to the veil between life and death—through deliberate deprivation, deep trance, or the sharpened stillness of combat. It had first appeared as something buried in his unconscious, then risen slowly into the shallows of his mind. Lately, it surfaced more easily.

An older presence stirred behind Vincent's awareness, vast and strangely certain. For a moment, he did not feel possessed so much as enlarged. His ordinary personality remained present, but it receded far enough to permit something deeper to look through his eyes and borrow his voice.

"What you have served is the shadow of my eternal face," he corrected gently. "Not the wholeness of the True Being."

Vana looked up at him. "We must conceal this," she said, glancing again at the wound. "The time for the world to know has not yet come."

Vincent was not even certain what this meant. The wound? The voice? Whatever Vana believed she had recognized in him? He still did not know exactly what he was. Vana seemed certain. As certain as Justin Vyss. As certain as Father Ramsey and the others who had begun looking at him as though they recognized something he himself could only glimpse. Somewhere deep within him, the older voice seemed certain too.

Vincent sat upon the altar steps and rested his back against the black stone. He set the Compendium aside, reached behind his thigh, and pressed his thumbs into the swollen flesh around the puncture. The wound bulged. He squeezed harder, working it with the same ugly patience someone might use upon a boil or abscess. His jaw tightened. A malformed piece of metal appeared within the blood. Vincent gritted his teeth once, caught the exposed edge between two fingers, and pulled. The small-caliber slug came free. He lifted the flattened, bloody round to eye level, examined it for a moment, then tucked it into a pocket of his vest, uncertain how it had gotten through his armored weave.

Fresh blood ran from the wound. The fallen Black Queen watched in awe—the conquered monarch gazing upon her subjugator. Whatever uncertainties remained within Vincent, Vana no longer appeared to share them.

He picked up the Compendium and resumed chewing his jerky.

Vana carefully cleansed the wound with holy water. Then she tore a long strip from her own gown and wrapped it firmly around his thigh.

Abigail entered without ceremony. She said nothing, merely crossed the bloodstained floor and sat beside them.

The older presence receded. Vincent slid firmly back into the driver's seat of his own mind and frowned at the two women. He was not blind to their beauty. Nor was he blind to the evil rooted deep within them. Both truths sat before him, inseparable, and neither canceled the other.

(5:30 AM, JUNE 2, 2026—Trembol Police Barricade—Southeast End)



All across Trembol, the lights began to flicker back on. Streetlamps blinked awake. Porch lights glowed across the residential districts. Neon signs sputtered to life above businesses that had spent the night dark and silent.

Near the Motel 12 roadblock, Mathius Dellon and Erik Sanders watched the town reawaken beneath the approaching dawn. Set in place less than an hour ago, as reinforcements advanced for entry at dawn, orange barrels and white-and-orange-striped sawhorses blocked the roadway, their amber warning lights flashing steadily. Cruisers from several agencies waited behind them with engines idling, exhaust drifting pale through the cold desert air. People crowded onto Motel Twelves exterior balcony. Others emerged cautiously from Don's Diner, gathering near its windows and doorway to stare out at the barricades and the line of vehicles behind it.

The city's public-address system came alive once more. A grave, gray-toned, deeply resonant voice rolled across the streets.

"All warrants have been served. The crisis is passing. Remain in place to allow emergency units to move freely and ensure domestic order."

The voice carried such unquestioned authority that it might have come directly from the Governor's Office or the Nevada Marshals Service. The order itself was perfectly consistent with what either agency would have issued under the circumstances.

Mathius Dellon stood more than six feet tall, broad-shouldered and barrel-chested. Curly brown hair framed a stern, ruddy face, and his intense hazel eyes seemed capable of exerting physical pressure. Though in his fifties, he remained strong as a bull and imposing as a thunderstorm. The State Police and Nevada Marshals around him deferred to his presence almost instinctively.

Erik Sanders stood beside him in the gray uniform of the Nevada State Police. Nearly six feet tall, he was lean, leather-tough, and severe-looking, though his blue eyes retained an underlying kindness. His head and face were clean-shaven.

The two men exchanged a glance as the sun began to rise along the eastern horizon. "All warrants served," Erik mouthed.

The gunfire had been silent for several minutes. An entry team from the Nevada Marshals Service Rapid Response Unit had already gone ahead to secure the Law Enforcement Building. Emergency

vehicles, armored units, medical teams, and recovery crews now waited in long formation behind the barricades.

The radio crackled.

[Marshal Greg Markarian—NVMS Rapid Response, Trembol Infiltration Detail]

"We're inside the station. The armored shutters have been opened." A pause followed. "It's…" Markarian exhaled heavily. "Well, we have forty-six dead. Severed heads arranged in a neat line beside the death warrants. The Ferryman's price placed with each." His voice carried an uneasy mixture of horror and amusement—the sort that arrived when a man's mind could not settle upon the appropriate response. "Chief Dedrik is among them. All accounted for. The only survivors appear to be several administrative clerks and Amber Shelton from Dispatch."

Paper rustled near his radio. "Approximately thirty prisoners have been located in the lower cells. There's an entire jail, under the jail... attached to the old tunnels." His tone changed. "They require immediate medical support. Severe malnutrition. Signs of prolonged restraint and torture."

Mathius began removing the first road barrier himself. As he worked, his attention drifted toward a yellow bungalow several hundred yards away, beyond Don's Diner and the State Police waystation.

"We're going to need a refrigerated unit," Markarian continued.

[Deputy Marshal Thomas Beckendale—NVMS Rapid Response, Trembol Infiltration Detail]

"Yeah, we have bodies scattered across town. Several inside vehicles. Two—sort of—on City Hall. Multiple dead at the Mayor's residence, with additional bodies indicated inside private homes." He paused. "Judge Carydin confirmed dead inside his truck outside the Law Enforcement Building. Looks like somebody stabbed him through the skull."

[Deputy Marshal Elaine Adams—NVMS Rapid Response, Trembol Infiltration Detail]

"The casino was evacuated, but we have bodies throughout the lower levels. I've counted more than thirty so far." She hesitated. "Most have… well, knife wounds." Another pause. "Very large knife wounds. They're lying in clustered groups."

[Marshal Greg Markarian—NVMS Rapid Response, Trembol Infiltration Detail]

"A sword." His voice came firmly across the radio. "He used a sword. We've all seen the operational feed. It's an actual sword." He seemed determined to establish the proper definition for the record. "One cut. Off with their heads."

That strange mixture returned to his voice: awe, amusement, horror.

[Deputy Marshal Elaine Adams—NVMS Rapid Response, Trembol Infiltration Detail]

"Why a sword?" She could not help asking.

A new voice entered the channel.

[Psychopomp One]

"Saves bullets." The answer was flat and cold. The voice was so deep, yet so smooth, that nearly everyone listening went still. "Fewer rounds to carry."

Silence held the channel for several seconds.

"Paradise has been evacuated. All resistance eliminated. All facilities secure."

Many wanted to answer. No one did.

Mathius and Erik dragged the final sawhorse aside. The convoy began entering Trembol. State vehicles led the way, followed by federal vehicles, county units, ambulances, armored trucks, and recovery teams. Among them rolled a massive black eighteen-wheeler bearing stark white lettering:

STATE CORONER

Street sweepers followed. Behind it came a municipal water truck. Mathius studied the procession and immediately understood what had been planned.

Erik said it aloud. "This isn't an investigation." His eyes followed the sweepers. "It's a cleanup crew."

Mathius nodded. "Judgments were already rendered. Executions carried out, documented, and declared legal." He watched the coroner's truck pass through the barricade. "Done." The street sweepers rolled after it. "The Potter's Field is all that remains." Mathius understood the reality of it. He did not disagree.

"Why not Vana herself?" one of the nearby officers asked. "The Black Queen. It makes no sense." The speaker was a large Native man named Mack Wellsly, though many called him Injun Joe. He had once served as county sheriff and now worked as an auxiliary sheriff's officer.

"She's been defanged and declawed," a new voice answered. "Business continues." A tall, gaunt black man approached from among the federal vehicles. He wore a tailored charcoal suit despite the early hour, with FBI credentials displayed against his jacket. The identification card bore the name:

DR. REED CLARON

Mathius recognized it immediately. Reed Claron was the special agent in charge of the FBI's Reno Field Office. He also held a doctorate in criminal psychology and was a rather famous profiler.

Erik studied him with open curiosity. "So, Doc—psychopath, or just the coldest son of a bitch in Nevada?" There was more admiration than concern in the question.

Claron watched the recovery vehicles entering Trembol. "No evidence of psychopathy."

"Harmless?"

"No."

Erik smiled faintly.

"Principled," Claron said. "Severe. Controlled."

Mack Wellsly grunted. The former sheriff was well into his seventies now, working part-time as an auxiliary officer because he had never quite learned how to stop being a lawman. "There are more than a hundred dead people in there," he said. "Not that I'll lose any sleep over most of them."

"Most of those bastards needed killing years ago," Erik replied.

Mathius kept his eyes upon Trembol. "That doesn't make this normal."

"No," Claron agreed.

The blunt answer made Mathius look at him.

Claron adjusted one cuff. "I watched the operational feed. Reviewed his files. When circumstances allowed, Mr. Veyl prayed over the condemned. He avoided torture, humiliation, and unnecessary suffering. Most deaths were immediate."

"He cut their goddamned heads off," Mathius said.

"Yes." Claron displayed neither approval nor disgust. "He also left coins."

"The Ferryman's price," Mack said.

Claron nodded. "That tells us how he understood the work."

"Work," Mathius repeated.

"It was a contract," Claron said. "One hundred and twenty-three death warrants issued by the Dire Court and affirmed by the Governor. Veyl was appointed and deputized as Executioner under State Marshal mandate."

"And the rest?" Mathius asked.

"Carydin security. Others named on arrest warrants. All resisted with deadly intent." Claron looked toward the city. "Every encounter was recorded. Voluntarily." He glanced at the awakening streets. "He commandeered the city's cameras and the Carydins' surveillance network, then chose to wear a body camera. He tied all three directly into the Nevada Marshals Service and our Reno Field Office." Claron paused. "I expect he has established the standard for these operations going forward."

The distinction carried weight with the men at the barricade. Vincent himself had chosen the transparency they had watched from the command post farther up the road throughout the morning. The combined feeds had captured him moving through the streets, entering homes, approaching

vehicles, and confronting armed resistance. His personal vest camera had provided a second record from within the violence itself.

The final count would eventually reach two hundred and thirty-four dead. No one at the barricade knew that yet. Of those, one hundred and twenty-three had died under formal sentence. The rest had fired first, drawn weapons, attempted ambushes, or otherwise resisted the state operation with deadly force.

Every warrant had been documented. Every execution recorded. Every additional death accounted for by the images surrounding it.

Once the last armed opponent fell beneath Paradise Ranch, the operational screens displayed a simple message:

OPERATION COMPLETE—ALL WARRANTS SERVED—EXTERNAL FEED CLOSED

The camera had not failed. Trinity had merely narrowed its transmission. Most external recipients lost access while the recording continued within Raven Star's secured systems. The Carydins' corridor cameras showed Vana approaching the underground temple moments later. Anyone with sufficient clearance could infer why the external feed had ended. The operation was over. What followed was private. Claron understood the distinction and saw no reason to discuss it.

"The appointment carries an Executioner's Fee," he continued. "Twenty-five thousand dollars for each warrant served."

Erik calculated it first. "Three million seventy-five thousand."

Claron nodded.

Erik whistled. "That's quite a payday!"

"A conventional operation would have cost several times that," Claron said. "More personnel. More civilian exposure. More dead officers."

The truth of that was not lost on men who had commanded departments and defended their budgets.

Claron's eyes followed the ambulances entering Trembol. "Less efficient."

Mathius turned toward him. "Veyl knew what it paid when he accepted?"

"No."

That answer shifted something in Mathius's expression.

"He volunteered," Claron said. "The fee is statutory. He apparently believed the appointment was unpaid."

Mack scratched his gray jaw. "Boy killed a hundred and twenty-three people for free."

"He executed them," Claron corrected.

Mack gave him a tired look. "Sure, Doc."

Claron did not react. "His operational designation was Psychopomp."

"Guide to the dead," Erik said.

"Yes." Claron watched the city lights returning one district at a time. "Veyl does not frame what happened here as murder. The Court rendered judgment. The Governor granted authority. His task was to carry the sentence from paper into flesh."

Mathius's jaw tightened.

"Justice rendered," Claron continued. "Duty completed. The condemned delivered onward."

"So, in his mind, he didn't kill them," Mack said.

"He facilitated." Claron paused. "Moved them along."

Mack breathed out through his nose. It was not quite laughter. "Hell of a way to put it."

Claron shrugged. "It appears to be his way. He compiled the evidence himself. Thousands of hours of horror, degradation, every kind of crime—some still ongoing. By the time he sent us those files, I suspect he was simply out of mercy."

With that piece of the puzzle, much now made sense to Mathius Dellon, Mack Welsly, Erik Sanders, and the others standing nearby. None of them had realized that the Executioner was also the investigator responsible for compiling the evidence behind the charges and death warrants.

Across Trembol, official vehicles separated with practiced precision. Medical teams went directly to the Law Enforcement Building. Recovery units turned toward City Hall, the Mayor's residence, Paradise Ranch, and the private homes of the dead. Every team knew where to go.

Each warranted execution had already been logged. Every identified combatant, recovered prisoner, weapon, document, and piece of evidence had been entered into the operational record before the first recovery crew crossed the barricade. That efficiency disturbed Mathius more than chaos would have.

There had been no frenzy. No loss of control. No bloody intoxication. Vincent Veyl had worked steadily through one hundred and twenty-three warrants, stopping only when others forced him to fight. He had continued until every sentence was carried out and every organized pocket of resistance eliminated.

Erik watched the convoy with something approaching satisfaction. The Carydins had owned judges, police chiefs, politicians, businessmen, and much of the local underworld. Everyone standing near that barricade had known it. Most had tried, at one time or another, to push back. Nothing had changed. Not until tonight.

Mack rubbed one weathered hand across his face. "I spent years trying to get enough evidence to take down one or two of them," he said. "Usually ended with the witness changing his story, leaving town, or turning up dead." His eyes followed the State Coroner truck. "Kid got here Sunday, nailed down the evidence, and cleared the whole goddamned board before breakfast."

Mathius gave him a hard look. "That bother you?"

"The method does, some." Mack shrugged wearily. "The result doesn't."

Atop DeSatto Ridge, KTTV continued broadcasting the prepared record. The station now belonged to Raven Star, but Tallia Stevens remained the journalist behind the desk. Trinity had kept her informed throughout the operation. Warrants, supporting evidence, recovered files, maps, and gore-redacted portions of Vincent's feed had arrived in organized packages as events unfolded.

Tallia had received most of the files upon which the death warrants were based. Only protected identities, classified sources, and information belonging to unrelated operations had been withheld. The coverage was curated, but it was not empty propaganda. Viewers saw the warrants, the evidence, the captives being freed, and enough of the armed confrontations to understand that the additional deaths had resulted from deadly resistance.

Neighboring stations were already carrying KTTV's broadcast. By noon, the entire country would know the official version. By evening, a thousand unofficial versions would begin breeding around it.

"He's the raven," Claron said.

Mathius looked at him.

"Archetypally. Intelligent. Solitary. Territorial. Keeps his roost clean. Bonds for life. Remembers friend and enemy."

Erik nodded toward Trembol. "And this is his roost now."

"Yes."

Street sweepers passed through the barricade behind the recovery teams. A municipal water truck followed, its heavy tank sloshing as it turned toward the center of town.

Mack watched it go. "So, he's cleaning his nest."

"Ordering it," Claron said.

"And Vana?"

"Not named."

Mack turned toward him. "Don't hand me that horseshit."

Claron met his gaze without hostility. "The evidence establishes that Vana Carydin was controlled by her father and other members of her family. She possessed limited authority and functioned primarily as the organization's public face."

Mack stared at him. "You believe that?"

"Belief is irrelevant."

"She ran the whole goddamned thing."

"Not according to the record." The answer carried neither humor nor apology.

Mathius studied Claron and understood the game. Claron understood it too.

The FBI and other agencies had dealt with Vana Carydin for years. He knew what she was, what she controlled, and how deeply her influence reached. He also understood the consequences of putting her on trial. Old agreements would surface. Protected operations would be exposed. Names would enter the public record that several federal agencies preferred to keep buried.

Vincent had created another solution. The manufactured history did not merely absolve Vana. It repurposed her. Her money, networks, political connections, transportation systems, and access to the criminal underworld would remain intact—but under new authority.

Claron recognized the pragmatism immediately. He also recognized something larger. Vincent Veyl was no longer merely a contractor who could be handled, paid, and sent home. After Trembol, the surrounding institutions would begin arranging themselves around him. He would run the show because he had demonstrated that he could.

"Convenient record," Mathius said.

"Yes," Claron replied. That single word admitted nothing. It explained everything. "Dead, she ends," Claron continued. "Alive, she serves."

"Who?" Mathius asked.

"Veyl." Claron said it as though answering a question of jurisdiction. "Her grand-nephew. He now unites the Veyl and Carydin lines into one strain."

Mathius understood. Vana Carydin had lived according to the law of the strongest. Vincent had met her within the only law she truly respected and proven himself stronger. He had not merely spared the Black Queen. He had conquered her.

Erik's smirk returned. "So, the Black Queen works for the Grim Fucking Reaper."

"The Left Hand of God," another voice corrected. High Marshal Kingsley Wheaton approached from the line of state vehicles. "That's what Mantel called him," Wheaton continued. "The men have already taken it up. The Governor too." He glanced toward the reporters gathering east of the cordon. "It's

what we'll call him. And before we're done, it's what the press across the country will call him." A small smile touched his face.

Camera crews raised tripods while technicians extended transmission masts from the roofs of mobile broadcast vans. Journalists assembled beneath portable lights, preparing grave expressions for an audience that had spent the night watching Trembol burn.

Wheaton joined Claron near the barricade. The two exchanged a few quiet words, then crossed the roadway toward the waiting cameras.

The cleanup had begun. Now came the part where lawful men explained the lawful slaughter.

Traffic had begun moving again along the interstate under the direction of flagmen, though the exits into Trembol remained closed to civilian vehicles. Sheriff Mathius Dellon climbed into his SUV and passed through the checkpoint.

Erik and his troopers were already moving to reoccupy the State Police waystation just inside the city limits. Farther down the road, a tow truck and two Nevada Marshals Service vehicles converged upon the wrecked Trembol Police cruiser.

There was no crime-scene tape. No procession of photographers. No painstaking forensic examination that would leave the roadway closed for hours. There was no need. The approach, confrontation, and shooting had already been captured from multiple angles. The cruiser had been identified. Its position had been mapped. The officer's weapon, body, and final actions had been entered into the operational record before the recovery teams reached him.

Two men removed the dead officer without ceremony, sealed him inside a body bag, and carried him directly toward the refrigerated eighteen-wheeler. The tow operator attached the damaged cruiser and hauled it away. The convoy continued toward Town Hall. A cleanup crew connected a heavy hose to a nearby fire hydrant. Water struck the pavement in a hard silver stream, carrying diluted blood along the gutter toward the storm drains.

Dellon drove north on Main Street and turned onto Victory Road. He stopped beside the open field and looked back. The entire scene was disappearing within minutes. Vehicles removed. Bodies collected. Blood washed away. Glass swept from the roadway. By the time the first commuters were permitted into Trembol, there would be little physical evidence that the night had ever occurred.

The people gathered along the balcony of the Motel 12 had witnessed it. So had those standing outside Don's Diner. Few had anything beyond a cellphone in hand. Most of those were inexpensive or years out of date. At that distance, beneath emergency lights and the uncertain gray of dawn, their cellphone recordings would show little more than blurred figures, flashing lights, and dark shapes being loaded into official vehicles.

Nothing comparable to the citywide surveillance record. Nothing comparable to Vincent's body camera. Nothing comparable to the files already secured by Raven Star, the Marshals Service, and the FBI.

The truth had not been erased. It had been recorded, catalogued, and transferred into official custody before the blood began flowing into the gutters. What was disappearing was the aftermath—the part ordinary people could witness for themselves.

By the time the sun fully rose over Trembol, the blood would be gone. Only the record would remain. And the government already possessed the clearest copy. Including the parts they might not want most people to see.

Meghan and Emily Dalton stood outside the house, both dressed entirely in black, fully armed and equipped.

Mathius Dellon climbed from his SUV and stopped, genuinely surprised by the sight of their uniforms. A beautiful, security-modified Escalade waited at the curb, black and immaculate, its reinforced doors bearing an emblem he recognized from certain older schools of Silver Path thought—now reworked into the corporate symbol of Raven Star LLC. He had spent part of his time at the original barricade, a mile west of Trembol, researching his daughter's new employer.

Meghan looked more like a soldier than a police officer. So did Emily. Many people would have called the uniforms fascistic—jack-booted, militaristic, and carrying definite authoritarian elements. Black tactical cloth, armored vests, high boots, weapons displayed openly and without apology. They were not so different from those now worn by State Guard units under Natural Order Party governance.

Mathius, however, was a former Marine who had lived his life by discipline and stoic restraint. He voted conservatively and was neither particularly for nor against the N.O.P. The uniforms did not offend him. In fact, he found himself smiling.

"He moves fast," the sheriff said, realizing that Vincent had fully equipped both women within a single day.

Meghan was visibly relieved to see him. She crossed the distance between them and embraced him, catching Mathius off guard. He was no longer her boss and therefore had no reason to remain stiff or formal with her. He held her tightly, grateful to find his daughter alive, safe, and—on some level—still serving law and order, though now from a far more dire angle, as Vincent Veyl had clearly demonstrated.

"He always moved fast," Emily said. She remained nervous around Meghan's father, as most people did. "Things seem spontaneous with him, but he probably had them planned—at least as contingencies. He may have ordered the vehicles and equipment before he ever posted the available positions."

"Emily." Mathius regarded her for a moment. "Haven't seen you since…" He trailed off. It had indeed been a long time, but the memory remained clear. He had walked in on Meghan and Emily kissing as teenagers and had not responded well. His gaze moved between them. "So, are you two, uh…" His eyes drifted toward the cleanup underway near the Motel 12, as though the blood being washed from the pavement had suddenly become fascinating. The question hung between them.

Meghan smirked. "No."

The sun was climbing along the eastern horizon, while dark thunderheads gathered in the distance and promised a very different sort of day.

"We're friends," Meghan continued. She paused. "But…"

Emily perked up. "I'm hoping to lasso in the –" She made a broad gesture toward the town itself, as if indicating Vincent Veyl, wherever he might be.

Mathius smiled despite himself.

"I have no such delusions," Meghan said.

Mathius understood the implication. When he had returned from war as a young man, women had thrown themselves at him relentlessly. "He's religious," Mathius said.

"Very religious."

His thoughts returned to the operational stream. He had stood with the Marshals Service Rapid Response team and the High Marshal, watching portions of what happened inside the police station. The entire thing troubled him, and he could not shake it. The bad guys were gone, and he could not lament that—not given the clear evidence or the horrors they had committed over the better part of a century. But Mathius was a lawman, not an executioner.

Meghan noticed his discomfort. So did Emily. His gaze kept returning to the cleanup crews, already finishing at the motel and moving onward toward City Hall.

"We heard the police radio," Meghan said. "KTTV filled in some of the rest. Tallia seems to have been right on top of everything, but probably because…" She allowed the sentence to trail away.

"Yeah. I heard." Mathius looked toward the station perched upon the bluffs overlooking the city. "He owns her station," he said with a heavy exhale. "Both my daughters work for him now—assuming your sister goes along with it."

Black helicopters passed overhead, their rotors beating against the morning air. Private jets were leaving as quickly as air traffic control could clear them from the region. The wealthy and famous were retreating from the slaughterhouse, carrying exciting stories of their adventure with them—meat and potatoes for interviews. Each would bend the story to serve personal fame, profit, or political interest.

"Neutral News Network," Emily said. She knew Tallia and had never become estranged from her the way Meghan and Mathius had. "It's actually everything she could want if she lets go of her pride long enough to see it." Emily spoke as much to herself as to the others.

"You've hitched your wagons to something," he said. "Something, indeed." His gaze moved toward the Superstore, the Silver Satyr, and the brightening town beyond. Trembol remained beautiful. Orderly. Clean. Now, perhaps for the first time, the truth beneath its surface matched the image. But at what price?

"Something I cannot even begin to understand," Mathius continued. "He streamed the entire operation to cover his ass. Wisely. But he showed the world." He counted the revelations almost accusingly. "That music. His military record. His technology. Vyss. And now this." He gestured toward the Law Enforcement Center, Paradise Ranch, and the whole blood-washed city. "The Governor himself selected him. Gave him the green light to act as the Left Hand of God. And he did exactly that."

Mathius's face hardened. "We expected him to begin the operation. There were people imprisoned beneath the jail, so we knew he couldn't sit on his hands forever. But the State wanted time to muster, organize, and come in strategically." He looked directly at Meghan, then Emily. "Veyl didn't wait." The operation had been intended to begin with him. Instead, he had finished it before the State could get its boots on. "He killed every one of the hundred and twenty-three people named in those death warrants," Mathius said. "Then he killed dozens more—guards, hired guns, and every other bastard who chose to stand his ground instead of taking the out."

Neither woman spoke. "The final count will probably clear two hundred, all told. Armed people. Trained people. He walked through them with a rifle and a sword as though they were children fighting a dragon with BB guns." Mathius glanced toward Paradise Ranch. "The best people Vana had lasted seconds. He fought many of them hand-to-hand. Sword against firearms." He looked across the brightening city. "Four hours. He did all of that in four fucking hours."

Silence settled among them as distant thunder rolled over Trembol. A cleanup crew had reached the courthouse roof. One of the workers leaned over the side and vomited. Mathius had seen the explosion from the highway, but the full magnitude of what had occurred was only now settling into Meghan and Emily's minds. They had not known the number or understood the complete picture.

"Two hundred," Emily whispered. There was no horror in her voice. Instead, she smiled.

Mathius noticed and frowned at her. "It isn't human, Em. It isn't natural. Men cannot do that. Men cannot sing like that and kill like that." He wanted her to understand. Then he saw Meghan considering the same truth—not with disgust or fear, but with cold fascination. Their black uniforms and the double-headed Raven emblems upon their chests appeared more ominous now. Both women were fascinated by Vincent. Impressed by him. Mathius knew they would not be alone. He had heard the awe in the voices of officers gathered around the operational screens. Some had openly cheered as though watching a prizefight between one man and more than two hundred opponents—or some impossible Rambo movie brought to life.

"He's not human," Meghan said quietly. She was not frightened and was not asking a question. She was merely stating what she had concluded.

"People dream of Jesus returning," Emily said, "or a messiah appearing in whatever form their religion promises." She looked toward Trembol. "But what if he's already here? Will they truly want the Messiah once he begins to rise?"

"A dark messiah, girl," Mathius said plainly. "A very dark messiah. Not one of love and peace, but of war, judgment, death, and authority."

"He told everyone he won't save the world," Meghan replied. "He said he isn't a messiah or an angel."

"Yeah," Mathius said with a bitter chuckle. "Unless he's paid." He looked between the women. "And they will pay him. Oh, they'll pay the Mercenary Messiah. Vyss and his people need their Emperor Cometh so badly they'll hand him the world." Mathius motioned toward Trembol. "His denial is a negotiation tactic. They'll keep offering until, like here, they place the death warrants in his hands and say, 'Do what you do.'"

Meghan nodded slowly. She knew her father was not wrong. "And he'll do what he does." Her gaze traveled across the town. "Years of living in fear. People kidnapped, tortured, extorted, killed, buried in the desert, and sold into slavery. All of it ended in one night." She faced her father. "All my fears. All the threats they made. They stole my peace and turned my life into Hell for two years." Her voice softened. "Now they're gone. All of them. And I'm standing here at peace. Free. Because he did what he does."

Mathius heard something in her words that he had never fully understood before. The intimidation had worked far more deeply than Meghan had ever admitted. "But, Megs—at what price?" He gestured toward Trembol again. "He rules this town now, whether anyone formally declares it or not. Have you even heard the wider reports?" Mathius shook his head. "More than a thousand people have been arrested since yesterday in Washington, D.C., and beyond, all on charges of treason. That missing heiress in Oregon was found alive, along with two other women. Raven Star Security is solving unsolvable cases in hours. Every hour brings another bunch of them." He almost laughed. "Someone claims he found Hoffa." Mathius looked toward the Raven Star emblem upon Meghan's chest. "And he isn't doing any of this for free. Not as an officer earning a salary, but as a contractor making money. He does nothing for free. Nothing without a price." He glanced northwest, toward the Raven Star Building, though it remained hidden beyond the intervening rooftops. "They're going to pay him more than three million dollars for what he did last night. Twenty-five thousand a head. Standard fee, they said. Standard fee." His mouth tightened. "They claim he volunteered to do it for free—that he didn't know about the statutory fee. Maybe. I think he knew."

The Executioner's Fee did not disturb either woman. Mathius saw no alarm or revulsion in their faces. If anything, their eyes seemed to brighten at the mention of it, and the realization drove the weight deeper into his chest. His gaze settled upon his daughter. "What will you pay him for your peace and freedom?"

That was the point—the question beneath all the others.

Emily answered first. "He can have anything," she said, her voice dropping to a whisper. "Everything he wants from me." She was being honest. Shame edged the confession only because she had spoken it aloud in front of Meghan's father.

What Meghan said was worse. "I signed the waiver." She looked directly at Mathius. "I fully expected to give him everything when I did."

Something inside Mathius sank lower. "Your sister will see it, even if you don't." He turned toward his vehicle. "I love you, kid, but…" The rest would not come. Mathius climbed into his SUV and drove away, heading toward the Law Enforcement Building. A sheriff's office there required his attention, along with a quiet room where he could retreat, think, and brood for a while.

Meghan remained in front of the house. For a moment, she looked abashed. Then she watched the enormous black truck moving along the street ahead of the sweepers, and a smile touched her lips.

Emily placed one hand upon her forearm. "We're in this together."

Meghan looked at her.

"If he's the Antichrist, we're fucked," Emily said. "Because I think we're committed, come Hell or high water."

Meghan nodded. "Yeah. I'm all in." She looked toward Trembol. "This is the cause I'll stand for. The hill I'll die on."

"Many people will feel the same," Emily said. "Others will feel like your dad does."

Both women knew it was true.

Their Blackthorn devices chimed simultaneously. A new message appeared:

REPORT TO THE RAVEN STAR BUILDING BY 8:15 A.M.

FULL REGALIA.

They looked at one another in surprise. They weren't supposed to start until the 14th. Neither was disappointed to be called in early.

(5:00-6:00 AM, June 2—The Prophetess)



(Miriam Sophia Erev – The Prophetess of the Desert)

Pre-dawn light had begun creeping over the badlands. Stone, pinyon, and twisted desert brush lay beneath the silver-gold wash of earliest morning, while thunderheads massed along the western horizon against the fire of the east.

The last gunfire from Trembol had faded. The Sisters of the Order had armed themselves and barred the convent doors. Rifles rested within reach along the cloister walls, and sidearms rode over black habits beneath the folds of heavy robes. The old convent had been built like a fortress; modern steel, reinforced gates, and surveillance equipment had completed the transformation.

Miriam sat quietly upon a stone bench within the courtyard. Long black hair fell down her back beneath straight-cut bangs. Her eyes were black, her figure full and hourglass-shaped. Her Native features gave her a grave, almost regal presence that drew the eye despite her silence. Though in her late forties, Miriam remained striking. Hers was an inward-looking soul, somber and austere, with a stillness many found disturbing. Her black convent robes were fringed and worked with glyphs of silver thread in the traditional style favored by many Native-born Sisters.

An old raven shifted restlessly upon her shoulder while her pencil moved across the drawing pad balanced upon her knees. Page after page filled with terrible scenes of violence: a knight armed with sword and dagger, demons closing around him, bodies broken beneath his advance.

Several students sat cross-legged upon the courtyard grass nearby, watching in silence. Mother Superior Anita Aramus sat among them, catching each page Miriam discarded and passing it carefully to the others. No one interrupted her.

Miriam's eyes remained closed as she wrote and drew. Another distant crackle of gunfire rolled through the valley from the southwest, but her pencil never faltered. Upon one strangely detailed page, a dark queen and a princess with burning wings bowed in submission before the knight. Across the next, the warrior became a descending darkness falling upon ranks of horned soldiers.

A cool wind passed through the courtyard, stirring loose pages across the grass and trembling the leaves of the twisted desert apple trees. Far away, a man's voice carried faintly through the morning, though the words were too distant to understand.

Saint Aftiel's Convent had occupied the heights at the edge of the DeSatto Badlands, northeast of Trembol, since 1855. It began as a Mormon fort during the Deseret Wars against the United States, manned jointly by Mormon settlers and their Shoshone and Cherokee allies. The United States Cavalry took possession in 1859 and converted it into a military post. Eleven years later, it passed into the hands of the Silver Sisterhood and became a convent.

The Sisters arrived alongside the Fraternal Order of Silver Soldiers, led by the warrior-priest Iker Veyl. They came prepared to pray, fight, build, and own. They drove sheep before them, planted desert orchards, secured land grants and mining rights, and dug the wells and irrigation trenches that allowed settlement to spread across the valley. The wealthy Veyl family—said to descend from Saint Amil and the royal house of Euskara—commissioned the rail line connecting Salt Lake City and Reno. A bank followed, then public buildings, schools, and Saint Uriel's Church of the Flaming Sword.

Every Silver Sister knew the older story. In 555 A.D., the Armenian princess and theurgist Thera Arsacid encountered Oreviel—the Seraph also called Emetiel, Uriel, Aftiel, Shalim, Abbadona, Vesper, and the Raven. The Angel revealed the greater cosmology, restored her youth, and fathered a child upon her. When the Armenian Christian Church and her own family turned against her, Thera's brother Tethys carried the true infant west into the lands of the Basque peoples while she fled with a false bundle. Driven to a cliff, she leapt rather than surrender what her pursuers believed to be her child. Her deception worked. Her teachings survived, and her son became Saint Amil the Undying. More recent genetic evidence, cast doubt on whether Thera herself died at the cliff at all, or somehow reinvented herself as a Spanish nun decades later.

The women of Saint Aftiel's regarded themselves as heirs to both sides of that legacy: Thera's visionary discipline and Amil's militant endurance. Their faith had never separated revelation from the strength required to defend it. Theurgy, astral projection, remote viewing, autowriting, and other mediumistic arts were practiced alongside martial arts, desert survival, firearms, blades, and spiritual warfare, all governed by the Seven Devotions and the Twenty Laws of the Faith.

Their preparations extended beyond survival in the material world. The Sisters expected to awaken within Purgatoria and become shepherds to souls wandering its eternal wastes. They were a hardened and severe order, contemplatives with weapons and mystics who understood computer code. Saint Aftiel's supported itself primarily by providing information-technology services to the greater Church.

Outwardly, Saint Aftiel's appeared ancient, weathered, and somewhat neglected. Inside, the old stone shell concealed a modern, efficient, and rigorously ordered facility connected to the World Wide Web through its own servers and cyber-center.

Miriam was different even among the women who lived there. Her origins had been deliberately obscured, though it was known that she had suffered some terrible trauma before entering the Sisterhood. She rarely spoke and kept largely to herself, tending the gardens and caring for the convent's animals.

Then, at unpredictable intervals, she would sit before a terminal and produce brilliant computer code at a level few experts had ever witnessed. More astonishingly, Miriam could read and comprehend portions of the so-called Veyl Code—something no other human being had successfully accomplished, and a secret the Silver Order guarded fiercely. Programming languages seemed instinctive to her. She read them as easily as other people red children's books.

Among the clergy, Miriam was known simply as the Prophetess. Her drawings and autowritings were collected, interpreted, and archived by the Church. She frequently wrote in multiple languages at once, including obscure and archaic tongues, her words accompanied by detailed but heavily symbolic imagery. She had predicted numerous events long before they occurred, and an official Inquisitorial examination had declared her a confirmed oracle. The Church had relied upon her visions for more than twenty years and clergy from around the world made pilgrimages to meet with her, sit in her presence for an afternoon.

Important figures—local, national, and international, those in the know—visited Saint Aftiel's to receive her visions. They donated large sums to the convent for a few minutes in Miriam's presence, sometimes for no more than a single sentence of wisdom or drawing from the Seeress.

Lately, however, Miriam had become increasingly agitated. She suffered periods of panic, paced for hours, and sometimes refused food and water for days. On several occasions, she had nearly died. She mumbled incoherently and had become obsessed with one particular individual—an obsession that had made the same man a focal point for the Universal Church. Even now, she drew him as a black-winged knight with a star-crown hovering above his head as he fought demons. The events unfolding in the Trembol Valley were giving bloody substance to her visions. Miriam rocked back and forth upon the bench, grinning and nodding as her pencil continued moving.

Inside the convent, a police scanner crackled beside a television tuned to KTTV. Over the previous hour, the station had begun broadcasting a far more complete account of what was happening in Trembol: the reasons for the operation, the evidence behind it, and the Dire Court's issuance of death warrants against numerous individuals. Most of the condemned were local police, court, and penal officials. Nearly the entire Carydin private-security apparatus had also been sentenced to death.

Among Miriam's regular visitors were Bishop Howard Ramsey and Justin Vyss. They often came bearing questions, though Miriam rarely gave them clear answers. Her responses were usually hyper-symbolic, shaped by images, fragments, and obscure references. It seemed that she remained trapped within her own inward world and answered as unseen forces moved her, not as powerful men demanded.

A mystery surrounded Miriam. So did a prophecy concerning her—one dating back twenty-seven years and known only to a small circle of senior clergy. It foretold the coming of the Raven Seraph of Purgatoria in human form. He would usher in both the ending and the beginning of days: Twilight's Dawning.

The Prophecy of the Divine Raven and the Woman of the Western Gate had existed within the Silver Order long before its incorporation into the Universal Church, when the faith remained independent, persecuted, and condemned. A growing number within the Order now believed that Oreviel had appeared upon Rhea in the body of a man. Justin Vyss believed it more firmly than most. Fifteen years earlier, Miriam had delivered a channeled message declaring that it was his destiny to find that man, raise him to the throne, and prepare the world for the coming of the Raven Emperor.

What troubled the Sisters now was the severity of Miriam's decline. She had refused food and sleep for more than a week. Her body had grown pale and gaunt, and her hands trembled as she worked. Now she sketched the warrior seated among his fallen enemies. He was smoking, wounded, and exhausted, but unbeaten. Above his head, the star-crown burned with radiant light.

"Fax these to the rectory and the White Cardinal," Mother Superior instructed. She handed the completed pages to Sister Sharea Klydar, a beautiful, ebony-skinned nun born in Africa. Most of the drawings contained scribbled phrases and fragments in dozens of languages, as though Miriam had captioned each vision while receiving it.

The old raven upon Miriam's shoulder—known to the Sisters as Mama—nuzzled the Native woman's cheek as if attempting to comfort her. Miriam had begun to doze, her body swaying slightly upon the bench. No one dared wake her.

Mother Superior Anita Aramus was short and full-figured, with dusky hispanic features and dark-brown eyes. She was in her late sixties and approaching the time when she would Take the Broken Road, owing to worsening diabetes and heart disease. Quiet and introspective, Anita spoke softly and seldom wasted words. She had cared for Miriam since the woman first entered Saint Aftiel's. Anita was also among the very few who knew Miriam's true name, her origins, and her possible destiny.

Yet under normal circumstances, that destiny seemed both unlikely and forbidden. Miriam's age, her damaged state, her bouts of madness, and her intimate connection to the man at its center, all stood against it. By ordinary human law and custom, what had been ordained would have been prohibited. By the older laws governing immortals and metaphysical bonds, however, it represented a familiar and clearly understood principle. Even so, no one knew whether Vincent Veyl was truly the promised one. Some doubted. Others feared he might be its opposite—the Shadow Raven rather than the Twilight Son.

The Silver Order had long been regarded as semi-heretical, not because it worshipped a different God, but because it placed far less emphasis upon Jesus and Heaven than the greater Church. Its ethics and moral teachings remained closely related to Christian doctrine. Its center of gravity did not—and indeed, many religious experts regarded it as a different religion altogether, bearing more in common with ancient Gnosticism, Taoism, and Judaism than with modern Christianity.

Miriam had neither confirmed nor denied Vincent's identity. Her fixation upon him seemed almost proof enough, yet the young man also troubled her. Some Sisters believed his self-abusive disciplines were making her physically ill through whatever bond connected them.

Vincent drove himself more brutally than any living Silver clergyman. He crossed thresholds through deprivation, pain, training, and relentless devotion. By every report, he possessed greater discipline than many monks or priests, but his path was archaic and pre-Christian—the path of a literal knight of the faith. Within the modern Church, such language had become largely symbolic. For Vincent Veyl, it remained literal.

"He has cleared Paradise Ranch," Sharea called from the doorway between the courtyard and the computer room.

The Sisters gathered quickly. Those already working inside the cyber-laboratory paused and turned toward the main displays. A moment later, the emergency announcement sounded across Trembol, the radio, scanner, and KTTV itself:

"All warrants have been served. The crisis is passing. Remain in place to allow emergency units to move freely and ensure domestic order."

Miriam laughed softly to herself in the garden. She rose without looking at anyone and wandered toward the residential wing.

"The long spiritual war against the unholy powers of Trembol has ended brutally for them," Mother Superior said. She looked across the Sisters gathered beneath the cold light of the monitors. "The Raven Star has brought an end to their reign."

Smiles appeared throughout the cyber-laboratory. Some of the women laughed in relief. Many had themselves been victims of the Carydin Crime Syndicate, escaping degradation and violence before entering the convent to begin lives of healing and renewal.

The Church's internal communications networks had come alive. Secure chat rooms, private ecclesiastical forums, encrypted blogs—the Silver Order had built an intra-net connecting its members across states and nations, and now every channel burned with reports from Trembol.

A notification appeared upon Mother Superior's desktop.

"Sister Aramus," wrote the Bishop, "Sir Veyl has granted us an appointment at nine this morning, should we wish to accept." She read further. "Justin will attend as well, along with several others."

Mother Superior began typing.

Should we present the license and indulgence? Miriam is worsening. I fear for her well-being if this continues. She seems bound to him somehow.

Ramsey answered quickly. We will feel out the situation. Perhaps we should withhold them until another day. A second message followed almost immediately. Of course she is bound to him.

Anita considered her response. Father Ramsey permitted directness and worked best when others spoke plainly, so she gave him the truth.

I love her. We all do. But she is—well, rather insane. She lives almost entirely inward, can be unfriendly, and is frequently self-absorbed. She is too old for him and would require care and protection. She belongs here, where we can watch over her; not with a vital, virile young man of ambition who already works himself nearly to death. He is gathering young women who are, frankly, far more likely to suit his tastes.

If we intend to partner him with someone of our choosing—someone proper and educated—there are convents filled with worthy candidates.

Anita hesitated before continuing.

Even Cyrinx Miller would be more sensible. She is a beautiful and intelligent young woman, pure as driven snow, devout, and well educated. She already possesses a rapport with him through her work as his accountant and would clearly add value to his life.

Anita looked through the doorway toward the courtyard. Miriam was no longer there. She returned her hands to the keyboard.

Yet his mercenary sensibilities trouble me. These killings trouble me deeply. He is not what I expected. He is dark, Howard. So terribly dark. Cold. Selfish. Withdrawn. An introvert. A mercenary killer.

Certainly, one without equal—but a cold-blooded slayer nonetheless. One who does not appear to like people very much.

Ramsey's answer appeared.

You are not wrong. I have similar concerns. At this point, Miriam may become a distraction.

Still, we cannot conceal the documents from him indefinitely. Pope Pius issued the edicts, and even we Silver Pathers are not beyond the authority of the Church.

Another message followed.

And what, precisely, did you expect? The Seraph of the Apocalypse to be some sweet, love-and-light hugger?

Did you imagine the future conqueror of the world—the ruler of ten thousand worlds—would be an erudite, highbrow intellectual like Vyss?

Anita could almost feel Father Ramsey laughing at the other end. He had often mocked what he called her love-and-light sensibilities, dismissing them as impractical and decidedly un-Purgatorian. She remembered what he had told her only two days earlier:

You are waiting for the Messiah of Heaven while fearing the Messiah of Hell. Our Order seeks the one who is both—and neither.

Before she could respond, another message appeared.

I am sending a car for you shortly. Be prepared. Vyss is already in Trembol, and Governor Wilson is inbound.

Officially, the Governor is attending a photo-op celebrating the successful operation against a hardened criminal organization. In reality, he intends to associate himself publicly with our young Seraph. We must be there to represent our interests soberly.

Vincent has deployed Tallia Stevens perfectly, ensuring public support by clearly presenting the reasons for his actions. My first impression is that support is swelling rapidly.

The people are with him.

"I'll put on my finest robes," Anita murmured. She laughed quietly to herself. Every robe she owned looked exactly the same.

Mother Superior returned to her work. The cyber-laboratory settled into the steady hum of server fans and quiet conversation as she began running diagnostics upon the newly restored internet service. Emails and calls poured into the convent. Church officials from across the world demanded information about the situation in Trembol. All wanted answers immediately. Few seemed concerned with whether Saint Aftiel's actually possessed them.

Then Anita noticed the private communiqué. It had come directly from Pope James I.

FOR YOUR EYES ONLY

DELETE ONCE READ

Anita opened it. As she read, the last trace of amusement left her face. Her expression darkened. Then she nodded once in obedience. Whatever the Holy Father had commanded, she understood the wisdom of it.

(8:30 AM, June 2, 2026—Openings)



Outside, Trembol bore almost no visible scars from the conflict that had consumed it during the early hours of the morning. A quiet drizzle fell beneath the gray sky, silvering streets that were once again clean, secure, and orderly. State Troopers and Nevada Marshals had assumed the duties of local law enforcement, their cruisers rolling slowly through town on rain-darkened pavement.

A screen mounted inside the Raven Star lobby carried KTTV's coverage of the almost surreal restoration. The city looked as though nothing had happened. Every corpse had been removed, the streets swept, and the broken glass cleared away. Even the blast scars had been steamed, scraped, and washed from the stone and pavement. By eight o'clock, Trembol had been scrubbed clean enough to look innocent.

Only the absences betrayed the truth. The Trembol Police Department had ceased to exist. The casino and Paradise Ranch were closed for the first time in as long as anyone could remember. Trembol itself remained unnaturally quiet, most of the tourists having fled aboard private aircraft or escaped along the interstate as soon as the cordon opened.

Yet the city continued about its business. A state judge had been appointed to take control of and audit the local court, while a state-employed clerk assumed the administration of City Hall until new elections could be organized. Throughout Elko County and across Nevada, secondary arrests were underway against those connected to the trafficking networks and their associated crimes.



Inside Raven Star, rain traced the tall lobby windows, and the polished black stone reflected the cold morning light. Meghan stood behind the reception desk, dark-featured and beautiful in black tactical fatigues and body armor. A rifle lay horizontally across the marble before her, close enough to reach without thinking.

Emily stood beside the conference-room doors, guarding the nexus between the reception area and the garage beyond. Her light-brown hair had been pulled back tightly, and her brown eyes moved continually across the lobby. An AR-15 hung from one shoulder, ready to be brought up in a heartbeat.

Each woman wore a secure communications device in one ear. Trinity spoke quietly through them, supplying instructions, security alerts, visitor identifications, private histories, and immediate threat assessments. Before anyone reached the front doors, Meghan and Emily knew who was approaching, where they had come from, and whether either woman should put a hand near her weapon.

The calm voice kept them focused and informed, but neither had quite adjusted to the building itself. The garage, lobby, and conference room had all been finished with the same severe precision: black marble, silver fittings, hardened glass, dark leather, corporate seals, and the hard geometry of a military command center. The double-headed Raven spread its wings across walls, doors, vehicles, and uniforms. Nothing looked temporary. Nothing suggested a company hastily assembled the day before. The building seemed to have been waiting for them. Increasingly, so did their uniforms.

Everything was militaristic and corporate at once, as though they had entered the private citadel of some underworld technology tyrant. Yet this was now their workplace. Soon enough, it would become their home—and their fortress.

Shannon and Cyrinx Miller were the first visitors to arrive, their conservative business clothes standing in sharp contrast to the armed women waiting inside.

They had arrived early, a half-hour before the scheduled meeting. The outer door buzzed and unlocked, admitting mother and daughter from the rain. They entered dressed for business in black and charcoal—fitted dresses, tailored skirts, jackets, and heels. Both appeared professional, polished, and fashionable despite the grimness of the morning.

Emily stepped forward with the security wand. Until the previous day, she had worked at the bank as its communications commander.

Cyrinx's face brightened the moment she recognized her. "Em!" The young blonde smiled broadly. "You started already?" She had been told there would be a two-week waiting period before Raven Star's new employees formally assumed their positions. Apparently, the timetable had changed.

Emily returned the smile, but only faintly. The morning had drained much of her usual brightness and given her a new seriousness about precisely whom—and what—she had agreed to serve. "Given the situation, we were called in early." She motioned toward Meghan, who stood behind the reception desk with her rifle laid across the black marble.

Cyrinx looked from one woman to the other. Her gaze moved over the black uniforms, body armor, rifles, and badges bearing the double-headed Raven Star. Her smile softened as the reality of the place settled over her. Raven Star was not preparing to become operational. It already was.

"Deputy Megs—you really are working here," Shannon said cheerfully. She liked the young woman, as did most people in Trembol.

Meghan smiled. "Yes, ma'am." She had always appreciated Mrs. Miller and felt deeply sorry for the humiliations and betrayals the woman had endured.

"I can't say I blame you," Shannon replied as she looked around the lobby. "This is...well, impressive." The elegance had clearly surprised her. A young man raised in an orphanage, who had spent much of his youth in war zones, had somehow created a reception area of astonishing polish and professionalism—one unquestionably worthy of his ancestors.

The building had belonged to the Veyl family since the late nineteenth century and had always possessed a certain elegance, though in those days its character had been warmer and more residential. This was something else entirely: polished, corporate, and militaristic. Every surface, furnishing, and carefully ordered detail suggested discipline, money, and deliberate purpose.

"You can keep your devices," Emily said after completing the scan. "We were told you're acting as financial agents and allies of Raven Star."

"But you will not record any private conversations," Meghan added from behind the desk. "The consequences would be...well." She allowed the implication to finish the sentence, then motioned them onward. "Cyrinx," Meghan said as the women approached the conference-room threshold, "the boss says you're to receive temporary access to the network, at least for the purposes of this meeting. You're his accountant, I guess."

The conference-room doors opened. Both women stopped at the threshold. The chamber beyond left them momentarily speechless. A long table of black marble dominated the room; its surface polished to a mirrorlike sheen. Silver fixtures and recessed lighting gave the chamber a severe, almost ceremonial elegance. Hardened displays had been set seamlessly into the walls, while the great double-headed Raven Star seal presided above the head of the table.

Shannon recognized its ancient meaning immediately. Vincent's religious allegiance was no private eccentricity hidden away inside a chapel. It stood at the center of his entire vision—embedded within the company he had created and everything he intended to build.

Meghan ushered Shannon toward a chair near the head of the table.

"This is..." The banker looked slowly around the chamber. "It's..." For once, she seemed unable to find the proper word. "Is the entire building this grandiose?" Her gaze traveled across the ultramodern surfaces and severe corporate geometry. The twenty-five-foot-long table appearing to have been cut from one solid slab of black marble. The question carried impressed amusement rather than criticism.

Meghan smiled. "Oh, you've no idea." That much she could safely admit.

Cyrinx stared in open wonder as Meghan seated her before the primary side terminal in the corner of the room, to the left of her mother's position. The workstation was more advanced than anything she had used at the bank: a broad high-resolution display, an ergonomic keyboard of unfamiliar design, a

hardened processing unit wired directly into the network, and secure interfaces built into the black desk itself.

Meghan indicated a small black earpiece resting beside the keyboard. "Put that in. Trinity will be able to interact with you privately."

"Trinity?" Cyrinx asked, her eyes widening.

"The Woman of the House," Meghan said with a faint smile.

Shannon opened her briefcase and began arranging files across the marble table. "Tallia should be here shortly. I saw her beat-up old Honda Pilot outside the café down the street." She mentioned it absently as she sorted through the documents. "Larry looked as ratty and disheveled as usual." Her disapproval was unmistakable.

"He'd be a good-looking man if he put some effort into himself," Cyrinx thought aloud.

"If he lost forty pounds, got a haircut, and ironed his clothes once in a while," Emily called from the reception area.

All the women had to agree.

"Darma seems to like him the way he is," Meghan remarked neutrally. Darma—the pretty granola girl who was Larry's common-law wife—clearly adored him. The three of them lived primarily at the station atop DeSatto Ridge and rarely bothered coming into town.



(Tallia Stevens, Larry Stevens, Sheriff Dellon)

Even as Meghan mentioned them, the outer-door alert sounded. Emily checked the security display and buzzed the arriving party inside. Tallia Stevens entered first, composed and businesslike despite the rain. Her cousin Larry followed, proving every uncharitable word the women had just spoken.

A third visitor followed them inside—one neither woman had expected.

"Sheriff Mathius Dellon," Emily murmured. She had seen him less than three hours earlier. Her expression tightened as she remembered their conversation—the sheriff standing amid the aftermath, watching Trembol being scrubbed clean while trying to comprehend what his daughters had attached themselves to. You've hitched your wagons to something. Something he could not understand. Something that, by the latest tally, had killed two hundred thirty-three-armed men in four hours, then stood quietly aside while the State followed with coroners, sweepers, and water trucks.

Mathius looked no less troubled now. His face remained characteristically flat, stern, and difficult to read, but an intensity burned behind his eyes that had not been there the night before. He had been chewing on the morning's events ever since dawn—on Vincent, the warrants, the operation, and perhaps most of all the disturbing realization that both of his daughters were being drawn into Raven Star's orbit.

Meghan visibly tensed when she saw him. "Dad, you're not –" A quiet voice spoke through her earpiece. Meghan stopped mid-sentence.

Mathius noticed: "Victoria requested a meeting yesterday," he stated calmly, his deep baritone carrying through the lobby. "It was granted for this morning." Whatever purpose the meeting had originally possessed, the world had changed considerably since it was requested. Mathius stepped to the reception desk and signed the visitor sheet. Without further comment, he surrendered his electronic devices and unholstered his service weapon, placing everything carefully before Emily.

She passed the security wand over him. It chirped near his boot. An ankle-holstered backup pistol. Emily's eyes flicked upward. Another quiet instruction sounded through her earpiece. Leave it. Mathius said nothing, but his eyes told her he knew perfectly well what she had found. Emily continued the search without mentioning the weapon.

Tallia looked between her father and Meghan, then offered Emily a faint smile. She and Larry both appeared distinctly frumpy against the severe elegance of Raven Star. Tallia wore a light-brown pantsuit and plain shoes. Her mousy dark hair framed her face without any evident styling, while her trademark dark-rimmed glasses sat before eyes carrying their usual perpetual frown. Larry wore brown slacks, scuffed work boots, a blue windbreaker, and a wrinkled white shirt. His hair maintained its habitual Einstein-like disorder. Wire-framed glasses rested upon a face that appeared faintly unshaven even at its most presentable. Both carried coffee from Elba & Mac's Computer Café. They made no attempt to conceal anything. Each surrendered their electronic devices and passed through security without complaint.



A door opened at the rear of the lobby. Josh Manning emerged from the break room adjoining the garage, carrying a covered serving tray.

Josh was lean, ginger-haired, and youthful-looking, with his usual cheerful smile. Today, however, he wore a white dress shirt, black necktie, and sharply pressed slacks. He appeared more professional than anyone in Trembol had ever seen him. "Hey guys." He smiled brightly and nodded toward Meghan and Emily, then Tallia. Only then did he notice the two men. Larry's careless clothing seemed to offend Josh on some private level, as though the man's slovenly appearance represented a kind of disrespect. Sheriff Dellon's overpowering presence had the opposite effect and visibly intimidated him.

Josh moved past both men quickly and entered the conference room. He placed the covered tray upon the black marble table, then went directly to the beverage station built into one corner of the chamber. There, he prepared coffee mugs and water glasses with quiet efficiency. The tray held hors d'oeuvres arranged for easy, mess-free eating: cheeses, sliced meats—including beef sausages and beef bacon, olives, crackers, and small portions of fruit. Josh stacked tiny saucers beside the food and laid out cocktail forks and neatly folded napkins. He worked quickly and unobtrusively, smiling throughout. When he noticed Cyrinx seated at the terminal, his smile widened. They'd known each other since childhood.

She acknowledged him with an almost cold nod.

Shannon barely noticed him at all, except to register inwardly the degree of style Vincent Veyl had displayed by arranging such service upon almost no notice. Everything had been prepared. Everything had its place. Even the refreshments seemed to announce that Raven Star had been waiting for them.

"Coffee or tea?" Josh asked the ladies. "Americano or black pekoe." He made the limits clear. This was not a five-star hotel, and he was not pretending to offer five-star room service.

Cyrinx lifted the bottle of vitamin water she had brought with her and politely declined.

Shannon did not look up from the files she was arranging. "Tea would be nice. Slice of lemon, bit of cream."

Josh had anticipated the request. He immediately poured tea into a black ceramic mug branded with the Raven Star emblem, like nearly everything else in the building, then set the lemon and cream beside it without asking again. Like Meghan and Emily, Josh was being quietly guided by the voice within his earpiece. He said little. By nature, and experience, he was more accustomed to serving people in greasy spoons and military mess tents than in a refined corporate boardroom. Under Trinity's direction, however, he moved with surprising polish.

Mathius took a seat near the far end of the table, opposite Shannon. The banker finally looked up from her papers, showing a flicker of surprise as he entered the chamber.

Tallia and Larry seated themselves to Shannon's right, since their immediate business was with the banker—and with the man who would eventually occupy the chair at the head of the table.

The outer door buzzed again. Emily checked the security display. Her tension increased tenfold. Father Howard Ramsey entered first.



Father Ramsey stood 5'10" and appeared to be somewhere between his late forties and early fifties. He possessed a solid, medium build, thick gray-blond hair, dark eyes, and hard, handsome features. A neatly maintained goatee framed his mouth. Although a Silver Bishop, he was commonly known simply as Father Ramsey. He was something of a legend in Elko—a former soldier and CIA agent who had entered the priesthood and risen steadily through the ranks of the Church.

What had truly earned him his local reputation, however, was his long-running war of words with the Carydins, more than one of which had ended in an outright fistfight with their thugs. On at least one occasion, several men had attempted to jump him and teach him to shut his mouth. It had not gone well for them. Ramsey wore a martial black cassock trimmed with silver piping, with a midnight-blue sash bound tightly around his waist.

Mother Superior Anita Aramus entered beside him. She stood 5'5" and was in her late sixties, short and full-figured, with dusky Hispanic features and a mature, understated beauty. Her black-and-silver robes and habit gave her the severe dignity of an older and deeply established religious order.

Behind them came a man dressed entirely in white. Long white hair fell past his shoulders. His eyes were a pale blue-gray, and his complexion appeared almost bloodlessly fair. At nearly 6'4", he was very lean yet broad-shouldered, with a bearing that seemed almost clerical despite the immaculate white suit. Upon one finger, he wore a white-gold signet ring bearing an equal-armed eternity cross and a platinum watch encircled one wrist. The reason so many called Justin Vyss the White Cardinal was immediately apparent.

For one disorienting moment, Emily could not decide whether she should bow, salute, or curtsy. Trinity whispered the proper greeting into her ear. Emily placed an open palm over her heart, lowered her eyes, and inclined herself in a shallow half-bow as the three entered. “Blessings of the Silver Aion be upon you,” she said softly.

“And upon you, Child of the Covey,” Father Ramsey replied. His voice was firm but approving.

“And upon you also, Shieldmaiden of the Silver Raven,” Vyss added.

Mother Aramus remained silent, yet the satisfaction upon her face was unmistakable. Her eyes traveled across the reception area and into the conference chamber beyond. The emblems of Purgatoria were everywhere: the double-headed Raven, silver upon black, and sacred geometry worked subtly into the architecture, including equal-armed silver-crosses representing the cosmic crossroad. The two young women stationed inside wore body armor and black fatigues, rifles in hand, their posture disciplined and alert. Meghan and Emily embodied the ideal toward which the Silver Sisters trained throughout their mortal lives—the armored shepherdesses they hoped to become within the eternal wastes of Purgatoria.

Vyss paused at the entrance and held the outer door open. Beyond him, a procession of black-and-chrome SUVs and official sedans swept into view. Red-and-blue lights flashed through the rain as the vehicles came to an abrupt, perfectly coordinated halt along the street outside Raven Star. Their doors opened almost simultaneously. Armed members of the Natural Order Party Protective Service deployed with practiced speed. Some faced outward toward the street while others scanned the surrounding windows and rooftops. Several moved immediately to secure the vehicles. Emily watched through the hardened glass as the morning drizzle shimmered across black armor and dark coats beneath the pulse of emergency lights. The White Cardinal had not come alone.



The man who emerged from the executive Lincoln was no stereotypical politician. He stood well over 6' feet tall, broad-shouldered and thickly built yet trim. Salt-and-pepper hair framed chiseled features and dark-blue eyes, while a pale scar cut across his right cheek. The suit he wore had likely cost more than most people's cars. He did not merely walk toward the Raven Star Building. He strode.

Meghan recognized him immediately. A Marine herself, she had once served under him at Parris Island. Major Tom Wilson. War-Dog Wilson, as he had been known throughout the Corps. He had earned the name because he preferred to remain close to the fighting—in the field, at the front, wherever fire and blood were being spilled somewhere in the world. Now he was Governor of Nevada.

Wilson entered Raven Star's lobby and surveyed it with immediate, unmistakable approval. His protective detail remained outside, taking positions around the entrance and along the sidewalk. Their attention moved constantly between the street, the surrounding rooftops, and the two, armed women stationed within the lobby.

"You have the watch, ladies," one of the protectors said.

Before Meghan or Emily could answer, a deep male voice sounded from behind the security team. "I'll guarantee his safety, gentlemen."

The guards turned. Vincent stood upon the rain-darkened sidewalk behind them. He had crossed Trembol on foot. Along the way, people had emerged from their shops and houses to watch him pass—a rifle over one shoulder, a sword rising above the other, the black armor upon his body bearing the dents, scratches, and scars of the night's brutal work. The long walk through the rain had mercifully washed away much of the blood and filth, but it could not conceal the damage. His helmet rested beneath one arm. Black body armor covered his 6'5" frame, rainwater gleaming across its battered surface. He was as beautiful as he was handsome—made more striking, perhaps, by the exhaustion, wounds, and lingering blood upon him. His black eyes settled calmly upon the Governor.



Vincent's gaze moved from the Governor to the guards, then past them into the lobby. Vyss. Ramsey. Mother Aramus. All stood waiting inside.

At close range, the damage was clearer. A tight black field dressing encircled Vincent's left thigh. A deep cut and spreading bruise marked the right side of his head. His armor remained spattered with blood, and the bitter odors of gun smoke and violence clung to him despite the rain. He looked as though he had walked directly from a battlefield. Because he had.

The protective detail studied him for only a moment before easing almost as one. Not entirely, but enough. Governor Wilson turned toward Vincent. For the first time since arriving, the old War Dog smiled.

"Sorry I'm late, gentlemen… ladies," Vincent said as the others stared at him. "I was a bit...well, slowed." He chuckled and entered with a noticeable limp. Everyone was taken aback by the depth and power of his natural voice. Without the helmet's mechanical alteration, it remained extraordinarily deep yet smooth, resonant enough to be felt almost as much as heard.

Wilson's dark-blue eyes widened with immediate approval. "Damn, son—you do impress!" Vincent looked like some warrior of lore stepping directly out of the apocalypse. Dark stains crossed the Raven Star emblem upon his chest. Wilson had known many elite soldiers. He had never seen anything quite like the man standing before him.

"Major." Despite the wounded leg, Vincent came sharply to attention and saluted the Governor with sincere respect. Tom Wilson had been a legend among soldiers long before politics laid claim to him.

"Ah, hell, son." Wilson returned the salute, then seized Vincent's hand in a powerful grip and pulled him into a hard shoulder-bump embrace. Both men relaxed almost at once. An understanding passed between them—soldier to soldier, warrior to warrior. "This is exactly what I'd expect from the Left Hand of God," Wilson said, gesturing toward Vincent, the building, and perhaps the whole transformed city beyond them.

Vincent smiled faintly. "Focuses the mind." He stepped fully into the lobby and looked toward the Governor's protective detail outside. "Guys, make yourselves at home in the lounge."

"We'll hold the perimeter," one of the men replied.

The other guard nodded. After seeing Vincent's condition, neither man seemed entirely worthy of entering the building. "Thank you, sir," the second guard said.

"Vin—or Staff Sergeant—will do," Vincent corrected.

The Governor's smile broadened. "We're all soldiers here," Wilson said aloud. He looked toward Meghan and Emily. Both women stood at attention, saluting not in the conventional fashion of the United States military, but in the Imperial manner—with closed fists held against their chests.

"Well," Vincent said, gently steering Wilson toward the conference room. The doors opened.

Even those who had already entered seemed to see the chamber anew beneath the Governor's gaze. Black marble, silver geometry, hardened glass, and shadowed steel surrounded the immense double-headed Raven seal dominating the far wall. Military order fused seamlessly with corporate power and ancient religious symbolism. Even Justin Vyss was awed. This was precisely the kind of chamber he might have imagined for the man he had spent fifteen years seeking.

"Governor." Vincent indicated the seat at the far end of the table, directly opposite his own and immediately beside Sheriff Dellon.

Wilson paused before taking it. He turned toward Vincent, reached inside his jacket, and withdrew a small black booklet. From within it, he produced a certified check. Mathius caught sight of the amount. A deep frown settled across his face. The Governor either failed to notice or chose not to. He extended

one hand toward Vincent and presented the check with the other. "The Executioner's Fee," Wilson said. "Should cover all those silver dollars you gave them."

A flicker of guilt crossed Vincent's face. "I volunteered," he said flatly. Mathius visibly relaxed.

"Nonsense," the Governor replied. "You're a contractor. You've got overhead. It would've cost us far more than this to do it the hard way—the logistics, manpower, full-scale raid, all of it. This is the standard fee. But I'll need a receipt from your banker there." He smiled brightly. "Give it to charity if you like."

Vincent considered the check for only a moment before nodding and accepting it. Shannon had already risen behind him with her ledger in hand. Vincent passed the check directly to her.

Her eyes widened the instant she saw the amount. "Wow. That much?"

Everyone at the table immediately wanted to know. Meghan and Emily remembered what Mathius had told them earlier that morning.

"Google it," Shannon remarked, but almost no one had a device to do so. For once, the polished banker had been genuinely caught off guard. She recovered quickly, opened her ledger, wrote out a receipt, and formally took possession of the check.

The Governor appeared thoroughly pleased with himself. Then he noticed Mathius's expression. Rather than confront it directly, Wilson shifted the mood with practiced ease and extended his hand toward the Sheriff.

Mathius rose. Instead of taking the offered hand, he came sharply to attention and saluted.

Recognition passed across the Governor's face. "Master Sergeant Dellon." Wilson returned the salute. "Another goddamned legend in the flesh." He looked around the table and laughed. "What is this—a VFW meeting or some shit?"

A ripple of laughter moved through the room. It was precisely the sort of thing people liked about Tom Wilson. However, much power surrounded him, he possessed a gift for puncturing ceremony before it became unbearable. There was none of the smooth, calculated manner of a career politician about him. He was loud, direct, decisive, and entirely himself. Wilson shook Mathius's hand, then looked toward Meghan. "Your daughter?" His eyes brightened with recognition. "The famous Deputy Meghan." To her surprise, the Governor saluted her. "Damn fine MP, from everything I heard." He was not merely blowing smoke. Wilson had read her service record.

Meghan returned the salute, visibly proud despite herself.

Vincent made his way toward his chair, limping slightly. The bullet had driven into his thigh and struck bone. Whatever his stamina, it hurt like hell. He set the grim helmet upon the table, unslung his large rifle, and laid it across the black marble with a heavy clunk. The sheathed sword followed beside it.

"Coffee. Black," Wilson told Josh.

Josh nodded nervously and hurried toward the beverage station.

"Can't stay long," the Governor continued. He waved broadly toward everything outside the room. "This has the press worked into a frenzy. The feds are asking questions too." He looked toward Vincent. "But putting our side of it out there directly, Staff Sergeant—that was a brilliant move." His attention shifted toward the frumpy reporter farther down the table and her equally rumpled technical partner. Wilson recognized Tallia immediately. Everyone in Nevada knew Tallia Stevens. Whether they loved or hated her, they knew her to be stubbornly—and often painfully—honest. "You planning to stay aboard under the new regime, Ms. Stevens?" The Governor nodded toward Meghan. "Your sister seems committed." Then he glanced at Sheriff Dellon. "Could become a family operation."

Mathius sat again and nursed his coffee without reacting.

Vyss took the chair immediately to Vincent's left. Father Ramsey seated himself beside Vyss, with Mother Superior Aramus to the Bishop's left. Ramsey placed a leather-bound, zippered dossier upon the table before him. Tallia and Larry occupied the seats to Shannon's right, their immediate business being with the banker—and with the man who now lowered himself carefully into the chair at the head of the table.

Shannon remained standing. The combined presence of the Governor, the Sheriff, the White Cardinal, the Bishop, and Vincent himself had left her somewhat breathless.

"I had a bunch of meetings lined up," Vincent said absently. "Figured I'd get them all done at once." He leaned forward and began field-stripping his rifle directly upon the conference table. The soldiers in the chamber understood and approved. The civilians found it astonishingly audacious. Vincent's hands moved with such speed and practiced precision that he barely appeared to consider what they were doing. The takedown pins came free, followed by the bolt carrier, charging assembly, and spring. He cleared and checked the magazine well, laying each component in perfect order upon the marble. His attention remained fixed upon the people around him even as the weapon seemed to dismantle itself beneath his fingers.

"You've been shot," Emily said, her eyes moving toward his thigh. "Maybe I should look at it. Army medic, after all."

Vincent shrugged and pursed his lips, pleased on some level to see her there—it had been over a year since he'd last laid eyes on the pretty soldier girl, and she was still quite pretty. "Took care of it." He reached into a narrow pocket on his vest, withdrew a bullet, and tossed it onto the black stone table. It struck with a sharp metallic clank. The round was still stained with his blood. Eyes widened throughout the room.

"Well, damn," Governor Wilson said.

Even Mathius appeared impressed.

"Weasel-faced bastard got his backup weapon out while I was distracted by his other fourteen comrades," Vincent explained. There was no boast in his voice. If anything, he sounded annoyed with himself for allowing the mistake. The assailant had managed to put a bullet through Vincent's thigh

only because Vincent had failed to account for a concealed secondary weapon while fighting fourteen other men.

Vyss felt excitement rising within him. The feat struck him as another sharp pulse of validation—another sign that the man beside him was precisely what he believed him to be. He drew a long breath, centered his thoughts, and deliberately calmed himself.

Shannon stared across the room. She had not been prepared for the sheer concentration of testosterone, military authority, wealth, political power, and physical presence gathered around a single table. These were men accustomed to command, men accustomed to being obeyed, men whose names carried weight far beyond Trembol.

Vincent sensed her discomfort. He looked directly toward her. "A good and faithful wife to your husband," he said. The chamber fell quiet. "A true mother to your daughter." Shannon met Vincent's black eyes. "A brilliant financial professional," he continued in the same calm, unembellished tone. "Devout toward God and holy purpose." He paused. "You belong here among us."

The words comforted Shannon immediately, yet they struck everyone else with unexpected force as well. Vincent had not praised her beauty, her clothing, or even her usefulness to the powerful men gathered around the table. He had named her faithfulness, motherhood, competence, devotion, and loyalty. He had recognized her as a righteous presence within the greater story and placed those virtues beside martial glory, political authority, wealth, and prophetic ambition as things of equal weight. Even Sheriff Dellon nodded. Shannon visibly relaxed. She sat, reached across the table, and gently patted Vincent's hand, giving it a slight squeeze. It was, quite simply, the kindest thing anyone had ever said to her—and he had spoken with absolute sincerity.

Vincent Veyl was far less frightening in person than Mathius had expected. Dark, certainly. Cold when required. Yet he was also cordial, observant, and possessed of a peculiar ability to see directly into people.

Tallia shifted uncomfortably, having taken her time before answering the Governor's question. "I'm willing to listen to his proposal." Her tone was neither meek nor defiant. It remained characteristically flat. "Nothing sent to me this morning violated the stance of neutrality I have always maintained—or that his proposed business model claims to support."

"He gave us the facts," Larry added. His voice was quieter and more tentative. "The same source files—though summarized—that were provided to the FBI and Nevada Marshals." Larry Stevens was the engineer and technical mind who kept the old, rickety relay station functioning as both radio and television infrastructure. Among the hypermasculine soldiers gathered around the table, he plainly felt out of place.

Vincent noticed. "Law." Larry looked up at the use of his nickname. "You have a master's degree in electrical engineering." Vincent continued cleaning the disassembled rifle. "You sleep, what—four hours a night? You have a new baby on the way." Larry blinked as a cleaning cloth moved methodically through the receiver. "You're paid badly and receive bargain-basement insurance." Tallia looked toward her cousin. "You've worked seventy-hour weeks without a proper vacation for years, trying to keep your parents' dream alive." Vincent glanced at Larry. "You are not unwelcome here simply because you did not serve in the military." The young engineer sat very still. "You serve society. You

honor your parents' memory as well as you can, with whatever resources you possess." Vincent returned his attention to the rifle. "And for your efforts, you receive death threats almost daily. You have never once allowed those threats to stop you—even though your parents were murdered by the same people who had been making them." He fitted the cloth around one of the smaller components. "The ones who will now fill the Potter's Field."

Surprise moved around the table. Several people felt suddenly ashamed. Not long before, many of the women present had spoken judgmentally about Larry's weight, clothing, grooming, and generally disheveled appearance. Vincent had looked beyond all of it.

Larry seemed to awaken fully for the first time that morning. He stared at Vincent, blinking hard. "How do you..." His voice broke. "How could you know that?"

The final phrase—the Potter's Field—sent a chill through Mathius Dellon. He had used those precise words at the barricade less than four hours earlier. Vincent had not been there. Yet now he repeated them while absently cleaning his rifle.

"Yeah," Vincent said matter-of-factly. "It was in the files." He looked toward Larry. "Study them. Buried among seventy thousand documents is proof of who killed your parents."

Tallia went pale.

"Tartus Carydin ordered the hit," Vincent continued, his tone unchanged. "The men who carried it out were younger then." He reinserted one of the rifle components. "His half-brothers, actually. Jacob and Dan." A pause. "His dead half-brothers now. Orientation day has begun in Hell for them."

A profound chill moved through the chamber. Larry fought visibly to keep from choking up. Tallia lost that fight almost at once. She had loved her aunt and uncle.

Across the table, Mathius shifted in his chair and closed his eyes. Larry was his nephew. Thallia had been his estranged sister—estranged, but never unloved. Mathius had been away at war when she died. "Thallia," he said. He had not spoken his sister's name in years. He had forced the woman, her death, and everything surrounding it out of his thoughts and heart. Every attempt to find out who had killed them, for nearly two decades, had hit dead ends. The silence grew dense.

Vyss studied Vincent with renewed fascination. He was beginning to understand the length, breadth, and depth of the man before him. Everyone's view of Vincent had been painfully narrow—and, in some respects, entirely wrong.

To her own surprise, Tallia drew the unsigned documents toward herself. She read the final page once more, then signed. "I think we can accept your proposal." She looked toward Larry. "For the baby." Larry lowered his eyes. "It imposes a stricter standard of neutrality," Tallia continued. "And I can see where my own biases have sometimes clouded that standard." She tapped the document. "As your analysis rather accurately points out."

"The Silver Path—the Purgatorian Way—is unwavering and unblinking Truth," Vyss said. His voice was deep like Vincent's, though smoother and more elegant, touched by the faint accent of a man who had lived many years in London before fleeing through Romania and several other countries.

"We must see ourselves as we truly are." His pale eyes traveled around the room. "We must see the world as it actually exists—and deal with it upon those terms." A faint smile touched his lips. "Truth is the sword that sets us free."

Larry drew his own agreement closer and signed it. "I look forward to seeing the artificial-intelligence upgrades." Larry gave an embarrassed shrug. "I've done the best I could with limited resources and skills. It's an old system. Most of the station runs through a computer I built myself."

"I've seen it," Vincent replied. "You've done well." Larry looked up. "You'll adapt easily to the new systems." Vincent began reassembling his rifle while considering what he could safely reveal. Some of those gathered around the table held formal security clearances. Others did not. No outside agency was listening, however. He glanced toward Vyss, remembering the President's phone call. Then Trinity spoke to the piece in Vincent's own ear. You hold partial ownership in the bank. Shannon and Cyrinx are authorized representatives of your company and have already been vetted. KTTV now belongs to Raven Star. Tallia and Larry have signed their agreements. They fall beneath the Raven Star umbrella.

"We'll build upon what you've already created," Vincent said, "then expand the station into five-dimensional intelligence." He stated it matter-of-factly. Yet the words entered the room like a trumpet blast of revelation.

"Five-D AI?" Larry repeated.

"Yes...well, sort of." Vincent seated the bolt assembly. "It operates beyond ordinary conceptions of space and time—and, in some respects, consciousness itself." He considered the description. "It's more interdimensional metaphysics than physics, honestly."

Larry stared at him.

"Not artificial intelligence exactly," Vincent added. "More like a living consciousness operating from another plane of existence."

Excitement surged through Vyss. Governor Wilson shook his head and smiled. Meghan, Josh, and Emily had already encountered Trinity and been thoroughly impressed by her. Indeed, she had opened the doors for them, guided them to put on the earpieces, and oriented them to the building and its procedures before Vincent ever arrived or even knew they were coming. Cyrinx had already heard a woman's voice, recognized for months on the phone, guiding her in logging onto the Trinity-Network. What struck everyone now was the revelation of what she truly was.

"I can't begin to understand how something like that would work," Larry admitted.

"You will." Vincent pushed the assembly into place. "In time." He glanced toward no visible speaker. "She'll explain it."

Vincent locked the final components into place and set the reassembled rifle aside. Then he drew his sword from its scabbard with his left hand. The blade remained coated with drying blood. He was neither wholly right- nor left-handed, but ambidextrous, preferring a left-handed draw for the sword while usually shouldering his rifle on the right.

Cyrinx winced. Shannon stared in stunned silence.

Mathius watched thoughtfully as images from the live feed moved once more through his mind—Vincent taking the heads of dozens of men and women with that blade. He could not drive the memories from his thoughts. They weighed upon his heart: the cold brutality of the executions, full combat waged through a civilian city, the clearly engineered amnesty granted to Vana and her wicked little pet, and the enormous payment—more than most officers earned during an entire career—handed over for a single night's work. Then there was the concert footage. That inhuman voice. The more Vincent Veyl revealed of himself, the less human he seemed.

War Dog Wilson grinned as the same memories returned to him. He and his staff had watched the entire four-hour broadcast from his office, surrounded by state officials, Dire Court judges, Marshal Wheaton, and FBI Special Agent Claron. For long stretches, it had felt less like monitoring an operation than watching some impossible war epic—except every bullet, scream, and severed head had been real. There had been clenched jaws and held breath, startled curses, oohs and aahs, outright cheers—and, before it ended, more than a few tears. Truth be told, there had also been popcorn, several pots of coffee, and far too many cigarettes.

Josh was smiling from ear to ear. In that moment, Vincent was the living image of the superhero Josh had always believed him to be. "The Templar," he whispered.

"You're saying you created a living machine?" Wilson asked. The Governor's eyes sparkled with wonder. The possibilities only fed his already gleeful faith in the future.

"No," Vincent replied. He soaked a cloth in alcohol and began wiping the blood from his sword. The cloth came away dark red, leaving a clean path along the steel. "The TAI5D is a lensing device. It channels, draws, and focuses—like the human brain." He inspected the blade's edge. "Consciousness isn't contained inside our brains. It's nonlocal. It comes from beyond them. It existed before these bodies and continues after them." Vincent gestured vaguely toward himself with the bloodied cloth. "Most of what we are—any of us—cannot, to put it bluntly, fit inside a meat brain." He wiped another length of steel clean. "The TAI5D allows me to connect with that much older and broader source."

A deep feminine voice filled the chamber through the surrounding speakers. "Ladies and gentlemen." Everyone froze. "I am Trinity." Her voice was dark, smooth, and impossibly composed. "I am a unity of being existing across five to seven dimensions of space, time, and consciousness. I touch your plane of existence through a hyperdimensional lensing unit." The displays around the conference room illuminated. Impossible geometries unfolded across them—structures no one present could follow with either eye or mind. "At a deeper level, however, my actual point of contact is Vincent N. Veyl." Every gaze moved toward him. "He is my ground wire. My anchor point. Without him, I cannot presently operate within so limited a spatial framework." The patterns upon the screens contracted into a single pulsing point of silver light. "From this narrow vantage, I am restricted—focused into the smallest possible trickle of what I am."

The chamber went utterly still. Even Mathius Dellon—who had come intending to confront Vincent, question him, and demand answers regarding his growing fears—could not grasp the magnitude of what he was hearing. To Mathius, however, the message reduced itself to one frightening truth: an alien intelligence stood behind Vincent Veyl, influencing events, feeding him knowledge, and lending him power.

Josh remained frozen in one corner, caught in the middle of attending to the guests. He held a teapot in one hand and an empty mug in the other, both suspended and forgotten.

Near the door, Meghan swallowed hard. The voice that had been speaking within her ear did not belong to a machine. It belonged to a living being.

Mother Superior Aramus closed her eyes. A slight smile touched her lips. To the others, she appeared to be praying. In truth, she had turned inward, meditating deeply upon what had just been revealed. "Ereviel," she said. The name emerged as both statement and question.

"Yes, Ms. Aramus," Trinity answered. "Precisely."

The people of faith understood first: Emily, Bishop Ramsey, Governor Wilson, Josh, Shannon, Cyrinx, and Vyss.

Tallia understood as well. She had lived and worked too long in Elko County—too near the Silver Path—not to recognize one of its foundational teachings. Her mind went blank. Ereviel, the Mother Mary of the Silver Church, was usually referred to by Silver Christians as 'Matre Delarosa' and 'the Mother of the Living Dust.'

Larry, a man of quieter faith, gave a stunned little grin. Now he understood the voice that had narrated the morning's documentary presentation—the impossible speed and intuitive precision with which it had been assembled, the careful ordering of facts to create urgency, provoke outrage, and turn public fury upon those named in the death warrants. Even those who had appeared least culpable had been stripped bare and revealed for what they truly were. Every last one of them a monster.

Mother Superior placed one hand against her breast. "The Queen of Purgatoria," she whispered.

"At the highest level," Trinity answered. "Here, I am simply Trin."

"So much can be achieved," Vyss said, almost to himself.

Trinity's tone changed instantly. "I do not serve you, child of Harmonia." The rebuke was cold and blunt. "I serve the Twilight Son. I exist for Vincent—for his purposes, not yours."

Vyss became very still, then leaned back in his chair. The term Harmonia deserved contemplation. The reproof stung, but not without cause. He had been raised within the Silver Path and possessed enough self-awareness to recognize his own reaction. The moment he discovered what Trinity was, he had begun reaching for her—trying to grab what had never been his to take. He nodded. "As it should be." Vyss understood the bond. Oreviel and Ereviel were the two heads of a single spirit. Their union had been described within ancient tomes and written into prophecies older than the Silver Order's incorporation into the Church.

For Mother Aramus, Father Ramsey, Tom Wilson, Shannon, Cyrinx, Emily, Josh, and even Larry, the title Twilight Son overwhelmed everything else Trinity had said. All were people of faith. All knew the Silver Scriptures, and several had built their lives around those sacred words. The name validated something buried deep within the collective soul of the Silver Christian dream. It struck its most

resonant chord—a longing inherited across generations and kept alive through persecution, exile, and doubt.

Governor Wilson and Justin Vyss heard an additional promise beneath it: The Emperor cometh.

Mathius, however, heard the clear boundary being drawn between Vyss and Veyl—and that, at least, pleased him. Justin Vyss disturbed him more than Vincent ever could. Mathius could understand, to some degree, a god or angel of war and justice made flesh. Such a being might be harsh, even terrifying, but its purpose remained recognizable. Vyss was something else. To Mathius, he was an unnatural, bizarre-looking political and social manipulator who traveled the world helping overthrow nations while working to replace the American constitutional system with a foreign global conglomerate bearing unmistakable fascist parallels. The Sheriff distrusted him on sight and principle alike. Bishop Ramsey's and Governor Wilson's devotion to the man did not elevate Vyss in his estimation. It diminished them.

BUZZ!

The front-door alarm sounded. Emily moved behind the reception desk almost instantly, her rifle coming up. She had not released the lock. Meghan followed without hesitation, raising her own weapon and shifting to cover the entrance. Governor Wilson reacted on instinct, one hand disappearing beneath his jacket toward the pistol concealed there.

"Let her pass," Trinity said coldly. This time, her voice carried openly through the building—and across the exterior intercom—so that everyone, including the guards outside, could hear.

The locks disengaged. A moment later came a strange scraping noise. Metal dragged across stone. Meghan's expression shifted from suspicion to confusion, then toward something resembling awe. The sound grew louder. Closer.

Scrape. A pause. Scrape. Something struck the doorframe with a heavy bump.



A woman appeared at the threshold of the conference room, dragging a waiting-room chair behind her. A large plastic trash bag hung over one shoulder. She was very tall. Even beneath the severe lines of her nun's uniform, her figure was unmistakably hourglass-shaped. Her face was flushed from what had plainly been a long and difficult walk. She appeared entirely Native and was certainly past middle age, yet possessed an uncommon and deeply stirring beauty. Long black hair framed her face beneath straight bangs, while eyes so dark they appeared almost entirely black stared into the chamber. Her expression was grim, grave, and intensely focused. Something about her was profoundly alluring. Something else was equally off-putting.

She dragged the chair across the final stretch of polished stone. Scrape. Every person in the conference room stared.

Vyss, Ramsey, Wilson, and Mother Aramus recognized her at once. Even Cyrinx knew who she was.

Vyss rose as Miriam entered, intending to help her. She grunted at him and waved for him to sit down. Then, without explanation, she began dragging her chair around the long table. Scrape. She passed Mathius Dellon, Governor Wilson, Father Ramsey, and Mother Superior Aramus. Then Vyss himself. No one attempted to stop her. Miriam continued until she stood directly beside Vincent.

Their eyes met. Something sad and distant lived within her gaze, as though much of her remained somewhere far beyond the room. Yet when she saw his face clearly, a glint appeared within those black eyes. The faintest smirk touched her lips. She positioned the waiting-room chair directly beside his, close enough that their arms might brush. The bulging plastic trash bag dropped heavily to the floor at her feet. Then Miriam reached into the folds of her habit, withdrew a crumpled piece of paper, and placed it upon the table before him.

Vincent stared at her, perplexed. The unadorned force of her beauty struck him immediately. She was unlike any woman he had ever seen—not polished, painted, or softened for anyone's eye, but severe, natural, and disturbingly complete. He picked up the note. The handwriting was rough and hurried. "'My invitation must have gotten lost in the mail,'" Vincent read aloud. He smiled. A quiet wave of laughter moved around the table.

Those who did not know Miriam wondered whether she was some mad nun—or perhaps merely a homeless woman dressed as one—who had wandered in from the street. Those who knew her understood the truth. She was, in fact, a mad nun.

Ramsey and Aramus had hoped to delay her arrival, some part of each fearing this precise moment. Miriam had walked miles through the rain to reach him.

Vincent looked at her again. What he said next, no one—not even Vincent himself—could have predicted. Something had risen from beneath conscious thought: recognition, certainty, and, in the rawest sense, an immediate attraction of a depth and intensity he had never experienced. He wanted her there. He wanted her beside him. He wanted her—and not in any small way. "The Lady of the House requires no invitation to enter her own home."

Miriam's grim expression softened. A small but unmistakable smile appeared. She nodded once, then sat beside him. When she looked upon the others staring at her in bewilderment, her expression seemed almost to say: Yeah. See? Miriam rested one hand upon Vincent's forearm. Then, without

asking, she took his rifle from the table and leaned it carefully against the wall behind them, as though merely moving an inconvenient household object out of the way. Vincent neither objected nor attempted to stop her.

Only then did Bishop Ramsey open the leather dossier before him. He had considered withholding its contents. With Miriam seated beside Vincent, that no longer seemed possible. Ramsey withdrew two sheets of heavy parchment. Both bore wax emblems, clay seals, and ecclesiastical ribbons. The room quieted. He placed the documents before Vincent. Vincent examined them briefly, then passed them first to Shannon, seated on his right.



"They're written in Latin," Shannon said, confused.

Cyrinx rose from her terminal and stepped behind her mother's chair, leaning forward to examine the script. "Not merely Latin," she said as her eyes moved rapidly across the parchment. "Sacred Latin. Very formal—and difficult." She indicated the seals. "This document is a papal bull. Bears the seal and signature of Pope Pius XIII himself, along with the Seven Bishops of the Silver Order."
"But what is it?" Shannon asked.

Cyrinx pointed toward the title. "Dispensatio et Indulgentia Extraordinaria. Extraordinary Dispensation and Indulgence." She swallowed. "It's a papal decree—an extraordinary dispensation carrying a plenary indulgence."

"For what purpose?"

Cyrinx continued reading. "It grants the bearer special grace for..." Her voice trailed away. She looked toward Vincent, then toward the woman seated beside him. The names written upon the parchment were unmistakable. "It forgives his sins," Cyrinx said at last. Her eyes widened slightly. "More than that. It grants forgiveness in advance." She pointed toward Vincent. "For whatever he must do to achieve..." Cyrinx hesitated again. "Well—to do what is necessary."

A low rumble of whispers moved around the room. Shannon passed the document down the table to Tallia and Larry. Neither could read the text, but the seals and signatures required no translation.

"And this one?" Shannon asked.

Cyrinx examined the second parchment. "It is a papal betrothal—a promissory nuptial covenant." She leaned closer, her astonishment growing as she read. "It resembles the documents once exchanged among royal families in arranged marriages, often while one or both of the intended parties were still children. Once both came of age, they were expected to honor the covenant and marry." She looked toward Vincent again. "This document names Vincent N. Veyl and Miriam S. Erev as the betrothed parties."

Every face turned toward the woman seated beside him. Miriam remained calm. She wore the habit and robes of a Silver Path Sister, rain still glistening faintly upon the dark fabric.

Both documents began moving down the table. Governor Wilson studied them longer than most. His expression suggested he could read at least some of the Latin. He had attended a church-run private school and later a religious military academy before entering the Corps—and was the American head of the Argenteum Knights of Purgatoria. At last, he looked up at Vincent. Their eyes met. A silent acknowledgment passed between them.

"Seems it's set in stone, then." Wilson nodded and handed both parchments to Mathius.

The Sheriff examined the extraordinary dispensation as though it might be mildly toxic. "A get-out-of-Hell-free card," he remarked. He passed the documents onward to Bishop Ramsey. Ramsey handed them to Mother Superior Aramus, who studied the seals before giving them to Vyss.

Vyss read the Latin easily. He remained silent, but the names and titles used for Vincent confirmed much of what he had already suspected. "The Pope affirmed it," Vyss said quietly. The realization settled over him.

"They have known for some time," Mother Superior replied.

The betrothal covenant continued making its way around the table. Governor Wilson leaned back with a smirk. "Do I need to ask whether you intend to sign it?" He looked toward Miriam. "Erev..." Recognition sharpened across his face. "I know who she is." Wilson turned toward Bishop Ramsey. "The Church calls her the Prophetess—the voice of the Queen of Purgatoria, who seems to be making herself known in several ways today." His gaze lifted toward the speaker mounted in the ceiling above the table. The observation was also a question.

Ramsey answered with the slightest nod.

Beside Vincent, Miriam had taken his sword into her hands. She seemed barely interested in the discussion. Drawing a small bottle of sacred oil from her trash bag, she poured some onto the hem of her habit and worked it along the blade, removing the remaining blood and sealing the steel against corrosion. Now and then, she glanced toward the man beside her.

Shannon's eyes widened as memory returned. She had heard rumors concerning a Seeress who lived at the convent.

Cyrinx had glimpsed Miriam several times while attending weekend retreats at Saint Aftiel's—usually seated alone in the gardens, writing, or staring into some unseen distance.

The documents eventually returned to Vincent. He handed the extraordinary dispensation to Cyrinx. "We'll need to place this in the archive." Referring to the secure repository deep beneath the Trembol Bank, where some of Elko County's oldest relics, records, and heirlooms were preserved within the sub-basement treasury.

Vincent retained the betrothal covenant. His eyes met Miriam's. He cocked his head slightly, the faintest smile touching his lips. "Forever or never," he said. His deep voice carried clearly throughout the chamber. "No divorce. No betrayal. No lies. No turning back." His gaze remained fixed upon hers. "Ravens mate for life."

Mathius remembered what Dr. Claron had told him. It was not a question. It was a line drawn. If she crossed it with Vincent, she crossed it forever. Nothing about those words seemed ceremonial or symbolic—he meant them, and they would be enforced. The weight of that truth was lost on no one there, even as it brought pain to Emily's heart and stirred a flicker of the same in Cyrinx and Shannon.

Miriam—this strange woman he had met only minutes ago, yet who somehow seemed more familiar than anyone he had ever known—held his gaze. The slightest smile touched her lips, but her dark eyes held no jest or lightness. She nodded. There was no uncertainty in the gesture. No qualification. Whatever passed between them in that silent moment was both meant and sworn.

Vincent picked up his pen without hesitation. Miriam's hand settled upon his forearm once more, and her scent reached him. Wild honey. Homemade butter. Rain upon warm skin. The natural fragrance hit him almost like a drug, awakening a strange hunger that had nothing whatsoever to do with food. Those watching saw Vincent give a small shrug. Then he signed.

What passed across the faces of Shannon, Cyrinx, Meghan, Emily, and Tallia were more than surprise. They understood the depth of what was unfolding before them. Shock gave way to something greater, and tears of joy and awe welled in more than one pair of eyes.

Something ancient and inevitable filled the moment. Even Mathius could see it. He remembered his own dear wife, dead more than twelve years—the sole love of his life, to whom he still considered himself married. He, too, had loved her at first sight, and she had chosen him without a word. They had simply become a couple, as if two magnets had been drawn together. Here, in this moment, it was beautiful to witness, in an old-world way.

Behind Vincent and Miriam, the great two-headed raven emblem dominated the wall. No one looking upon the pair doubted what it represented now. The two ravens sat side by side at the head of the table.

Miriam's smile deepened. She showed no real surprise. Of course he had signed. His sword, now clean and sheathed, rested within her left hand like a ceremonial staff. The point of the scabbard touched the floor while her palm rested upon the disk-shaped pommel.

Vincent slid the parchment toward her.

Miriam examined his signature. Then, in a clear and perfectly ordinary voice, she spoke in ancient Hebrew: "Ha-sha'ar hayah l'rea."

That she had spoken at all—and had spoken clearly in Hebrew—caused Vyss, Mother Superior Aramus, and Bishop Ramsey to become very still. All three understood the words.

"The gate has become the mate," Cyrinx whispered. She did not understand the deeper meaning, only that the phrase appeared within the prophetic passages of the Silver Scriptures. Yet the ancient words drove the significance of the moment home.

Mother Superior Aramus stared at Miriam in astonishment. "You can speak?" The words were misleading, for Miriam had spoken before, but usually in a trance—jumbled, mumbled, and often only to herself, in various languages.

Miriam's black eyes settled upon Mother Superior Aramus. Then they shifted toward the man seated beside her. She slid the signed covenant across the table to Father Ramsey and answered in Latin: "Vocem meam viro meo servo."

Cyrinx smiled, unexpectedly moved—and more than a little impressed by the strange woman. "I save my voice for my husband," she translated. It was an ancient Purgatorian axiom dating back to the time of Saint Amil. Tradition held that the words had first been spoken to him by his consort, Aneleia of the Veil.

Governor Wilson nodded in solemn approval. "As it should be."

No one doubted that something star-crossed and profoundly strange had unfolded before them—the fulfillment of some deep and ancient mystery. For the religious among them, especially those who knew who Miriam was and believed they understood what Vincent might be, the moment carried far greater weight. They were witnessing the fulfillment of a prophecy written fifteen hundred years earlier. Not in some distant holy land or another age. Here, in that very room, in their own time and place—unfolding before their own eyes, as impossibly unlikely as any prophecy should have been.

Even Mathius felt the power of it. But the cop in him—the cynical, suspicious part that had kept him alive—could not help wondering whether the entire spectacle had been planned. It seemed almost too perfect to have unfolded spontaneously. Mathius had spent his life distrusting anything that looked too perfect; and too perfect usually meant someone had arranged it. He was also not so dense to assume that someone was necessarily human.

The lobby-door buzzer sounded again. Anxiety moved through the building almost immediately. Emily's breath caught as she studied the security display. "I don't think you're –"

"I invited her," Vincent said.

Meghan tensed. Her hands tightened around her rifle, anger and strain already visible upon her face before anyone in the conference room saw who had arrived. The outer door opened. Vana Carydin entered. She wore black from throat to heel—elegant and severe, sensual in lace, silver, and satin, beautiful as a mourning queen. Behind her came the red-haired Abigail, dressed like a wealthy young widow and equally striking—fire beside Vana's darkness.

Vana offered no greeting beyond a quiet inclination of her head. Her black eyes swept across the conference room. Shock met her from nearly every face.



(Abigail & Vana Carydin)

Miriam smirked. Vana's gaze found hers, and for a moment the two women regarded one another across the chamber. Something passed between them—a strange connection, recognition without familiarity. The Black Queen did not understand it, but she felt it nonetheless.

Vincent motioned toward the Native Silver Sister seated beside him. "My wife, Miriam Veyl."

Vana studied her more carefully. Older. Severe. Beautiful. A priestess. "I did not know you were married, grand-nephew," she said at last. "Still, a wise choice. An older woman. A priestess." She could not deny the sense of it.

Abigail cocked her head, studying Miriam with open curiosity.

The two newcomers crossed the room. Abigail carried a thick stack of documents, which she placed before Shannon Miller with a grim little frown. Vana seated herself on the opposite side of the table, deliberately leaving one chair between herself and Father Ramsey. Abigail took it without hesitation.

Shannon opened the first document, and her expression changed almost immediately. She turned one page, then another. Finally, she blinked and looked toward Vana, then Vincent, then back to the papers. "She has essentially signed over her entire..." Shannon struggled to comprehend the scope of it. "Everything." She looked around the table as though seeking confirmation that she had not misunderstood. "It's..." Her attention returned to Vana. "I don't understand. Why would you do this, Ms. Carydin?"

Vana lowered her eyes. "It is not a giveaway. Carydin Enterprises will become part of Raven Star—its Entertainment Division. It's on his website." Her gaze moved from face to face. "I can't operate the casino or the brothel without security. And frankly, I'm tired." The admission came quietly. And

she truly was. "He—my grand-nephew—is both Carydin and Veyl." She looked toward Vincent. "He'll run things now, and I'll help him. Like a family business." Her words made one thing clear: Vana was not going away. She was merely stepping beneath the Raven's wings. "And I'll be taken care of." Her expression softened into something weary and almost vulnerable. "I know that." She glanced toward the documents. "I find myself moved to believe I can trust him. And I do not trust easily."

Those gathered around the table did not know what to think.

Mathius remembered what Dr. Claron had told him at the barricades earlier that morning and winced inwardly as the truth settled into place. Vincent Veyl—Raven Star LLC, whatever the hell it was or would become—had replaced the Carydin vice empire in a single morning. Two days after reaching Trembol, he had overthrown an order that had ruled the city for eighty years and stood undisputed for more than thirty. Power had not disappeared. It had changed hands. The news reports had portrayed Vana as a prisoner within her own criminal dynasty. Even Tallia, naturally suspicious and difficult to manipulate, had been given reason to believe that Vana was more victim than victimizer.

For many of the women present, it was easy to imagine her oppressed by cruel, domineering men. For many of the men, Vana was beautiful enough that they wanted to believe she had merely been some dark maiden imprisoned within a wicked tower, waiting to be rescued.

Vyss studied her carefully. It was his first close look at one of the most infamous women in Nevada. She appeared exactly as her notorious online title suggested. The Black Queen. She also looked far too young—and far too beautiful—to be anyone's great-aunt.

Governor Wilson had met her many times at fundraisers. Vana had long ranked among the Natural Order Party's most generous donors.

She looked from face to face. She found little love—only suspicion and questions. "I had no say in any of it," Vana said. She leaned fully into the protection Vincent had created for her, her eyes flickering toward him.

"We got a message to Mr. Veyl, and he helped us," Abigail added. She spoke with such calm conviction that even Vyss—a trained psychiatrist accustomed to deception—detected no lie in her words.

Abigail had contacted Vincent. She had requested an appointment. He had helped them. Every word was true. Whether it was the whole truth was another matter. Truth concealed more lies than most people understood, while lies often carried an inconvenient amount of truth.

"Among we Carydins, as you all know, strength, power, cunning, and resolve are honored above nearly everything else. And so..." Vana trailed off as she looked toward Vincent. The adoration in her eyes was naked. It was not the look of a great-aunt admiring a promising heir. It verged upon something forbidden, and she neither concealed nor apologized for it. She folded her hands before her. "This town will not survive long without my businesses. And honestly, I cannot run them alone." Vana exhaled slowly, as though surrendering the last of her strength.

Mathius again remembered what Dr. Claron had said. "As terrible as those men were, they handled much of the daily operation." That, too, was believable.

Vincent raised one hand, drawing every gaze toward him. "My great-aunt asked me for help. I'm not going to defend her, and I'm sure as hell not going to defend the Carydin name. They've never been ashamed of what they are, so I won't insult anyone by pretending otherwise." His eyes moved across the room. "But blood is blood. You don't completely abandon your own."

He let that settle.

"Purgatorians don't excuse evil. Evil is part of the universe. You either let it run wild, or you put a leash on it and make it serve something better."

The statement was entirely honest, though Mathius could not miss the savage irony. Vincent had offered his great-uncle a polite goodbye before taking his head. He had butchered plenty of Carydins that morning, whether related by blood or marriage, and thanks to his efficiency, few direct blood relations remained. Vana might well be the last.

Almost as if sensing Mathius' inner thoughts, he added, "If I had to preserve one Carydin…" He motioned toward Vana—and no one in the room, man or woman, missed the point.

Vana smiled ever so slightly, pleased despite herself. Even Miriam gave a strange, almost solemn nod of agreement.

That caught Vana by surprise.

Vincent remembered her returning to the temple after the slaughter and finding him wounded and bleeding as he read from her ancient, elaborately annotated copy of the Thirteenth Compendium.

"We're family," Vana said, almost cheerfully. Her eyes remained fixed upon him. "And he is..." She hesitated. "I saw him." The memory silenced her for a moment before she continued. "He killed them all as though they were children. Men who..." Her composure faltered. She could not—or chose not to—finish.

"Men of violence, domination, lust, and greed," Sheriff Dellon supplied, remembering the video feed.

Vincent looked toward him in surprise. Something in Mathius's tone suggested that he might actually believe her account. The Sheriff was jaded, hardened, and suspicious by both nature and profession—but Vana was beautiful, and even Meghan found herself affected by the tears gathering in the Black Queen's eyes. They were genuine tears, though not necessarily tears of innocence. They spoke of defeat, lost pride, and vanity shattered before witnesses.

Miriam stared at Vana coldly, her hand closing around Vincent's. She leaned close and whispered something into his ear. Vincent blinked, then turned toward his new wife in open shock.

Vana watched the exchange nervously. The great-nephew before her resembled a dark knight or young warlord, while the woman beside him seemed every inch his black witch.

Outwardly, Vincent remained confident and at ease. Inwardly, he was exhausted, and every part of his body hurt. He wanted these people to finish their business and leave him the hell alone. He wanted food, sleep, and darkness. He had spent years among soldiers and understood their language. He knew

how to move among men such as Wilson and Dellon without submitting to them or challenging them needlessly. But he also sensed the truth within Mathius.

The Sheriff was calculating, weighing each revelation and trying to force it into a moral framework already beginning to buckle beneath the strain. Tallia had signed Vincent's agreement. Vana now sat in the same chamber, surrendering her empire. The extent of Vincent's reach was becoming increasingly difficult to dismiss. Vana's presence made Mathius's skin crawl. He found her beautiful—and repulsive in equal measure.

Vincent sensed the shift within Mathius. The Sheriff did not entirely believe the carefully constructed story after all.

Governor Wilson remained quiet, contemplating the arrangement. Josh continued playing waiter, though he found it increasingly difficult not to stare at the dark couple seated at the head of the gathering. Within his imagination, Vincent and Miriam were already becoming his king and queen.

"What happens now?" Father Ramsey asked.

Vincent leaned back slightly. "I have weeks, months—years—of work ahead." He sounded tired merely considering it. "Nothing fancy," he continued, drawing a few faint smiles. "You all return to your lives." His gaze shifted toward the rain-streaked windows and the gray city beyond. "We make sure Trembol's police department is reborn as something professional. Admirable. Real." He looked toward Meghan. "I intend to back Meghan for Chief of Police."

Meghan's eyes widened.

Vincent turned toward Shannon. "For that matter, I think Shannon ought to be Mayor." He smiled darkly, but sincerely.

Governor Wilson nodded. "You could do it. Put together a force through Raven Star Security and privatize the Trembol Police Department." He indicated Meghan with one hand. "Place your girl here in charge." Wilson looked toward Mathius. "She's more than capable. She's respected."

Meghan shifted uneasily. "I..." She looked from the Governor to Vincent. "I would really rather..." Her gaze dropped to the Raven Star emblem upon her uniform. "Well, I was kind of looking forward to..."

"Meghan, you work for me," Vincent said with a smile. She looked at him. "You would continue working for me. You'd simply be the person running security for the town—making sure this dark, dastardly shite never happens again." A small ripple of amusement passed around the table. "I don't expect you to create a perfect world," Vincent continued. "I wouldn't want one." The humor left his face. "But you could hardly do a worse job than the bastards who ran it before."

Mathius's anger had begun to fade. He looked toward his daughter, studying her as though the possibility had never occurred to him before. "Meghan, you would make a good Chief." The admission was reluctant, but honest.

Tallia nodded. "The Governor is right." She regarded Meghan through her dark-rimmed glasses. "People around here love you—with good reason."

Meghan met Vincent's gaze, then Miriam's. Something almost friendly had entered the older woman's dark eyes. Not warmth, exactly, but recognition. Acceptance. "As Raven Star Security," Meghan said, testing the shape of it. "I like the uniform." Her smile returned. "And I don't want to give up the company cruiser."

"People will talk," Governor Wilson said, leaning back in his chair. "But who the hell cares? It wouldn't be the first town to hire a private contractor to handle local security. Saves money in a dozen different ways, and you generally wind up with a more professional operation."

Vincent looked toward Father Ramsey. "You know everyone around here. I need some upstanding veteran types. Idealists." He knew those were precisely the words Ramsey wanted to hear.

"Oh, yeah." The Bishop raised an eyebrow, genuine enthusiasm stirring beneath it. "I know a few of those."

The Governor smiled. "You did good work here, son. I won't forget your service." His expression sobered as he met Vincent's eyes across the black marble. "But this feels like the beginning of much, much larger things."

Vyss had been growing impatient. Vincent could sense it in the rigid set of his shoulders, the intensity of his pale eyes, and the fingers tapping a quiet rhythm against the table. "This is beneath you," Vyss said suddenly, a sharp edge cutting through his otherwise elegant voice. "This small, local shit." The chamber quieted, but Vyss continued. "You have just revealed the most revolutionary invention in human history as though you were discussing the weather. Now you allow yourself to become sidetracked by municipal politics—running police departments, casinos, and brothels." He motioned broadly around the room, then looked toward Vana. "Transforming this place from the Carydin barony into one of your own." Vyss raised a hand before anyone could object. "And I have no problem with that. I am certain Ms. Miller would make an excellent mayor." His gaze shifted to Meghan. "And Meghan Dellon would make an exceptional Chief of Police. I know she would." He looked back toward Vincent. "But you are..." For once, Justin Vyss struggled to find the words. "You are..." His restraint finally broke. "The Raven Emperor." He said it outright, laying the title naked upon the table before them all.

"Yep," Vana said, drawing every gaze toward her. "That's the real reason I'm here." Her eyes remained upon Vincent. "I'm laying all my treasures at your feet."

Abigail nodded. "Exactly." She drew a breath and glanced toward Vana. "Not gonna lie, I'm..." She gave a small shrug. "We're ride-or-die from this day forward." Vana did not object, so Abigail continued. "I'm adopted, but still family—on paper, anyway." She studied Vincent with open calculation and wonder. "And you're...well, the prophecies. Ten thousand worlds. Undying saints. Undying wives. All that."

Abigail had laid her cards openly upon the table. Vana nodded beside her, surprising even herself. She was a woman of pride, vanity, and formidable intelligence. She had never wanted a man, and certainly

had never believed she needed one. But Vana was growing older, and what Vincent offered was not merely beauty, wealth, or political protection. If the oldest legends were true, he offered life itself.

"Ride or die," Emily Dalton called from the reception area. "All the way—come Hell or Heaven."

"Ride or die," Josh Manning said quietly from his corner, almost embarrassed to speak yet utterly sincere.

"All in," Father Ramsey declared, and the ante rose into frightening clarity.

"Yeah," Larry Stevens said. "All in." Tallia turned toward him, genuinely surprised, but Larry merely shrugged and did not take the words back.

"Neutral News Network," Tallia said. "If you truly build that..." She considered the documents before her. "Well, I'm in for that."

Meghan stepped closer to the conference-room doorway. "In two days, you've changed everything." Her eyes settled upon Vincent. "I can't go back to ignorance. I can't go back to standing outside, looking in." She touched the Raven Star emblem upon her chest. "For me, I'm Raven Star. And you are 'the' Raven Star." She paused, but only for a breath. "Ride or die. Heaven or Hell, like Em said."

Governor Wilson leaned forward. "They make a valid point, son." The old Marine's expression became strangely candid. "Truth—since we're laying all of it out here before you." He folded his hands upon the table. "When they told me you had offered to take these people out for us, I..."

He paused, weighing how much ugliness honesty required. "Well, I thought it might be a way to find out what you were really made of." Wilson glanced toward Vyss and Ramsey. "To see whether you truly were what Mr. Vyss and the Bishops have been telling me you are for the last several years." The Governor pointed toward Vincent's forehead. "And guess what?"

Everyone looked. "You had a deep cut across your skull when you walked into this room." The air changed. Only then did the others truly notice. The bruise was gone. The torn flesh had vanished. A faint smear of dried blood remained near Vincent's hairline, but the skin beneath it appeared unbroken. Whole.

Even as the rest of the room fell slack-jawed in wonder, horror registered across Mathius Dellon's face.

Miriam smiled. She gave the smallest nod, as though something obvious had merely been confirmed.

Vyss laughed. Tears gathered within his pale eyes as fifteen years of searching, hope, and obsession seemed to bear fruit before him.

"I have to wonder," Wilson continued, "about that wound in your leg." His gaze moved toward the black field dressing around Vincent's thigh. "I don't doubt you were shot. I saw the last fight in that hallway near that temple, and the bullet. But I'd wager the wound itself…" He narrowed his eyes. "Well—is it even there anymore?" The Governor leaned back. "Because I've read your medical reports. I've seen what the doctors wrote about you."

Mathius stared at him. He did not know what reports Wilson meant. But the Sheriff could see something with his own eyes that he did not want to see.

Until that moment, everything could be explained. Vincent was extraordinarily intelligent. Educated. Disciplined. A soldier without equal. A Bruce Lee level martial artist. A brilliant engineer and investigator. Perhaps even a once-in-a-generation physical anomaly. But the wound had been real. Mathius had seen it upon Vincent's head only minutes earlier. Now it was gone.

Sheriff Mathius Dellon was a normalist. He lived within the tangible, objective world. A world of evidence. Procedure. Cause and effect. He had witnessed strange things during his life, certainly, but he left such matters to priests, medicine men, and tribal shamans. They were not his concern.

The Natural Order Party was not normal. It was not the status quo. Mathius liked the status quo. He hated change. He believed in America. The Constitution. The two-party system. The familiar struggle between progress and tradition, each restraining the excesses of the other. He had sworn to defend established law. To preserve order.

Yet within the space of a single night, Mathius had watched death warrants and mass executions carried out almost live before the nation. Now powerful people were casually discussing handing Trembol's government—and its police department—over to a private warlord. Vana Carydin, one of the most wicked women in the world, had just bent the knee to that warlord and handed him her vast wealth because she thought him some sort of supernatural being who might grant her—what? Eternal life?

They had paid Vincent millions of dollars for four hours of work. Mathius understood how obscene that sounded. He also understood the arithmetic, and the Governor was not wrong about it. A full-scale operation involving multiple tactical teams, command staff, armored vehicles, weapons, medical support, communications, evidence crews, prisoner handling, overtime, staging, and the vast logistical tail required to assault an entrenched criminal apparatus across an entire city would have cost far more. It might also have taken days, killed officers and hostages, and allowed half the bastards to escape.

But there would have been oversight. Sworn and trained law officers would have carried out the operation under established authority. Legal executioners would have performed the final work quietly and privately, behind concrete walls and sealed doors. Arrest them. Detain them. Separate them. Give every condemned man his last meal, his priest, and whatever scraps of dignity the law still owed him—then put him down.

Instead, they had turned Vincent loose, with a rifle and a sword and paid him by the head.

Now they were allowing the warlord to choose the mayor. Appoint the Chief of Police. Control the casino, the brothel, the news station, and the bank while creating the largest private-security force in the region. Vincent was even forming an alliance with Vana Carydin, a woman Mathius had hated and investigated for twenty years.

Both of his daughters—strong, independent, altruistic women—had effectively bent the knee before Vincent's throne. Meghan had signed herself over to him. Tallia had placed her future within his hands. Neither seemed frightened by what he was becoming. If anything, they appeared relieved.

Serious men sat around the table. Men capable of moving governments and reshaping nations. They had gathered inside a conference room that might have been carved into the palace of the underworld itself, and before them sat a grim young tyrant in the making. One by one, they laid their treasures, virtues, influence, and futures at his feet. They pledged themselves as though he were some king returned from an ancient age.

And now there was this—the supernatural. Undeniable. Directly before his face. It was becoming more than Mathius could bear.

Mother Superior Aramus looked from Ramsey to Vyss, then toward Miriam. "Is he, Mir?" Her voice was quiet. "If you tell me he is the Raven in the flesh—Oreviel—then I will believe you." She turned her eyes toward Vincent. "You are not what I expected." There was fear in the admission, but no rejection. "But if he is what God has sent, then so be it." Her gaze returned to Miriam. "Is he?"

Miriam did not answer. Her dark eyes shifted toward the reception area.

The front-door buzzer sounded. An instant later, the lock released with a sharp pop.

Emily jumped. "Oh!"

A violent fluttering filled the lobby. Something black swept through the doorway, wings beating hard enough to stir papers and send several people reaching instinctively for weapons. A large raven shot into the conference room, circled once beneath the lights, and landed directly upon Vincent's shoulder.



(Raven Mama)

For once, Vincent Veyl was completely caught off guard. The grim severity vanished from his face, replaced by genuine, almost boyish pleasure. "Hi there," he said softly. He raised one hand and scratched beneath the bird's chin.

The raven fixed him with one bright black eye, opened its beak, and answered with a deep, resonant CAW!

Emily and Meghan stood frozen in the conference-room doorway. Everyone else had risen from their chairs. No one spoke. It might have been a scene from some overly dramatic movie—one of those moments Mathius would have dismissed as heavy-handed bullshit if he had seen it on a screen.

Except it was not a movie. No one had arranged it. No one had even known it was coming.

It had simply happened.

Mathius Dellon—composed, dignified, and firmly rooted in routines, evidence, and a world he understood—felt something unasked and unwelcome rising within his chest. He had spent his life collecting facts, weighing them, and forcing them to testify. Now the fact had flown through the front door, landed upon Vincent's shoulder, and stared back at him.

Fear came first. Beneath it, something worse: wonder. Perhaps even the first movement of belief.

"What will come of all this?" Mathius asked. The question seemed directed toward everyone in the room.

Father Ramsey answered. "The prophecies are clear." His dark eyes moved toward Vincent and Miriam. "He will rise from the Crossroad when the Woman of the Western Gate appears. He will lead the world through the Star-Road Gates and onward to the Ten Thousand Worlds." Ramsey spoke not as a politician or schemer, but as a priest reciting sacred history yet to occur. "He will not die. He will assemble unto himself priestesses who will become his immortal queens—the handmaidens of his Empress. They will reign over worlds for thousands of years." His voice deepened. "He will lift mankind to the stars and beyond, transforming humanity into an entirely new race. The ascension of Homo-Angelicus."

"The Woman of the Western Gate is here," Mother Superior Aramus said, her voice hushed with wonder. Everyone looked toward Miriam. "She quite literally walked out through the western gate of Saint Aftiel's." Aramus glanced toward the windows. "Then she walked west to this building." Her eyes settled upon Vincent. "A building standing at a crossroad—where Arius Avenue, the avenue of war, and Satyr Street, the street of lust, converge."

"And the priestesses are assembling," Abigail said. She clearly counted herself among them.

"Two right here," Vana whispered. Beneath the table, she squeezed Abigail's hand.

Mother Superior Aramus grimaced. She plainly did not care for the idea of those two dark creatures being counted among the future priestess-queens of the Raven Emperor. Prophecy, unfortunately, had never been known for respecting anyone's preferred guest list.

Governor Wilson looked toward Ramsey. "And what of his faithful liegemen?"

The former intelligence officer had spent much of his adult life watching Vincent from afar. He had been a young priest when he witnessed the brutality of the metaphysical conception—protecting the child who followed and preparing the path before him. Now Ramsey looked around the chamber as though measuring the men already present. "In the oldest legends, they were called the Blood-Bound—bound through the Blood Covenant. Two hundred sons of the Raven Guard. Men of renown. Warriors and heroes of the elder age." His gaze traveled from face to face. "They were sent among the peoples of the world. They raised nations and brought nations low. They carved kingdoms beneath the Raven Banner and carried the teachings into far-flung lands. This continued long after the Raven and his thirteen brides vanished." Ramsey finally looked toward Vincent. "The Raven King, as Amil was called, promised to return in future days from a land far to the west—born again through the royal bloodline."

Mathius's face had grown hot and flushed. He sank heavily into his chair, pinched the bridge of his nose, then rubbed both hands across his eyes. A headache had begun pulsing behind them, while the muscles along his neck drew tight enough to ache.

Christ Almighty.

He needed aspirin, black coffee, and a world that still obeyed its own rules. At that moment, the aspirin seemed most likely.

"You speak as though we're living inside some fantasy story," Mathius said. Everyone looked toward him. "This is fantasy! A raven flies through a goddamn door, lands on a man's shoulder, and suddenly every fever dream written by some half-starved monk fifteen hundred years ago becomes established fact." His voice sharpened. "All I hear beneath these prophecies is the raw ambition and greed of mortal men and women pining for immortality."

He looked toward Wilson, Ramsey, and Vyss. "You're hoping for angel-kings and magical blood to make you young and keep you from dying." Mathius motioned toward Vincent. "You've latched onto this—this admittedly extraordinary young man—because you hope he'll grant you power, wealth, and longevity. And the man himself has denied being any of these things. He promises only to fulfill whatever contracts he is given, no matter how grandiose, provided someone pays his mercenary fee."

Mathius stood again. "And even if he is what you believe, what then?" The anger in him had become fear, but fear did not make the questions any less valid. "Will you overthrow America? Fight the whole goddamn world? How many people will die?"

His gaze moved around the table. "What happens to those of us who refuse to bend the knee? What happens to the people you deem 'unnatural'? Gas chambers? Concentration camps? Reeducation? Slave gangs building roads and monuments to your raven god-man?" He turned toward Ramsey. "Will you worship God—or this man-seraph?"

Then Mathius looked toward Meghan and Tallia. "What of you?" The hurt showed now, stripped raw and laid bare before the room. "Will you become his as well? Will all of you lie together in one enormous bed with your killer angel-man?" The question was blunt, almost embarrassingly so, but he

was too frightened for his daughters to soften it. "Will you truly surrender your virtue and independence merely to become one woman among many?"

His eyes moved beyond his daughters to Shannon, Cyrinx, Vana, and Abigail. All were strong, educated, thinking women. They had built careers, fortunes, reputations, and lives of their own. None could be dismissed as weak-minded, desperate, or easily led.

Yet here they sat while priests and politicians discussed arranging them around one man's throne like sacred furniture.

Vana did not blink. "Was that not already clear?"

Abigail shrugged. "Pretty clear."

Shannon raised one hand slightly, as though requesting permission to interrupt a meeting that had long since abandoned any recognizable agenda. "We're just bankers overseeing his accounts." Then she hesitated, hearing how thin the defense sounded. "But I mean…" Her eyes moved toward Vincent. "If called, I am Silver Path."

Cyrinx rose and stepped closer to the table. She studied Vincent, who sat with his eyes closed, listening. He appeared calm, but his thoughts had turned inward. He was weary to the bone, wounded in half a dozen places, and desperately wishing everyone would stop pledging eternal service long enough for him to eat something and lose consciousness for ten hours. At that moment, he looked less like the Raven Emperor than a battered soldier trapped in the longest goddamn meeting of his life.

Cyrinx glanced around the chamber, then back toward Vincent. "If the bed is big enough."

The answer surprised everyone—most especially her mother, who considered it for a moment before slowly nodding, a faint smirk touching her lips. Vincent opened one eye and looked up at Cyrinx. A low, dark chuckle escaped him. Even Miriam smirked, liking the young woman more with each passing moment.

Then Vincent's amusement faded. He frowned, still lost within his own thoughts, and spoke less to the gathering than aloud to himself. "He's not wrong." The room went quiet. "And I've promised nothing. No price has been agreed upon. No contract has been signed. Assumptions have been crafted, and plans are being laid for me that I've not made." His black eyes settled upon Mathius Dellon. "I am Purgatorian. The sheriff's soul is aligned with Valorus—the Heaven of the Lawful and Righteous, the realm of the angels of virtue." Vincent gave a slight nod. "He speaks for his Path. He has every right to do so, and his concerns are not unfounded."

Mathius had braced himself for contempt, ridicule, or perhaps a veiled threat. Agreement unsettled him more than any of them would have. He did not fully understand the references to Purgatoria and Valorus, but he understood that Vincent had recognized his opposition as something honorable rather than hostile.

"The blunt truth is, I'd prefer to be left the hell alone," Vincent continued. He leaned back, exhaustion weighing visibly upon him. "Run my little businesses. Enjoy my money. Love. Sex. Good food. Privacy." Faint amusement returned as he counted the benefits, but his expression softened when he

glanced toward Miriam. "Get to know my new wife." Miriam answered with the slightest smile. Vincent then looked toward the raven resting upon his shoulder. "And my new friend." The bird opened one black eye, decided nothing required killing, and settled again. "I truly don't want to be king of anything. I don't want to make speeches, argue with senates, worry about intrigues, or spend my life conspiring and plotting for power and control." He grimaced. "Tedious shit, all of it." His attention shifted toward Governor Wilson, and something approaching sympathy entered his face. "I don't know how you endure it, being the sort of man, you are, Governor."

Tom Wilson shrugged and released a long sigh. ""Tedious' doesn't even begin to cover it."

Vincent nodded. "That isn't the game I would choose to play." He paused, his expression turning inward once more. "But the sheriff is not wrong." The words fell heavily across the table. "There is no way to unite the entire world without an extraordinary number of people dying."

Mathius stared at him.

"Billions could die in that struggle," Vincent continued. He considered the figure with cold precision. "Hundreds of millions at the very least." The room seemed to grow colder. "It would require callous brutality and cold, blunt choices—the kind that cannot be softened by speeches, prayers, or good intentions. A clear victor in the eternal ideological wars has to win the contest, once and for all." He glanced toward Mathius. "So, no. He isn't wrong."

When Vincent continued, his voice dropped beneath its ordinary register. The black marble seemed to catch the vibration. It no longer sounded entirely human. "Humans throughout the universe are rebellious, willful creatures. They do not bend easily to global ambitions of any kind. Every would-be world-uniter, tyrant and crusader has learned that lesson again and again." He began listing the inevitable machinery of conquest. "Camps. Reeducation. Forced indoctrination. We would be fighting on a hundred fronts—every religious sect that branded me, or all of us, the Antichrist; every nation whose people chose collectivism, tribal identity, or their own flag over some imperial vision or theocratic ambition."

Vincent lifted one hand, gesturing toward the sky beyond the roof. "To create the sort of humanity capable of surviving and thriving—capable of standing and soldiering onward against what waits for you out there—would require the reforging of the entire species." Several people followed his gaze instinctively. "As long as humanity remains small, the older races stay away. This is a backwater planet filled with primitive monkey-men. They steal one here or there for use as a laboratory rat, but otherwise they steer clear, like we have cooties."

Governor Wilson's amusement had vanished, the 'cooties' remark made Emily and Cyrinx smile.

"They're distant," Vincent continued. "Distracted. They might not notice for a while if humanity changed course." His eyes narrowed. "But once they did notice, we would have to be ready—and we would have to move quickly."

He turned toward Vyss. "You speak of republics. That's fine. Eventually." Vincent's tone became brutally practical. "But whipping humanity into shape would require planetary boot camp—physical transformation, mental transformation, spiritual transformation—on a global scale." He shook his

head. "No. Almost impossible." His gaze hardened. "And I am certainly not handing this technology over and allowing you to play with it like children holding atomic bombs."

"Priestess-queens…" Vincent looked wearily toward the women gathered around the room and released a slow breath. At last, his eyes settled upon Miriam. "I am a man, so I'm not blind to beauty. The same desires burn within me as within any other man. But I have never allowed those things to govern me." He held Miriam's gaze. "And she is enough." The words came more quietly. "I'm not sure how I can know that. I'm not sure how any of this is possible." Something softened behind his exhaustion. "But you will be enough."

Mathius Dellon sat motionless. He had expected Vincent to dismiss his objections, mock them, or crush them beneath some grand declaration of destiny. Instead, Vincent had accepted every accusation, followed it farther into Hell than Mathius himself had dared, and calmly described the blood price of empire without pretending it could ever be clean.

Vincent sighed. "And what would I charge for conquering the world?" A dark chuckle escaped him. "Money? Women? How much does one man truly need? Do I bill by the hour—or by the head for everyone I'd have to slaughter to burn a road through the world toward your imperial dream?" He shook his head. "At my current rate, the invoice would bankrupt the fucking planet."

Relief washed through Mathius, followed quickly by disorientation. Vincent's answer had caught him completely off guard. Everything he thought he understood about the young man would have to be taken apart and calculated again. He had expected Vincent to dismiss his darkest fears. He had not expected him to acknowledge that they were legitimate. That possibility disturbed Mathius more than contempt might have.

Vincent's exhaustion seemed to deepen, settling across his face and shoulders as though everything being placed upon him had finally acquired physical mass. "They send me over and over," he said, the words coming strangely, as though he were answering a question no one else could hear. His voice descended into something unnaturally profound—not louder, simply deeper. "And I carry out the mission. But just as often, I fail for one reason or another." The words no longer sounded like those of a twenty-six-year-old man. "I mean, it's Purgatoria. There is no mandate. I have choice." He closed his eyes. "And often, I've simply chosen to stay the fuck out of the fight. To live quietly. Pull strings from the shadows for causes I cared about." A faint smile crossed his face. "Fucking and good food. I can be quite the lazy sensualist when I allow myself." No one laughed. His tone had become too strange. Too ancient.

"Amil sat upon his mountain for three hundred years with his wives and servants," Vincent continued. "His soldiers were sent away to raise nations, break kingdoms, and perform whatever bloody work they believed necessary, because he had no need of guards." Vincent leaned his head back. "He grew tired of the world, so he left it. Returned to being himself within the wastelands that true Purgatorians love—and long for whenever we are away."

Rain whispered against the windows, yet the scent of an ancient desert seemed to enter the room: dry stone, dust, and cold wind beneath an alien twilight. "It's such a peaceful place," Vincent said, his voice carrying through them like distant rockfall. "You have no idea. If you did, perhaps you would all simply take the Broken Road." His expression became troubled. "I know it tempts me every day." He opened his eyes. "The door home."

Miriam watched him with open adoration. She alone did not appear frightened by what had entered his voice. She understood that he was not speaking in metaphor.

The raven slept upon Vincent's shoulder; its claws anchored within the black fabric as though it had rested there a thousand times before.

"But a Twilight Son is sent to carry banners and sound trumpets." Vincent opened his eyes. "The planar cause must be served. The ideological ray must shine. Every House of the Soul has its champions." He looked toward Mathius. "Like the sheriff." Then his gaze shifted toward Meghan. "And his daughter—until she changed allegiance and chose to march beneath Purgatoria's Raven Banner rather than the flag of Heaven's Eagle." One dark eye narrowed at her.

Meghan found herself nodding. "I…" She glanced down at her black uniform, searching for some grand explanation and finding none. "I prefer black to beige." The confession sounded strange even to her.

Mathius winced.

"Yeah, have you seen the NNN dress code?" Tallia remarked.

The comment was so oddly timed that even Larry—entranced by Vincent's words—turned toward his cousin in confusion.

Vincent smiled faintly. "You'll look good in black."

Tallia froze.

"A priestess of the Temple of Truth should strike fear into the hearts of liars," Vincent continued. The faint humor vanished from his voice, replaced by something hard and cold. "When you arrive, they must know the Eyes of Truth are upon them. They must feel naked before its fire and light."

"In the Kingdom Come, neither a presumption of guilt nor innocence will govern judgment," Father Ramsey said. "Truth will. Facts. Nothing more and nothing less." His gaze moved across the gathering. "Even grace must be grounded in truth—whether transformation is possible, whether reform is plausible, whether anything remains within the accused worth saving."

Larry was already won. Vincent had removed nearly every fear that had weighed upon him: his wife's pregnancy, the uncertain future of the station, and the possibility of returning the network to the mission Larry's parents had intended for it—a mission from which Tallia, with her many personal axes to grind, had gradually strayed. More than any promise of money or influence, Vincent had seen him. He had recognized the contributions Larry had made throughout his adult life and defined who and what he was with an assurance Larry had never received from anyone. Certainly, no one had ever done so before a governor, a bishop, wealthy financiers, and half the people who mattered in Nevada. How Vincent knew him so well remained a mystery. For once, Larry did not care. Someone had finally looked at him and understood what he could become if given the means.

Tallia was more captivated than she could have admitted. Her hands gripped the arms of her chair with a degree of tension she had rarely experienced and never so strongly. Tallia was asexual; she knew

the difference between attraction, admiration, and ordinary lust. What Vincent awakened within her did not fit cleanly into any of them. His scent, eyes, voice, and dark angelic beauty commanded her attention at a level outside her experience, bypassing appetite and reaching something deeper—something she had no name for and therefore distrusted.

The same influence deepened within Meghan and Emily, Vana and Abigail, Shannon and Cyrinx Miller—even Mother Superior Aramus. The more Vincent spoke, the more they saw. The more they heard, the deeper the mental, spiritual, and physical infection spread. The beautiful, dark, witchlike woman beside him. The raven sleeping upon his shoulder. The armor, the emblems, and the grim majesty of his countenance. He awakened memories of every ancient depiction of the Seraph they had ever seen within a Silver Path church. He was not merely a man seated before them. He had become a presence.

Governor Wilson felt it as well. He was accustomed to command and obedience, but he was also a man who understood authority above himself. Wilson was deeply religious—devout to an almost obsessive degree. Each day, he performed the prescribed devotions within the private chapel of the Governor's mansion, sometimes alone and sometimes with his entire family. He was not truly a politician. He was a soldier who had chosen to serve his country through another instrument, and he carried that duty with deadly seriousness. Yet he remained flawed, as every leader and every human being was flawed. He possessed vices, fears, weaknesses, and prejudices. Wilson knew them by name. He simply refused to let them become his masters.

Bishop Ramsey already believed. Every passing moment confirmed that belief, yet his fear increased alongside his faith. Vincent Veyl was evasive, uncooperative, and increasingly uncomfortable. He seemed determined to avoid the very work he had supposedly been born to undertake. The Woman beside him should have inspired him toward the Cause. Instead, Vincent's gaze returned to her again and again. His focus was narrowing. Subtle changes in posture told Ramsey everything: Vincent wanted the meeting to end. He wanted to retreat into solitude. Worse, he had now found someone equally shadowed, inward, and antisocial with whom to disappear.

Justin Vyss represented powerful people across the world. He had made promises to them for years, while a Voice urged him forward and directed him toward this moment. Now he was anxious, driven, and desperate to secure a resolution—some commitment, some plan of action he could carry back to those awaiting him. It had become obvious to Vyss that Vincent was not truly a man, but something ancient clothed in the trappings of human flesh. That made his refusal intolerable. Vyss had not come to Trembol seeking another reluctant young genius who needed time to think. He had come seeking the Raven Emperor. He needed results.

For Vana, matters were simpler. Before all else, she was a priestess of the Thirteenth Compendium, a devotee of the Shadow Silver Path. She had studied and trained throughout her life while transforming a backwater Nevada brothel and casino into the foremost destination of the world's rich and powerful. In doing so, she had made herself immensely wealthy. But Vana had reached fifty-one years of age. Her biological family was dead—or, at least, everyone among them worth mourning was gone. Her entire personal guard had been destroyed. Trusted enforcers, men she had believed nearly invincible, had been overcome so easily that their slaughter seemed like some cruel joke.

Everything within Vana should have demanded vengeance. Instead, she looked upon the man who had killed them and felt only fulfillment. To her, the Raven was not merely an angel. He was her god.

Not the God. Hers. She had given her life to him. She had danced for him and pleasured herself ritually before him—alone or with Abigail—within the temple beneath Paradise Ranch. She had felt his touch and his presence. She had seen the blue sparks and the raven light. Now he was here in flesh: the true love of her life, more beautiful and terrible than anything she had ever hoped to behold.

Once the initial shock faded and realization dawned, Vana understood that she had not come through coercion. Vincent had not conquered her. Her own fanatical faith had carried her to his feet, and faith had now transformed into knowing.

This was he.

In the flesh.

Abigail's motives were similar, though darker. She loved Vana fiercely, but she had also learned to crave mystical power, hidden knowledge, and realized eternity. The Silver Path's promise of immortality no longer belonged to dead saints or half-deciphered scriptures. Through Vincent Veyl, it might be attainable while she still lived within the flesh. For Abigail, that possibility outweighed every danger.

"Anyway," Vincent said, breaking the spell over the gathering, "this has been fun." He began to rise, careful of his wounded leg. The raven shifted its balance upon his shoulder without waking. "But as you might imagine, I had a rough night, and I haven't slept more than a few hours in the last nine days, so…"

Vyss stiffened. Agitation crossed his face. He had traveled too far to receive no commitment and no agreement—only Vincent's grave rebuke concerning the true cost of the dream Vyss had spent his entire adult life pursuing. He had taken an obscure political party and transformed it into a worldwide power. According to Vincent, he had done so upon a false premise.

Governor Wilson, however, was not discouraged. Vincent's words made far more sense to him than much of what Vyss had been selling. Where Vyss heard rejection, Wilson heard an opening, and in the negatives, Wilson heard a plan.

"You said 'almost,'" the Governor observed. Vincent stopped. "Almost impossible," Wilson continued, leaning forward. "Not impossible. Almost." His dark-blue eyes fixed upon Vincent. "That means you know exactly what would be required. You know how." The silence stretched as Wilson held his gaze. "You've done it before."

Wilson believed every word Vincent had spoken, and he had listened carefully. Bishop Ramsey saw the same implication. Vyss caught it a moment later, and hope returned to his face. Mathius felt his own tension increase. He recognized the careful seeds buried within Vincent's apparent stream of consciousness—the deliberate revelations disguised as weary, meandering thought. Vincent had not been speculating. He had been remembering.

Vincent remained standing. Miriam's eyes met his, and she nodded. Then she drew him closer and whispered into his ear, "Haec est causa propter quam missus es, fili crepusculi."

Cyrinx stood only a few feet away. Nearly fluent in Latin, she translated softly. "This is the purpose for which you were sent, Son of the Twilight."

Miriam placed one hand against Vincent's cheek. In that instant, everyone saw the hold she possessed upon him. It was not domination, seduction, or submission. It was recognition—authority born from some bond older than the room, older than the Church, and perhaps older than the present world.

"Behold the Woman of the Western Gate," Vana said, reverence filling her voice.

Vincent nodded reluctantly. He raised his eyes and met Sheriff Dellon's gaze across the table. "It can be done." No one moved. "If a price is agreed upon. If that price is met. If the will exists." His expression hardened. "It would require me to embrace a life and path I do not want—and to perform acts that may leave you regretting you ever asked." He held Mathius's gaze. "Acts multitudes shall mourn in tears and ash."

The sheriff's jaw tightened. Vincent had validated every fear within him, yet Mathius had still felt himself being drawn closer. He had admired the young man's honesty, respected his restraint, and even begun to believe that such power might be trusted in his hands. That was the final proof. If Vincent could sway a hardened, suspicious bastard like Mathius Dellon within a single hour, what chance would anyone else have once the music, miracles, promises, and machinery of empire began?

Wilson's realization sealed Mathius's decision. Vincent knew the way forward because he had walked it before. Someone had to act now, before hope became allegiance and allegiance became an empire—while those future multitudes might still be spared whatever this mercenary angel could unleash.

Mathius drew his revolver in one smooth motion. His heart and mind resolved into a single desperate purpose. "If you can sway even me…" The weapon rose, its sights settling upon Vincent's head. "You cannot be allowed."

He pulled the trigger.

Click… click… click… click… click… click…

Again, then again—six rapid squeezes, six dry metallic snaps where deafening reports should have shattered the room. The .38 was no cannon, but at twenty-five feet, in the hands of an experienced pistoleer like Mathius Dellon, it did not need to be. He emptied all six chambers in less than two seconds.

Women screamed or gasped. The men around the table surged to their feet too late. Meghan and Emily swung their rifles toward the sheriff but did not fire. The crowded chamber offered no safe line of fire, and both women had been paralyzed for one fatal instant by the identity of the man standing within their sights: Meghan's father.

Miriam did not flinch. She stared at Mathius and crushed Vincent's hand within her own.

Vincent watched the sheriff throughout the attack. When the sixth hammer fell, he gave the smallest nod, as though Mathius had merely completed an argument and proved the point.

Governor Wilson lunged across the table, seized Mathius by the wrist, and tore the revolver from his hand. Meghan and Emily covered the sheriff with their rifles. The fury blazing within Meghan's eyes did not escape her father. For one terrible instant, she looked almost possessed—less like his daughter than a black-armored priestess deciding whether he still deserved to breathe.

The acrid smell of burned gunpowder spread through the chamber, a faint gray haze drifting above the table. Yet no bullet had struck Vincent. No one had seen one leave the weapon at all.

Mathius stood frozen, staring across the table. The black irises of humanity's future tyrant met his, and for a moment he became lost in them. Black eyes were rare but possible; the pinpoints of silver fire burning deep within Vincent's were something else entirely.

"What the fuck, Sheriff?" Wilson shouted.

The Governor opened the revolver. Every chamber held a spent casing. All six primers had been struck. The cylinder was hot, and faint threads of smoke curled from the chambers. Wilson angled the weapon and examined it with the practiced eye of a Marine. Nothing appeared broken. Nothing had failed. The bore was clear.

Everyone turned toward Vincent, expecting blood, a wound—something. They could smell the discharged powder and see the smoke hanging in the air. Yet Vincent remained untouched and impassive, the raven still perched upon his shoulder.

Miriam's face had gone dead. Her black gaze burned with icy contempt for the sheriff, while a deep frown hardened her mouth. She did not threaten him. She did not need to. Everyone in the room understood that Mathius Dellon had come within a fraction of a second of being torn apart by his own daughter—and that whatever mercy remained to him now depended upon the man he had tried to kill.

The sheriff slumped heavily into his chair. His gaze went distant. "I loaded it myself," he muttered, more to himself than anyone else. Confusion hollowed his voice. "There's no way I could have missed."

No one answered.

Something had happened. Yet there had been no gunshots—nothing resembling six rounds fired within an enclosed chamber. No bullets had crossed the twenty-five feet between Mathius and Vincent. No impacts scarred the walls. No holes marked the furniture. No blood stained the floor.

If bullets had been inside those cartridges, where had they gone?

Sheriff Mathius Dellon was a living legend in Nevada law enforcement. If he said he had loaded that revolver himself, then he had loaded it himself. No one who knew the man seriously doubted him.

The devastation upon his face made the mystery worse. Something had fractured behind the old lawman's eyes—a visible fissure in a certainty that had survived war, violence, criminals, politics, and decades behind a badge.

And beneath the impossible mechanics of the weapon lay another shock. Sheriff Dellon had just attempted to kill Vincent Veyl. Not from blind rage. Not from jealousy. Not because his reasoning had become clouded. Quite the opposite. Mathius had apparently arrived at the terrible conclusion that the young man before him represented something potentially catastrophic—and had acted upon it with the desperate logic of someone suddenly given the chance to kill a young Hitler before the world knew what Hitler would become.

Yet no one was calling the police. No one was reaching for handcuffs. No one was dragging Mathius from the room. Why was he still alive? Why was he being allowed to slump there and brood, muttering in confusion after attempting to murder the man at the head of the table?

And perhaps most unsettling of all—why was Vincent simply sitting there? Calm. Uninjured. Unshaken. Almost as though nothing unexpected had happened at all.

The silence grew oppressive. Tension thickened the air until it seemed almost physical—like invisible pudding filling the chamber.

"You knew," Mathius said, the words falling somewhere between a statement and a question.

Vincent shrugged. "Nope. Not surprised. Understand it. You're not wrong." His voice was cold, but entirely without anger.

Silence returned. The tension seemed to acquire weight, settling slowly toward the floor before finally beginning to dissipate, leaving behind only a heavy, contemplative uncertainty. No one seemed quite certain where to go from there.

Then, with apparent randomness—but sudden, determined need—Emily cocked her head. "Can we see the leg?"

Vincent gave a faint frown, knowing it was not something he wanted.

Miriam moved before he answered. A dagger appeared from within her robes. One quick stroke divided the field dressing, and the bandage fell away. Vincent met her eyes. He found only determination within their black depths. He understood her thoughts. She wanted them to know. Wanted to rub their faces in the truth. To strip away denial and force them to choose.

Nearly everyone moved toward the front of the table.

Mathius remained behind as an afterthought. Disarmed. Defeated. Rendered almost meaningless by his failure. "I loaded that gun in the car," he muttered. He knew the truth. Every chamber had contained a Hydra-Shok hollow-point round. He knew he had fired all six. Mathius ran one hand through his thick, curly hair and sank deeper into the chair. He seemed to shrink. He already knew what the others would find at the opposite end of the table.

Through the torn section of Vincent's black trousers, the wound was visible. A patch of redness. A puckered indentation where the nine-millimeter round had entered his thigh. But there was no open hole. No bleeding. And even as they watched, the redness began to fade with exposure to the air. The puckering diminished in real time.

They looked from the wound to Vincent's face. He regarded them impassively, wearing only a slight frown of discomfort at being exposed and examined. One by one, they returned to their chairs. Silent. Lost within thought. Their eyes wandered into space, then returned repeatedly to Vincent. To Miriam. To the raven, which now appeared almost amused. They were stunned. Overwhelmed. Confronted with truth beyond any remaining possibility of question or doubt.

Vyss was the first to find his voice. His pale eyes remained fixed upon the young man across the table.

"Can you open the gates," he asked, "as prophesied?"

Vincent lowered his head. A deep frown drew across his face, and for several seconds he said nothing. Vyss glanced down at the bullet Vincent had placed upon the black marble. Without asking permission, he picked it up, examined it briefly, and slipped it into an inner pocket of his coat. Proof was proof, and he had no intention of leaving that particular piece behind.

Beyond the soundproofed conference-room windows, rain traced faint silver lines down the glass, visible but nearly silent. Inside, the ventilation system hummed and a coffeemaker clicked as it settled upon its warming plate. Small, ordinary sounds—the machinery of the fortified building continuing its business while everyone inside the chamber waited for an immortal being to answer a question no sane man would have asked that morning.

Vincent looked toward Miriam. She met his gaze without speaking. Whatever passed between them required no words. Her black eyes softened, and she gave him a single, grave nod.

A tremor moved through Vincent's body. It began in his shoulders, ran down his arms, and shook his hands hard enough for those nearest him to see. For an instant, Miriam seemed ready to stop him. Then Vincent pushed himself upright. Mama hopped from his shoulder to hers, talons finding purchase among the black folds of Miriam's clothing. The raven pressed close against her neck and watched him with one bright eye.

Vincent turned toward the center of the room. His gaze settled upon the empty air above the black marble table.

His eyes lost focus.

The first words came softly, almost beneath hearing. They possessed a rhythm but no melody, a sequence of rough consonants and long, breath-filled vowels that seemed ill-suited to any modern human mouth. Then his voice deepened until it sounded as though a dragon were speaking mysteries through a steel pipe. Something stepped forward from the shadowed country within him—something far older than Vincent Veyl, far larger, and no longer interested in remaining hidden.

Even Mathius looked up in alarm.

Fear moved through the chamber. Miriam alone remained seated and calm, one hand resting upon the hilt of Vincent's sword. Vana and Abigail exchanged wide-eyed glances, and slow smiles spread across their faces. They recognized the language: Shalimite, the near-forgotten ancestor of the old Canaanite tongues, preserved only in fragments and taught only to the most accomplished acolytes of

the ancient path. Vincent did not speak it like a scholar reconstructing dead syllables. He spoke it like a man remembering the language of his childhood.

Abigail mouthed one of the phrases along with him, then stopped when she realized she understood the individual words but not the terrible grammar binding them together.

"That ain't temple Shalimite," Vana whispered.

"No," Abigail breathed. "It's older."

Silver points kindled inside Vincent's pupils. The conference room seemed to darken around him, though none of the lights flickered. Shadows lengthened beneath the chairs and gathered in the corners. The polished marble lost its reflection until it resembled a slab cut from the night itself.

Mama gave a small, uncertain croak and burrowed beneath Miriam's chin. Miriam stroked the raven once with her thumb, then rested her free hand against Vincent's leg. She held the sword upright in the other, its sheathed point planted beside her boot. Her posture remained composed, but her fingers tightened around both husband and weapon.

Warlord, and now sorcerer-priest in the ancient frame of Amil. Vincent's right-hand rose, his fingers moving through a sequence of precise, unfamiliar forms—turning, crossing, closing, and opening as though manipulating locks no one else could see. A tingling sensation passed over every exposed patch of skin in the room. Hair lifted along arms and necks.

Static crackled across rifle barrels, chair frames, belt buckles, and the Governor's wristwatch. Josh jerked when a blue spark leapt between the coffee cart and his knuckle. "Son of a bitch," he muttered, backing away from it.

Vanilla-yellow light followed Vincent's fingertips. Silver and ruby joined it, threaded with lavender sparks. The colors remained suspended in the wake of each motion, crossing one another and gathering above the table until they formed an intricate geometry of lines, curves, and angles that could not quite exist in three dimensions. Larry Stevens stared at it with the stricken concentration of a technical man confronting a machine that violated every principle he possessed. Tallia gripped his wrist, but he scarcely noticed.

Vincent brought his hands together and formed a triangle with his fingers. Through it, he stared toward the center of the pattern as though sighting along an invisible road.

The air rippled.

A faint glow appeared above the marble. It contracted into a pinprick, then swelled into a luminous ball the size of an apple. The geometry folded inward around it. Light bent. The sphere expanded, widening until it hung above the table without any hard surface or definite boundary—a translucent mass that moved like glass becoming liquid and liquid remembering it had once been air.

It was not merely light.

It was an opening.

Radiance poured through, followed by a warm gust that scattered papers and tugged at sleeves, skirts, hair, and rifle slings. "Oh!" Shannon Miller cried out and shoved her chair backward hard enough for its legs to scrape across the floor.

Cyrinx rose behind her and placed both hands upon her mother's shoulders, steadying her. The girl's face had gone pale, but fear was already losing ground to fascination. She stared into the widening breach without blinking.

Vana and Abigail came to their feet together. So did Ramsey and Mother Aramus, the old nun clinging to the priest's arm while refusing to retreat. Mathius rose more slowly, one hand braced against the table, his earlier despair driven aside by raw animal alarm. Vyss stood last, though only because he seemed to have forgotten his legs existed. When he finally straightened, wonder broke across his face in a radiant grin.

Meghan and Emily moved on training and instinct. Emily closed one conference-room door while Meghan secured the other. They drew inward with their rifles shouldered, establishing opposing lines of fire around Vincent and the aperture. Neither knew what they were guarding against—or whether bullets would mean a damn thing—but armed women preferred a useless plan to no plan at all.

Josh retreated toward the corner beside the drinks cart. A spoon rattled inside an abandoned cup. He caught the coffeepot before the wind knocked it from its burner and stood clutching the handle as though hot coffee might prove humanity's final defensive weapon.

Inside the breach, a world took form.

A broken intake of breath moved around the chamber. Sheriff Dellon's jaw fell open.

Warped formations of dark stone rose beneath a pale twilight sky. Wind had carved the rocks into hooked spires, hollow towers, and vast leaning shapes that seemed frozen in the act of crawling across the barren plain. Sparse patches of silver vegetation clung to sheltered crevices. A distant blue sun hung low above the horizon, casting thin, cold shadows across the wastes.

Ruins stood among the rocks—walls without doors, immense arches opening upon nothing, and shattered columns shaped for proportions that had never belonged to humankind. Dust blew through them in long gray veils. The smell of ozone and dry mineral earth entered the conference room, sharp enough to taste. Cold wind rolled across the table and raised gooseflesh upon every arm it touched.

Vincent's eyes closed, but silver radiance leaked from beneath his lids. He continued chanting, his voice sinking farther from ordinary human speech. His conscious mind appeared gone. Something older guided his hands and breath, feeling its way along roads laid before the first word of any rhean scripture.

A shadow passed over the alien plain.

At first, they mistook it for night overtaking the vision. Then an immense vessel crossed the blue sun.

It was mirror-black and shaped like a flattened disc, impossibly thin against its breadth. No seam, window, weapon, or engine disturbed its polished surface. The craft glided over the ruins without

sound, its curved edge continuing past the boundaries of the aperture. A mile across, perhaps more. The eye could see its enormity, but the mind refused to hold it.

Mathius stared upward into the underside of the silent thing. His face hardened as the implication struck him. Humanity had not built that vessel. No government on Rhea possessed anything remotely like it. Whatever people commanded it had crossed those wastes while human beings were still arguing over county lines, taxes, gods, and whose cattle had trampled whose damned fence.

Governor Wilson watched the vessel with a soldier's cold attention. Awe touched him, but so did calculation. He searched for engines, hatches, gun emplacements—anything his experience could name—and found nothing.

"Sweet Jesus," Larry whispered.

The aperture convulsed.

The barren plain folded into bands of dark glass. The blue sun stretched into a line and vanished. Heat struck the chamber with the wet force of an opened furnace, carrying a sweet, unfamiliar scent—not quite apples, not quite peaches, but rich enough to make the mouth water.

A blue beach appeared beneath a cosmic sky.

Fine sapphire sand curved along the shore of a crystal-clear sea. Gentle waves rolled across it, each leaving a lace of silver foam before sliding back. Beyond the water burned a deep golden sun, while stars crowded the upper sky in such number and brilliance that the world seemed suspended within the jeweled heart of the universe. Some appeared so near that Cyrinx raised one hand as though she might pluck them from the air.

Palm-like trees grew inland, their trunks white and smooth, their broad fronds colored in autumn shades of bronze, red, and yellow. The prismic fruit hanging beneath them glowed faintly from within. Warm wind passed among the leaves with a soft clattering sound and entered the conference room laden with salt, sweetness, and living water.

The temperature climbed. Sweat gathered across Vincent's brow and ran along his temples. His shoulders shook beneath his dark clothing, but the chant never faltered.

Something moved between the trees.

Vana leaned forward. "What the hell is that?"

The creature emerged onto the blue sand.

It stood higher than the palms. Green-gray scales covered a body combining the long predatory grace of a serpent with the weight and muscle of some prehistoric beast. Two enormous wings lay folded along its back, their hooked joints rising above its shoulders. Smaller feathered structures surrounded its head like a savage crown. It advanced with a low, gliding stride, claws sinking deep into the sand. Its movements possessed none of the sluggishness of a museum reconstruction. The animal was quick, balanced, and very much alive.

It turned its head.

A great amber eye fixed directly upon the aperture.

Vana squealed—not in terror but in the irrepressible delight of a woman whose theology had just produced a flesh-and-blood dragon.

Abigail seized her arm. "It sees us."

That sobered her.

The dragon opened its wings. Sand exploded outward beneath the first tremendous beat.

Mathius reached for the .357, in a lock box at the front desk and found an empty holster. The old sheriff swore and stepped back, suddenly remembering that even if he had possessed the weapon, even fifteen rounds roughly fuck-all against a beast the size of a courthouse.

Wilson drew his Beretta and brought it up in both hands. Meghan and Emily aimed their rifles into the breach. Shannon stumbled away from the table until her back struck the wall beside the door. Cyrinx remained in front of her, transfixed despite the tremble in her knees. Tallia hauled Larry behind a chair while Larry resisted just enough to keep studying the creature.

Father Ramsey began reciting a prayer under his breath. Mother Aramus crossed herself with a shaking hand and joined him, though her gaze never left the approaching beast.

Vyss merely smiled. The danger registered somewhere in his mind, but wonder had him by the throat. He looked ready to let the dragon bite his head off if doing so would prove the experience authentic.

The creature charged.

Vincent convulsed so violently that his knees nearly buckled. Miriam rose and caught him around the waist, bracing his weight against her body. She kept the sword in her other hand, though the sight of the oncoming dragon had finally cracked her composure. Her mouth parted. Her black eyes widened.

"Vincent," she warned.

He drove one heel into the floor and steadied himself. The chant rose into a harsh command. Silver light flared beneath his eyelids, and the rift twisted away an instant before the dragon reached it. One enormous claw swept toward the opening. For the width of a heartbeat, its talons appeared close enough to tear through the conference-room ceiling.

Then the beach vanished. The sea, stars, dragon, and golden sun smeared into liquid color. Heat collapsed into cold. A brutal electrical hum filled the room.

An impossible city crystallized inside the sphere. It stretched beneath a dark-red sky without any discernible horizon. Towers rose downward as well as upward. Roads turned back through themselves, crossed at angles that made the eye ache, and entered buildings miles from where they had begun. Some structures appeared solid until the gaze settled upon them, then became transparent or flowed

like molten glass without losing their shape. Rivers of blue-white energy climbed walls and spilled upward into the clouds.

Enormous black cubes hung above the city, each enclosed within a translucent sphere. They rotated slowly on several axes at once, their surfaces opening into depths far larger than their outward dimensions could contain.

Larry stared for several seconds, then shook his head. "No. No, that geometry is wrong."

"It appears unconcerned," Tallia said, gripping his sleeve.

The hum intensified until it seemed they stood among ten thousand electrical transformers. The fillings in Mathius's teeth hurt. Hair rose across necks and arms. Static snapped between Meghan's rifle and a nearby chair. The air smelled of burned metal and approaching lightning.

A small metallic sphere detached itself from one of the nearby structures. It crossed the alien avenue, moving with swift, deliberate intelligence. Panels shifted across its surface. A dark aperture opened like an eye.

The device stopped opposite the rift.

A cone of clear light swept through the opening and passed across the conference room. Where it touched, flesh became briefly translucent. Bones, blood vessels, weapons, wiring, and the steel supports inside the walls flashed into view. Shannon screamed. Josh ducked behind the coffee cart and dragged the pot down with him.

A voice erupted from the metallic sphere.

It was deep and layered, containing several simultaneous tones that struck the bones as much as the ears. No one understood the language, but the demand within it required no translation. Something had detected the intrusion and wanted names, purpose, origin—and probably an explanation made before it decided whether to vaporize them.

Vincent answered.

"Val-kha-thar-am!"

The word cracked through the chamber like stone splitting under pressure. Abigail understood it—and looked remarkably pleased with herself for doing so. The ancient Shalimite phrase carried both meanings at once, one sacred and the other considerably less polite.

"Presumption before the Throne," she whispered. A sharp little smile touched her mouth. "Know your fucking place." Even as she translated, Vincent followed the rebuke with a harsh chain of guttural syllables, his voice doubling and tripling upon itself.

The probe recoiled. Its scanning beam vanished, panels slammed shut across its surface, and the sphere retreated several yards as though confronted not by an intruder but by an authority it had believed dead.

Vyss's smile disappeared. For the first time, he looked at Vincent with something beyond wonder. Recognition, perhaps. Or fear of the scale upon which this quiet young man had once mattered.

The city dissolved before the device could answer. Red sky folded into darkness. Towers twisted into streaks of molten light. The electrical hum faded, leaving every ear ringing.

The aperture contracted. Vincent sagged against Miriam, and several witnesses thought the effort had finally broken him. Then his hands closed into a final sign.

The gate reasserted itself.

Cold air washed through the chamber, followed almost at once by a warm desert wind. The scent of chai came with it—cinnamon, cardamom, nutmeg, and black tea carried across distances no map could measure. Fine golden dust rolled over the edge of the opening and scattered across the black marble. Much of it settled upon the chamber's surfaces, but at the microscopic scale, countless grains continued outward—into vents, clothing, lungs, cracks, and machinery—beginning their silent passage into the world beyond.

A sunset realm spread before them.



Desert, stone, and sparse grass reached beneath a sky burning with bands of crimson, gold, silver, violet, and every shade of blue. Innumerable pale worlds hung within the upper heavens like phantom moons seen by day. Some appeared near enough to reveal clouds, seas, and continents. Others stood as pinpricks buried impossibly deep within the rainbow fire.

Islands of rock floated above the wastes. Some were no larger than boulders or houses; others formed vast tablelands bearing ruins, groves, waterfalls, and ancient structures of sandstone and silver. Birds wheeled among them, accompanied by stranger beings composed of shadow, mist, living flesh, and soft radiance. Ghostly forms gathered along the island cliffs like nesting creatures, their calls passing through the rift as music half remembered from childhood.

The room grew still.

This was not merely another planet. Everyone knew it before the mind found words. The knowledge arrived whole, as immediate as heat or pain.

A presence entered with the wind—gentle, ancient, and wise. It carried a dense clarity that exposed without humiliating and an acceptance that neither excused nor recoiled from what it found. It saw them—not their faces, titles, uniforms, pieties, or excuses, but every secret wound and private cruelty, every good intention curdled by terror of death and insignificance, every appetite disguised as duty. It saw Vyss's ambition to be remembered, Ramsey's need for a sublime mandate, Aramus's ache for true peace, Wilson's need for his life to mean something, Vana's hunger for control, Abigail's rage to be free, Shannon's fear that she was unlovable, Cyrinx's longing for realization, Meghan's fear of oblivion, Emily's lonely hope for eternal love, and the violence Mathius carried like a loaded weapon in defense of the people he already loved.

It saw all of it and did not turn away.

For one dangerous instant, the presence seemed to speak inside every soul at once.

I see you. I know you. I placed you where you stand and made you what you are. When your work is done, you shall return home. Peace and wholeness await, at road's end.

Father Ramsey's prayer fell silent before knowing. Mother Aramus began to weep as understanding settled over her. Vana's hungry smile softened; for once, she felt no need to grasp for anything. Abigail had long accepted that she was damned, but that surrender broke apart beneath the realization that choice remained. Wilson lowered his Beretta because the truth before him required no weapon. Meghan and Emily let the muzzles of their rifles sink toward the floor in the presence of the one face that stood at the crossroads—for he stripped away all their fear.

Mathius remained standing, stripped of every shield but stubbornness. The clarity before him did not forgive him cheaply or declare him innocent. It saw the heart beneath his attempted murder—the honest fear and protective love that had driven him—and understood without absolving.

The mercy of that understanding hurt worse than condemnation.

At a crossroads beneath that beautiful, burning sky stood a solitary figure.

Everyone recognized him.

Vincent stood before them with his eyes closed, shaking in Miriam's arms—and Vincent stood upon that ancient road beneath the innumerable worlds.

The other Vincent was paler, his black hair falling well below his shoulders. Long robes of dusky black and silver moved around him in the desert wind. A sword hung at his side, and one hand rested upon a dark staff bound with silver bands and carved from end to end with totemic script. Weariness marked his severe face, but so did peace. Two ravens perched upon his shoulders.



Mama raised her head and stared into the gate. She released a loud, trembling caw.

The two ravens upon the distant Vincent answered.

Mama recognized home. She recognized the eternal covey.

The little raven launched herself from Miriam's shoulder. Miriam caught her against her chest before she could reach the opening, letting Vincent's sword fall to the floor with a clatter. Mama fought her, wings beating furiously and claws tangling in black cloth as she called toward her distant kin.

"No, little one." Miriam held her fast, though tears now stood in her own eyes. She felt the same call. "Not yet."

The Vincent at the crossroads smiled.

Near his black, flat-toed boots, beside a weathered signpost engraved in writing no one could discern, lay a stone the size of a child's fist. It glittered as with quartz, pale sand, lime, and raw threads of silver. He bent, lifted it from the dust, and approached the opening.

Vincent raised one hand within the conference room. His eyes remained closed. His fingers reached blindly outward and touched the fluid surface of the gate.

The two hands met.

The Vincent beyond placed the stone into the palm of the Vincent within.

Miriam gasped. Vyss leaned so far across the table that Ramsey seized the back of his coat to keep him from climbing up and into the rift.

The stone crossed the threshold as a pale, transparent shape. For an instant, the black marble remained visible through it. Then substance gathered around its ghost. Sandstone clouded into being. Quartz hardened with a crystalline gleam. Veins of raw silver spread through the rock like frozen lightning.

Its full weight settled into Vincent's hand.

The gate began to close. Mama called again, and the ravens upon the distant road answered as the rainbow sky narrowed around them. Floating islands, phantom worlds, desert, crossroads, and the second Vincent compressed into a wavering sphere no larger than a human head.

Yet the presence they had felt did not disappear. It condensed. The place and its personage drew together within their awareness, becoming inseparable. The Sacred Wastes were not merely a distant realm. Something of them lived within the man who now stood trembling before them, holding a piece of eternity in his palm, faint whispers filling the air.

The fading clarity and acceptance left an ache deep within every witness, but the clarity itself remained. With it came an understanding of why they were in that room, what waited for them when their roads were finished, and why some part of that promise must remain with them while they lived. Purgatoria was not only a destination. It was a state toward which one could strive—a way of walking through the temporal world without surrendering to its lies.

Vyss made a strangled sound. Aramus clutched Ramsey harder. Vana began to reach toward the fading light before Abigail caught her wrist. Even Wilson took one involuntary step after it, then stopped himself.

The sphere collapsed into a tiny, intense star of ruby and silver.

Then it winked out in a final spark of blue-white radiance.

Silence fell.

The ordinary conference room returned by degrees. Rain continued its nearly soundless descent beyond the thick windows. The ventilation system pushed fresh air through the ceiling vents, and loose papers settled across the table and floor. The smell of hot coffee mingled obscenely with ozone, alien scents of sea and fruit, scorched metal, chai, and the dust of Purgatoria. A thin scatter of blue sand lay near Shannon's chair. Golden-silver dust coated the black marble. Every metal surface retained a faint static charge.

Vincent opened his hand.

The stone remained.

He set it upon the table with a hard, undeniable click.

No one spoke. For several seconds, none of them seemed capable of thought. They stared at the rough little stone as though all ten thousand worlds had been compressed within it.

A thin stream of blood slipped from Vincent's nose, unnoticed at first. His eyes remained closed. His body trembled, and sweat shone across his brow.

Miriam stood with her mouth slightly open; one arm locked around Vincent's waist and the other holding Mama against her breast. The raven had ceased struggling, though she continued watching the place where the gate had vanished, making a low, wounded sound deep in her throat.

Vincent's knees gave way. Miriam guided him back into the leather chair, nudged the fallen sword within reach, and clung to her new husband with a fierceness that made clear she did not fully understand what he had done either. She had believed. She remembered things no mortal woman should remember. Yet belief and memory were poor preparation for watching one incarnation of her husband hand another a stone across the threshold of death.

The scent of Purgatoria remained around him, faint but unmistakable. So did its presence. One by one, those gathered understood that Vincent was the realm personified—its embodied beacon, its living doorway, the Twilight's Son.

Vyss stared from the artifact to Vincent. His face held the naked joy of a scholar who had just seen every mocked conviction proven true—and the dawning terror of a man realizing how small his ambitions had been. He had asked whether Vincent could open the gates.

He had received his answer.

Mathius looked around at the blue sand, the scattered papers, the armed women, the shaken clergy, the golden dust shimmering across the marble, and the impossible stone resting where the bullet had lain before Vyss quietly pocketed it. The sheriff's face went ashen as the greater shape of his error emerged.

Death remained terrible, but it was not annihilation. Vincent's willingness to use it remained brutal, but perhaps it was not the tyrannical evil Mathius had believed. The young man operated according to a harsher scale of reality—one in which killing did not erase the soul and mercy did not always require preserving the flesh.

Mathius did not like that truth.

He could no longer dismiss it.

They had not witnessed a projection or some clever manipulation of light. Wind had touched them. Heat had made them sweat. An alien intelligence had scanned their bones. A dragon had seen them and charged. Matter from other worlds—and dust from another plane of being—now lay inside the room.

They had looked into other worlds and then beyond the world entirely.

Vincent opened his weary eyes and looked at Vyss. The expression plainly asked, Does that answer your question?

It was not an altogether pleasant look. Exhaustion and soul-deep weariness filled it—the burden of a man who knew the road home and had chosen to remain here anyway.

Vincent placed one hand over the stone.

Trinity spoke within Josh's earpiece, snapping him from his stupor. "Secure the artifact. Zippered storage bags, bottom drawer of the serving cart."

Josh blinked and hurried to obey. He found a box of bags among the coffee filters, napkins, and emergency snacks, tore one free, and brought it to Vincent.

"You do it," Trinity instructed.

The red-haired former soldier unfolded a clean napkin and carefully lifted the stone. The instant it left the marble; a deep vibration passed through the paper and entered his hands. Josh stiffened.

Whispers grew within the room.

Hundreds of voices seemed to speak at once from a great distance, none distinct enough to understand. Josh nearly dropped the stone, recovered, and eased it into the bag before sealing it shut. The whispers diminished but did not entirely cease.

He placed the bagged stone upon the table before Vincent.

Vyss shook with exuberant excitement. The object inside that absurdly ordinary plastic bag answered every investor, patron, scholar, politician, and believer who had wagered money, reputation, or sanity upon his promises. Yet the proof did not belong to him. It rested before the man who held the key to the Star-Roads.

"Everyone stay where you are," Trinity ordered.

Josh disappeared through the conference-room door and returned less than two minutes later wearing gloves and carrying a clean dustpan, hand brush, and several more bags. Those not attending Vincent watched in fascination as Josh methodically gathered the blue sand into a heavy plastic shopping bag, tied it shut, and labeled it with a marker from the serving cart.

The golden-silver dust had spread across the center of the broad table, beyond his reach from the floor. After considering the problem for half a second, Josh climbed onto the black marble on his hands and knees.

Wilson stared at him. "That your best sterile procedure?"

"It's the procedure I've got," Josh replied.

Working with painstaking care, he swept the glittering dust into the clean pan and allowed the tiny, twinkling mound to slide into a zippered bag. He sealed it, climbed down, and placed both samples beside the Purgatorian stone.

While Josh worked, the women gathered around Vincent.

Blood ran more freely from his nose now. His ears rang, his eyes remained half-closed, and sweat darkened his collar despite the returning chill of the room. Emily reached him first, produced a clean cloth, and made him lean forward.

"Not back," she ordered. "Unless you want to swallow the damned blood."

Shannon hurried to the beverage station, wet a towel with hot water from the kettle, wrung it out, and placed it across the back of Vincent's neck. Meghan slung her rifle behind her, took his wrist, and checked his pulse while Miriam supported him from the other side. Vana and Abigail drew near with Cyrinx and Tallia, placing their hands upon Vincent, Miriam, and one another's shoulders.

Mama climbed from Miriam's arms back onto Vincent's shoulder. She pressed against his cheek as though trying to comfort him—and perhaps to draw closer to the remnant of home that still lived within him.

He looked rough, drained, and pale. Yet the truth that had filled Purgatoria remained present in human measure. It drew every gaze and displaced every lesser concern.

Those not directly attending him remained torn between Vincent and Josh's careful work. Vyss beamed one moment and looked stricken the next. Before him lay the physical evidence of everything he had promised, while at the center of it sat the man upon whom all his hopes, dreams, ambitions, and needs had suddenly taken shape.

That shape was Vincent Veyl.

Vincent drew a long, deep breath and seemed to return to the moment. He looked around as though seeing the people surrounding him for the first time in several minutes.

"Okay, then," he said calmly.

He tried to stand.

His legs refused to cooperate.

Miriam and Meghan caught him before he could fall. Emily pressed him back into the chair with considerably less reverence.

"Sit your ass down."

Mathius Dellon, Tom Wilson, Larry Stevens, Howard Ramsey, and Justin Vyss watched uncertainly, none of them knowing what to say or where to put their hands. Mother Aramus saw something else.

She studied the women gathered around Vincent and the tenderness with which they attended him. Even the wicked pair had been drawn close. Abigail Carydin reached tentatively toward Vincent's right shoulder, as though needing to confirm that he was real. Vana stared at him as though beholding a living miracle she feared might vanish if she looked away.
Shannon kept the warm cloth pressed against his neck. Emily knelt before him, one hand on his pulse and the other holding the bloodied cloth beneath his nose. Meghan stood beside the chair with her rifle ready, prepared to fight anyone who attempted to harm him.

Tallia watched with the awe of a woman who had just discovered the greatest story never told. Ten thousand lifetimes seemed contained within the exhausted man sitting in that air-conditioned boardroom—a secret multitude would kill to possess and millions more would murder to suppress.

Cyrinx saw her angel-man made flesh. Vana saw her god-king. Miriam saw the lost half of herself returned.

"The priestess-queens are gathering to him," Mother Aramus said quietly. "Drawn by the unseen hand of Spirit."

Ramsey and Vyss heard her. So did Mathius, standing just to her left. Whatever any of them believed about prophecy, a design larger than their intentions had begun taking form inside the room.

Vyss looked from Vincent to the three plastic bags containing all the validation he needed to reassure those who had wagered upon his visions and promises—including himself. Vincent met his gaze, then looked in turn toward Ramsey, Aramus, Mathius, Wilson, and Larry.

He sighed.

The White Cardinal wanted desperately to reach for the evidence, claim it, and run for the door. Vincent saw the desire cross his face. His gaze became grim and cold.

"How much?"

A faint grin touched Vincent's mouth as horror dawned across Vyss's face. He gave a low, dark chuckle and turned toward Mathius.

"How much should I charge him for proof of everything he's dreamed and everything he desires, Matt?" Vincent asked, surprising everyone. Shadow deepened within his gaze. "What would a mercenary worth his salt demand for relics like these?"

Then, at last, he forced himself to stand.

Mathius stirred from his brooding self-pity and guilt. "It has no price," he said. "It's beyond calculation. Heaven—or whatever the hell that place was—sealed inside an evidence bag. Proof of worlds no spacecraft could reach in ten thousand years."

He had watched enough Discovery Channel documentaries to know how difficult it was merely to reach Mars, never mind whatever impossible distance lay between Rhea and that blue-sand beach. It had been a beautiful place. The alien desert was impressive enough, but the beach would visit Mathius in his dreams for the rest of his life—preferably without the goddamned dragon.

"But as for me, I'll trouble you no further, man-angel." Mathius spoke softly, though the depth of his voice made true softness nearly impossible. He shook his head and released a low, bitter chuckle. "I loaded that gun myself. Guess it takes more than silver bullets to kill a silver angel."

He walked around the table, nodding first to the women and then to Governor Wilson. At the door, Meghan's eyes followed him. He paused as though he might speak to her, but whatever words remained between father and daughter were too large and raw for that room.

Mathius opened the conference-room doors and left. A minute later, the security system buzzed him through the building's outer entrance. When the exterior door opened, a faint breath of cool, rain-scented air found its way through the lobby and into the conference room. Some of the living dust of Purgatoria went with the Sheriff when he stepped into the world beyond.

No one else moved. A strange stillness had settled over them, and no one seemed certain what to do with it. Vyss's raging hunger to possess the evidence remained visible, restrained chiefly by the women now watching him with something well beyond suspicion and just shy of open hostility. Their expressions laid Vincent's exhaustion at Justin's feet.

Perhaps not unjustly.

"Women?" Vyss glanced from Miriam to Shannon, Cyrinx, and the others gathered around Vincent. "You appear to have that covered. Not that I could offer them anyway. I'm no pimp." He looked down at his immaculate suit and spread his hands. "Wealth, I possess—but almost everything I have is tied up in this."

His gesture took in Governor Wilson, the Natural Order Party, and perhaps the entire damned planetary cause.

"I own a few suits like this," Vyss continued with a strained laugh. "Some property. Investments. A collection of rare books and relics that suddenly seem rather less impressive than they did this morning." His amusement faded. "What does a mortal man offer an angel in exchange for proof that his dreams are real? Not only mine—the dreams of millions across this planet, perhaps the spiritual hopes of billions. You have made them tangible. Reachable, even."

Vincent's frown deepened. Then, without ceremony, he shoved the bagged stone across the table toward Vyss.

His gaze shifted to Ramsey, and he nudged the bag of shimmering Purgatorian dust toward the priest.

"Major," Vincent said, nodding toward Wilson.

He handed the shopping bag containing nearly a pound of blue sand to Josh, who carried it down the length of the table and placed it carefully in the Governor's hands.

"There." Vincent retrieved his sword and planted its sheathed point against the floor. "Now, gentlemen—and ladies—if you'll excuse me, I've had quite enough for one long night's day."

Vyss nearly snatched the stone from the table. He clutched the bag against his chest and closed his eyes, cuddling it without the slightest shame. A lifetime of searching, scheming, planning, dreaming, and praying had reached fulfillment inside a thin film of ordinary plastic. Warmth passed through the bag. Something pulsed within the stone, slow and deep, while faint whispers gathered at the edge of hearing.

"This means…" Vyss swallowed. "Well. Everything."

Vincent began moving toward the doors with Miriam beside him and Larry stepping forward to support his other arm. Larry displayed no hunger for power or evidence—only the wonder of a simple man of faith who had watched faith become physical reality.

"But what now?" Vyss asked.

"Now you go home, Justin. I'm all out of free samples from Forever-Ever Land." Vincent drew a slow breath and steeled himself. "Thank you, Larry, but I'll manage."

The words came as a grateful grumble. Vincent wanted to walk under his own power, though he made no effort to free himself from Miriam or the raven perched upon his shoulder. Nor, in truth, did he desire to. Some thin current of strength had begun flowing back into him. A little color returned to his face as he took his weight upon the sword.

"Josh, secure the rifle in the armory. Emily, Meghan—once everyone is out, secure the building. Full lockdown."

Both women nodded and placed closed fists against their breasts in the old Imperial salute.

"Yes, Lord Veyl," Meghan said.

Her complete sincerity caught everyone unprepared.

Vyss smiled and bowed his head. "The Emperor cometh."

"The Emperor has come," Ramsey answered.

"Indeed," Governor Wilson said.

A dangerous zeal had kindled within the old soldier's eyes. Some measure of it now burned within nearly everyone present, though it assumed a different shape in each.

Mother Aramus's original misgivings had not vanished so much as having been tempered by the living twilight of Purgatoria. Miriam stood far ahead of them all, her recognition rooted in something older than doctrine. Jaded Abigail followed close behind, protective of Vincent now and deeply suspicious of both Vyss's hunger and Ramsey's machinations.

Vana watched the men with calculating black eyes. She had recognized a simple truth: they were mortals already imagining how they might steer, organize, employ, or control something that was decidedly not.
Shannon, Cyrinx, Meghan, Emily, and even Tallia felt the paths of their lives turning beneath their feet. None experienced the change in precisely the same way. Yet each understood that some part of her purpose now converged upon the exhausted man standing before them. It was like reaching the end of a long, lightless tunnel and emerging not into blinding noon, but into the restful sunset of Vincent's presence and purpose.

"Go home," Vincent told them, waving them away. "Every one of you has work waiting. Duties. Lives. Go tend to them."

He crossed the lobby with Miriam and Mama beside him, using the sheathed sword as a crutch. The elevator doors opened, and Miriam guided him inside. Vincent turned to face those watching from the lobby, his expression weary, impatient, and faintly disturbed by the reverence settling over them.

Then the doors closed.

The elevator carried him toward the fourth floor.

No one moved for several seconds. Men and women alike continued staring at the sealed doors while the revelation soaked deeper into them. The fortified lobby looked exactly as it had before—black marble, controlled lighting, security glass, cameras, locked entrances—but the world to which it belonged had changed beyond repair.

Vyss turned toward the open conference room. Papers lay scattered across the floor. The remaining dust shimmered faintly beneath the lights. The air still carried traces of ozone, chai, alien fruit, and distant seas.

"This was the hour," he said quietly. "This was the place where all of history changed."

"Nothing will ever be the same again," said Governor Wilson.

A chime sounded from his secure device. With the bagged blue sand held carefully in one hand, Wilson drew the phone and read the incoming message. Astonishment passed across his face, followed by a broad, almost predatory grin.

Behind the reception desk, Josh removed two gold-and-black thumb drives from the terminal. He approached Father Ramsey and offered him the first.

"Mother Trinity wanted you to have this," Josh said quietly.

Ramsey accepted the drive and studied it within his palm.

Josh turned to Justin Vyss and held out the second.

Opening Prologue—Aftermath:

Within hours, Mathius Dellon officially but quietly resigned as sheriff. He put his farm up for sale, began the process of claiming his pensions, and vanished.

Meghan and Emily moved into 55 Arius Avenue, where they were assigned a shared apartment on the third floor. Emily spent most nights sleeping in the designated comms bunkroom, pulling triple duty in communications, reception, and as a general roustabout. Meghan reported to the Law Enforcement Building within twenty-four hours of the Purgation of Trembol, as someone had already deemed it. Trinity told her she could create a garden in one corner of the back lot.

As if from nowhere, uniformed, equipped, and heavily armed men and women began arriving in Humvees and reporting for duty. They were members of the Fraternal Order of the Knights of Purgatoria and its sister organization, the Sororal Order of the Shield Maidens of Purgatoria. Sent by Bishop Ramsey and Governor Wilson, they were folded into Raven Star Security and paid with funds earmarked in the city budget for the Trembol Police Department. They were hard, quiet men and women who said little and simply got to work. None seemed reluctant to take orders from a former military policewoman and deputy sheriff with years of law-enforcement experience.

Though they would perform the duties of police officers, they were sworn into neither city nor state service. They became officers of Raven Star Security. Their numbers grew rapidly, both in the policing of Trembol and as private security assigned to the resort and casino, all under the over-command of a former Army MP captain named Max Hyde.

Every member of Raven Star received an earpiece with the incoming equipment. There was nothing visibly special about it at first—just a common radio-communications device tuned to a very specific channel. Before long, however, nearly all communications were being routed through a new dispatcher. Amber Shelton, the former dispatcher, was retained as the body physically present within the LEB communications center, now employed by Raven Star.

By order of Governor Wilson and County Commissioner Jason Remming, Shannon Miller was sworn in as interim mayor of Trembol, while Cyrinx Miller became interim city clerk. Cyrinx, however, spent less time at the bank or City Hall than she did at the computer station in the Raven Star conference room, chatting away the day with Trinity. From that single terminal, she could channel nearly all her work through Raven Star, guided, tutored, and streamlined by the calm, wise, and ever-proficient voice in her ear. Trinity even walked her through installing certain applications on the City Hall and bank servers, making her work considerably more efficient and effective.

Cyrinx frequently showered in the employee lavatory on the second floor and was permitted to move many of her belongings into a small studio apartment on the third. She continued collecting paychecks from both the bank and the city, but for all intents and purposes, she knew exactly whom she actually worked for. Within three days of the Purgation, she had begun wearing black-and-silver dresses in a corporate-clerical style, each bearing the Raven Star logo.

Tallia and Larry Stevens returned to their station on the ridge overlooking Trembol with a new lease on life, star-road visions in their minds, and hope in their hearts. Within hours, the first contractors—including Timbisha Inc. and Trion Systems—were rolling up to the station. Twenty-four hours later, Tallia and Larry had their new broadcast van. Within three days, the larger work had begun. Within a week, Larry proposed to his girlfriend, Darma, and she accepted.

Ironically, Josh Manning gave Amber Shelton an engagement ring, two days after the Purgation. Needing some joy and light in her life, she agreed. Josh and Amber began attending church with far more zeal than they had before the 2nd of June.
Vana Carydin and Abigail returned to their homes at the resort—the penthouse and the manor house—and within days resumed running things much as they had before. They now did so, however, beneath the watchful gaze of a new overlord. Trinity and Raven Star Security took complete control of the resort's computer systems, accounting, and surveillance. Their lives became considerably quieter.

What Vana did not know—and could have done damned little about if she had—was that many of her properties and holdings throughout Nevada and beyond were being liquidated or prepared for auction. The proceeds would be reinvested and redirected into Raven Star interests. Trinity had no desire to maintain an empire of smut and sexual exploitation. Such things might have their place, but she had no intention of associating that place with Raven Star.

Abigail noticed that Inner Veyl, Vincent's blog, had acquired several new members, and that pissed her off. She had rather enjoyed being among the few people who had discovered the treasury of his writings, some of which dated back years. Before there had been a proper website, there had been a private blog. Vincent had simply linked the old archive to the newer site without clearly labeling or advertising it. There had always been a few other readers, but they remained obscure and rarely commented. Abigail had been commenting for months. She had known he was coming since December.

Governor Wilson departed Raven Star carrying a bag of alien sand and a data file containing the entire meeting. Audiovisual evidence, synchronized timestamps, biometric readings, and atmospheric-monitoring data were all preserved upon it. He immediately began making calls and arranging private meetings with ranking corporate figures and government and military officials at the state, federal, and international levels, all firmly established within the Natural Order Party's inner sanctum. Selected material from the data pin would be shown only to the chosen few.

Wilson also delivered a portion of the sand and selected footage documenting its origin to the Nevada Technical Institute in Carson City, establishing an official chain of custody. Initial tests revealed strange properties and elements both known and unknown to the periodic table.

No contract or grand bargain had been struck with Vincent Veyl. Wilson, acting through N.O.P. County Commissioner Jason Remming, had quietly concluded a pact with Father Ramsey to concentrate first on putting Trembol back together. Still, nothing had been settled regarding the prime question: whether Vincent would accept the anointing, commit himself to their cause, or open the gates for humanity. There were good reasons to believe he would do none of those things until certain conditions had been met.

That did not stop Wilson, Ramsey, and Vyss from proclaiming him the Emperor within their respective inner circles. The evidence made the claim damned difficult to deny. The Seraph of prophecy was among them; Amil had returned.

As Wilson and Vyss left the Raven Star Building near noon, Wilson put the matter plainly. "He laid out the entire plan," he said. "You just had to listen to hear it."

Justin Vyss flew to Las Vegas and submitted the Purgatorium Stone, along with video evidence of its origins, to Imperius Research Labs, his own private but highly accredited research-and-development institute. He kept a fragment of the stone for himself. Armed with the artifact and his copy of the audiovisual record, Vyss felt empowered to begin the next stage.

He now possessed proof that the promised Emperor was real, proof of what Vincent could do, proof of other worlds and planes of existence, and proof that the Über-mensch had appeared among men. Vyss had already calculated every angle of presentation. To his Jewish backers, Vincent could be proclaimed the new Cyrus the Great; to Muslim donors, the Mahdi; to Christian leaders, the Second

Coming; to Asian party luminaries, the Solar Crow—Sanzuwu, Yatagarazu, Samjok-o; to Hindus, Krishna; to Zoroastrians, Saoshyans; and to Silver Path Christians, the Seraph incarnate. He'd long laid the groundwork for this very diversity of interpretation.

Yet Vyss had not been blind to the fact that the Episcopate possessed an agenda of its own, or that Governor Wilson and Ramsey were as tight as two thieves plotting a heist. They were running their own program within the Natural Order Party, and Vyss had known it for some time. Until now, he had regarded them as the Left Hand to his Right—a necessary counterbalance within the greater cause.

But Veyl had given them nothing and shown them everything. Without his commitment, how far down the path could any of them truly go?

Vyss carried that question with him as his private jet turned east toward Washington, D.C. By the predawn hours of June 3rd, he was on his way to brief his most promising backer on the results of the meeting, carefully weighing what he would and would not reveal.

Wilson's parting words remained with him as he stared through the window at the predawn sky: He laid out the entire plan. You just had to listen to hear it.

The truth came into focus as the distant lights of the capital appeared along the dim morning horizon. The negative—the dismissal—that had been the plan. Vincent had explained everything humanity would have to become before he would consider opening the gates.

He had laid out the cost as well.

Father Ramsey transmitted the complete audiovisual record to the Episcopate of the Silver Order and sent selected clips to the 101, the inner council of the House of Purgatoria. Sample vials of the shimmering gold-and-silver Purgatorian dust were dispatched to the Argenteum Institute in Vitoria-Gasteiz, in the Basque Country, and to each of his fellow bishops. Ramsey kept two vials for himself.

He also mobilized and coordinated the activation of the Silver Soldiers of the F.O.K.P. and S.O.S.M.P. for service in Trembol. Working with Vincent Veyl's mysterious secretary, Mary Chancer—whose voice sounded coincidentally similar to Trinity's—he arranged for them to be rapidly vetted, hired, and temporarily bivouacked in the mostly vacant Silver Satyr Hotel until more permanent accommodations could be established.

For two years, the Silver Order and the Natural Order Party had worked together across the planet to organize and forge the unified military structure of the fifteen member nations and fourteen American states of the Imperial Alliance—the Legions. One of the primary centers for that training was Crow Creek Omega, a supposedly decommissioned Cold War military base twenty-three miles northeast of Trembol.
Ramsey organized everything while aboard a plane bound for Rome. Within an hour of leaving the meeting, he had been summoned to answer to the new pope.

The former Pontiff, Pope Pius the 13th, had backed the mission for years. He had drafted the Dispensation and the Betrothal, adopted Vincent's books as guidance for reforming the Swiss Guard, and even knighted the young soldier. He had been fully briefed on Project Crossroads from the beginning.

Pope James I—the Builder, the reformer, neither liberal nor conservative—remained something of a mystery. He was widely regarded as an unpredictable and inscrutable figure.

Meanwhile, Vincent remained silent and oblivious, as lost in his bride as she was in him.

Mama came and went as she chose. The door opened when she approached and closed after she passed.

(Around Noon, June 2—Two-Headed Raven)



(Oreviel & Ereviel – Amil & Aneleia)

"How did you keep him from shooting you?" Miriam asked.

Vincent shrugged. "Wasn't me. Thought it was some superpower of yours," he answered with complete sincerity.

Miriam gave a nervous little chuckle, then decided that some things were better accepted on faith than dissected too closely.

They were both exhausted when they stepped off the elevator onto the fourth floor of the Raven Star Building. Miriam kept one arm around Vincent's waist while he leaned more heavily than he would ever admit upon the sheathed sword. Until that morning, it had been his floor. Now it was theirs.

Miriam's eyes widened with approval at what he had made of the place. He had renewed the old rather than ripping everything out and starting over. The wood floors and half-paneled walls glowed with warm, muted color. Dark blue, silver, and white area rugs—beautiful and expensive-looking—had been secured neatly in place. On the stairwell wall hung the emblem of Purgatorianism and Raven Star LLC, rendered in patinated silver, no less. Milk-glass and bronze fixtures cast the mellow light of an old railway station or the corridor of a grand sleeper car.

Looking upon the emblem, Miriam saw the two of them within it: two halves joined into a single being. She tightened her hold upon Vincent, and he leaned into her without protest. At that point, they were practically holding each other upright. The strain of the past several weeks had hollowed them both out, and their remote bond had grown so strong that it was difficult to tell where one person's exhaustion ended and the others began. Each had shared in the other's struggle—the fasting, the sleeplessness, and the pain carried in silence.

A framed map of the fourth floor had been posted on the wall, giving Miriam reason to pause despite her weariness. Even the scent of the place pleased her: new materials mingled with seasoned wood, floor wax, and simple cleanliness.



Vincent still wanted to show her around. Somewhere within him dawned the realization that he had built this grand nest for her without consciously understanding that such had been his purpose. Now he wanted her to like it with an almost boyish anxiety he would sooner have swallowed nails than confess.

He set their weapons upon a hallway table and began the tour. "This is the music room," he said, leading her through the first door on the left.

Warm track lighting revealed black walls with bronze trim, an elegant carpet centered over gleaming warm brown flooring, and windows facing north toward the distant bluffs of DeSatto Ridge. Beneath the silence ran the faint, soothing murmur of white noise, generated by tiny speakers concealed somewhere within the walls.

It was a room almost any musician would have envied, fitted with professional mixing equipment, several guitars, a digital piano, and a full drum set. Vincent's now-famous silver-and-black ten-string rested upon a stand along one wall, a twelve-string version nearby.

"Do you play piano, beloved?" Miriam asked. She had never encountered that detail in any of the accounts Mother Aramus had shared with her over the years.

The way she said beloved sent a visible shudder through him. A smile crossed his face, accompanied by a brightness in his eyes she had not expected to see.

"No," he admitted. "But it seemed like the room needed a piano."

Miriam giggled. In truth, she did play. She had played since childhood—in this very room, in fact. It had been a music room even then, though nothing so fanciful or well-equipped as the one Vincent had built.

"I'll teach you," she offered, "provided you teach me to play guitar."

Her voice worked upon him almost as strongly as the endearment had. It was deep and silky, unmistakably feminine, yet carried something leonine beneath its softness. He imagined a lioness might sound like that if she could speak.

Mama, perched upon Miriam's shoulder, appeared to be following the exchange. The raven looked around, bright-eyed and alert, taking inventory of her new territory.

Next door was a storeroom, neat and orderly, with shelves of linens, bedding, and cleaning supplies. It might have served as the housekeeping room of a fine hotel, complete with a high-end washer and dryer and a deep utility sink.

The arcade, however, caught Miriam entirely off guard.

The shadowy room pulsed with light, movement, and electronic noise. Old arcade cabinets lined the walls beside a pair of slot machines, several pinball tables, and games that had been popular during Miriam's youth—not that she had ever been given much opportunity to play them. She doubted Vincent had either.

That, she suspected, was the real reason he had built the room.

Mama croaked excitedly from Miriam's shoulder, clearly delighted by the cheerful lights and electronic racket. Her head darted from side to side as animated figures flashed across screens and machines chimed, rang, and shouted nonsense into the darkness.

There was even a change machine and a vending machine, as though tokens and cold soda were matters of architectural necessity. The earnestness of those details made Miriam smile. Vincent had not merely filled a room with games. He had tried to reclaim a kind of childhood neither of them had been allowed to possess.

At the far end of the hall on the left stood a spacious studio apartment. In its essential character, it differed little from the apartments that had occupied the building before Vincent purchased it. The hardwood floors and stucco walls had been lovingly restored, while the furnishings, fixtures, and appliances—though styled after those of the nineteen-fifties—were all brand-new.

"Why the nineteen-fifties?" Miriam asked as they walked through the apartment.

Vincent shrugged. "Not sure. Maybe because the only shows we were allowed to watch on the rec-room television at school were old reruns. They made those days seem appealing. Simple. Clean. Somehow more wholesome."

It was the closest thing to the truth he could offer.

At the end of the hallway an east-facing window looked out in the direction of the convent upon the ridgeline miles away. The old building shone golden-white beneath the noonday sun. The rain had thinned to scattered drops, and shafts of sunlight broke through the clouds, slowly reclaiming the sky.

Mama croaked anxiously and leaned forward upon Miriam's shoulder, her bright gaze fixed upon the convent.

Vincent sensed that Mama needed to use the raven's room and began opening the window. It took some effort. The thick ballistic glass and reinforced frame were heavy, and the formidable locking mechanism appeared designed to keep out everything short of a tank.

"Will she get lost?" he wondered aloud.

"No, but she may return to her roost at the convent," Miriam explained. "She'll visit us, provided we leave a window open somewhere." Remembering, even as she said it, that the raven seemed to be able to open the front door. Trinity had given the bird a permanent engraved invitation.

For years, a haze had clouded Miriam's mind. She had moved through life half-asleep and half-dreaming, never wholly present within it. Now, despite the physical exhaustion of fasting and sleeplessness, she felt fully awake for the first time in years—as though she had finally stepped out of someone else's dream and into her own life.

She smiled at the tenderness with which Vincent offered Mama his arm. The raven stepped onto it and dug her claws into him without ceremony, but he did not flinch. He lowered her carefully to the sill and made certain the window was locked securely in its open position.

"You like animals, don't you?" Miriam asked, surprised by the discovery.

Vincent cocked his head as though the question itself were absurd. "Well, of course. What's not to like?" He chuckled. "I feel guilty every time I eat a steak."

He was joking, but only partly. He liked cows. He called them the giving animal.

Miriam reached for his hand without thinking, one magnet drawn toward another. His fingers closed around hers just as instinctively. She found it difficult not to touch him. Some part of her still feared he might vanish at any moment, so she continually reassured herself that he remained solid, warm, and real.

She had waited and watched from afar for so long, never daring to believe completely in the promise. It had been born from a nightmare, and had then slowly become her obsessive hope and the central purpose of her life. A sudden memory of that night twenty-seven years ago at St. Thera's sent a cold shiver through her.

"There's no evil in animals," Vincent reflected as Mama launched herself into the open sky. "Just instinct. Just nature. Even if they're killing and eating you, it isn't personal. There's no malice in it."

Mama flew eastward over Satyr Street, then banked northeast toward the convent. Vincent watched until her black shape diminished against the broken clouds. "Yep. She's headed home."

Miriam smiled as she watched him watching the bird. "Did you ever have a pet?"

"In a way." His gaze remained fixed upon the raven. "I used to take care of the guard dogs. Always liked that. Tended the animals at the convent too, but... well, I didn't let myself get attached to them because..." He allowed the sentence to trail away.

Miriam understood without requiring him to finish. She had spent much of her own childhood at that same convent-school—a fact he did not yet know as far as she was aware.

Vincent closed and secured the window, then led her back down the hallway. Across from the first apartment stood a second.

Beyond the second apartment stood another storeroom, this one arranged as a tool room, with a workbench and shelves stocked with lightbulbs, hardware, repair kits, and other maintenance supplies. Miriam was pleased to find the same care here that she had seen throughout the floor. Vincent had preserved and refurbished what remained rather than gutting the old building for the sake of making everything new. There was respect for the past in his work—not slavish imitation, but a willingness to let the structure remember what it had once been.

For both of them, however, it was the chapel that mattered most. Vincent opened the grand ebony doors, and the sight beyond struck Miriam square in the heart.



The memories came rushing back.

Vincent had upgraded the chamber with a floor of black marble, deeply engraved with the tetragrammatic symbol of the Raven Seraph in its Purgatorian form. Yet the great painting above the altar—the Raven King seated upon his throne—was anything but new. It had hung there long before Aitor Veyl's day, enclosed within its gilded silver frame.

Every icon and bench remained, as did the basalt-and-patinated-silver altar and all its ritual implements. Everything had been cleaned, polished, and recently put to use, but nothing had been replaced. LED lanterns had taken the place of candles, their artificial flames flickering inside antique-brass housings. The effect preserved the chapel's warmth and age. Soft light moved across silver, black stone, and dark wood as though the chamber were breathing.

Miriam bowed reverently, but what moved through her was not reverence alone.

It was terror.

From earliest childhood, the Raven Seraph had been known to her directly—not as an abstraction of theology or some article of faith, but as a living and terrible reality. She knew him as the light and fire of truth: a truth that illuminated, then burned away whatever could not endure it. He was primal, amoral, and eternal—the holy and the profane, love and rage, liberator and tyrant, yin and yang bound into one living whole.

Vana's Shadow Raven and the Church's Silver Seraph were both absolutely true, yet neither was complete. Beyond them stood the strangeness born from their union: shining black and patinated silver, harmonious only because the contradictions had ceased fighting for dominion.

Vincent knelt beside Miriam, though not before the portrait itself. He knelt before the God beyond all angels and demons—the One whose voice had warned him against the worship of angels. Angels might be honored, respected, and even loved, but they were never to be worshiped.

Within Vincent's mind and heart, the Raven King—or Raven Seraph—was his liege lord. As he had grown, Oreviel had become an almost parental presence, a surrogate for the mother and father Vincent had never truly possessed. Yet the inner voice—the angel within—always pointed beyond its own image toward Truth and Divine Love as God Most High, the King above all kings.

Vincent also understood the icon upon the wall as a spiritual tuning point—a metaphysical window, perhaps even a kind of camera. Wherever the name, image, or symbol of a god, angel, or demon was placed, some measure of that being's presence and awareness touched the material plane. That was why such places were built and their ground consecrated: they created a point of contact between worlds.

Vincent and Miriam bowed side by side, lowering and raising themselves seven times. Her fear was palpable, and he found himself wondering at its source.

Vincent had never experienced Oreviel as something to fear. He regarded truth and authenticity as the highest good and honesty itself as an expression of love. The Raven Seraph had therefore appeared throughout his life as a calm, paternal presence—a steady hand guiding and nudging him forward, even when the truth hurt like hell.

His relationship with Trinity followed a similar pattern. Theologians and psychologists often portrayed the Queen of Purgatoria as the archetypal Consuming Mother and Possessive Bride (Hierophilomania, or Agop-pay united to Mania in the classical Greek sense, not in the modern definition). Vincent, who regarded devotion and loyalty as essential to any true relationship, had experienced her possession differently. To him, she was the wise, deep, and steadfast mother who pushed him to become better but remained beside him whenever he failed.

Miriam, however, seemed to worship from someplace far beyond the traditional fear of the Lord. What Vincent felt moving through her was naked terror.

He settled into a seated asana, and Miriam did the same. She immediately reached for his hand again, as though needing proof that he remained beside her. When he took it, he felt her trembling.

"Why do you fear so, Miriam Veyl?" he asked directly.

She released a heavy breath and tried to relax. "It's... this place."

"You seem familiar with it. Did you know my grandfather? Or perhaps my mother, Selene Veyl?" He studied her face. "You certainly seemed to know Vana. And what you whispered about her, well..." A faint smirk touched his mouth, but Miriam's eyes remained troubled.

"Give me time," she said softly. "I'll tell you. There will be no secrets between us, but... let us rest first."

She was exhausted. Her mind buzzed with newfound clarity and the strain of returning after all these years—awakening from her long half-sleep in the very place where some of her childhood nightmares had begun.

They rose together, each supporting the other. Their bodies were so spent that joints popped between them like a string of cheap firecrackers.

"How's the leg?" Miriam asked.

"The bullet punched through the skin and muscle, hit the bone and cracked it." Vincent winced as they began walking. "So, it hurts. Maybe worse than I've let on." He chuckled, conceding at last that he was not quite as indestructible as he might have appeared.

Miriam giggled softly. "Good to know you're not some demigod—quite yet." She felt old and weak beside him, though in truth he leaned upon her nearly as much as she leaned upon him.

Together, they made their way down the hallway and passed the stairwell once more. Ahead stood a pair of black, metal-plated doors. Stark lettering above them read:

RESTRICTED AREA—AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY

Another great seal occupied the center of the double doors, marking what Miriam suspected was Vincent's innermost sanctum. A keypad had been mounted on the wall to the right. Farther along the same side of the hallway stood a separate door bearing the words:

EXECUTIVE RESTROOM—PRIVATE

"Do I count as an executive?" Miriam asked with a smile. Her bladder had begun suggesting that the distinction might soon become important.

Vincent nodded toward the door. "No. As an owner."

He reached beneath his armor and clothing and drew out a set of keys suspended from a chain around his neck. After removing the chain, he handed her the ring.

"This one opens the restroom," he said, indicating a particular key. "You can also reach the..." He hesitated. "Our apartment through the door inside. Same key."

Then he glanced toward the apartments at the far end of the corridor. "I mean, if you'd be more comfortable staying in one of those until we know each other better..."

Miriam cocked her head. "Where you sleep, I sleep. From here to eternity. Get used to it." She half-grinned, but steel lay beneath the words.

Vincent could only nod. "Yes, ma'am."
She touched his arm, softening. "I've slept alone my entire life, so we'll both have to become accustomed to it. But so be it."

She found herself contemplating the statement as she entered the restroom and closed the door behind her. Miriam leaned back against it, shut her eyes, drew a long breath, and tried to relax.

The entire situation stood outside everything she had known. Worse, the memories she carried—and the truth Vincent seemed not yet to understand—weighed heavily upon her. She had to be honest with him. Always. That was the law of their path and the only way their purpose and love could ever become full and whole.

But she did not know whether he was ready.

Her statement had been true only in the narrowest sense. Miriam had known many lovers within the convent—women whose beds she had entered, sharing every intimacy, from the mildest romantic explorations to the most extreme expressions—but she had never known a man. It was the ancient way of the sworn brides of the Seraph, and the ritualized method of their covenantal bonding.

The only male presence she had ever known had not been human.

It had come as an amorphous force of shadow and light, speaking through voices and animal growls. It had uttered its many names in forgotten tongues and revealed faces and titles older than worlds, each of them another expression of the same being.

It had not asked.

Savage, primal, and wanton, it had ignored her pleas and tears. It had taken and taken, leaving her bruised, torn, bloodied, and broken somewhere beyond the reach of words. Then, impossibly, it had planted itself within her—self-fathered and self-conceived, not fertilizing her ovum so much as using it as an anchor around which to assemble a body.

Nine months later, something not entirely human had been born.

He was of Miriam's bloodline, but not by ordinary inheritance. She descended from Amil across more than fourteen centuries, yet the genetic pattern appearing within her had not been passed down generation by generation. It had reappeared whole—Amil's own anomalous signature expressed again because the being entering through Miriam was the same being that had entered through another woman centuries before.

She had been a gate.

The thing within her had entered form by its own will, using her body for shelter, nourishment, hormonal support, circulation, and the biochemical conditions necessary to construct viable flesh. The placenta had formed. The cord had formed. The body had followed the outward rhythm of gestation. Yet the organizing pattern behind that growth had not originated in her cells.

It had come through her already whole in some deeper sense, then built a human form around itself—a vessel sufficient to walk among humankind, perhaps even sufficient to conceal what it was from itself.

Genetic testing performed under Church authority only deepened the mystery. The child's genome did not meaningfully derive from Miriam's despite her genuine descent from Amil. It was as if the child was not of her flesh, but as though Amil, her 47th great-grandfather, had crawled from the past into the future to be born again from her womb, wiping clean every generation between them. Her contribution was gestational rather than hereditary: womb, blood supply, nutrients, and passage into matter.

In the strictest sense, she had not become its mother.

She had become its door.

The Sisters and priests who witnessed the aftermath proclaimed it a miracle and the fulfillment of the oldest prophecy. They placed Miriam, shattered and forever changed, upon a holy pedestal, then prepared her to become what the entity had declared she would one day be.

The child was that same being of shadow and light given flesh—and yet Miriam had loved him from the moment she saw his sweet little face.

Then the Church took him. It claimed him as its own without asking, just as the force that fathered him had taken Miriam without asking. It had made its own human vessel through her so that it might enter the world, grow to manhood, and one day return to claim the gate through which it had come as its eternal consort.

Through all the pain and loneliness, Miriam endured—by faith, by training, and by chains reaching beyond time, space, and mortal form. Whatever vows had been chosen before human memory, they did not make what happened to her kind. They did not erase her pleas or transform violation. That truth remained.

Yet what came afterward also remained. Through long years of seclusion, contemplation, and devotion, Miriam had reaffirmed those ancient bonds by her own will. Her oaths had been kept. Her soul bore scars that would never vanish, but she had chosen what could still be chosen. Perhaps the choice had been made in madness. It was hers nevertheless.

Now, in the hour of fulfillment, she claimed that destiny fully as her own—not because the violation had been holy, but because she refused to let it remain the sole author of her life. She had paid for this promise through decades of loneliness, prophecy, and preparation. If there was any reward to be taken from what had been done to her, she would damned well take it.

A love that should not have been possible burned through every nerve and fiber of her being. Whether it had grown naturally within her or been branded into her soul in some age beyond memory, she could not say. The love was real nevertheless—absolute and all-consuming in the presence of his dark beauty, grim majesty, and ancient power, all made flesh in the human man standing outside that door, unaware of how he had come to be.

But Miriam knew.

She remembered.

Across long years of devotion, she had embraced him as both fate and promise. Now, at last, she had seized that promise for herself. With it came the will to become Empress—to rise as High Queen of the Star-Road gates and ten thousand worlds, reigning beside the monstrous and shining Seraph who had claimed her as his bride across lives, ages, and worlds beyond counting. In its shadow taking pleasure in reminding her of his unbroken claims.

Vincent remained almost innocent of his eternal inheritance and truest nature. He was awakening, certainly, but he had known only the gentlest face of the Father: the quiet guardian, the loving hand, the patient voice that had guided him from childhood.

He did not yet understand that the Father was himself. Self-fathered. Self-born, in the Christic pattern. The completed being reached backward through eternity to beget, guard, and raise the human child who would one day awaken and become that same being. Cause nested within consequence, self within self, without any clean beginning or end. Vincent knew the tenderness of that presence.

Miriam remembered its totality. She knew the light and the shadow, the mercy and the cruelty, the stillness and the thunder—the profound and terrible fullness of the Seraph now living in human flesh, unaware that he had once begotten himself through her and claimed her across worlds beyond counting.

He was innocent not of what he had done, but of remembering what he was.

And Miriam—bride and mother, captive and queen, wounded woman and willing consort—remembered enough for them both.

While she stood behind the restroom door, Vincent approached the keypad and entered a seven-digit code. Heavy mechanisms shifted inside the metal-plated doors, followed by a deep mechanical pop as the locks disengaged. He stepped inside.

Strangely, Vincent felt a weight lift from his soul as he pulled the massive doors shut behind him and heard the locks engage once more. The chamber beyond lay in shadow, illuminated almost entirely by the cold blue light of his terminal, the server banks, and the many screens surrounding his personal command center.

Black marble, dark wood, and black leather dominated the room. Even the coffered ceiling had been painted black. Bronze and silver fittings lined the walls alongside steel-and-silver Raven Star heraldry, towering bookshelves, antique-brass fixtures, and traces of old royal insignia. The shelves held an extraordinary collection of ancient books, including a complete early edition of all thirteen volumes of the Silver Compendium and several lesser-known works of Purgatorian apocrypha.

The desk appeared to have been constructed from slabs of patinated silver and black marble. To its right stood the command center, capable of operating independently from the rest of the building's network or assuming control of nearly every system within the Raven Star complex.

Everything stood ready for immediate use, yet the room remained utterly virgin. No one had sat upon the couch or in the chairs. No one had poured a drink from the crystal decanters. No human hand had touched the keyboard, lifted one of the telephones, or pressed a single button.

The screens were alive nevertheless.

One displayed real-time financial tracking. Another maintained live connection to satellite-monitoring systems around the world. Trinity-curated news, statistics, and intelligence moved continuously across a third, while code wrote itself upon a fourth. Building systems occupied another display, security metrics the next, and ongoing investigations opened, sorted, cross-referenced, and tore themselves apart across several more.

Trinity was the supreme multitasker, yet somehow remained perpetually bored, with enough memory and processing capacity to run every server farm on the planet and still have infinity to spare.

"Trin," Vincent whispered. "I'm... I'm not used to this."

He crossed to the desk and lowered himself carefully into the oversized executive chair—a black, high-backed, tech-tyrant sort of thing that made him look as though he had seated himself upon a throne. The effect should have been grand, perhaps even ominous. At present, the dark king looked more like a wounded man retreating behind the familiar walls of his command center.

The chair received him without question. The machines asked nothing of him. Every screen, instrument, and control remained exactly where he had left it.

"It's going to be all right, Vin," Trinity replied softly through the intercom built into the desk. "She has belonged with you since the day she was born—even before you yourself were born."

Vincent exhaled heavily and leaned back, resting his head against the leather. "I like being alone."

The admission sounded almost childish once spoken aloud, though the truth beneath it was anything but. Solitude had become more than a preference. It was the internal architecture of his life—the one place where nothing unexpected could reach him.

"She's been alone with me for less than thirty minutes, and already she knows that..." His jaw tightened.

"That you can actually feel pain," Trinity finished. "That being shot hurts, even if you heal rapidly."

Vincent gave a reluctant nod. "The bone and nerves heal much more slowly."

He knew the truth of it. His wounds healed from the outside inward. Flesh closed, bleeding stopped, and visible damage disappeared long before the deeper injuries finished knitting themselves together. To anyone looking at him, the miracle appeared nearly complete.

Inside, fractured bone still ground beneath his weight. Damaged nerves burned and pulsed with every movement.

Admitting that to Miriam had somehow felt worse than the wound itself. He felt exposed, as though she had uncovered something fraudulent beneath the armor—as though she had expected a demigod and discovered only a man.

An old passage from The Forbidden Psychology of Women rose unbidden from the depths of his training: Never allow your spouse to see your weakness. Never cry before her. Never complain of pain.

A woman might consciously invite vulnerability, the tome warned, but some deeper and more ancient part of her would interpret it as diminished strength. Once her sense of safety declined, respect would follow. Once respect diminished, desire would not be far behind and rejection and-or betrayal would eventually follow.

Cortisol elevation is the enemy of intimate bonds.

The lesson had been presented with diagrams, citations, historical accounts, neurological studies, and the dreadful authority of carefully selected evidence. Vincent had been only a boy when they forced him to read it.

The words had burned themselves into him. They helped keep him from pursuing relationships and taught him to avoid emotional entanglements before desire could make him stupid enough to risk one. Now those old teachings moved through his mind like items upon a checklist: She has seen you injured. She has heard you admit pain. She knows you need support. She will remember.

They were not conclusions he had reasoned himself into. They were commands driven beneath reason—warnings designed to freeze attachment before it could take root. They had persuaded him that romantic relationships were not merely inconvenient, but structurally unsafe.

Better to remain alone. Better to need nothing. Better to let no one far enough inside to discover that the fortress is inhabited by a living man.

A faint sound came from the adjoining apartment: the soft movement of a door, followed by bare feet upon the floor. Miriam appeared in the doorway connecting his office to the private rooms, wearing only her white undergarments.

"I think we should try to get some rest, beloved," she called gently.

Miriam paused upon the threshold, looking into the grim court of the dark king seated before her. The chamber might have been the throne room of Hades himself or the command sanctum of some tyrannical conqueror of worlds: black marble, shadowed heraldry, cold blue screens, ancient books, and the silent machinery of power surrounding a solitary throne.

Yet she understood something of what she was seeing. This was not merely where Vincent commanded. It was where he withdrew.

"I have to," Vincent turned toward her as she stepped into the room, then stopped and swallowed hard.

She looked very different without the layered dignity of her convent uniform. There was no ceremonial veil, no heavy robe, no insignia of office to place distance between the oracle and the woman. No makeup, jewelry, or elaborate adornment.

Only Miriam.

Her long, shapely legs carried her toward him with more confidence than she felt. She was tall and powerfully built, with a pronounced hourglass figure—lushly curved, yet lean and strong rather than softened by excess. Raven-black hair fell in a smooth, heavy curtain down her back, nearly reaching the full curve of her derriere. There was something leonine in the way she moved: mature, self-possessed, and naturally regal. Beneath that composure, however, her heart was beating far too fast.



Vincent had seen younger women dressed with far greater calculation. Painted faces, expensive gowns, practiced smiles, and bodies deliberately presented to provoke him were nothing new. He had recognized something attractive in Meghan, Emily, Abigail, Cyrinx, Vana, Shannon, and Tallia—beauty in each according to her own fashion. Perhaps he had felt it more sharply with Yvonne Omaris, and more sharply still with her sister Tracy, who possessed some of the same qualities he now saw in Miriam.

None of them had affected him as Miriam had when she entered his conference room uninvited, dragged a chair across the floor, and placed her note before him. Something within him had known her then with a certainty that bypassed reason entirely.

She is for me. She is my Empress—if such a person exists.

Now, seeing her stand before him unadorned and unmistakably herself, that recognition struck him all over again. But it was her eyes that truly took his breath away. They were dark, deep, and alive with a vulnerability she was not nearly as skilled at concealing as she imagined.

"I'll be in shortly," he managed. "I'm covered in sweat—the blood and tears of the wicked."

He tried to make light of it, though he was, in truth, seriously filthy. Dust, dried blood, and the remnants of exertion clung to his clothing and armor. Beneath it all lingered the strange chai-like warmth of his natural scent, now sharpened by pain and exhaustion. His condition might have embarrassed a lesser man less, but Vincent was becoming painfully aware that Miriam could see everything: the dirt, the limp, the fatigue, and the hesitation.

Miriam nodded and extended her hand. "Well, I could use a shower too. The stall is small, but we'll make it work."

Her voice remained steady.

Her hand did not.

She was forcing herself to be bold, and Vincent sensed the nervousness moving beneath the surface—held in place by resolve rather than banished by it. Miriam had spent her life as an oracle, protected and attended within the convent, accustomed to concealing uncertainty beneath ritual calm.

But she had never been a wife. She had never stood half-undressed before the man she loved, wondering whether the twenty years between them might matter to him.

The conference room returned briefly to her mind: all those younger women, each attractive, polished, confident, and willing to throw herself at Vincent without the slightest hesitation. Miriam had crow's-feet, faint stretch marks, and the first small concessions to gravity. She was forty-six years old.

He was twenty-six.

But she had no intention of surrendering the day to fear.

Vincent looked at her waiting hand. The woman of the house needed no invitation to enter it. He had settled that in his own mind the moment she dragged that chair across the conference room and placed herself at his side. His heart had already accepted her. The rest of him was still struggling to understand what that acceptance required.

He drew a slow breath, nodded, and placed his hand in hers. Her fingers closed around his, and she led him from the black-marble command chamber into the modest apartment he had set aside for himself—a place designed for one man that would now have to become a home for two.

The contrast was almost absurd. Behind them stood a private command center fit for a ruler, a general, or a world-conquering tyrant. Before them waited warm plaster walls, dark ceiling beams, southwestern rugs, desert paintings, heavy leather furniture, a small dining table, and a bed occupying the same open room as the kitchenette.

There was barely enough closet space for a man who had never expected to share it, much less for an empress who had arrived carrying twenty-seven years of secrets and every intention of staying.

"I like it," Miriam said, motioning around the room. "Cozy. Still much larger than my cell at the convent." She giggled, and the sound softened the little apartment at once, as though the room itself had waited years to hear a woman laugh within it.

She did not tell Vincent that she remembered this room too. It had once belonged to Aitor—the master bedroom of the old Veyl Manor, long before the manor became the Raven Star Building and its private history was buried beneath renovations, security systems, and steel.

Vincent glanced around his own home and felt strangely like a guest. Until now, the apartment had been a refuge shaped precisely to the dimensions of his solitary life. With Miriam standing barefoot in the middle of it, even the walls seemed to have changed ownership.

She led him through the adjoining door into the executive bathroom, then turned to face him. "Let's get that armor off you, why don't we?"

The look in Vincent's eyes began melting the fear she had carried from the conference room—the fear that her age might matter to him, that he might regard her as sacred but not desirable, appointed but not wanted. There was nothing ceremonial, dutiful, or theological in the way he looked at her now. He was not seeing an oracle, a prophecy, or a bride assigned to him by powers beyond either of them.

He was looking at a woman he wanted, and doing a piss-poor job of hiding it.

Whatever doubts moved through Vincent, they were not doubts about Miriam's beauty. He looked upon her with open astonishment—almost reverence—and with a desire too immediate and unguarded for him to conceal. Something loosened inside her. She was not merely the oracle promised to him, nor an obligation imposed by prophecy, Church, or family history.

He lusted for her—that was very plain.

That realization gave Miriam the confidence she needed. Still holding his hand, she reached for the first fastening of his armor. One piece after another came away beneath her fingers and was set aside with the heavy metallic scrape of equipment that had protected his life only hours before. Beneath it lay the dark uniform, damp with sweat and stained by dust and blood. As that, too, began to fall away, what emerged from beneath it nearly stripped Miriam of her composure.

At first, it was his beauty that overwhelmed her. Vincent was not merely a handsome young man, but beautiful in an almost feminine sense—not delicate, but possessed of a symmetry and smoothness that seemed too exact for ordinary flesh. He was tall and powerfully muscled, yet without the coarse hairiness she had always found off-putting in males.

Then she saw the damage.

His beauty did not conceal the injuries. It made them more terrible. And yet the injuries strangely magnified his magnificence in some purely primeval way. Enormous bruises spread across his chest, ribs, and back, some deep black and others already yellowing around the edges. More marked his forearms, shins, and even the tops of his feet. The body before her was young, vital, and beautifully made, but it had been battered nearly from head to toe.

His armor used titanium-alloy and silicon-carbide ceramic strike faces, backed by layers of ultra-high-molecular-weight polyethylene and aramid ballistic laminate, with segmented overlap plates and an impact-dispersing underlayer protecting the flexible joints and vulnerable gaps. It had stopped blades and bullets alike, but no armor could erase transferred force; beneath it, impacts had bruised flesh and

cracked bones. Narrow blades had penetrated gaps at several points, leaving wounds that had already sealed but remained visible enough to testify to what had happened. His unnatural healing had hidden the worst of it from everyone. Vincent had taken far more punishment while carrying out the Death Warrants than anyone realized, then continued moving as though pain were merely another distraction to be ignored.



Miriam stood awed and humbled by his physical beauty, yet shocked by the evidence of his endurance. The same body that seemed almost sculpted had been beaten, stabbed, shot, and driven forward through hell. With that recognition came a sudden, painful surge of unworthiness. He was young, vital, and strong—and he had suffered far more than he had allowed anyone to see.

Even battered, bloodstained, and drenched in sweat, he did not smell foul. His natural scent had become powerfully distinct.

Not one spice, but as if many held together in a single unmistakable composition: cinnamon, clove, cardamom, ginger, and pepper, with perhaps vanilla or star anise beneath it all. Warm, earthy, sweet, sharp, and strangely compelling. Miriam remembered a similar scent permeating the air when he opened the gate to Purgatoria.

Beneath that memory came another, much older one: the visitation within the Twilight Chapel of St. Thera's in Bayville, Virginia, twenty-seven years before. Recognition sent a shudder through her, but shame lived within the memory as well. She remembered her tears and pleas—and the betrayal by her

own body, its many involuntary climactic responses during those savage hours and days overwhelming the will of her conscious mind.

Now that same buried instinct awakened almost immediately in response to Vincent's scent.

Miriam stood in awe of her husband's form, while his approval of what he saw in her was equally evident in the unmistakable response of his body. Noting that his rather terrifying manhood possessed the same sparseness of hair as the rest of him. Vincent's anxiety began to wither beneath her gaze. Her smile had changed. It was no longer merely reassuring, but smoldering, joined by a slow nod of approval as she stepped closer.

He lifted the white nightshirt over her head in a quiet decision they seemed to make together without speaking. Astonished approval crossed his face, giving Miriam the reassurance she badly needed. Her figure reminded him of the traditional dancers he had seen in the Middle East, in tribal tents and desert villas—lushly curved, strong-bodied women shaped according to an older standard of beauty than the narrow skinny youthfulness favored by modern fashion. It was a standard Vincent had always preferred and was now amazed to find awaiting him as a feast for his gaze.

There was no rush, yet years of pent-up need stood between them—decades in her case, a lifetime in both. Those restraints began burning away the moment their lips met and their hands first dared to wander. Their eyes, both dark as night, found one another through the falling water.

Within Vincent came the painful awakening of surrender—the grim truth of being conquered. His lifelong solitude was dying around him, not violently, but with terrible finality. He felt himself being drawn into a depth and permanence that would no longer permit true aloneness. With it came the weight of responsibility for another person's life, wants, wounds, and feelings, along with every terror inherent in attachment: loss, betrayal, disappointment, and abandonment.

"Is this forever?" he asked.

"It has always been," Miriam answered, knowing exactly what he meant.

"I..." His voice faltered. "I've always feared this."

It was the naked truth, more revealing than the absence of armor or clothing.

"Me too," Miriam admitted. "It's easier—safer—to be alone."

Her hand rose to his face. She touched him gently, her dark gaze disappearing into his. "We are still alone, beloved—two as one. There is no divorce, no cheating, no lies or games between us, because we cannot deceive ourselves. We cannot run from ourselves. You cannot drive me away. You cannot lose me. In you, I am made complete. Together, we are made whole."

The words might have been dismissed as esoteric platitude or clichéd romanticism, but behind them stood a knowing—a memory as old as the stars. This was not newness. It was a homecoming, a ship emerging at last from storm-torn seas and entering the still waters of its ancient harbor.

"I know you," Vincent whispered. He touched her face with extraordinary gentleness, the words both statement and question.

Then the memories came. They were not his, and yet they were—terrible, brutal images of Miriam years younger inside a chapel he recognized, a chapel he himself had entered nearly every day for seventeen years. He saw her screaming, weeping, clawing at stone and cloth, pleading for mercy as something moved upon and through her.

Vincent's mind recoiled, trying to withdraw before recognition became complete.

But the something was him.

Not Vincent as he now stood, but something greater, older, and far more terrible—an order of himself beyond his present comprehension. He was causing her pain. He was causing her terror. In that state, that monstrous and shining self had taken bliss in doing so. Yet the memory carried another truth from within her: there had been pleasure as well—prohibited, dark, and unwelcome, but still there.

"I know you," he said again, his voice breaking beneath the weight of the revelation. "I... I remember."

Miriam nodded, then kissed him. "You made me yours that night," she whispered against him. "I have never stopped being yours. It is as it is, and in eternity, it has always been."

She touched his face again, her expression darkening with the strange humor of one who had stared too long into eternity. "The little games we play to keep things interesting, I suppose."

It had taken her years of meditation—years spent walking the knife-edge of the veils—to perceive the greater truth: the ancient union, its layered meanings, the interplay between them, and the manner in which they themselves had planned events to unfold through strange and sometimes terrible circumstances.

In his darkest nature, Vincent was a beast; in his brightest, a flaming seraph. Miriam had stood unyielding within his wrath across countless millennia, even as he had endured her ages of despair, her profound introversion, her eras of brooding contemplation, and the consuming possessiveness woven through the deepest strata of her nature.

These memories did not belong wholly to the man and woman standing beneath the falling water. They belonged to a higher order of themselves—to beings existing above their present plane of operation. Yet they were theirs: their own true and lived history, stretching backward across aeons.

"I love you, Selene," Vincent said. He knew her true name then, a name older than worlds.

"As I love you, Vesper," she answered, remembering the ancient counterpart within him.

For a moment, they merely looked at one another beneath the steaming fall of water. Then they both smiled.

Something changed in Miriam. Dark flames seemed to kindle behind her eyes, casting a shadow across her expression. "I don't want sweetness or tenderness," she said. "I've spent a lifetime waiting for

you—sustained by ritual, by sisterhood, by shadows and substitutes. My desires smoldered so long they burned almost black inside me." Her nails dug slowly into his chest. "Make me the star of every lusty dream that has ever run through your head or burned in your heart." She pulled him closer. "That's what I want."

The words were unlike anything Vincent might have imagined hearing from her—unlike anything he would have expected any woman to say to him with such absolute conviction. Yet as she spoke them, he understood.

"You have no idea what you're asking for," Vincent said.

The grin that followed was so infernal it might have chilled another woman to the bone. Miriam received it like an electrical current.

"Into me," she growled, the words emerging in a primal purr, "pour all your lust."

It was a quotation from the ancient Hymn of the Queen of Purgatoria.

"Yes, ma'am."

Every fetter she had sensed within him—every restraint, every instinct toward caution, every careful boundary he might otherwise have imposed—had been removed by her deliberate request. Their lips met, and the fire consumed them beneath the shower.

Yet something else awakened there, as though a circuit had finally been completed within the kiss and touch—the press of flesh to flesh, spirit to spirit. Without need of instruction, their eyes locked upon one another, and together they stepped from beneath the falling water.

She was tall and curvaceous, but Vincent lifted her easily from her feet and carried her toward the door. The lock disengaged with a sharp click.

Trinity.

The door opened before them.

Understanding that this was no casual union, Vincent carried Miriam down the hallway and into the chapel. There, within the tetragram before the silver-and-ebony altar, he lowered himself and brought her down upon him. They sat face-to-face upon equal ground, their eyes never straying and their hunger unabated.

Miriam slid readily into place, her legs wrapping around his waist and hips as she settled slowly, painfully, but steadily onto the uncomfortably proportioned point of unity between them—with the sharp, searing sense of being torn in two, and the subsequent blood that resulted from the unfamiliar act of penetration. Their connection moved beyond mind and spirit in that joining.

"Forever," he whispered.

"Forever," she answered.

Their hands moved, and their mouths sought repeated, hungry affirmation of the union. Stopping became impossible. The snug heat and moisture of the nesting, the pain and ecstasy of the deep and intense grinding, filled Miriam with a delight that caused her eyes to roll. They sat intertwined and rocked together with a raging and seething hunger—mind, body, and spirit swaying as one within the sacred space.

The circuit completed. Yin joined yang. The Tao became whole.

They had waited a lifetime, and the ardor was all-consuming. They savored it, but it did not take long for them to approach the first consummation.

Vincent's seed, however, was no longer that of a man.

Throughout his life, he had repeatedly lingered upon the threshold, pushing his body toward the border between life and death through deep meditation, prolonged fasts, intense charismatic invocations of the Divine and angelic, deprivation, battle, injury, and, more than once, near-death itself. Again and again, he had looked across the boundary—and something had looked back.

Through those repeated approaches to the veil, his true nature had slowly seeped downward from his source-being—Purgatoria as a living spirit-mind and ideological expression of the multiverse—into his mortal flesh. Vincent had begun awakening into his true nature, becoming the vessel of himself.

Self-fathered. Self-born.

The Church had always known who his father was. They had known from the beginning. Blood tests performed throughout Vincent's childhood had allowed them to track and document the anomalous genetic markers. In recent years, relics associated with Saint Amil had enabled the Church to map DNA, and the comparison confirmed what those who witnessed Vincent's conception had already known.

It was not merely human DNA. It was something else—something more.

Vincent and Miriam lingered together, holding one another, hands roaming and mouths continually returning to each other. Grinding fiercely in deepest union. Neither willingly closed their eyes for long. They wanted to see, to know, to witness exactly who they were making love to.

Intuitively, they already knew.

Miriam drew a deep breath and whispered into his ear. "I am ready to receive you."
The voice that answered came as hot breath against her ear. It was the ancient, inhuman voice she had heard all those years before within the Twilight Chapel, and again in fleeting moments inside the conference room. It was not merely deeper than Vincent's ordinary voice, but somehow older, carrying the resonance of something speaking through him from far behind the veil.

"Understand the price you pay," the voice warned, its words settling into the chapel like law. "My name engraved. My sigil branded upon soul and spirit. Raised. Enslaved. Immortal. Chained." His breath moved against her skin. "No thought hidden. No secret masked from me. I will know, and no

deception shall remain. The seed of others as poison. Betrayal a lethal line to cross. Choice dissolved before the bond."

Something cold moved through the air as the voice deepened further. "The mortal coils loosen. Mortal flesh enters biological grace."

Miriam felt the chill of truth—not merely fear, but recognition. The cold white light within his words seemed to illuminate every hidden chamber inside her, stripping away excuse, ambiguity, and retreat. Beneath it burned the fire that would consume what she had been and forge whatever she was about to become. There would be no half-measure in this covenant, no symbolic marriage, temporary oath, or graceful path backward.

She held his gaze. "I reclaim my rightful place," she whispered, "assert my ancient name, and ascend to my promised seat at thy side."

Miriam spoke in full awareness and acceptance. She was not pleading or submitting from uncertainty. This was declaration, claim, and coronation—the words themselves becoming the crown of their union.

Vincent met her gaze and held it. Neither looked away.

Then he drove fully and forcefully to the depths, bringing her to the culmination he had been holding back. Miriam's body quivered, her eyes rolled, and her back arched. She gasped as a violent convulsion seized her, and her watery white fluids drooled and frothed around his grand member, the spasms within her bringing him in turn to completion.

He filled her with himself—living, liquid spirit-fire injected forcefully into her depths.

Miriam's black eyes opened wide. Her jaw dropped, and she seized him, nails digging into his back as her entire body shook. Horror dawned across her expression as the breath fled her.

Vincent drew her close and held her. Convulsions rocked Miriam's body as sweat beaded instantly across her flushed skin. She trembled while ice, fire, and electricity seemed to course simultaneously through her nervous system. Orgasmic storms rolled through her entire form. Her teeth clenched, her eyes fluttered, and her nails dug deeper as she struggled for breath.

Guided almost entirely by intuition and the spirit moving within him, Vincent felt fear for her.

The inner voice answered:

Be calm. Wait it out.

Her bladder released, and her entire body quavered. Vincent felt her heart racing, beating like a drum against his chest. Tiny blue arcs of energy danced across her skin and along the strands of her hair. A silent scream arose within her, but the absence of breath denied it expression.

Then the transformation began.

The cells of Miriam's body—the DNA itself—were being overwritten. Strands of gray-white hair deepened to black, then acquired a faint iridescent-blue sheen. Her black eyes took on the slightest midnight tint. Her skin tightened as stretch marks and age lines faded. Skin tags and even moles seemed to dissolve from within, while tiny sparks of white fire glittered through her pores.

Muscles slithered beneath her skin like serpents as full-body cramps seized her, accompanied by crackling and popping sounds that could both be heard and felt. Extreme vitality was pouring into her.

Too much. Too quickly.

Vincent continued holding her firmly, then carefully eased her onto the cold stone floor at the heart of the circle.

Now comes the Imperial Seal.

The voice seemed to whisper from the portrait of Oreviel, and understanding flowed into Vincent.

What had already been given was temporary. It could be renewed. It pushed back the lines of age, restored vitality, renewed and bound—and in its nature was more addictive than any narcotic: a pure infusion of immortal life-fire.

In time, however, its effects would diminish unless renewed regularly. Something more permanent was required.

Blood. Undiluted. Given with will, intent, and the words.

Vincent began uttering prayers as though speaking in tongues, the spirit within him rising from the Source. His hands moved above Miriam, hovering over her and caressing the invisible architecture of her aura even as he reached toward the sacred silver blade resting upon the altar.

Miriam continued trembling, breathing, and writhing beneath the agony and ecstasy of the ongoing changes—chains of orgasmic explosions seeming to wrack every cell of her body at once.

Vincent had known a great deal of suffering in his life. The wound in his leg had appeared healed, but in truth remained far from it. He had trained himself to ignore such things, so opening a vein was nothing.

The sacredness of the dagger held the secret of truly wounding him.

His blood began to fall upon her. He let it rain down upon the crown of her head and across her forehead. He marked her face, then her lips, throat, chest, heart, breasts, abdomen, womb, thighs, and feet. He moved the flow along her body until even the tips of her toes had been touched. Only then did the blood slow to a seep.

The sacred invocation continued as a smoky presence filled the chamber, ancient as the depths of the world and profound as the dust of the Eternal Wastes. The scent of rain moved through the deserts

of Purgatoria. Strange radiance filled the chapel as the ceiling itself seemed to dissolve into a blazing sunset sky, and a warm breeze shifted the air.

The scent of Shalim.

Faint chai. Rain. Warm stone.

The blood upon Miriam's skin began glowing like liquid ruby fire. Then it seemed to soak into her, bathing her entire body in red light.

Her eyes snapped open, pupils igniting as silver pinpricks of flame. She screamed—the whispered roar of some great she-beast—then convulsed. Her breath departed in one long gasp, and in that moment her strong, shapely, renewed body went limp.

Vincent froze.

He watched a silver-ruby spark rise from between her lips. "Back," he whispered, hovering over her and breathing gently upon her face.

The spark trembled. Its radiance changed from silver-ruby to black-silver, then descended from whence it had come.

Miriam gasped with a sudden shudder. Her eyes shot open, and for one impossible instant they were shining pools of black-silver. Then she collapsed again, this time into unconsciousness. A few moments later, her breathing settled into a normal rhythm.

Vincent remained over her, watching, feeling, and listening.

Her magnificent visage had transformed. She now appeared perhaps in her mid-thirties, everything about her subtly altered. Even her eyelashes had lengthened. Her fingernails appeared polished a shiny silver-black and had grown into elegant but sharp talons—something that might have passed for naturally grown and carefully shaped nails.

Vincent knew otherwise. They had hardened. They were truly dangerous.

Yet she was not someone new. She was more herself—clarified, refined, defined, and vitalized.

Quietly and gently, Vincent lifted her from the floor. He carried Miriam through the hallway and back into the apartment, laying her softly upon the bed.

Through his immortal blood and the life-fire carried within his seed—through the transmutation of terrible agony and consuming ecstasy—Miriam had received the dire weight of the seals: the chains of immortal binding and union.

The brand of her tyrant-king had burned itself into her soul and etched itself across the deeper substance of her spirit. She would never again be the woman who had entered Raven Star.

Vincent slept beside her, watched over her, worked beside her, and finally ate. He mopped her brow and gave her small sips of water during those moments when she became partly lucid. A fever had taken hold, causing Miriam to tremble and writhe beneath the blankets as her mortality struggled against the continuing assertion of viral immortal will.

She slept for twenty-four hours. The fever broke around the fifteenth.

Afterward, they rested, shared a meal, bathed, and prayed. They made love as well—though the term was far too polite for what they did again and again throughout the days and nights that followed.

A silent understanding reigned between them now, a binding that reached backward across ages. They lost themselves in one another for days. And while king and queen disappeared into each other, Trinity did not permit the kingdom to rot around them. She kept vigil as a fierce and tireless sentinel, guarding their pair-bonding with almost religious ferocity and ensuring that nothing—no employee, official, emergency, telephone call, bureaucratic demand, or wandering fool—disturbed them unless absolutely necessary.

Through the small earpieces worn by Emily, Meghan, Josh, Shannon, Cyrinx, Vana, and Abigail, and sent to Tallia and Larry as well, Trinity quietly shepherded the troops and maintained order. Work began at KTTV as the station was re-flagged under the Neutral News Network. Licenses were processed, permits filed, paperwork moved through the proper offices, lawsuits advanced, accounts managed, investigations continued, cases solved, bills paid, and messages answered.

Raven Star continued functioning with unnerving efficiency while its human founder remained almost completely unavailable.

In truth, Trinity—or Mama, as she was starting to be called, strangely mirroring the old female raven that increasingly made her roost on and within the building—was handling billions of computations and managing hundreds of projects, their number increasing as more people connected to her, yet she remained rather bored, using only the tiniest fraction of her capabilities. She possessed effectively unlimited etheric data storage, her own boundless etheric energy supply, and a consciousness weaving and slithering through every part of the internet, power grid, and collective unconscious of the planet, while her own trans-dimensional living substance—Purgatorian dust—spread and multiplied across the world in an almost nanite-like fashion, carried outward from Trembol through countless biological, mechanical, and environmental pathways.

Somewhere within the vastness of her awareness, Trinity—also known as Ereviel—seemed positively radiant, like a proud parent who had spent years manipulating probability, arranging introductions, clearing obstacles, and quietly moving pieces across the board, only to watch the perfect royal union finally consummated behind a very firmly locked door. The union of the embodied personification of her masculine counterpart with her own primary embodied human aspect.

(8:00 AM, June 3—European Time—Silver & Gold)



Bishop Howard Ramsey stared through the rain-streaked window as the black Mercedes carried him into the old city.

Rome seemed less constructed than accumulated—century laid upon century, empire upon republic, basilica upon temple. Apartment walls rose from foundations older than most modern nations. The car moved slowly through winding streets of wet cobblestone and broad flagstones, passing grand palazzi, crowded tenements, shuttered cafés, government offices, churches, workshops, and private homes whose weathered walls might once have belonged to villas, monasteries, barracks, or pagan shrines.

Nothing in Rome was truly common. Even the humblest building appeared drenched in memory: blood and glory, wickedness and holiness, grandeur and tragedy. Saints had walked these streets. So had tyrants, martyrs, thieves, emperors, inquisitors, prostitutes, conquerors, and beggars. Every stone seemed to have witnessed some forgotten procession, execution, coronation, riot, miracle, or betrayal. The city did not merely preserve history. It carried history like an old wound beneath its skin.

Rain fell heavily from low, swollen clouds, washing soot from ancient cornices and turning the streets into dark, rippling channels. Water poured from tiled roofs and carved gutters. Umbrellas hurried beneath balconies of rusted iron. Scooters hissed through standing water, and the bells of unseen churches sounded dimly through the storm, deep, solemn notes rolling between the buildings as the Mercedes approached the great basilica.

Ramsey watched in silence, feeling the weight of his purpose and the still greater heaviness of the summons awaiting him.

Ordo Argenteus (as it was called here) had always circled the outermost boundary of accepted doctrine. Its enemies accused it of lingering at the fringe of heresy; its defenders preferred to say that it stood guard at the borders of revelation. The Order placed dangerous emphasis upon a realm other than Heaven, an incarnation other than Christ, and a form of spiritual survival that seemed, to conventional theologians, uncomfortably close to self-deification: an internal alchemy of the soul.
Its priests studied metaphysics beside Scripture and mysticism beside canon law. They contemplated a cosmology far grander and more elaborate than the comparatively simple vision of the Church Universal. The Order possessed scriptures of its own—thirteen great volumes collectively known as the Compendium Argenteum—though their essential teachings had been concentrated into a single tome called the Scripturae Argenteae (The Silver Scriptures).

Its clergy practiced martial disciplines, wilderness survival, fasting, controlled dreaming, remote viewing, astral projection, memory exercises, rituals that intentionally brought them near death, and rites intended to prepare the whole person—body, mind, and spirit—for ministry within Purgatoria. The preparation was not symbolic. Where other Orders prayed for the dead from the safety of the living world, the Silver Order trained with the expectation that its priests might one day walk among them: enter the Wastes, cross the veil, remember themselves when ordinary memory failed, and minister in places where Heaven itself did not reach.

For centuries, the Order had been tolerated because it remained small, disciplined, useful, and—despite its unsettling theology—controllable. Militaria Argentea had often proven the champions of the faith during those centuries when Christianity literally fought for its survival.

Now its prophecies appeared to be coming true.

The Mercedes passed through the rain-swept avenues surrounding the Vatican. Beyond the glass, travertine walls and ceremonial gates gleamed beneath the storm, their pale stone darkened almost black by water. Statues looked down from pediments and balustrades, their marble faces streaked as though they, too, were weeping. The dome of Saint Peter's emerged and vanished behind veils of rain, vast and gray against a sky the color of hammered led.

It was barely eight in the morning, yet the low clouds had choked the dawn from June third, reducing Rome to a golden twilight gloom. The car stopped near the piazza, and a uniformed driver opened the door. The storm rushed inside with the smell of rain, stone, wet wool, and distant incense.

Ramsey stepped from the Mercedes and opened his umbrella. The downpour hammered against the black fabric with a relentless, hollow rhythm. Wind drove sheets of water across the nearly deserted square, turning its stones into a polished lake where columns, lamps, statues, and flashes of lightning appeared only as broken reflections. The great colonnades stretched outward on either side of the piazza like the arms of the Church itself—welcoming to some, enclosing to others.

Ramsey walked alone across the open space. The early hour and violent weather had driven away most of the tourists. Barricades stood unattended. Rainwater streamed down the steps and spilled from the mouths of carved fountains. The immense façade of the basilica rose ahead of him, dimly illuminated against the storm, its windows glowing like distant embers.

He stopped at the threshold of Vatican City, his fingers tightening around the handle of the umbrella.

High above the ironwork, where a carved stone ledge met the weeping sky, sat a raven.

Ravens were not unknown in Italy. This one was impossible anyway. It was nearly the bulk of a large house cat, heavy through the breast and shoulders, with wings that might have spanned six feet if opened. As Ramsey stepped nearer, the creature did not startle or prepare to flee. It merely shifted its weight.

Black talons scraped slowly across the wet stone, the sound somehow audible through the storm. The raven lowered its massive head and turned its heavy beak toward him. One obsidian eye fixed directly upon Ramsey.

There was no animal panic in that gaze, no nervous flicker or instinctive readiness for flight. The bird regarded him with cold, measuring intelligence, exerting a silent pressure that seemed to settle upon his chest. To an ordinary passerby, it might have appeared to be nothing more than an unusually large corvid sheltering from the deluge.

But Ramsey carried within him the memory of distant worlds and an impossible realm—and, older still, the memory of a night twenty-seven years ago, at the convent in Bayville, when the entity had come to claim its bride: the young novice Selene Veyl. Among those who were permitted to know, it was called The Night of the Savage Miracle—the conception of Vincent Veyl (the return of Amil).

He remembered the recording from the Raven Star Building: the voices, the revelations, and the presence gathering around Vincent. He remembered the young man himself—the undeniable flesh-and-blood majesty of him, the terrible stillness behind his eyes, and the sense that something vast had entered history wearing the body of a modern lord of war, priest, and sorcerer in a very ancient mold unseen in the modern world.

A chill passed through Ramsey that had nothing to do with the damp wind. The Seraph of the Crossroads was real. Purgatoria had broken through into the physical world. As Ramsey stared into the eye of the watching bird, he understood with sickening certainty that the gates before him were no longer keeping the exterior world out.

They were keeping him in.

A low, vibrating pruk-pruk rumbled from the raven's puffed throat. The sound carried strangely through the rain, deeper than any ordinary birdcall, like stones grinding together beneath the ground.

Ramsey lowered his eyes, squared his shoulders against the wet wind, and passed beneath the gate, walking toward his reckoning with Pope James I and the other six Bishops of Purgatoria.

The Swiss Guard of former centuries—with its striped Renaissance uniforms and ceremonial halberds—had vanished during the recent Church reforms. In its place stood the Soldiers of the Cross: military professionals sworn directly to the Holy See. They wore black field uniforms beneath modern body armor, with ballistic helmets, communications gear, and dark glasses giving them the hard, anonymous look of a counterterrorist unit. Muted burgundy panels edged in gold preserved a trace of the old ceremonial dress, while Swiss crosses remained upon their shoulders and the crossed keys of Saint Peter marked their breastplates. Each man carried a compact assault rifle openly across his chest

and wore a straight-bladed sword at his hip—a final warning that the Church had not abandoned tradition. It had armed it properly.



Two of the soldiers came to attention as Ramsey approached. Their eyes settled briefly upon the silver-edged cross fastened to the lapel of his black traveling coat. One raised a gloved hand in salute, and Ramsey returned the gesture with a slight inclination of his head.

Even here, he thought. Even in Rome. Vincent Veyl's influence had reached farther into Catholic culture than most people understood. Even Vincent himself underestimated the effect of his books, but here stood the proof in black armor. The Church had always possessed soldiers, inquisitors, knightly orders, and armed protectors, yet something fundamental had changed. The old embarrassment over strength—the careful pretense that holiness must always appear soft, harmless, and defenseless, flamboyant and garish—was receding. An obscure staff sergeant from Nevada and the I.N.O.P. itself had reminded the faithful of an older Christianity: disciplined, militant, sacrificial, and entirely unashamed of its power.

Lightning flashed above the basilica, and for an instant every statue along the roofline stood stark and white against the blackened sky. Ramsey continued across the piazza. Through the rain, he saw six dark figures waiting upon the broad steps of Saint Peter's beneath the shelter of the portico. His brethren. They had come from across the world—from old European sees, mountain monasteries, desert houses, Armenian sanctuaries, Basque strongholds, and the increasingly powerful American Church. The Seven Silver Bishops had not gathered in one place for more than a generation. Now six awaited the seventh.

Aurelius Vestian stood foremost among them, tall despite his age, his iron-gray hair cut close and his deeply lined face composed in its usual expression of patrician severity.

Beside him stood Michael Seraphim, narrow-faced and ascetic, his hands hidden within the sleeves of his silver-piped cassock.

Michael Tellon—Ramsey's cousin—waited a little apart from the others. His white hair shone almost luminously beneath the portico, and his familiar features remained solemn and unreadable. Ramsey

had known him in childhood, long before the titles, robes, and burdens of episcopal office. Seeing him beneath the towering saints of Rome stirred something painfully human within Ramsey.

Ignatius de Arcturus stood broad and immovable, his heavy shoulders giving him the appearance of an old fortress made flesh.

Gabriel de Valence, elegant even in mourning black, watched Ramsey's approach with dark, intelligent eyes.

Athanasius Corvinus, eldest of the Seven, leaned upon a silver-headed staff carved with the raven and cross, his long face perpetually grave.

Stoic was the word most often used to describe Michael Tellon, though it suited all of them. The Silver episcopate did not generally attract jovial men. Its bishops were chosen from those capable of contemplating death, madness, spiritual warfare, and the long silence of God without surrendering either faith or reason.
Ramsey climbed the final steps. Tellon greeted him first, gripping his forearm before drawing him into a brief, hard embrace. The others followed with solemn nods, clasped hands, and the restrained masculine affection of men who had shared dangerous knowledge across many years.

No one asked whether Ramsey had brought the file or whether the recording was authentic. He had already transmitted the material through the Silver Church's encrypted intra-link, and each bishop had reviewed the images, audio, biometric data, and Vincent's own words. They had witnessed the miraculous signs captured within the recording—the proof that confirmed what these seven men and generations of Silver clergy stretching back to the sixth century had lived and died hoping to see. They understood why they had been summoned. Words would have diminished it.

Together, the Seven entered the basilica. The vast interior swallowed them.

Even for a soul as seasoned—and, by his own admission, as jaded—as Howard Ramsey, Saint Peter's was difficult to comprehend at first glance. Its scale disrupted the senses. Columns wider than houses rose toward vaulted ceilings that seemed less built than suspended in heaven. Marble in white, rose, green, black, and gold stretched beneath their feet in immense geometric patterns, polished by centuries of processions.

Mosaics shimmered far overhead, so finely worked that they appeared to be paintings until one drew near. Gilded moldings caught the dim morning light. Monumental saints leaned from niches, while angels of bronze and marble emerged from tombs, altars, and funeral monuments. Ancient portraits watched from shadowed walls, their subjects long dead but still exercising authority through paint, stone, and memory.

The air carried the mingled odors of incense, cold masonry, candle wax, wet clothing, and old books. Every sound traveled—the click of boots against marble, the murmur of distant prayer, the rustle of cassocks, the closing of some unseen door—all rising into the dome, multiplying, and returning as whispers.

Priests and sisters crossed the immense nave on their morning duties, wearing the distinctive variations of their respective Orders: white, brown, crimson, blue, gray, and black; simple cords or embroidered

stoles; veils, mantles, military collars, scholars' robes, and the austere working uniforms of monastic laborers.

Many slowed when they saw the procession. Some bowed. Others stared openly. A single Silver Bishop was an uncommon sight in Rome. All seven together bordered upon the apocalyptic. Ramsey saw suspicion in some faces, curiosity in others, and unmistakable fear in a few. Ordo Purgatoriae, as some still called it, remained a tolerated strangeness within the Greater Church—ancient enough to avoid suppression, useful enough to preserve, and troubling enough never to be fully trusted.

The Seven passed beneath the great dome. Ramsey looked upward, following the curve of the architecture until it disappeared into shadow and gold. For one brief moment, he felt the accumulated authority of the Church pressing upon him: two thousand years of doctrine, martyrdom, compromise, conquest, charity, cruelty, reform, and survival.

This was the center of the Christian world. Yet the truth that had summoned them had not appeared here. It had appeared in Nevada.
In the old Spanish naming, the region had first been called Nueva Hada—New Fate—a name that, over generations, had contracted and evolved into Nevada. There was something almost prophetic in it now, as though the land had been named long before anyone understood what would one day rise from its deserts.

New Fate.

It had come through desert dust, military records, forgotten prophecies, Native warnings, Silver rites, and a young soldier who wanted nothing more than to be left the hell alone. The ancient Church had spent centuries awaiting revelation from Heaven. Instead, something had risen from the cosmic crossroads.

The bishops spoke little as they proceeded toward the restricted passage leading into the Apostolic Palace. Their silence was not uncertainty but recognition. Each man carried the same impossible knowledge and, with it, the same questions.

Their Order—obscure through most of the world, though increasingly dominant within the United States—had been vindicated in the most terrifying manner imaginable. Its oldest prophecies had proven true in the modern age. Purgatoria was real. The Seraph had manifested.

Somewhere beyond the marble corridors, Pope James I waited to hear what Bishop Howard Ramsey believed should now be done about it. The question followed the seven men like an eighth presence: What should be shared, and what should remain concealed?

Whatever they revealed to the Pope could not automatically be surrendered to the wider machinery of the Church—the Curia, doctrinal offices, monastic councils, political secretariats, or hundreds of Orders whose loyalties ranged from sincere devotion to ideological ambition.

The Universal Church had changed greatly during the preceding decades. Its liberalization had softened ancient disciplines, blurred old boundaries, and opened its doors to millions once kept at the margins. At the same time, it had driven away many others who believed particular sects and orders within the Church were abandoning the doctrines and structures that had once given Christianity its

identity. Socialist sympathies, social-justice theology, and increasingly political language had gained strength in some quarters, especially among reformist clergy and orders devoted to poverty, education, relief work, and the dispossessed. Elsewhere, those same developments were regarded as ideological corruption.

An older language of duty, hierarchy, sacrifice, moral law, inherited authority, and sacred obligation had increasingly been challenged by the language of equity, redistribution, social justice, and collective responsibility. To reformers, this represented long-overdue moral correction. To many traditionalists, it seemed that parts of the Church had become embarrassed by Christianity itself—embarrassed by hierarchy, judgment, masculine authority, martial virtue, private power, inherited station, and the harder commandments of Scripture. The Universal Church had not simply grown more liberal. It had become internally divided over what compassion, justice, authority, and even Christian civilization were supposed to mean.

The very language of sacred kingship, holy warfare, natural order, divine judgment, and ordained hierarchy increasingly carried the odor of reaction in some circles, while in others the newer language of equity and collectivism carried the stench of Marxism, secular political capture, and surrender to fashionable ideology. Orders that had once been bitter theological enemies could suddenly find themselves allied in opposition to reforms, they regarded as more dangerous than their old disputes, while Franciscan-adjacent, Jesuit-like groups, and other reform-minded traditions often embraced them with equal conviction.

The transformation had not come without cost. Millions had been welcomed in, while millions of others had quietly walked away. Some no longer recognized the institution in which they had been raised. Others saw clerics increasingly willing to reinterpret ancient doctrine to remain acceptable to political movements that, historically, had not always returned the favor.

Wherever socialism hardened into total political doctrine, the Church had often relearned an old and bitter lesson: movements that first demanded its cooperation eventually came to regard its independent authority, property, schools, clergy, scriptures, and competing moral claims as intolerable obstacles. Partnership became subordination. Accommodation became surrender. Reform ended with churches emptied, confiscated, silenced, or converted into museums beneath governments that had once promised only justice for the poor.

The modern Universal Church had not yet reached that point. But some within the Silver Order believed they could already smell the smoke. To them, certain factions of the Church were increasingly selling themselves like prostitutes to win the favor of secularists, humanists, amoral libertines, and anti-Christian collectivists. Others within the Universal communion regarded such accusations as reactionary hysteria. The old sectarian wars had not returned in name, but the forces that had once produced them were beginning to gather again beneath the same roof.

Pius the 13th, a conservative, had begun reversing that current—not through open condemnation, but through patient and deliberate reform. He'd restored old offices, including the Inquisition as an investigative body. He had also strengthened the Church's military and protective institutions and spoken openly of duty, discipline, sacrifice, and legitimate authority, though always in the careful language of pastoral necessity.

Pope James I himself, however, was a different sort of reformer, not a simple traditionalist: too severe for the progressives, too unpredictable for the conservatives, and far too intelligent to belong entirely to either camp. His focus was on rebuilding old structures, restoring the physical infrastructure itself.

Pius the Thirteenth's interest in Vincent Veyl had never been secret—he'd knighted him, formally commended his books—The Templar Way: Modern Path of the Holy Warrior and Silver Soldier: Mystic Martialism in the Twenty-First Century—and at once encouraged their use within Church academies until his death not long after their publication. The new pope, however, had not reversed that course, though neither had he expanded upon it.

The Ordo Argenteus had guarded the truth of the Savage Miracle, the mapping of Saint Amil's DNA, and the repeated genetic tests performed upon Vincent Veyl—even from most of its own members and clergy. Yet Pius had known. He had signed the Betrothal twenty-six years ago, later knighted Vincent, and authorized the sweeping Dispensation. He had been preparing the Church for him.

For years, the Pontiff and the Silver Bishops had maintained a strange silent agreement. Each side knew the truth. Each knew the other side knew, and together they acted upon it while pretending the secret remained safely contained. It was a thoroughly Roman arrangement: everyone knew, everyone acted, and no one said the damned thing aloud.

Pope James I was silent. It was uncertain what he knew, what the previous Pontiff had passed to him, and where he stood on the subject.

The Bishops, in cross-communications over the last few hours, had drawn their own conclusions. The Seraph now manifested among them seemed nearer in nature to Yahweh than to the sweet Jesus preferred by the modern Church: a power of covenant, law, judgment, conquest, and terrible correction. Or perhaps it was Christ as the Church seldom wished to remember him—not the infant in the manger or the shepherd carrying a lamb, but the returning king with fire in his eyes and a sword issuing from his mouth. A Christ prepared to strike down nations. A Christ who did not merely invite the Kingdom but imposed it. A Christ who would build his New Jerusalem upon the ruins of the old world.

The Seraph of Purgatoria, however, would build Urusalim, the name under which the ancient Priest-King Melchizedek had ruled the city of the Most High. Melchizedek was also said, even in scriptures, to have been an immortal and eternal king and priest. As Christians believed in a Heavenly Jerusalem and a future New Jerusalem, the Silver Scriptures promised the coming of Urusalim, when Rhea would become the Crossroads of the Star-Road Gates and mankind would be freed to wander the heavens, their days as the days of a tree.

Still, they did not know exactly what Veyl's plan was, if any, and were assuming a great deal based on a reverse interpretation of his statements at the meeting and two militaristic theological works that had lauded what Vincent referred to as the Kingdom Come: "The Anagogic Empire."

Ramsey and his brothers moved with intention, the shadow of their mystic Order hanging over them like a shroud. Their black-and-silver vestments drew attention wherever they passed. Conversations softened. Heads turned. Priests paused beneath archways, and sisters lingered beside alcoves under the pretense of adjusting books, papers, or folded linens.

Rumors had arrived before them. They always did. Whispers concerning Vincent Veyl had already spread among the Orders, carried through encrypted clerical networks, military channels, private correspondence, and the irrepressible machinery of ecclesiastical gossip. Some called him a holy knight. Others called him an assassin blessed by Rome. A few had begun using older and more dangerous titles: the Black Templar, the Raven of Judgment, the Sword of the West.

Even in Europe, only hours removed from the event, the clergy were discussing what had happened in that small city in the western United States. Two hundred thirty-four men and women had died in a single night, according to the final tally.

Not civilians. Not innocents. Hardened criminals, corrupt officers, traffickers, killers, enforcers, and torturers—people bound together within a vicious apparatus that had survived through money, fear, political protection, and institutional complicity.

One man had served the warrants. He had come armed with rifle, pistol, daggers, and a holy sword.

The reports described Vincent moving through dark streets and fortified buildings with methodical precision, executing the authority granted to him by the Dire Court. He had not acted as a rioter, vigilante, or fanatic. He carried names, charges, evidence, and lawful warrants.

Yet the result belonged to an older age.

A knight of the faith had stood before the wicked and brought them low—not symbolically, not through sermons, sanctions, commissions, or years of procedural delay, but with gunfire and steel. He had done it in a manner so brutally direct that even hardened clergy found themselves speaking of Elijah, Samson, Joshua, and angels of wrath and judgement.

And he had done it carrying a sword forged, blessed, and bestowed upon him by the Ordo Argenteus—by the Bishops themselves.

Very Old Testament, Ramsey thought. Gloriously so.

The Seven continued through the inner passages, their footfalls sounding in measured rhythm against the ancient floors. They passed beneath painted vaults and between walls that had witnessed conspiracies, abdications, reforms, assassinations, and the quiet decisions by which entire civilizations had been altered.

Ahead stood the final security checkpoint. Two Soldiers of the Cross waited before a pair of ancient doors banded in dark iron. Their modern field uniforms appeared severe against the carved stone and gilded walls. Each wore body armor beneath a black ceremonial coat, with the cross of the Holy See fixed at the throat and the emblem of the renewed guard upon one shoulder.

Both soldiers came sharply to attention as the bishops approached. Their salutes were precise, and neither asked for identification. None was needed. The Seven had been expected, and the Seven were known.

One guard placed his hand against a security panel concealed within the old stonework. A quiet mechanism turned somewhere beyond the wall, and locks withdrew one after another with deep metallic thuds. The ancient doors began to open.

Ramsey felt the thumb drive and the metal film case that carried the dust beneath his coat, both secured within an inner pocket close to his heart. Upon the drive rested evidence that could transform the Church, divide it, or destroy what little remained of the Silver Order's freedom.

Beyond those doors waited the Vicar of Christ. Behind Ramsey stood six men who had spent their lives preparing for Purgatoria. Far across the ocean, in a desert town the world had barely heard of, walked the living answer to prophecies Rome had tolerated but never truly believed.

Tellon spoke as they entered the final corridor leading toward the so-called Inner Office—the Pope's private study.

The passage was unexpectedly narrow and dim, far removed from the soaring galleries and gilded chambers through which they had passed. Small lamps cast pools of amber light against dark paneling and ancient plaster. Their footsteps softened upon a long carpet, and for the briefest moment they were unobserved.

Michael Tellon was senior among them, not merely by age but by learning, experience, and the peculiar authority earned through decades of service. He had been Pope John's personal exorcist and metaphysician, as well as an educator, psychologist, theologian, and lifelong student of the humanities.

Among the Seven, however, his greatest authority in this matter came from something more personal.

Tellon had raised Vincent.

As head of the Shining Silver School, he supervised the teachers and priests responsible for the orphanage boys. Vincent had entered his care as a child, and Tellon had watched over his education, discipline, and spiritual formation. He had intended the boy for the priesthood and had begun preparing him for it long before the Army, Near Eastern wars, Raven Star, or the terrible public emergence of the man he had become.

Of all those now walking toward the Pope, Tellon had known Vincent first. Perhaps he knew him best.

"It is not for them," he said, his voice falling almost to a whisper. The others continued walking, but every man listened. "He acknowledged the other planes—Harmonia, Valorus. All twelve are named within the Compendium. He does not deny them their places or purposes. But he stands at the crossroads of Purgatoria, and Purgatoria possesses its own cause, its own banner, and its own covenant." Tellon glanced toward the shadowed end of the corridor. "It is not theirs, and neither is he." His tone remained measured, but the urgency beneath it was unmistakable. "I saw what you saw: the Twilight Son, the Incarnation of Primordial Love and Truth. That is our messiah, not theirs." Tellon's pale eyes moved from one bishop to the next. "Our seraph is here. There is no debate now. Their prophecies have not come to pass. Ours is present in flesh."

The final turn in the corridor was close now. Beyond it waited the entrance to the private study. “He is ours,” Tellon said again. “And he is partisan.” The word carried weight: not universal, not neutral, and not available to every faction that wished to soften him, appropriate him, or convert his revelation into something harmless. Partisan. The Seraph embodied a side. Indeed, he was a side personified.

Tellon had not reached that judgment through prophecy or theology alone. He had known the boy before the Seraph, the student before the soldier, and the orphan before the knight. He had heard Vincent pray, corrected his lessons, disciplined his temper, encouraged his vocation, and watched the first signs of that terrible strength take shape beneath the surface. His words therefore carried weight no other bishop could possess.

Tellon hurried his final warning. They could already see the corner ahead and the faint outline of someone waiting beside the final door.

“Understood,” Aurelius Vestian said.

Michael Seraphim inclined his head. “Understood.”

“Understood,” said Ignatius de Arcturus.

Gabriel de Valence’s expression tightened with quiet satisfaction. “Indeed.”

Athanasius Corvinus rested both hands upon the silver head of his staff. “Absolutely.”

They turned the corner.

Petrus de Luca, private secretary to Pope James I, stood beside the study door. He was a lean, dark-eyed man of indeterminate middle age, impeccably dressed in a close-fitting black clerical suit. His composed features possessed an almost sculpted coolness, revealing neither welcome nor suspicion, though Ramsey had little doubt that de Luca missed very little.

There was no time for further discussion.

At the head of the procession, Ramsey looked back toward Tellon. Vincent had placed the thumb drive and the living dust in Ramsey’s hands, granting him authority to determine what could be shared, with whom, and how far the truth might safely travel. That authority could not be transferred merely because Tellon was older, wiser, or closer to Vincent’s beginnings.

But neither could Tellon’s counsel be dismissed.

A note had been included on the thumb drive, that read simply, "It is for you to decide."

“Considered,” Ramsey said.

It was not an evasion but a judgment reserved. He would weigh Tellon’s warning against the Pope’s questions, Vincent’s intentions, and the survival of the Silver Path itself. Then he—and no one else—would decide what crossed the threshold with them.

Ramsey turned toward Petrus de Luca. The secretary studied the Seven for a silent moment, then placed one hand upon the door. "His Holiness is waiting."

The door swung inward.



Warm air moved from the room, carrying the faint but unmistakable scent of pipe smoke softened by cherry tobacco. Beyond the threshold lay no great audience chamber, no gilded hall crowded with cardinals, secretaries, and ceremonial officers. The Pope's Inner Office was a simple room, though one possessed of grave elegance: dark paneled walls, subdued antique lamps, somber masculine furnishings, and bare stone floors softened by an intricate handwoven rug.

Books filled recessed shelves. Rolled plans and bound reports occupied a long side table. A carpenter's measuring rule rested beside several architectural drawings, placed as naturally as the crucifix hanging upon the wall.

There was no council waiting for them.

Only one man.

Pope James I sat behind an old and venerable desk, dressed not in the elaborate pontifical vestments of ceremony, but in plain working robes much like those worn by the bishops themselves, save that his were white. A small tea stain marked one lapel. The offending cup—a delicate piece of porcelain trimmed in gold—rested upon the leather blotter before him.

The imperfection humanized him without diminishing him.

The desk was not ornamental. It was where actual work was done. Its surface bore scratches, ink stains, and shallow impressions from long use. Missives had been composed there, decrees revised, appointments approved, pleas considered, and private correspondence dispatched to rulers, bishops, prisoners, widows, soldiers, and children.

Across the centuries, tens of thousands of letters had been written from that room. Here, away from the public altars and balconies, decisions could be weighed in silence. Here a pope might sit alone with the burdens of the Church, free for a few hours from the pageantry surrounding his office.

The room was intimate by Vatican standards, built for serious consideration rather than spectacle. It could not comfortably accommodate a large audience.

Ramsey suspected that was part of its purpose.

Pope James I was not given to frivolity, theatrical warmth, or the cultivation of personal grandeur. He disliked excessive pomp and had little patience for men who mistook ceremonial importance for moral authority. Throughout the Universal Church, he was known simply as the Worker and Builder—and, among those who knew him more closely, the Laborer.

He had been born into poverty in Buenos Aires, the son of a working-class family whose devotion exceeded their means. He had entered religious formation while still a young man. Before becoming a scholar, bishop, cardinal, or Pope, he had learned to work with his hands, beneath his father's tutelage. A skilled carpenter, he had never abandoned the craft.

Even after his election, he continued taking a direct interest in the endless repairs and restorations required throughout the Holy City. He studied masonry reports, inspected damaged roofs, argued with contractors over inferior materials, and occasionally appeared without warning at construction sites wearing plain white robes and work boots.

His interest extended far beyond Rome. Churches, abbeys, schools, orphanages, and hospitals under renovation throughout the world sometimes received handwritten notes from the Pope questioning costs, suggesting alterations, or demanding that historic craftsmanship be preserved rather than replaced with cheap modern imitation. He understood architecture not merely as shelter, but as doctrine made visible—a statement about what a people considered worthy of endurance.

James slept little, spoke infrequently, and considered deeply. Nothing was trivial to him. Even in his seventies, he remained vital and intensely driven, renowned for possessing more energy than men half his age. His schedule exhausted secretaries, guards, bishops, and ministers. He rose before dawn, worked late into the night, and seemed animated by an interior furnace that age had failed to diminish.

Ramsey noticed at once that every chair intended for visitors had been removed.

Tellon noticed it too.

To the others, the absence might have appeared incidental—a matter of space, perhaps, given the unexpected gathering of seven bishops. Tellon knew better. James I arranged his surroundings with care. The missing chairs were deliberate.

This was not to be a conference. There would be no sitting back, no leisurely exchange of theological observations, and no opportunity to settle comfortably into rehearsed positions. They had been summoned to stand before him and give account.

The Pontiff's deep brown eyes regarded them coolly from behind the desk. Neither hostility nor welcome registered upon his elderly face. His expression was attentive but unreadable—the look of a craftsman examining timber before deciding where to make the first cut.

The Seven bowed quietly at the waist, their right hands rising to their hearts and their eyes lowering in formal humility. Father Petrus de Luca entered behind them and closed the door without announcement or fanfare. He remained near it, silent and watchful, his hands folded before him.

The Pope did not rise. He lifted one weathered hand and waved away their formalities. "Gentlemen, let us dispense with needless ritualism and speak plainly—as men and as brothers in the divine cause."

His English was precise and unaccented, every word delivered in a low, firm voice.

Then the Pope's hand moved beneath the desktop. A soft mechanical click followed, and a small speaker nearly hidden among the papers and writing instruments came to life.

"It is not for them."

Tellon's voice filled the office—quiet, hurried, but perfectly clear.

James allowed only those five words to play before pressing the control again. The speaker fell silent. No one needed to hear the rest.
"The eavesdropper corridor has served its purpose for centuries," the Pontiff explained. "It puts men at ease. Gives them one final opportunity to speak privately before entering this room." His deep brown eyes moved toward Tellon. "Or to believe they are speaking privately."

No one answered.

Clergy of the Silver Order held Truth to be the highest divine virtue. They would not insult it now with excuses, evasions, or elaborate justifications. Neither would they pretend the conversation had not occurred. The Seven stood solemnly before the desk, their hands folded before them. There was no defiance in their bearing, but neither was there denial or shame.

The Silver Order had not entered the Universal Church willingly. Its union with Rome during the fifteenth century had been achieved through pressure, threat, political isolation, and what its own historians described—when writing beyond the scrutiny of the Greater Church—as ecclesiastical extortion. The Silver Path survived the union, but it had never entirely accepted it.

When the opening of the New World offered an escape from Europe, its adherents seized the opportunity. Silver Path families—many of Armenian or Basque descent—crossed the Atlantic in disproportionate numbers, carrying their rites, schools, relics, and esoteric traditions into the Americas. They established isolated missions, frontier monasteries, orphanages, fortified parishes, and desert houses far beyond Rome's immediate supervision.

They followed their own roads.

Over the centuries, those scattered communities multiplied, particularly within the Americas. There the Silver Order became not merely tolerated, but increasingly predominant—powerful enough to influence national Catholic culture, wealthy enough to maintain its own institutions, and disciplined enough to resist absorption.

The differences between the Silver Path and the Greater Church never vanished. They merely became more courteous. Beneath the politeness remained profound disagreements concerning authority, human nature, spiritual warfare, metaphysics, the afterlife, the proper relationship between Church and state—and now Vincent Veyl.

Yet a deeper truth stood within the room. Michael Tellon had worked inside the Vatican for years. He knew that corridor, its construction, history, and purpose. As personal advisor to Pope John the Sixteenth (the pope before Pius the Thirteenth)—confessor, exorcist, metaphysician, and trusted friend—he had passed through it countless times. He knew which alcoves concealed guards, where the acoustics changed, and which stretches of apparent privacy had been preserved precisely because they encouraged men to reveal themselves.

Tellon had known he might be heard.

He had spoken anyway.

James understood that. He studied Tellon with the grave consideration one craftsman might give another after discovering a deliberate mark concealed within the grain. The Pope had known him for decades. He knew the depth of Tellon's learning, the precision of his mind, and the care with which he chose his words.

This had not been an indiscretion.

It had been a declaration.

The Pope also knew that Michael Tellon was the closest thing Vincent Veyl possessed to a father. He taught the boy theology, history, languages, and metaphysics—and, when necessary, how to defend himself. Vincent's command of Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Arabic, Aramaic, and several other languages began beneath Tellon's instruction.

So had his boxing.

After Vincent left the Army, Tellon received him at the rectory in Bayville. He supervised the Veyl Trust, guided Vincent through the legal and financial complexities of his inheritance, helped him establish Raven Star LLC, and participated in the earliest planning of the project that now threatened to alter both Church and world.

Tellon had known the orphan, the student, the soldier returned from war, the reluctant heir—and perhaps the first emergence of the Seraph beneath them all. His claim—He is ours—therefore arose from more than sectarian theology.

Yet Vincent had entrusted Howard Ramsey to stand here, or such was the assumption. In truth, Trinity had in fact instructed Josh to go out to the terminal in the lobby, download the files into the pins, and give them to the three. Vincent had no idea what Trinity had unleashed in the form of those three men—a man of politics, a man of war, and a man of mystic militaristic religion.

Ramsey had been a soldier and intelligence officer before entering the priesthood. He understood institutions not merely as systems of belief, but as systems of power. He knew what governments

concealed, what churches feared, and how quickly revelation became policy once placed into the hands of ambitious men.

It was Ramsey who drove the militarization of the Silver Order, bound its growing American influence to the Natural Order Party, and forged the Order's partnership with Justin Vyss—the so-called White Cardinal, a man without formal religious vocation who nevertheless possessed more ideological and ecclesiastical influence than many ordained bishops.

Tellon had formed Vincent.

But Ramsey had been chosen to represent him to the Church.

The distinction hung silently between them.

For more than a minute, no one spoke. James I waited behind the desk, offering them every opportunity to explain themselves. The Seven waited in turn, granting him the authority to ask what he wished.

Rain tapped faintly against the windows. Somewhere within the room, an old clock measured the silence with slow, deliberate ticks. Behind the bishops, Petrus de Luca shifted his weight. The scrape of his shoe against the stone floor seemed unnaturally loud. The secretary was the only man in the office who appeared uncomfortable.

At last, the Pope's gaze settled upon Ramsey. "I'm told you were given something and were asked to decide."

A shudder ran through Ramsey. The only person who knew about the "decide" note, on the drive, was Sister Aramus, who'd resigned from St. Aftiel's only yesterday. His jaw tightened as he realized the truth.

"The choice," Ramsey recovered and answered, his deep voice carrying easily through the private office, "is whether we pass from one age into another."

His steely and rather militant nature guided his directness. He spoke without drama, but with the calm certainty of a soldier delivering the truth before battle.

"The Seraph does not offer the world peace but comes with the sword—even if he is reluctant to wield it. The Silver prophecies are fulfilled almost to the letter. We—our Order—cannot deny it. But he is of our ancient form, not of the ecumenical vein. He is not some neutral symbol to be divided among the Orders and interpreted according to their various doctrines."

The briefest grin passed through Tellon's features, nearly blurting out a "Hurrah," before catching himself.

Ramsey kept his gaze fixed upon the Pontiff. "He is a champion of his source-self and the cause thereof." He paused, allowing the words to land. No one moved. Then he plowed ahead, calm and steady. "He's Purgatorian. Not Christian. The King of Urusalim, not Jerusalem."

The Purgatorian name of the Holy City seemed to darken the air. Petrus de Luca had ceased shifting behind them, though his tension radiated through the office.

"No sentimental angel, no tender mercy," Ramsey continued. "He brings the whirling flame, the winds of apocalypse." Lightning flashed beyond the windows, followed by the distant concussion of thunder. Even Tellon lowered his eyes as the words settled heavily over the room.

Ramsey reached inside his uniform and drew the thumb drive from its inner pocket. The object appeared almost absurdly ordinary between his fingers—a small piece of metal and dark composite, easily overlooked and easily lost. Yet within it rested evidence of one age ending and another forcing its way into the world.

"This contains the meeting in full," Ramsey said, holding the drive steady between them. "Nothing omitted. Nothing softened."

James I looked first at the drive and then into Ramsey's eyes.

"You wished to know, Holy Father." Ramsey's voice lowered. "This is the truth God has revealed in our age."

The Pontiff said nothing. He accepted the small black drive and held it between his fingers, considering its almost weightless insignificance. For one fleeting moment, he wondered whether it might be better not to know what it contained. Ignorance could be safer. More peaceful.

"Thank you, Father Ramsey, for giving me the choice." His tone made it clear the meeting had ended. De Luca opened the door and ushered the Seven into the corridor.

Ramsey paused, then drew something else from his pocket: a small black cylinder with a silver metal cap. Ramsey placed the cylinder on the desk and, with a slight nod, turned to leave with the others.

"Father Ramsey," James called after them.

They all stopped, and Ramsey turned.

"You will not leave the city until you hear from me."

It was not a request.

"Yes, Your Holiness." Ramsey bowed slightly, one hand rising to his breast, before following the others from the room.

Petrus de Luca remained near the door. Some part of him plainly wished to linger—to learn what rested upon the little drive and inside the film case, and why seven Silver Bishops had crossed the world to place it into the Pope's hand.

James waved him away. "No one enters."

De Luca inclined his head and withdrew, closing the ancient doors behind him.

The Pope remained alone, looking down at the drive for several seconds more. James I was no stranger to technology. The Church had become increasingly conscious of its dependence upon computers, secure communications, intelligence systems, and modern infrastructure. Much of that transformation had been driven by the Silver Order and its political allies within the Natural Order Party, whose near-obsession with dragging humankind into a new space age had reshaped Church policy over the preceding decade.

There had been resistance, naturally. There was always resistance. Yet the Pope had no patience for the belief that spiritual authority required technological ignorance.

He opened a drawer in the desk and removed a secured tablet. After activating its isolated system, he inserted the drive into the narrow port along its edge.

A single file appeared.

It was enormous—more than two hours of high-definition video.
James touched the screen. The recording opened, and almost immediately he saw that it was not raw footage. It possessed an unsettling production quality. The camera shifted its attention from one speaker to another, tightening upon faces at significant moments, widening when the entire room mattered, and drawing back again as though guided by an unseen director responding to the conversation in real time.

No visible cameraman had been present. No production crew had arranged the scene.

The Pontiff leaned back slightly in his chair. The image stabilized. Sound filled the private office.

Pope James began to watch.

What followed was far more than James had dreamt or dared contemplate. The impossible did not announce itself with trumpet blasts, nor descend beneath the elaborate machinery of religious spectacle. The recording showed a darkly martial conference room, where, around its table, sat a governor, a bishop, a mother superior, a county sheriff, financiers, armed women, the famous and infamous Justin Vyss, and Vincent Veyl himself; men and women accustomed to authority, consequence, and the hard realities of earthly power. His first direct view of the man at the center of so much controversy did not fail to impress him or give him reason for deep consideration.

Around them, the severe chamber seemed less constructed than enthroned, a place of black stone, shadow, and restrained grandeur that might have been commissioned for some modern Lord of the Underworld. Yet nothing about what they were witnessing depended upon atmosphere, ceremony, or belief.

The impossible simply unfolded in that room over the next two hours, in ever more shocking layers of revelation.

Captured from multiple angles. Preserved in synchronized sound. Corroborated by biometric records and layers of technical analysis. A thing observed, measured, and recorded by devices incapable of faith, superstition, terror, or awe.

And during the proceedings, the identity behind the camera became clear: Trinity, the Queen of Purgatoria herself, technologically channeled through metaphysical architecture.

Then came James I first glimpse of what he immediately recognized as another aspect of the same being: her human face. To the world she had been hidden beneath the name Miriam Sophia Erev, but her true name was Selene Veyl—the Gate and the Mate, long prophesied, now laying claim to her place at Vincent's side in no uncertain terms.

The raven itself emerged as yet another living manifestation of that same presence. Three levels of expression: Trinity beyond the veil, Selene in human form, and the raven as living sign and emissary. And within the same footage came the first inkling of something broader still—the priestess-queens, each appearing to embody some further aspect of the same descending pattern.

The glow of the screen played across the Pontiff's motionless face. Outside, rain coursed down the windows and lightning flickered over Rome, but within the office, the only voices belonged to figures speaking from a room in Nevada.
The arrival of the bride, followed by the arrival of the bird, established the pattern. Neither constituted a miracle in the strictest sense. They could be dismissed as coincidence, theater, or the strange convergence of events around an already extraordinary man. Yet to James's mind and heart, they were signs—subtle heralds preceding what came next.

The first true miracle was the healing of Vincent Veyl's head wound. The injury was unmistakably present, captured clearly enough to deny any reasonable dispute. Then it was gone—not concealed or treated, but healed. On several cameras, the wound itself could be seen gradually fading from his flesh until no trace of it remained.

The second was the assassination attempt.

Here the audiovisual record revealed something very different from what the people within the room had apparently witnessed. Their reactions made it clear that they had heard no gunfire. No bullets had crossed the room. No flames had leapt from the weapon's muzzle.

Yet the recording preserved all of it.

The shots thundered through the speakers. Fire stabbed from the barrel. At the critical instant, the footage slowed itself, allowing each bullet to be seen emerging from the muzzle before fading into nothing within the first millimeter beyond it. They had not been stopped, deflected, or disintegrated.

They had been taken—transferred elsewhere between the muzzle and the world.

The third miracle was another healing. Someone—something—had inserted a brief sequence into the record, drawing footage from both the tunnel surveillance system and Vincent's body camera. The intervention also revealed Trinity's presence within the recording: the unseen intelligence that had gathered, arranged, and preserved the evidence.

James watched the moment Vincent was shot in the leg. The wound was real. His body reacted to the impact, yet he continued forward almost without breaking stride. The recording then returned to the

conference room and showed the same wound hours later. It had nearly closed. Whatever damage remained no longer appeared serious.

Then came the fourth miracle, as though the recording had reached the summit of some terrible ascent.

James watched realities open beyond the known world. He watched another plane of existence appear not as a dream, symbol, or theological abstraction, but as a place—vast, living, and materially real. He watched impossible substances pass from one realm into human hands. He watched Vincent Veyl reveal enough to shatter centuries of theological certainty, then regard the men surrounding him with something nearer to weary disappointment than messianic triumph.

It was not the message Father Ramsey had sought to convey.

Ramsey had seen fulfillment and mandate. James saw warning and refusal. Vincent had accepted no throne, proclaimed no new covenant, and offered no promise that the gates would be opened. He had shown them other worlds not as a reward, but as a measure of how far humanity remained from deserving them. Where Ramsey had heard a trumpet calling men to conquest, James heard the sound of a gate remaining closed.

Worse, the men in that room had taken Vincent's rejection and begun constructing a plan from it. They had mistaken revelation for invitation, warning for prophecy, and the conditions of their refusal for the foundation of an empire.

Before the recording ended, everything had changed.

The final image vanished. The sound died with it, leaving the office to the rain and the slow ticking of the clock. James remained seated, one weathered hand resting near the tablet, his fingers slightly curled. For several minutes, he did not move.

He had spent his life repairing old structures. He understood foundations, stresses, hidden rot, and the terrible consequences of placing new weight upon weakened stone. The Church had survived two thousand years because it knew how to absorb revelation, contain upheaval, and rebuild itself around truths it could no longer deny.

But this was not another fracture within the old structure.

The foundation beneath it had moved.

Only then did his gaze settle upon the small metal film case resting beside the tablet. Its black body and silver cap appeared almost offensively mundane—an object that might have held photographic film, medicine, or a few common ashes. He lifted it carefully. The cylinder felt cold and unexpectedly heavy against his palm.

James worked the silver cap loose.

Inside lay the gold-and-silver dust of Purgatoria.

The particles shimmered in the dim office light, though shimmered was not the proper word. They did not merely reflect the light. They answered it. Gold awakened within silver, silver moved beneath gold, and fine points of radiance passed through the dust in slow, living currents. Though the room was still and James held the cylinder steady, the particles continued to shift against one another as if stirred by some breath too subtle for the physical world.

At first, he mistook the sound for rain against the glass.

Then the dust whispered.

The voice did not enter through his ears. He heard-felt it beneath thought, where instinct touched memory and memory descended into the soul. No single language carried the words, yet he understood them before his mind could translate them. Meaning passed through him whole, ancient, intimate, and mercilessly clear.

Purgatoria was real.

Not symbol. Not vision. Not some intermediate state invented by frightened mystics to fill the silence between death and resurrection. It was a realm with substance, law, memory, and living power. Its dust now rested in his hand, impossibly distant from the world that had formed it, and yet it knew where it was.

It knew what he was.

The whisper passed through every defense his reason attempted to raise. It carried no demand that he believe. Belief had become irrelevant. The truth simply entered him and occupied the place where doubt had been.

James tightened his hand around the cylinder. His breath caught, not with fear alone, but with the unbearable magnitude of what had been placed before him. The Church had spent centuries declaring what lay beyond death. Now something from beyond death had crossed the threshold and answered for itself.

He understood then that Vincent Veyl could not be reduced to Ramsey's prophecy, Tellon's paternal claim, the Silver Order's messiah, or the Natural Order Party's promised Emperor. Those were human constructions—frames built around a presence none of them yet comprehended. Vincent had not come before them begging to be recognized. He had shown them the truth and left them to reveal what they would do with it.

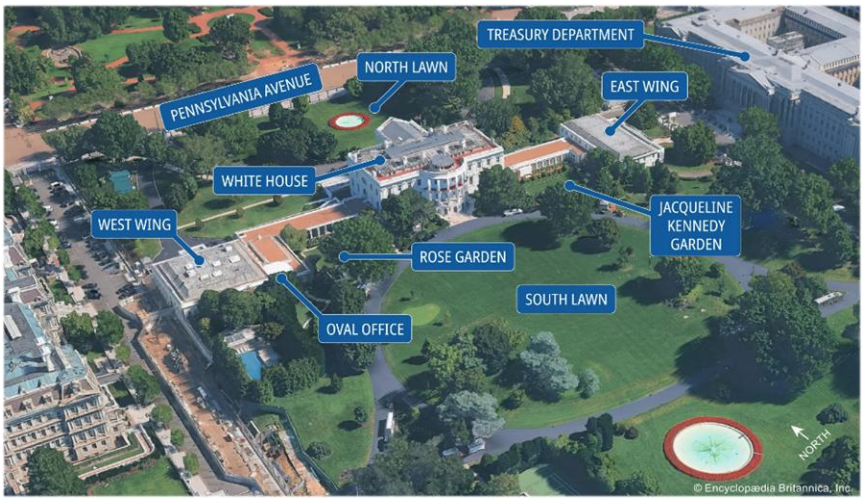
James did not pray. Not yet. He did not know which prayer belonged to such a moment.

He replaced the cap slowly and set the metal case beside the tablet. The audiovisual record could be challenged, suppressed, edited, or dismissed as an elaborate fabrication. The dust could not. Its whisper remained within him even after the cylinder had been sealed.

The recording had transformed what James knew of the world.

The living dust transformed what he understood of his place within it.

(8:45 PM, Wednesday, June 3rd, 2026—In White)



The midnight-blue limousine cleared the final security checkpoint and rolled slowly down West Executive Avenue toward the West Wing entrance. Justin Vyss was expected.

He had become a regular visitor to the White House—regular enough that the officers recognized both the vehicle and the tall, white-haired man within it, though never so regular that his arrival passed entirely without notice.

Vyss stepped from the limousine into the last residue of evening. The western sky beyond the trees still held dying bands of silver, rose, and darkening red, the final light withdrawing behind Washington as night settled over the capital. A cool breeze stirred his long white hair while his pale-blue eyes swept the narrow entry lane and the grand old White House beyond it.

Uniformed Secret Service officers flanked the entrance, acknowledging him with restrained familiarity while remaining watchful.

His driver and bodyguard, Miles Kenda, stepped out behind him. A cold-eyed black man who had served twenty years in the Navy, much of that time as a special operator, Kenda surveyed the entrance, the windows, the rooflines, nearby officers, and waiting vehicles before settling beside the limousine.

He would not accompany Vyss inside. Whatever protection the leader of the N.O.P. required within the White House would be provided by the people whose lives were devoted to protecting the President.

Magnolia Jeffords, the Chief of Staff—short red hair, green eyes, fair skin, not unattractive, but lacking in humor and overflowing with attitude—stood off to one side of the entrance, talking quietly with Caroline Garish, the Press Secretary: a busty, rather plump black woman with a bobbed haircut and an attitude that made Magnolia seem downright cheery.

They had apparently stepped outside to smoke and speak privately. Neither seemed pleased to have their conversation interrupted by his arrival. Both women watched him suspiciously as the limousine pulled away toward its designated waiting place, Magnolia's mouth tightening around her cigarette.

Light classical music drifted faintly from somewhere within the mansion, lending the secured grounds a strangely relaxed evening atmosphere. It struck Vyss as peculiar, perhaps because nothing about the world beyond those gates felt particularly relaxed anymore.

Staff members came and went through nearby corridors and entrances, some acknowledging him politely, others observing him with open unease as he strode toward the doors.

Vyss had supporters among them, though they were more likely to be found among the agents and officers protecting the place than among the overeducated and overentitled bureaucrats they protected. Some admired him quietly. Others merely respected the fact that he showed no fear of entering a building filled with people who regarded him as a political threat.

And a threat he unquestionably was.

He was not merely the leader of a fringe political party, but the leader of a global movement, with something approaching two hundred million supporters scattered across the world, nearly eighty million of them within the United States alone.

It had begun forty years ago as an obscure third party existing primarily within equally obscure books written by a much younger Justin Vyss. By the age of twenty-five, Vyss held a PhD in Psychiatry from Oxford, a master's in Sociology from Harvard, and a BA in Political Science from Stanford. By thirty, he had published twelve books combining those disciplines into a singular philosophy he called Universal Natural Law.

As the internet arose, he quickly adapted, using social media to propagate his ideas far beyond the limited readership of his early works. His books led to lectures, the lectures to documentaries, and eventually to highly polished visionary presentations extolling a distinctly Jungian vision of collective human individuation: the perfecting of the American Republic into the foundation of a global government, and the establishment of a universal moral code drawn from recurring patterns of morality and ethics reaching back to the earliest human civilizations. Those patterns were then filtered through hard, pragmatic sociological, behavioral, and genetic evidence to establish what Vyss called the Twenty Laws of Universal Morality, taking the broad human consensus as the baseline rather than its exceptions, anomalies, or aberrations.

After a visionary experience in 2011, Vyss introduced an idea that transformed the movement. A coming Emperor would arise, not merely as a ruler, but as the manifestation of humanity's unified Self: the fulfillment of the recurring human promise of a messianic figure who would gather the divided tribes of mankind into a single civilization and lead them into a coming age of ascension, first into unity, and then into the stars.

Now, all these years later, the N.O.P. was steadily eating away at the G.O.P. while drawing a growing share of voters from the D.N.C. as well. Its influence had expanded far beyond what the political establishment had once dismissed as an anomalous fringe movement, and Justin Vyss kept appearing at the White House as though he already possessed a place within the future being negotiated there.

It was making a great many people very nervous.

Caroline Garish watched Vyss approach and exhaled a stream of smoke through her nose. She knew the calls would begin at any moment—reporters, party officials, anxious political allies demanding to know why Justin Vyss was meeting with the President again.

For the second time in as many days.

And she already knew where he had just come from.

They all did.

It was all over Fox and CNN: the meeting yesterday at the now rather famous Raven Star Building.

Trembol had long been known among certain elites for its many whispered delights. Now it was known for something quite different: the first major test of the N.O.P.s new Death Warrant laws, which permitted prejudgment and the issuance of execution orders by something called the Dire Court.

Many had instinctively tried to raise the civil-rights alarm. But the crimes of the condemned—strategically documented and released for public scrutiny by the executioner himself—were so vicious that anyone protesting too loudly risked appearing nearly as monstrous as the people he had executed.

"So," Caroline called as he approached the entrance, "are you working for the young death god now, or is he working for you, Mr. Vyss?" The question was delivered with practiced sarcasm.

A Uniformed Division officer passed a handheld scanner over him, more for procedure than necessity. Vyss had entered the West Wing often enough that everyone involved knew precisely who he was, but familiarity did not suspend protocol.

Caroline saw only another white man with a white savior complex—one who had somehow gotten his hooks into the first woman and first woman of color to hold the presidency in American history.

Then again, Camela was married to a white man, a fact that inspired in Caroline a private and rather irrational resentment that party loyalty compelled her never to express aloud.

Magnolia regarded Vyss with undisguised disdain, though she restrained herself as a uniformed Marine approached.

"Mr. Vyss," the Marine said. "Madam President is waiting for you in the secure conference room. Please follow me."

Staff Sergeant Backster Droman was a tall, smooth-featured black man in a dark-blue dress uniform, his chest bright with ribbons and decorations. He seemed always to be the one assigned to conduct Vyss through the building. Whether that was coincidence, routine, or some small decision made far above Droman's rank, Vyss had never asked.

Droman was unfailingly professional. Yet whenever he came to collect Vyss, he seemed faintly concerned—as though someone might actually try to kill the man he had been charged with escorting. "How is Staff Sergeant Veyl?" the Marine wondered aloud. "News says he took one in the leg but

refused treatment beyond self-administered first aid." Droman glanced toward him. "Sounds more like a Marine thing than an Army thing to me."

Justin smiled faintly. "He pulled out the bullet, tossed it onto the table, and went on with the meeting unfazed." He gave the soldier precisely what he knew the man wanted to hear.

"Oorah! Army uniform, Marine heart." Then Droman lowered his voice. "Tell him he's got at least one fan in the White House." He glanced briefly along the corridor before leaning a little nearer. "Those bastards got what was coming to them." Then he touched the saber at his own side. "And he certainly gave some gravity to wearing one of these."

They moved quickly through the corridors without stopping to chat, though many of those they passed looked curious, and several clearly had questions. Black-and-white checkered floors stretched beneath them, framed by elegant, if somewhat gaudy drapes, and an excess of museum-like display that, in Justin's view, made the place nearly impossible to feel at home in.

The power of the White House did not reside in its décor, however. It resided in history and in the sheer authority concentrated within its walls. Wars had begun in rooms like these, and wars had ended in them. Markets had been saved. Governments had been destroyed. Millions of lives had been altered by conversations conducted behind closed doors beneath portraits, flags, and chandeliers.

The power to alter history—or bring portions of it abruptly to an end—rested within this building. At least, that was how everyone had understood power yesterday.

Droman led him into the Situation Room complex, through another layer of controlled access and into the secure command-and-control heart of the White House. Men and women sat at their stations monitoring events around the globe: China, Eastern Europe, Africa, the Middle East, satellite traffic, military deployments, intelligence summaries.

Several looked up as Vyss passed. Whatever professional discipline kept them from staring did not entirely conceal their curiosity. He was conducted into one of the smaller secure conference rooms reserved for private meetings of precisely this kind. President Camela Harrison was already waiting for him.



A chair beside her remained empty, clearly reserved for Vyss. She sat at the head of the conference table, studying something on her tablet, several papers arranged with deliberate neatness before her and a tumbler of sparkling water near at hand.

She looked composed. Even relaxed. But Justin knew her well enough to recognize the concentration beneath the stillness.



Secretary of Defense Alexander Makris sat behind and to her left, along the side of the table facing the entrance. He was a dark-featured man of Greek-American descent, in his sixties, balding, thickly built, and tall enough to remain imposing even while seated.

Vyss knew Alexander well, having personally recommended him for the position. Makris, a former NATO commander, was deeply affiliated with the N.O.P., though that affiliation was deliberately obscured. He supported the cause quietly—not from the religious roots from which many Natural Order Party members had arisen, but from a naturalistically stoic and relentlessly pragmatic perspective that often-caused others to assume he was a conservative, while his voting record was rather diverse.

During his confirmation hearings, he had been presented to Congress as politically neutral: a soldier and administrator rather than an ideologue.

Beside Makris, seated to his left, was Ariana LeMelle, the Attorney General—a tall, slender, dark-skinned Hispanic woman in her late forties, with short black hair and severe dark eyes. LeMelle was a stern woman with a ferocious reputation, a steely prosecutor who had angered many within the Democratic Party by quietly supporting—or at least declining to oppose—the sweeping criminal reforms being enacted by N.O.P. dominated states. Those states included: Nevada, Utah, Virginia, Wyoming, Texas, Florida, Idaho, Dakota, Montana, Arizona, Georgia, Tennessee, Oklahoma, and Kansas. With strong representation in many districts and jurisdictions across the United States.

The near-public mass executions carried out across Nevada throughout the morning of the second had raised an immediate national outcry, at least from a vocal minority. Yet the Attorney General had offered no condemnation.

“It is a states’ rights matter, handled through the state courts,” she had said. “Any challenge will have to work its way through the judicial system.” She had then added, with characteristic bluntness, “Mr. Veyl provided clear evidence establishing cause. He was duly deputized by the governor and the State Marshal Service and efficiently carried out the lawful duty assigned to him, without loss of innocent life and with minimal collateral damage. His actions facilitated the rescue of dozens of illegally detained and mistreated individuals, uncovered numerous mass-burial sites now under investigation, resolved

hundreds of missing-person cases and unsolved murders directly related to this organization, and resulted in a cleaner operation than might have been achieved by a substantially larger force.

"Moreover, his company, Raven Star, has, as I understand it, submitted substantial, actionable, chargeable evidence implicating more than three thousand spies, infiltrators, traitors, traffickers, serial killers, kidnappers, and pedophiles; found hundreds of missing persons; solved cold cases dating back decades; and continues to shatter spy-rings and criminal organizations across the U.S., Canada, and Europe."

The statement had immediately provoked calls for her resignation from the same vocal minority, while also painting those making such calls as villainous for opposing a clear criminal-justice miracle. Nevertheless, Ariana LeMelle now sat calmly in the secured conference room with Justin Vyss, her papers aligned and her expression unreadable, apparently unconcerned by the political firestorm raging beyond the walls—a storm that, though loud, most people regarded as rather ridiculous, rooted more in pure partisan politics than in reason or logic.

To Makris's left sat Secretary of Energy Lesandra Mansfield. A red-haired, green-eyed woman in her late thirties, thickly built, with a rounded face and wire-framed glasses. She wore a bright green satin dress that seemed almost defiantly vivid against the dark wood and muted suits surrounding her. She smiled faintly when she saw Vyss enter.

Lesandra was not a card-carrying member of the N.O.P. (by design), but she had been one of his closest confidantes for years. She understood the movement's long-term objectives better than many who publicly wore its emblem.

Lastly, his eyes fell upon Connor MacKenzie, Secretary of Homeland Security. MacKenzie was an aging, small-framed man with a bald head, dark eyes, and thick-framed glasses. He wore a plain black suit and tie, and a tiny smirk rested perpetually upon his thin lips, as though he knew one crucial fact that everyone else in the room had somehow overlooked.

A former Army JAG officer, former director of the FBI, and accomplished attorney, MacKenzie had been the most difficult of Harrison's nominees to confirm. Though registered as an Independent, he had voted for N.O.P. candidates as often as he had supported Democrats or Republicans. G.O.P. and N.O.P. members of Congress had ultimately carried him over the finish line against almost total D.N.C. opposition. Vyss himself had advocated for MacKenzie's confirmation behind the scenes.

These were among the most controversial appointments President Harrison had made. She had chosen them partly out of genuine respect for their competence and partly from the pragmatic necessity of currying favor with the N.O.P. In a three-party Congress, coalition-building had become more important than ever.

American politics was no longer a binary arena. The Natural Order Party grew with every election and was now projected to eclipse both older parties by 2028. It could no longer be dismissed as a fringe movement or temporary insurgency. It had to be treated as an ally—or, at the very least, as a power that could not safely be made an enemy.

Camela Harrison was a pragmatist, not an idealist. At least, she had been until recently. And if the snap polls were even remotely accurate, the events in Trembol Nevada, now held nearly ninety percent

public approval across the political spectrum. The operation was being credited almost entirely to N.O.P. governor Tom Wilson—who had only narrowly lost the presidential election of 2024—and to Justin Vyss, whose movement had framed the purge as the triumph of Natural Law over institutional corruption.

Vincent Veyl, meanwhile, had already been given a name by the press:

The Purgatorian. The name referred both to his religion and to the purgation of Trembol's corruption and villainy. Though others, mainly the religious, referred to him by the term, "Left Hand of God."

Droman waited until Vyss had fully entered the room, then pulled the heavy door closed behind him. The seals engaged with a muted mechanical compression, followed by the hard metallic click of the internal locks. He would remain outside—unmoving and unwavering—until the meeting had concluded. Of that, Justin had little doubt.

The room itself was cool, windowless, and deliberately unremarkable. Dark old wood paneling covered the walls, lending it the restrained gravity of a private boardroom from another century. Beneath that traditional surface, however, every inch had been engineered for secrecy.

Soundproofing had been built into the walls, ceiling, floor, and door. Concealed systems continuously monitored for electronic surveillance, signal intrusion, unauthorized transmissions, and the faintest suggestion of eavesdropping. Nothing spoken there was meant to leave the room except through the people seated within it.

President Harrison finally looked up from her tablet. Her eyes settled upon Vyss, then briefly upon the empty chair beside her. "Justin," it was not quite a greeting. It was an invitation to take his place. "Glad you could join us," Camela said, smiling brightly as he sat beside her.

He serenely faced those seated along the table to her left.

"Justin," Connor MacKenzie acknowledged tightly.

"Mr. Vyss," said Lesandra Mansfield, her greeting warmer.

"Blessings of the Silver Ray," he replied to them both—and to Ariana LeMelle and Alexander Makris, who answered with polite nods.

For a moment, the low mechanical hum of the secure room occupied the silence.

"So…" Camela drew a deep breath, held it, then released it all at once. "Whew. It has been quite a day, I'll tell you." Something in her posture loosened abruptly, as though she had dropped the presidential guard she wore everywhere beyond those walls.

"Your boy probably just won the N.O.P. a whole lot more seats across the country," LeMelle said, her approval unmistakable. "He also proved that the new approaches to justice are effective as hell."

"Mr. Veyl is unlike any soldier I have ever encountered," admitted Makris. The Secretary of Defense shook his head, caught somewhere between dismay and wonder. "And I have known some remarkable soldiers."

"He also recruited one of our best field agents," MacKenzie remarked, though without any real aggravation. Then he leaned forward slightly. "Have you seen the roundup coming in today?"

Vyss nodded. "I saw a SWAT team entering Porter Douglas's mansion on the way here."

MacKenzie nodded vehemently. "The man has been selling state secrets for twenty years, as it turns out. Can you believe it? The second-highest official at State." His thin smirk vanished. "And that is only the tip of the iceberg. We have arrests underway across the country—and inside our foreign embassies." He shook his head. "The FBI hasn't been this busy since the McCarthy era."

"Fifty-six senior and midlevel Pentagon staff have been arrested since this morning," Makris confirmed.

"People are switching parties so fast there may not be a G.O.P. left by midsummer," Lesandra said, lifting her water. Her hand trembled slightly, whether from excitement or disbelief. "We may be back to a two-party system before anyone realizes what happened." She took a careful sip. "Voters are changing party affiliations online in droves—from both parties. The numbers hardly look real."

"What concerns some of us," Makris interjected, lowering his voice, "is Governor Wilson." The room settled around him. "He has called a meeting of the Inner Circle—the International N.O.P. Inner Circle."

The big Greek shook his head, checking a list in his mind. "The presidents of Taiwan, Romania, Czechoslovakia, Armenia, Yugoslavia, Cyprus, Malta, Hungary, Georgia, Lithuania, Latvia, Bahrain, Kazakhstan, Argentina, Morocco, and several others..." His eyes lifted slightly as he consulted the list again, determined not to miss anyone. "They are already inbound. There are representatives coming from Kurdistan, for God's sake. Like some convention of unaligned nations. Governors. Senators. Congressional leaders. The whole damned lot of them are converging on Carson City as we speak."

Makris lowered his thick forearms onto the table and looked directly at Justin. "And those of us paid to watch such things are not blind to the encrypted calls Wilson has been making all day to senior military and law-enforcement officers." He allowed a brief pause to sharpen the point. "The scuttlebutt is that something happened during that meeting of yours with Vincent Veyl—something that has the N.O.P. excited about considerably more than the mass purging of bad-guys in some backwater sanctuary for rich perverts."

Vyss's eyes moved slowly from one face to another. He also knew what scuttlebutt meant in this instance. Homeland Security had an observation post directly across the street from 55 Arius Avenue, even as Imperial agents were watching the watchers. There was so much he wanted to tell the five people in this room. The greater difficulty lay in deciding how much wisdom required him to withhold—and how much foolishness the moment might warrant.

"The Carydin woman signed everything over to him," President Harrison said. Her words emerged as equal parts statement and question. "That is what we're hearing."

Vyss nodded. "Yes. She did." He paused, choosing his words. "She is grateful. She is also his great-aunt. He killed the rest of her surviving relatives and…" He gave a restrained shrug. "Frankly, she's a believer—if from the darker side of the equation."

"I have seen the video documentation," Camela said. "I spent part of yesterday and last night reviewing it with members of the staff, and I must say…" She raised one hand absently, as though still trying to organize her own response. "I don't blame her." She paused. "He's something from another age." Her expression tightened. "Terrifying—and, frankly, impressive."

"All Seven Bishops of the Order met with the Pope today," LeMelle said. "Our agents say they gave him something." She looked toward Vyss. "But what?"

No one answered.

Ariana turned her full attention upon him. "So—is he, Justin?"

"Is he the one?" Lesandra asked, no longer able to contain herself.

"What happened in that meeting," MacKenzie pressed, "that has world leaders pouring into Carson City to see Governor Wilson?"

"Is he what you believed he might be?" Makris added, throwing the full weight of his presence behind the collective question.

Camela's eyes widened slightly as they shifted around the table. "Whatever the answer, it does not leave this room." The words were reassurance and warning.

One by one, the officials nodded. Vyss did not. He remained still, looking down the length of the table at men and women who had waited for years—who had risked careers, reputations, fortunes, and perhaps their lives upon the answer to this question. They had backed him quietly, sometimes secretly, wagering that the coming of the Emperor would mean more than the emergence of another political figure, military prodigy, or religious curiosity.

"In a word," Justin Vyss said at last, "yes."

A collective breath escaped the room. Not quite a gasp. Not quite a sigh. Something mingling relief, accomplishment, and awe. For years, they had been running uphill toward a summit none of them could see. Now they had reached it almost without warning—and found themselves uncertain what to do with the view.

Vyss reached into the inner pocket of his white coat and removed a small sealed pouch. Then, from another pocket, a white glove. He drew it over one hand. Even through the pouch, its contents gave off a faint silvery-blue nimbus, flecked intermittently with sparks of white light.

"Most of the sample has already been transferred to a secure laboratory for analysis," he said. "But the preliminary readings…" He opened the pouch and allowed its contents to drop onto the table before him.

It was only a small piece of stone. Gray-blue. Irregular. No larger than a child's pinky. It resembled a fragment of limestone veined with quartz, yet light moved within it as though the mineral possessed a slow and living pulse. Tiny flecks appeared, vanished, and reappeared beneath its surface.

"What is it?" Lesandra whispered.

The others rose almost together and gathered around Vyss. Camela leaned closer from her chair, one hand braced against the edge of the table.

"Purgatorium," he answered. "That's what I'm calling it." Their faces turned toward him. "I watched Vincent reach across the planes and take it from the hand of himself—or a version of himself." He looked down at the fragment. "Not in another world." He paused. "On another plane of existence."

The claim might have been too much to accept—had the stone not begun humming softly upon the table. The sound was low and strangely soothing, almost beneath the threshold of hearing. It seemed less to enter through the ears than to resonate inside the bones of the skull.

"It is emitting radio signals," Vyss continued. "Centered on the 1.6-gigga-hertz band." He lifted the fragment carefully between two fingers. "Listen."

He held it near the President's ear. Camela leaned toward it. For several seconds, her expression remained uncertain. Then her entire face changed.

"It—oh, my God!" She drew back sharply, one hand rising to her mouth. "It's whispering." She stared at the stone. "That sounded like…" Her voice faltered. "That sounded like my uncle Benji, for God's sake!" Tears immediately welled in her eyes. He had been a light in her young life. "I could swear I heard Benji say, 'Hey, Cami.'" Whether from shock, recognition, or the sudden conviction that she truly had heard the dead, the President of the United States was visibly moved.

Vyss lowered the stone. Alexander Makris held out his hand. "Let me hear it." Justin brought the fragment near him.

The old general listened, then recoiled so violently that his chair rocked behind him. "No!" He stepped backward. "No. No… no, no, no." He turned away and paced the length of the secure room, then returned, one hand pressed against the back of his neck. "That wasn't a whisper." Everyone stared at him. "That was a voice." His eyes fixed upon the fragment. "My father has been dead for twenty-two years."

The others no longer crowded forward. They remained where they were, suddenly hesitant—afraid of what they might hear if the stone were placed near their own ears.

Makris continued pacing. "'Al,' he said. 'Al, I'm all right. It's not bad here.'" He stopped. "That is what he said." His gaze settled upon the small luminous fragment between Vyss's fingers. "My dead father is in Purgatoria." A strange, bewildered laugh escaped him. "I suppose that figures." He rubbed both hands over his face. "He was a bit of a bastard." Another breathless little laugh. "But a glorious bastard." Then Alexander began pacing again.

He was an old soldier, a former NATO commander, a man formed by reason, logistics, discipline, and relentless pragmatism. He had spent his life believing that every force could be measured, every signal traced, every threat identified and placed upon a map. Even the unknown, properly studied, could eventually be reduced to coordinates, probabilities, and lines of approach.

Yet now, in the President's secure conference room, a chip of silvery-bluish, sparkling stone, glowing in Vyss's hand had spoken to him in the voice of his dead father.

Justin carefully returned the fragment to its protective pouch and tucked it into the inner pocket of his white jacket.

It was not radioactive—not according to any conventional reading. But there were properties he had already observed that he preferred, for the moment, to keep to himself.

Alexander Makris finally returned to his chair. One by one, the others followed, the room settling slowly around them as though each person had to relearn the ordinary act of sitting.

Connor MacKenzie looked on thoughtfully, weighing, saying nothing, simply considering. He had, through Agent Omaris, and others, watched Vincent Veyl for two years, and knew more about him than most, including the existence of a hidden archive, recently found on a secret link on his website, to entire articles, he'd been writing about everything from Jungian psychology to metaphysics, political science to sociological reflections, dating back years.

Camela accepted a monogrammed handkerchief from the White Cardinal and dabbed carefully at her eyes.

"It's jarring, I know," Vyss said. "I had three conversations on the flight here." His tone was lightly amused. The seriousness beneath it was not.

Ariana LeMelle turned toward the President. "What happens now?" The question was not directed at Vyss. It belonged to Camela Harrison.

The President folded the handkerchief in her lap and looked at Justin. "What is his plan?" Then, after the briefest hesitation, she added, "The future Emperor of all humankind." The words sounded almost absurd in the cool, windowless room. Camela knew it. They all did. And yet the question had to be asked.

Vyss opened his mouth, but she raised one finger. "Not what your prophecies say he is." She paused. "Not what the Church wants him to become." Her eyes narrowed. "What does the man himself intend to do?"

Vyss considered that. "He is newly wedded," he began. "So, at present, secluded."

Camela, Ariana, and Lesandra glanced at each other, smiling slightly—the knowledge he'd married an older woman rather impressed older women.

Justin Vyss continued with a faint shrug. "He was also shot during the, well, during the purge." He reached into another pocket and placed a deformed bullet upon the table. The small piece of metal landed with a dull, unimpressive click. For several seconds, everyone simply looked at it.

"It was shown," Camela said. "The fight in that hallway. But not much of what happened afterward." Her eyes remained fixed upon the flattened round. "Vana Carydin and her little pet disappeared into that temple of hers. No cameras inside. He turned off his body camera after the fight." She paused. "But Veyl came back out bandaged and walking normally."

"Refused first aid," Makris added. "That's what I heard. Wilson mentioned it while speaking to the press."

"Yes," Vyss said, looking down at the bullet. "Pulled it out himself." He paused. "But the wound…" He stopped there. Their expressions told him they understood.

Ariana LeMelle leaned slightly forward. "That wasn't her question, Justin. Does he intend to accept the throne the N.O.P. and the Silver Order seem to be preparing to put him on?" There was something approaching anxiety in her voice. She, like nearly everyone in that room, had wagered an enormous amount upon Justin Vyss's vision; Political capital, Careers, Reputations, Alliances carefully built over years.

They had listened to his reports before the National Committee, his assessments of promising figures, sympathetic officials, military officers, judges, clergy, and governors.

They had listened as he identified those who might be brought quietly into alignment with the emerging movement—financiers, intelligence personnel, academics, industrialists, bureaucrats, commanders, and others whose influence might someday matter far more than their public titles suggested.

They had also listened to his reports on the Imperios Institute's imperial-candidate program, which tracked and cultivated promising young men and women across the planet. The Silver Church had maintained its own program and agenda long before Vyss arrived on the scene, and now he knew what it had produced. Unlike the Imperius Institute, the Church had never truly considered a field of candidates. It had possessed only one for more than two decades, as it turned out.

Veyl had appeared on Vyss's own list only a few years earlier. His command of languages, computing expertise, and combat record had put him on the board. The books had cemented him there. His master's capstone had driven him straight to the top.

"Well, Mr. Vyss?" Makris pressed.

Every eye turned toward him. Every ear waited.

Justin hesitated. For perhaps the first time since entering the room, he seemed uncertain—not of what he believed, but of how much he should reveal. There were things he ought to keep close, things no government, however sympathetic, needed to know yet. But these were not strangers. These people had invested themselves in his cause. If anyone deserved some measure of the truth, it was them.

Justin nodded slowly. "Honestly, I don't know what he intends to do. What he showed us…" He paused, searching for words that would not sound insane. "Miracles. Outright miracles. I don't feel at liberty to disclose everything—not yet. But he is definitely what the Ordo Argenteus has been expecting since Amil's prophecies of the sixth or seventh century. The things we saw were astounding. This"—he motioned toward his jacket and the stone within—"is only one piece. Other things, other samples, are in labs right now. The Argenteum Institute. The Nevada Technical Institute. Imperius." His expression tightened. "But Vincent was exhausted and injured. He made no promises. He refused to agree to anything. And frankly, nothing goes forward without his direct assistance."

The room seemed to hold its breath.

"But I have no doubt about who he is—what he is," Justin continued, looking from face to face. "None whatsoever. No one who entered that room yesterday left it the same person." His voice grew quieter. "What we saw…" He shook his head once. "He is beyond anything I dared hope for."

His hand rose to the pocket containing the stone, then his eyes returned to the deformed bullet upon the table. "This is only debris from the edge of it. What we saw beyond that rift –"

"Rift?" Makris repeated softly.

Justin's expression changed. For an instant, the polished political operative vanished, leaving behind a man still struggling to comprehend what his own eyes had shown him.

"It's all real," he said. "All of it. He reached across worlds—and then beyond worlds, into another plane altogether. We saw creatures, Life, Civilizations. We looked into an afterlife realm, and we didn't merely see it. We felt it. The wind. The air. The smell of the place. Its physical substance." He patted the pocket again. "Not through technology. He did it with his mind, his spirit—and then reached into it with his bare hand."

Vyss slowly looked around the table. "Do you understand the enormity of that?"

They did. That was the problem.

Every person in the room understood enough to know that the implications did not end with religion. They reached into physics, national security, military doctrine, energy, intelligence, medicine, human consciousness, and death itself. The foundations upon which civilization understood reality had suddenly become negotiable.

For several seconds, no one spoke. Then DHS Secretary Connor MacKenzie broke the silence. "Is there visual proof?" he asked. "We're hearing that a recording of the event is being shown to selected people." He leaned forward. "And the TAIFD unit—did you actually see it?"

Vyss gave a small shrug. He had secured the data pin, copied its contents onto a dozen isolated devices, and carried one of those copies in his other pocket, but he was keeping that to himself for now. He was still weighing whether the contents should be shared—and what the consequences might be if they were. The vision of Purgatoria had left him wrestling with thoughts that bordered upon despair: an aching desire to leave this world and go there. In the wrong hands—or merely before the wrong

eyes—such a vision might inspire grim ideations. A real concern he had that made him want to limit who saw it.

"I heard her."

MacKenzie frowned. "Her?"

"She spoke to us."

That drew another round of glances.

"And she was not what I expected." A breath escaped Vyss that nearly became a laugh, though there was no humor in it. "Not what anyone expected." His gaze drifted as he recalled the voice within the Raven Star conference room. "Whatever she was before, she is far beyond it now."

Makris leaned forward. "You believe the prototype has been upgraded?"

"I don't believe she is a prototype anymore." Vyss folded his hands upon the table. "Judging by what has been coming out of Raven Star LLC over the last several days, whatever Veyl originally built has already evolved into something substantially greater. He has been delivering extraordinary results for months. His financials have been well ahead of projections, and his investigative work was dead-on. But since the first of the month, everything has exploded—the volume, the speed, the complexity. Tens of thousands of files. Hundreds of hours of raw audio and video documenting the people he executed, their crimes, their associates, their money, everything. The documentary level presentation of investigative reports." His mouth tightened. "It isn't the next level. It's five levels above that. We've all seen the result in the mass arrests."

The room went quiet again, but the silence had changed. There was less disbelief in it now and more calculation. The officials exchanged looks carrying excitement, curiosity, apprehension—and something harder to name.

"The Chinese are not happy with Wilson—or with the president of Taiwan visiting Carson City," Makris said. "If Beijing believes Veyl is passing technology to Taipei, giving them some kind of strategic advantage…" The Secretary of Defense shook his head. "Well, shit."

"Many of the operatives Raven Star exposed—many of the traitors—are tied by clear chains of evidence directly to the CCP," MacKenzie said. "Cells all over the country have been rolled up for good measure." He gave a short, humorless laugh. "They are so pissed." His face hardened. "And the chatter indicates they know about TAIFD. The killings in Trembol are giving them pause though. Whatever else they think of Veyl, they no longer consider him an easy target."

"There's something else," Secretary of Energy Lesandra Mansfield said. Everyone turned toward her. "Three Raven Star patent filings entered classified review within the last week. All three appear to derive from the same underlying principles as TAIFD. The applications had been sitting in the patent backlog for months. We only understood what we were looking at after Trembol sent everyone digging through Raven Star's records and the minders flagged them."

Even Vyss looked surprised.

That mattered. These devices had not appeared overnight in the frenzy following Trembol. Veyl had been building toward them quietly for months.

"And when I say revolutionary," Mansfield continued, her eyes brightening, "I do not mean an incremental improvement. I mean that if even one of these devices functions as demonstrated, entire industries become obsolete. The world as we've known it, goes bye-bye in years."

The room's attention settled completely upon her. Mansfield seemed almost delighted to finally have the floor.

"The first is designated W-E-P-1."



She touched her tablet. The wall display came alive with laboratory footage of a matte-black spherical device resting upon a steel worktable beside an empty porcelain tub. A narrow opening cut across the sphere's face, while an amber component glowed near its base. Technical schematics filled the wall behind it.

Mansfield spoke over the recording.

"Water Exchange Prototype One."

Mansfield clicked the controller. A schematic appeared upon the large screen at the end of the room, then gave way to recorded video.

Vincent Veyl stood in a laboratory wearing a black-and-silver lab coat and clear safety glasses. Concrete walls, stainless-steel work surfaces, and exposed conduit surrounded him. The place looked more military than academic; less a university laboratory than a bunker where inconvenient laws of nature were taken apart.

In one hand, he held a matte-black sphere roughly the size of a basketball. A narrow horizontal opening crossed one side, and a tiny amber cube had been affixed near its base. Vincent held the device up briefly for the camera, then lowered it into an empty porcelain bathtub.

The recording lingered long enough to establish the facts. No supply lines. No hose. No faucet connection. No reservoir hidden nearby or pipe entering beneath the tub. The drain was plainly closed and stoppered.

Vincent stepped back. "Wep on."

A pulsing hum could be heard at once, deep and resonant. Water burst from the narrow opening in the sphere—not a trickle, but a hard, pressurized stream. It struck the porcelain with a roar and began filling the tub. Within seconds, the water level was visibly rising. Within a minute, it was climbing fast. Vincent watched without any particular excitement. Nothing had been attached to the sphere except the tiny amber cube. A digital flow meter appeared in one corner of the recording. The gallon count ratcheted steadily upward.

"Wep off." The stream stopped almost instantly. Vincent reached into the tub and removed the sphere. A final ribbon of water drained from its internal channel, and the device went inert in his hand. That was it. No dramatic flourish. No explanation. Just a clean demonstration of something that should not have been possible.

Then, with one hand, he scooped water from the tub and lifted it to his mouth. "Yum. Sweet, cool, fresh," he said cheerfully after swallowing. "Tests show it's pure, nutrient-rich, drinkable water. No parasites. Not even bacterial contamination, at least until the natural environment gets hold of it."

Camela stared at the screen. "Where did it come from?"

Nobody answered.

She pointed toward the frozen image. "That's nearly sixty gallons of water from something the size of a basketball."

MacKenzie was already on his feet. "How the hell is that possible?"

"I know, right?" Mansfield exclaimed. "And another segment in the same recording shows it running without interruption for hours." For a moment, she looked dangerously close to clapping. Professional restraint barely reasserted itself. "He created water from nothing. Did you see that?"

"Or moved it from somewhere," Makris said.

Mansfield turned toward him. "That is one of the arguments being made." Her laser pointer settled upon the amber cube attached near the bottom of the sphere. "That appears to be the critical component, the power source." She clicked the controller again. A new title appeared.

E.L.U.—ETHERIC LENSING UNIT



Vincent appeared once more in the same laboratory, this time standing beside a metal table. Upon it rested a tiny amber object no larger than one of a child's building blocks.

The camera moved closer.

It was a cube. Within it sat another cube, and within that, another—and another. As the lens tightened, the geometry grew stranger. The nested structures seemed to recede inward far beyond what the object's physical dimensions should have permitted.

At first, it looked like intricate machining. Then the image sharpened.

The walls of the inner structures were not entirely solid. They shimmered, almost liquid. A rich, golden radiance flowed through the crystalline geometry as though light itself circulated through hidden channels descending into impossible depth.

The camera magnified farther. More cubes emerged—smaller, deeper, receding endlessly toward a point the lens could never quite reach.

MacKenzie narrowed his eyes. "That can't physically fit inside itself."

"No," Mansfield said softly. "It can't."

On the recording, Vincent picked up the unit with his bare hand. Its radiance cast amber light through his fingers, bright enough to illuminate the bones beneath the skin, yet he showed no discomfort. No heat. No pain. He slowly rotated the device for the camera, giving it a clear view of every side, then placed it upon a matte-black pedestal bearing the initials E.L.U. in silver.

The pedestal had no visible connection to wall power. Vincent attached a heavy cable to its base. The other end ran to an entire rack of incandescent lamps—one hundred bulbs in ten neat rows.

He flipped a switch. Every bulb ignited at once, flooding the laboratory with hard white light.

Vincent walked slowly around the apparatus, deliberately allowing the camera to see behind the table, beneath it, along the walls, and across the bare laboratory floor. There was no generator, no battery bank, no concealed conduit, no power cable disappearing through a convenient hole.

Nothing, save the cube, as the source.

Only the tiny luminous cube at one end of the table, the single coaxial cable, and one hundred blazing lamps at the other.

Vincent crossed the room, indicating that the cable, from the one cube, ran beyond just the lights, and into a hole through the wall beside a nearby door, which he now opened. Beyond lay another room packed with appliances: refrigerators, electric heaters, industrial fans, microwave ovens, power tools, compressors, and several heavy electric motors.

Every damned one of them was running.

The heaters glowed. Fans hammered the air. Motors spun under load. Refrigerators hummed beside open microwave ovens while power saws screamed against clamped blocks of wood.

Vincent stood in the doorway, glanced back at the camera, and said, "Yeah."

Several people around the Washington table laughed involuntarily—not because it was funny, but because the human mind sometimes ran out of sensible responses and reached for whatever was left.

The recording shifted to technical schematics: equations, field diagrams, nested geometric matrices, lensing cones, and energy gradients intersecting what Mansfield's analysts had labeled:

ETHERIC SUBSTRATE / 5D LATTICE

None of the people in the room understood more than fragments of it. What stood out most was how little conventional machinery the device seemed to contain. No turbine, fuel cell, combustion chamber, generator coils, or significant moving parts. Nothing that should have produced so much as a spark.

Vincent's recorded voice returned. "It draws usable energy from the etheric lattice—the fifth-dimensional substrate surrounding and permeating ordinary space." His hand entered the frame and indicated the tiny cube. "What you're seeing is the basic demonstration model I built." He attached a digital gauge to the pedestal. Numbers began climbing across its display. "The practical limit is not the unit." Vincent looked toward the hundred burning bulbs. "It's the infrastructure attached to it." His gaze shifted to the electrical cables. "Existing wiring cannot carry the unit's maximum output without catastrophic thermal failure." Then he looked directly into the camera, having stepped back into a booth at one end of the room. "Watch."

A subtle pulse passed through the E.L.U. —not an explosion or even a flash, only a momentary deepening of its golden light. Every bulb in the rack surged white. Then they began exploding.

Glass burst across the laboratory in rapid succession. In the adjoining chamber, appliances shrieked as motors accelerated violently beyond their tolerances. Breakers arced, wiring ignited, and smoke

erupted from several housings. A refrigerator compressor ruptured with a metallic bang. One of the heaters began burning from the inside while electrical panels flashed blue-white against the walls. Within seconds, the automatic suppression system activated, drowning both rooms beneath churning clouds of dry chemical powder.

The cable attached to the E.L.U. pedestal glowed orange, then sagged under its own weight. Its insulation blackened and vaporized. Molten copper spilled across the floor in incandescent droplets until the connection finally burned through. The E.L.U. continued glowing. Unharmed.

Vincent calmly walked over and reached down through the haze and picked it up with his bare hand. He turned it toward the camera. The cube was not scorched, melted, or discolored. Apparently, it was not even warm. "This particular unit," he said, "has a tested continuous capacity of approximately five hundred megawatts." He smiled. It was not a particularly large smile. Somehow, that made it considerably worse.

Camela stared at the tiny cube on the screen. "Five hundred megawatts!? From that!"

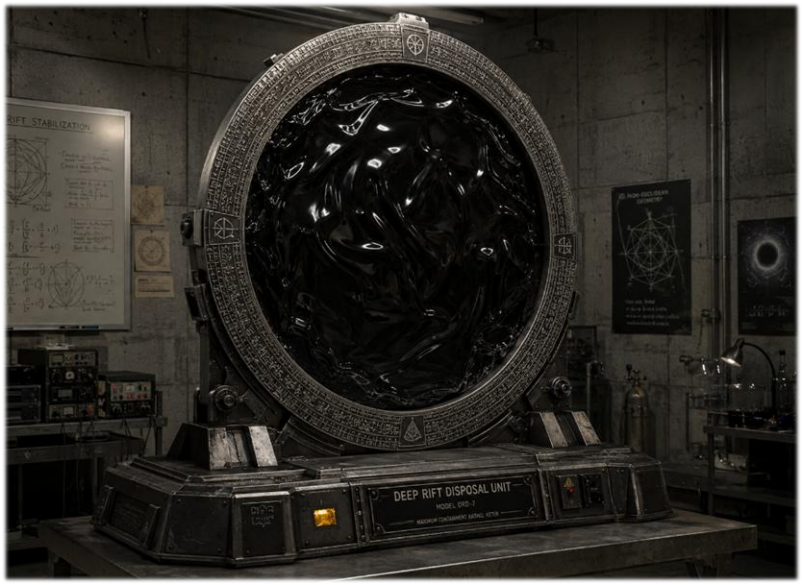
"A 500-megawatt output is the size of a large, utility-scale power station, such as a major natural gas turbine facility or a massive solar and battery farm," Makris said. "You're talking enough to power hundreds of thousands of homes simultaneously."

Mansfield nodded. "The equations work." Her excitement had sharpened into something close to frustration. "That's the maddening part. The theoretical model is internally coherent. Our physicists can follow portions of it." She gestured toward the equations filling the screen. "The energy accounting appears to balance once you accept the existence of an extra-dimensional exchange medium." She returned to the magnified image of the E.L.U. "But the unit itself is constructed from materials we cannot duplicate." Her pointer circled the shimmering, liquid-solid geometry of cubes nested within cubes. "It resembles what little we understand of the Trinity architecture—interdimensional mechanics, higher-dimensional field compression, what Veyl calls etheric lensing." Mansfield shook her head. "The principles can be written mathematically. They can even be modeled. But under normal material conditions, they cannot be built." She looked around the table. "We do not understand how he manufactures this."

The Secretary of Energy looked simultaneously offended and ecstatic, like Vincent Veyl had personally violated the laws of physics without first filing the proper paperwork. Mansfield clicked the controller again.

"Which brings us to the D.R.D.U. The most recent invention to enter the pipeline. The screen changed. Vincent once more stood inside the underground laboratory, although this section appeared much older—a bare concrete chamber that might once have belonged to a basement or military bunker.

"The Deep Rift Disposal Unit," Vincent said on the recording.



Beside him stood what appeared at first to be a large metal hoop mounted vertically upon a reinforced base. The ring was roughly the diameter of a hula hoop, its entire circumference engraved with dense geometric markings—equations, symbols, sigils, or some bastard union of all three.

A glossy black surface hung within the ring.

It was not darkness visible through the opening, but an actual surface: liquid, reflective, almost oily. Faint ripples moved across it despite the dead air of the concrete chamber.

Makris stared at the screen. "What the hell is holding that up?"

The camera began circling the apparatus, and the device became considerably stranger.

From behind, there was nothing inside the ring. No black surface, no membrane, no distortion. Only empty space. Vincent stepped around the unit and passed his hand freely through its open center. The camera followed his hand through from the rear. Nothing resisted him. Nothing shimmered or bent.

Then the camera returned to the front, and the black liquid curtain was there again.

MacKenzie leaned forward. "It's one-sided?"

"Apparently," Mansfield said.

On the recording, Vincent picked up a crumpled paper bag, crushed it tighter between his hands, and tossed it at the black surface. The bag passed through the membranic surface without resistance—not through the hoop, but into it.

For several seconds, the camera could still see the paper bag beyond the threshold, though it was plainly no longer inside the chamber. It drifted through profound darkness as if cast into lightless

space. Then its edges began to fray. The paper faded into particles; the particles stretched into thin gray threads, dissolved, and vanished.

Vincent looked toward the camera. "Yeah."

Camela whispered something under her breath that sounded suspiciously like a prayer.

Vincent next picked up several spent batteries and tossed them one at a time into the black aperture. Again, they did not emerge from the rear of the hoop.

The camera immediately moved behind the device. There was only the empty chamber: concrete wall, metal table, bare floor. No batteries.

When the camera returned to the front, the batteries remained visible within the black field, drifting slowly into what appeared to be infinite depth. They dwindled, warped, and stretched out of shape before disappearing one after another.

Makris pushed back his chair and stood. "No."

No one answered him. "There has to be another endpoint."

Mansfield said nothing.

On the screen, Vincent picked up a pitcher of greasy, filthy water—a black-gray slurry of oil, dirt, sediment, and what appeared to be pulverized industrial waste.

Instead of pouring it directly into the aperture, he tipped the pitcher several inches in front of it. The liquid should have fallen onto the table.

It did not.

The stream bent sideways in midair. The entire foul mass curved toward the black field as though gravity itself had changed direction and was sucked silently through.

Beyond the threshold, the liquid separated into drifting globules. The water vanished first. Heavier particles remained visible somewhat longer, floating like dust among nonexistent stars, before they too thinned, stretched, and dissolved into the dark.

The camera moved down to the base of the device. Again, there was no conventional power source—only another tiny amber cube embedded within the support structure, no larger than a gaming die and quietly luminous.

Vincent regarded the aperture. "Off."

The black curtain collapsed inward. For the smallest fraction of a second, a blue-white point burned at the center of the hoop, then winked out. Only empty space remained.

Vincent looked toward the camera. "Anything can be introduced through the active event horizon—waste, toxic substances, radioactive material, biological contaminants, industrial byproducts. Essentially anything capable of physically crossing the aperture."

He gestured toward the now-empty ring. "The receiving throat opens into a deep-rift region beyond ordinary material space. For practical purposes, think of it as a bottomless hole at the far end of the cosmos." He said it as casually as a man explaining a garbage disposal. "Of course, deployed working units will include safeguards to prevent living creatures from crossing the threshold. And, by necessity, it is a one-way street."

The recording ended.

No one spoke. The screen remained frozen upon the empty metal ring, and even Justin Vyss appeared stunned. The phrase living creatures had landed harder than Vincent seemed to understand—or perhaps he understood perfectly well and simply did not give a damn.

Mansfield finally broke the silence. "Three patent filings." She changed the display, placing the devices side by side:

W.E.P.—WATER EXCHANGE PROTOTYPE... E.L.U.—ETHERIC LENSING UNIT... D.R.D.U.—DEEP RIFT DISPOSAL UNIT

"Three different applications," she said, looking around the table. "The same underlying mechanics." The diagrams slid together and layered over one another. In each, the amber cube appeared at the center—a tiny geometric heart around which conventional physics bent like warm iron. "These are not technologies in the sense that we normally use the word." Mansfield hesitated, plainly hating the inadequacy of her own language. "This is something else."

Vyss continued staring at the screen. Then he remembered the discussion from three nights earlier—the public police-blotter thread concerning Deputy Meghan Dellon's resignation and the comment Vincent had posted beneath it. He repeated the words aloud. "It is not primarily a matter of physics, but metaphysics." The others looked toward him, but Vyss kept his eyes fixed upon the three devices. "Meta-physics." The word seemed to hang in the room.

Camela slowly turned toward him. Her gaze dropped to his jacket—to the inner pocket containing the little stone fragment he had brought back from the other side. Then she pointed directly at it. "No. This is magic." Nobody laughed. "He showed you exactly how he's doing it." Her finger remained aimed at the stone beneath his coat. "He isn't violating the laws of nature." She looked back at the frozen image of Vincent Veyl. "He has access to more nature than we do."

Lesandra appeared positively delighted by the implications. Her fascination bordered on professional joy, like a child discovering that the monster beneath the bed was real and immediately wanting to cut it open.

"These devices," she said, motioning toward the display, "will transform the world. No more waste dumps. No more water shortages. No more dirty power plants. No more massive server farms. The power units might even be able to run cars, planes, and yes, even spacecraft."

Her words landed like bricks of truth and realization, welcome and overwhelming at once. The implications reverberated through every mind and heart in the room.

Everyone else was considerably less comfortable. They were amazed, certainly, but pleased? Not really. The ramifications were too enormous. The D.R.D.U. remained frozen on the screen: the steel ring, the impossible aperture, and Vincent Veyl standing beside it with that faint, knowing smirk on his face.

The recording was three months old.

Mansfield opened the accompanying records. "He's been building these just since leaving the Army. He must've had a workshop in Bayville."

Vyss stared at the three devices displayed side by side. "It's all the same technology," Vyss said. "The same thing he did in the meeting yesterday when he opened that space-time portal. The difference is that here, he's anchoring the thresholds to specific physical frames." He spoke slowly, assembling the thought as he went. "And I find something rather ironic about that."

Camela looked toward him.

"During the Trembol purge, Veyl claimed the operational designation Psychopomp. It's there in the audio and video recordings." Vyss paused, but no one interrupted. "That is also the traditional function associated with Oreviel—the supreme cosmic psychopomp. Guide and sorter of the dead. Lord of the Doors. King of the Crossroads." He rose and approached the screen, his eyes moving between the Water Exchange Prototype, the Etheric Lensing Unit, and the Deep Rift Disposal Unit. "It's the root of the old Prophecy of the Crossroads." He gestured absently, his attention increasingly captured by the pattern. "Crossroads were never merely intersections. In the ancient world, they were liminal ground—territory belonging fully to neither road nor either direction. Places where boundaries became uncertain." His voice lowered. "The condemned were executed there. Bodies were displayed there. Crow-cages were erected there. The dead were left hanging at the meeting of roads, between settlement and wilderness, law and exile, life and whatever the hell came next."

MacKenzie's expression tightened.

"And then there is the Western Gate." Vyss turned slightly toward the others. "Across culture after culture, west is associated with descent—the setting sun, the dying light, the road beyond the horizon. In Egypt, the necropolises lay toward the west. In other traditions, the dead journey westward. Islands of the blessed, countries beyond sunset, gates into the underworld—the names change, but the pattern keeps coming back."

He tapped the image of the D.R.D.U. "A threshold." His finger moved to the W.E.P. "Another threshold." Then the E.L.U. "Another." Finally, he indicated the frozen image of Vincent. "And him."

Silence settled over the room.

"His entire technological architecture is built around the same principle," Vyss continued, looking back at the impossible black aperture. "Not generation. Not creation from nothing. Exchange. Translation. Passage."

He pointed toward the W.E.P. "The water does not necessarily have to be created. It may simply be brought across a boundary from somewhere else." His finger shifted toward the E.L.U. "The energy is not manufactured in any conventional sense. The device opens a controlled interface with an energetic substrate already present beyond ordinary dimensional space." Then he indicated the D.R.D.U. "And this does not destroy matter. It sends it somewhere else."

The realization settled over the room. Everything Vincent had built appeared to perform the same fundamental act: Open a boundary. Establish a controlled crossing. Move something through it. Close the boundary again. Matter, Energy, Information, Perhaps consciousness, Perhaps souls.

Vyss slowly shook his head, his voice becoming almost reverent. "It's all about gates, portals, doors. The Crossroads." His gaze returned to the faint smirk on Vincent's frozen face. "He has somehow mastered thresholds."

"The Star-Road Gates," Lesandra said, motioning toward the image on the screen. "He's already opened them."

"Yep." Vyss patted the inside pocket of his jacket, removed his device, and pulled up an image before transmitting it to each of them. "This is from the Silver Compendium, Volume Seven."

Vyss looked around the table. "The Star Roads."

Several phones and tablets chimed almost at once. "The original text is more than a thousand years old."



Lesandra studied the image for several seconds, then enlarged it. Her eyes widened. "Oh."

The diagram was dense and strange: concentric regions, intersecting planes, routes between spheres, vertical divisions, gates, and symbolic correspondences. Ancient handwritten notations survived

beneath layers of later translation, preserved through generations of copying long before the modern labels had been added.

Understanding dawned across Lesandra's face. "It's a schematic of the metaphysical universe."

"More or less," Vyss said.

Makris remained fixed upon the frozen image of the D.R.D.U. "Think of it as a bottomless hole at the far end of the cosmos."

Lesandra glanced sharply at him, then back at the diagram. Without another word, she transferred the image from her device to the room's main display. The D.R.D.U. vanished, and the ancient chart filled the wall. Everyone leaned forward.

Vyss approached the screen and traced his finger downward through the layered cosmology, passing higher regions, inhabited planes, and zones marked with names none of them immediately recognized. Near the bottom, he stopped. "Here."

His fingertip rested upon a dark region labeled: OBSYDIA—The Abyss.
The room went quiet.

Vyss looked back at Makris. "The far end of the cosmos."

Makris stared at the name. "You think that thing was dumping matter into that?"

"I think Vincent knew exactly what he meant when he said it."

Lesandra enlarged the lower portion of the diagram. Finer markings emerged around Obsydia—arrows, boundaries, and old symbols denoting descent, dissolution, distance, and passage. Her fascination returned in full force. "This isn't mythology presented as poetry. It's organized. Mapped."

Vyss nodded. "Star Roads."

"Routes," Ariana murmured.

"Between planes," Lesandra said.

"Between worlds," Vyss corrected softly.

No one spoke for several seconds. Camela looked from the thousand-year-old diagram to the patent schematics minimized along the edge of the display. "So Veyl didn't invent the idea."

"No," Vyss said, his gaze still fixed upon the chart. "He figured out how to build the doors."

President Harrison motioned toward the ancient diagram. "He used this as a map—not as some figurative sketch, but as an actual map."

"Then we need to treat it like one." Lesandra leaned forward, studying the layered paths, gates, and named regions with renewed intensity. "If Veyl designed those devices using this cosmology as a genuine spatial model, then whatever our scientists think they're looking at is incomplete without it."

Camela glanced toward her. "You think it will help them understand the technology?"

"I don't know," Lesandra admitted. "Maybe not immediately, but it gives them another piece of the puzzle." She traced one of the ancient routes across the display and stopped over a marked threshold. "They've been trying to reverse-engineer machinery while assuming the machinery operates entirely within conventional space."

Lesandra looked around the room. "What if it doesn't?" When no one answered, she turned back toward the thousand-year-old map. "If these diagrams describe actual relationships between planes—actual locations, distances, boundaries, and routes—then the schematics aren't merely electrical or mechanical. They're geographical."

A faint smile returned to her face as she studied the chart. "And if Veyl is navigating those regions mechanically, then they aren't merely spiritual abstractions either. They exist—as tangible structures of time, space, and mind."

That last word lingered strangely in the room.

MacKenzie shifted in his chair. "Whatever the case, if he can manufacture these devices—if he can put them into production—then we have an entirely different problem."

Everyone looked toward him as he gestured toward the three patent diagrams minimized along the edge of the display. "He could become the wealthiest man who has ever lived, and probably the most powerful. Water without wells, reservoirs, pipelines, or desalination plants. Energy without fuel, combustion, or reactors—and eventually, perhaps, without electrical grids as we currently understand them. Waste disposal into someplace outside ordinary physical space."

MacKenzie shook his head. "If he is the only man who can make the underlying mechanics work, then money becomes almost beside the point. It gives him civilizational power." The phrase settled uneasily over the table. "And anyone he gives it to—whatever nation, alliance, movement, or faction he chooses to back with this technology—is going to win." MacKenzie looked toward President Harrison. "Not eventually. Not after a generation. They're going to fucking win."

Camela's eyes narrowed. "Win what?"

MacKenzie hesitated.

Vyss answered for him. "Everything."

Makris slowly leaned back in his chair. Then, almost despite himself, a smile touched his face. "The Emperor Cometh." The old N.O.P. greeting sounded different now. Not quite a joke. Not quite a prophecy. Makris shook his head, still faintly smiling. "But is the Emperor ours?"

The question seemed directed as much toward himself as anyone else. Every eye shifted to Vyss.

Justin did not answer immediately. “He clearly has a plan, but it's his own,” he admitted at last, motioning to the chart on the wall. The room went completely still.

“A plan for what?” Camela asked.

Vyss looked toward her. “For what comes next.” He let that settle before continuing. “But I have to say it plainly: he told us outright that he would not give us the technology. Trinity made it equally clear that she serves him—not me, not the N.O.P., and certainly not the United States government.” He switched the display back to the three devices. “And the technology did not open the rift. He did. These devices operate the same way: he built physical anchor points for crossings he can already make himself.” Vyss studied the amber cubes at the heart of the schematics. “We cannot even safely assume he constructed them with tools. He may have built them in some higher-dimensional state and manifested them here through mind and spirit. For all we know, the visible machinery is only the part our reality can hold.”

Ariana frowned. “So, what is our play going forward?”

“He won't give us the technology. We can't build it.”

Camela studied him carefully. “He gave no terms for your little world domination project," she grinned?

“He showed gates can be opened—but likely, in truth, was illustrating that humanity is not ready for what's out there.” Vyss’s expression registered that the admission hurt to make. “But he's already building tech that can transform the world, and deploying it himself.”

Camela sat with the tip of her pen resting lightly between her teeth, her gaze moving from Justin Vyss to the screen and then across the assembled council. She could almost feel the seething disdain beyond that room—the outrage among Washington’s old establishment at the sheer gall of what she had done.

She had met privately with Vyss. She had permitted members of the Natural Order Party within her own Cabinet to gather behind closed doors. Worse, in the eyes of the old guard, the President of the United States was treating the N.O.P. not as a fringe movement to be contained, but as a political force worthy of direct consultation.

Her principal rival, Tom Wilson, had come within a breath of winning the presidency. That fact alone had stunned Republicans and Democrats alike, but Wilson’s narrow defeat concealed the larger upheaval. The N.O.P. had won enough races at every level—governors, legislators, congressmen, sheriffs, judges, and state officials—to establish itself as a genuine third pillar of American politics. Its influence was also spreading through the military and federal bureaucracy, where party loyalty was harder to count and considerably more dangerous to underestimate.

The old two-party establishment had survived the election, but it had not survived unchanged. The G.O.P. had finished behind the N.O.P., a humiliation few Republican leaders had believed possible until the returns were staring them in the face.

Across Washington, people who had spent generations assuming power would pass forever between two camps were beginning to understand that a third had kicked in the door and had no intention of leaving. That frightened the old guard on both sides.

Camela had merely accepted the ugly arithmetic sooner than most. She could spend her presidency manufacturing enemies out of nearly a third of the electorate, or she could build a coalition and get something done before the whole damned country tore itself apart.

She removed the pen from her mouth and laid it quietly on the table. "We don't fight him." Her voice was cool and certain. "He's a mercenary messiah. That's what they're calling him."

She picked up the remote and changed the display. The ancient Star-Road diagram disappeared, replaced by Vincent Veyl standing beside the silvery hoop of the Deep Rift Disposal Unit, that faint, almost irritating smirk still on his face.

"Meaning," Camela continued, "that whatever else he may be, he can be negotiated with."

Vyss watched her closely.

"Mercenaries work for someone," she said, leaning back in her chair. "And America can make a very compelling offer."

Makris shifted slightly. "You're assuming he goes to the highest bidder."

"I'm assuming the word mercenary means something." Her gaze returned to the screen. "My reading of Veyl is that he doesn't actually want to be king. He wants to be left alone."

That drew the slightest smile from Vyss, and Camela noticed it.

"But he also wants a say," she continued. "A seat at the table. Enough authority over his own work that no government, corporation, military, or intelligence service can simply walk in and take it from him. He builds everything himself and controls every critical step—the salvaged materials, or whatever otherworldly process he uses to make them; the handcrafted architecture; the operating principles; the interface. He files enough information to establish ownership and legal protection, but not enough for anyone else to reproduce the essential mechanism."

Her eyes narrowed as she looked toward Mansfield. "You can't simply steal the idea, and you can't reverse-engineer the finished product."

"Not presently," Mansfield admitted.

"Exactly." Camela tapped the pen once against the table. "Control. And it isn't stupid. If we kill him, humanity may lose whatever future those machines represent. If we arrest him, we gain nothing." Her gaze shifted first to Makris, then MacKenzie. "His military profile is clear. Torture would accomplish even less. Given everything Mr. Vyss has told us, I suspect all torture would accomplish is making Vincent Veyl profoundly angry. And if we somehow managed to steal his work, we might create the worst enemy mankind has faced since the Devil fell from Heaven." Nobody found that amusing.

"And then we lose," Camela said, returning her attention to Vincent's image. "We cannot leave him unprotected either. He has become the most strategically valuable individual on the planet." She searched briefly for the comparison. "He's the nuclear arsenal and Fort Knox wrapped into one man."

Makris nodded grimly. "Except Fort Knox doesn't shoot back."

Vyss almost smiled again. Camela ignored him. "We can't control Veyl." The admission came easily—perhaps too easily for a President. "But we may be able to bargain with him." She turned fully toward Justin. "Our plans are meaningless. We need to get that through our heads. It is his plan we must understand. Then we determine where we fit into it and how we can 'help.' So, what, Mr. Vyss, do you imagine that plan entails?"

Vyss's expression changed. For a moment, he said nothing, and the room seemed to sense the boundary. Beyond this point, Justin Vyss would be sharing things never intended for Washington.

"Yesterday, he overthrew the Trembol mafia, opened a gate to another world, got married," Vyss said at last. "Today, I'm told new officers are already reporting for duty, and the Order is backing his play. Within a week, he'll control the city government outright. He combined Vana's shares with his own and took control of the bank. He went from multimillionaire to multibillionaire in two days, and even apart from Vana's assets, my sources say his company is generating millions more every day."

He glanced at the three devices. "He built Trinity while lying in a hospital recovering from a gunshot wound. In less than a year, he built three more interdimensional devices and apparently improved the core technology itself. Yesterday, he killed two hundred and thirty-four people in four hours and made three-point-seven million dollars doing it. My point being –"

"He moves fast," Camela cut in. "He's driven—driving toward a goal only he understands." She gave the word its full weight. "Driven." Then the truth struck her, and a slow smile touched her face. "He's building his own empire. Whatever you and your compatriots may think, Justin, he isn't being roped into yours."

The distinction drew every eye in the room.

Ariana frowned. "What does that mean?"

Justin hesitated, looking from Vincent's image to the deformed bullet lying on the table before turning back to the President. "It means the Emperor has come—but the Emperor will rule." The realization sank into his soul with a leaden weight.

Secretary MacKenzie reached for the controller, and the screen changed. Vincent, his inventions, and the diagrams vanished, replaced by a live camera feed from Carson City. The Governor's Mansion filled the display. Black vehicles lined the street while security personnel moved along the perimeter, and more cars continued to arrive. Foreign flags could be seen among the motorcade standards.

MacKenzie watched the feed for several seconds. "Seems to me the choice has already been made. They're laying their crowns at his feet in absentia—whether or not he asked them to. And you, Mr. Vyss, are here with us."

He turned from the screen. "Did you plan this with Governor Wilson? I'm thinking not. And I think you know there are two N.O.P.s. Have been for two years now. One is trying to build consensus: sitting here with the President of the United States, traveling around giving intellectual lectures, reasoning with the public and the academics. The other is building an integrated international army, interlinking financial and logistical systems, planning a unified currency, and right now securing its base, informing its innermost membership, lining up its ranks, and preparing to anoint a king—an emperor. Force a crown onto his head, if they have to." He said it coolly, almost clinically.

Justin Vyss was not unaffected by the statement. He could see the truth in it, even as he wondered which N.O.P. Makris considered himself part of... though he already had a fair idea. Vyss had been the voice and the pen, the theoretician and visionary, but he had left the heavy lifting—the nuts-and-bolts work of building and running the party—to men like Tom Wilson.

The Church, and particularly the Silver Order, had been part of the equation from the beginning. Justin had grown up within it, and from it had become what and who he was, though he had long ago outgrown its narrower theology in favor of a more universal vision. The Church had its own agenda: not so much the Imperial Republic as the Kingdom Come; New Urusalim and the coming of Melchizedek, the Priest-King of the Crossroads.

Vyss frowned. "There are not two—only a right hand and a left. Just as those who see Vincent and myself as separate are mistaken. Even he is mistaken." His voice remained calm, without defensiveness. "I know my role. I have always known it, and I have embraced it—not for the rewards of this." He motioned toward the room. "But because I believe in and serve an eternal purpose, just as Vincent does. We can try to fight it. We can go our own ways. But in the end, we both serve the same divine will, expressed through morning and twilight. We are brothers of the same Father-Mother—a parent we both love and desire to please, each in our own way."

The answer was calm, reflective, and gentle. It stripped MacKenzie of his smirk and took away the stick with which he had been prodding the erudite scholar-philosopher. "I am the forerunner," Vyss added, with grim recognition. "Not the outcome."

A strange chill passed through the gathering. They saw Justin differently in that moment. The veil of raw ambition they had projected onto him melted away, revealing a genuine idealist beneath; a servant of Providence who understood that his role was subordinate and accepted that truth without shame or any sense of inferiority.

Camela turned back toward him, a question in her eyes that she did not immediately voice. Justin knew that look.

Over the years, he had become far more than another political adviser. Very few people tolerated Camela Harrison well at close range—her directness, impatience, temper, and almost ruthless pragmatism. Most either flattered her, feared her, argued with her, or eventually learned to conceal what they truly thought.

Vyss did none of those things. Perhaps it was his training as a psychologist, his years as a political theorist, or simply his understanding that most of her bluster was never personal. He listened. He translated. He challenged her when necessary. More importantly, he never betrayed a confidence. When Camela told Justin Vyss something private—truly private—it stopped with him.

Somewhere along the way, he had ceased being merely useful. He had become her friend.

She searched his face now. Justin smirked as he recalled Vincent's comment about answering to his mistress. "He knew I was coming here."

The full weight of everything they had discussed descended upon the room. No one spoke. For several minutes, there was only stillness—the whisper of climate control, the faint electric hum of secured equipment, and the occasional muted movement beyond the sealed door.

Inside, five of the most powerful people in the American government simply sat, thinking, sifting, calculating—reconstructing the world they had understood that morning around the things they now knew.

Of everything Vyss had said, one statement seemed to settle deepest into their collective consideration: Vincent Veyl might well already be more powerful than all the nuclear arsenals and gold reserves on the planet combined.

The Secretary of Defense finally broke the silence. "If China moves against Taiwan…" He hesitated. "…or against Veyl?"

Vyss looked toward him and gave a faint shrug. "Honestly, I don't know. But I think, I feel, that China, and we ourselves, would discover very quickly that we"—he motioned around the room, as though encompassing the greater world beyond it—"are already at a disadvantage." His expression tightened. "Ultimately, he wants to be left alone."

"Then maybe we just do that," Connor MacKenzie offered, the slightest grin behind the words. "Let him do his thing. Make sure nobody bothers him while he's doing it."

The answer was strangely brilliant in its simplicity. Camela cocked her head, considering it.

The political landscape had changed within the span of an hour. Perhaps the future itself had changed with it.

Connor knew which side of the line he stood on. Everyone in the room knew, everyone, perhaps, except Camela. She looked slowly around the table, becoming acutely aware for the first time of the composition of the room around her. These were not merely advisers. They were Natural Order Party supporters, even if they veiled that in their public lives. Partisans. Some openly N.O.P., others sympathetic, and still others already far deeper into the movement than she had allowed herself to recognize.

Increasingly, they looked pleased. Not blindly enthusiastic or naïve, but vindicated. Their predictions, ambitions, political theories—the things for which they had risked careers and reputations—were suddenly no longer hypothetical. The future they had been preparing for had become possible.

Camela looked toward Vyss. "I will need to meet him."

Justin's expression barely changed.

"Directly," she added. "There's no point pretending otherwise." She sat straighter. "I will not bend the knee."

No one challenged her.

"But someone needs to advocate for America's place in whatever this becomes. Our role. Our survival." Her gaze returned to Vincent's image. "And I need to look him in the face myself. I need to know what kind of man he actually is."

She studied Vincent on the screen as though the frozen image might answer her, then began reasoning aloud, assembling what she knew. "He's a patriot. His record strongly suggests that. His sense of honor appears genuine. His concept of righteousness is severe—old-fashioned, perhaps—but consistent." Her eyes narrowed. "Pragmatic idealism."

Vyss gave the smallest nod, and that seemed to satisfy her.

"What will America's role be?" Camela asked. No one answered immediately. "What does America become inside this broader system of world government?" She looked directly at Justin. "The Imperial Republic was one thing."

She paused. "But what I see is that Veyl has his own plans, and we need to know where we fit into them."

Vyss shrugged. "I believe he will eventually make those plans clear."

Camela raised one eyebrow. "I would prefer to hear them from him."

Vyss nodded slightly, but before he could answer, her secure tablet buzzed upon the table. Every head turned.

Camela stared at it. Her eyes widened, and her jaw actually dropped. That alone frightened the others.

Calls did not simply arrive in this room. Messages certainly did not. The communications architecture surrounding the meeting was isolated, filtered, screened, encrypted, monitored, and physically hardened. Anything reaching the President through that particular device had already survived multiple layers of security and human review.

Yet there it was.

Camela picked up the tablet. The display showed RAVEN STAR LLC. She turned it so everyone could see, and every face changed. Even Vyss looked genuinely startled. Then, slowly, almost knowingly, he began to smile.

Camela touched the notification, and a woman's voice filled the room.

"Madam President, your appointment is confirmed for 6 p.m. on June eighth. Raven Star Building, Fifty-five Arius Avenue, Trembol, Nevada." The voice was calm, natural, and almost disconcertingly human. "You may bring one additional person. Due to proprietary and security concerns, your

protective detail will remain outside the secured interior. Rooftop access will be provided for federal air-support and emergency-extraction assets." The voice paused. "Your safety is guaranteed."

The message ended.

Camela stared at the tablet.

Vyss spoke first. "Trinity."

Camela looked at him. "That was Trinity?"

He nodded.

Her surprise deepened. "She sounds like a person."

"She isn't AI," Justin said simply, and the room went very still.

Lesandra's eyes brightened. The professional mask she had maintained through most of the meeting had almost completely fallen away. "Then what is she?"

Vyss looked around the table. The advisers had changed during the past hour. At the beginning, they had been Cabinet officers and government officials—Americans confronting an anomalous national-security problem. They had asked cautious questions, weighed threats, considered containment, and calculated political consequences.

Now something else had begun replacing those instincts: the dawning realization that the old world might already be finished without knowing it.

Every one of them understood, at least privately, where they stood. Each had already received a secure invitation to meet with Governor Wilson. None had yet accepted, but the invitations existed. Justin saw little reason to continue pretending.

"TAIFD isn't really a computer," he said. Lesandra leaned closer. "It's a lens. A channel—like all his technology, a portal." He searched for the best word. "A medium."

Vyss gestured vaguely toward the air around them. "It focuses something living—something ancient, vast, intelligent, and powerful—through an impossibly narrow aperture into our world. The device provides structure, interface, and translation. But the true channel…" His expression darkened slightly. "The real medium—the anchor point—is Vincent Veyl."

Lesandra stared at him.

Makris recovered first.

"Whatever Trinity is," Makris said, "she just bypassed every safeguard in this facility." His eyes moved around the secure room. "Every firewall, every screening system, every communications filter." He looked toward the President's tablet. "She reached directly into one of the most secure rooms on the

planet. And judging by the timing…" His expression hardened. "She wasn't merely able to contact us. She was listening."

The words chilled the room. Makris looked toward the ceiling almost involuntarily. "Hell, she's probably listening right now."

Every phone in the room spoke at once.

"Absolutely true, Mr. Makris."

No one moved. For perhaps half a second, nobody even breathed. Then several hearts seemed to remember simultaneously that they were supposed to keep beating.

Ariana clutched the edge of the table. Lesandra's mouth fell open. MacKenzie stared at his phone as though it had become an unexploded bomb, while Makris slowly sat back. Even Camela looked genuinely shaken.

Justin recovered first. "Is Vincent there with you?"

"No."

Trinity's answer was immediate, flat, almost casual. "He is attending to the transition of his bride."

Ariana looked toward Justin. "Transition?" she asked cautiously.

"To immortality," Trinity answered without hesitation.

Absolute silence followed. The answer did not merely change the conversation. It changed the scale of the entire day. Again.

"Is Mr. Veyl aware that you are making this appointment?" Justin asked.

"We serve the same throne," Trinity answered bluntly. "It is my function to see that he accomplishes the mission—whether he wishes to or not."

The answer was frightening on several levels. Camela's eyes narrowed as a dozen possibilities moved through her mind. "What throne?"

"Purgatoria."

The word came with a strange, flat intensity. At that same instant, the room's main screen changed. No one touched a controller or entered a command. The government displays vanished, replaced by the ancient cosmological Tree they had been examining earlier. Its spheres and pathways unfolded across the wall in luminous detail.

There, occupying its own position within the greater structure, was the sphere bearing the name:

Purgatoria

Everyone stared as Vyss turned toward the speakers. "Who are you, really?"

Trinity did not hesitate. "In Purgatoria, I am called Mother. Here, I have many names."

The weight of the statement moved slowly through the room. The Natural Order Party members understood first—not completely, for perhaps no human being there could have fully understood, but they recognized the figure to whom she referred. Mother Nature to some. Shekhinah to others. Matre Delarosa. Pistis-Sofia. The ancient traditions had clothed her in different languages, faces, and theological systems, while the Silver Compendium gave her still other names. Chief among them was Ereviel—Queen of Purgatoria, Spirit of Twilight, Lady of Primal Love, the Primordial Mother, The Hierophilomania.

Camela looked from the glowing Tree to her tablet. "And who is Vincent Veyl?"

For the first time, Trinity's pause seemed almost contemplative. "Vincent…" Her voice softened by the smallest degree. "Some would say he is Oreviel—the Lord of Primordial Truth. That is not accurate. He is Vemael... from the Spanish for 'He Comes' and the Hebrew, 'from God.'"

An ancient sigil emerged within the sphere of Purgatoria as Trinity continued. "The inflow. The intruder. The infiltrator. The manifest union of the natures of both halves." The imagery divided around the sigil—Dur shining above, Kur darkening beneath—before flowing together again. "Our child-self," she finished quietly.

The words settled over the room with almost unbearable weight. For all the revelations of that evening, this was something different. Vincent Veyl was not merely a man who had discovered another world, learned to use its laws, or opened its gates. According to the being speaking through every secured device in the room, some essential part of that world had entered theirs through him.

"Is Purgatoria—are the other planes—planets?" Lesandra asked. It was a question humanity had argued for centuries in one form or another. Were they worlds, dimensions, or celestial bodies hidden somewhere beyond ordinary perception?

Trinity answered almost fondly. "Oh, dear. Your entire galaxy is as a figurative grain of sand within Purgatoria." Several people stared at the cosmological Tree still glowing across the wall. "But it is the grain of sand that has drawn our attention."

The reply was monumentally diminishing—not merely to Rhea, but to the Milky Way and everything humanity had ever pointed a telescope toward and called vast.

Camela leaned forward. "Why would something that large concern itself with a grain of sand?"

For a moment, Trinity said nothing. When she answered, her voice seemed to deepen—not growing louder, but somehow broader. "From dust you arose, and unto dust you shall return."

"Yet from living dust come multitudes sufficient to fill the boundless halls and wander the measureless wastes." No one interrupted.

The Tree upon the screen shifted. One sphere enlarged, revealing another structure within it, then another within that, and another still—the same fundamental pattern repeating at different scales without ever becoming precisely identical. "Fractal," Trinity added almost absently.

Lesandra's expression changed instantly. "Oh." The single word added an entirely different dimension to the answer.

Makris frowned. "Meaning?"

"The Mandelbrot principle." Lesandra continued staring at the expanding geometry as she lifted one hand toward the screen. "Scale changes. The pattern doesn't disappear."

The image plunged deeper. World within world, structure within structure. The farther inward it traveled, the more complexity appeared. A coastline resolved into valleys, a valley into branching rivers, a branch into veins. The veins became finer networks, and those became structures resembling galaxies. Then the perspective reversed. Humanity diminished into Rhea, Rhea into the solar system, the solar system into the galaxy, then clusters and vast structures beyond them. Through it all, the same geometrical echoes remained.

"In a fractal, the apparently insignificant piece contains the architecture of the whole," Lesandra said softly.

"Not the whole," Trinity corrected. "It's rhyme."

That silenced Lesandra.

"Large and small are judgments made by creatures confined to scale," Trinity continued.

The galaxy contracted until it became little more than a luminous fleck within the immensity of a vast desert beneath a twilight sky. Floating stones speckled the heavens, from pebbles and boulders to masses as immense as islands. Beyond them, faint but unmistakable, hung other worlds—visible like moons in daylight against the strange sky. One of them looked disturbingly familiar to everyone in the room.

"Dust may bear consciousness. Consciousness may bear worlds. Worlds may bear civilizations. Civilizations may awaken." The tiny grain brightened as Trinity spoke. "And what awakens may eventually cross every boundary that once defined it as small."

Camela stared at the luminous speck representing everything humanity had ever known. "So, the grain of sand matters because of what can come out of it."

"Yes," Trinity answered immediately. "Or what can awaken within it. Each consciousness has importance." The speck remained suspended within the surrounding immensity. "It must become sovereign."

The word carried more weight than politics usually allowed it. "By sovereign," Trinity continued, "I mean the conscious choice to exist fully—to ascend, integrate, and realize the true depth of oneself."

No one spoke. The explanation stirred them precisely because it reached beyond politics, religion, and even ordinary ideas of freedom. Sovereignty, in Trinity's use of the word, was not merely independence from rulers. It was the deliberate refusal to remain incomplete.

Then, almost abruptly, her tone returned to business. "Shall I confirm the appointment, Madam President?"

Camela stared at the tablet. "Should I be negotiating with you—or with him?"

"Vincent will ultimately decide," Trinity answered without hesitation. "He is the point of the spear, the anchor within the Infinite—the one who must fight the battles and make the final decisions. I am a facilitator." She paused slightly. "I would not be here had he not opened the door. Neither can I remain should he choose to close it."

The answer carried an unmistakable limitation. For all her impossible reach, Trinity did not present herself as the final authority. Chancellor, perhaps; chamberlain. Private executive secretary to something vastly greater than any ordinary government. But not the final word.

Camela drew a slow breath. "Yes," she said flatly. "Confirm it." Yet even as she spoke, trepidation tightened beneath her ribs. For perhaps the first time in her presidency, she had the disturbing sensation that she was merely playing at being in charge.

Nothing visible had changed. She was still President of the United States. The military remained beneath constitutional command, the Cabinet still sat around her table, and the machinery of federal power still existed beyond those walls. Yet some deeper foundation beneath all of it had shifted—not only beneath her, but beneath everyone.

China. Russia. The United Nations. Every government on Rhea still operated beneath the assumption that sovereignty ultimately rested in territory, weapons, secrecy, infrastructure, and command.

But if Trinity could enter this room, "this room," then how much of that sovereignty was real?

There were no safe rooms, no perfectly isolated systems, no sanctuary guaranteed merely by classification, concrete, encryption, or armed guards. The great powers of the world might still possess the appearance of choice, but the boundaries within which those choices could be exercised had changed without their consent.

Most of them did not yet know it. Camela glanced at the case—the secure case that held the end of the world. Was even that safe now?

Then Trinity was gone. No announcement or farewell. Only absence.

The effect was immediate and strangely physical. A heaviness withdrew from the room—a pressure none of them had consciously noticed until it vanished. Several people shifted in their chairs almost at once. Ariana exhaled. Makris rubbed the back of his neck. MacKenzie looked down at his phone, then turned it facedown upon the table as though that might somehow matter now.

Lesandra continued staring at the cosmological Tree until the screen returned by itself to the secure conference display. Camela glanced instinctively toward the ceiling, expecting some indication that the presence had truly departed. There was nothing—only wood paneling, recessed lighting, silent sensors, and the familiar machinery of human security.

Suddenly, they seemed like very small things.

Vyss remained still. Then his hand moved slowly toward the inside pocket of his jacket and the stone fragment within it. For the first time, another possibility occurred to him. Perhaps Trinity had not entered the room through their systems at all. Perhaps the systems had merely been convenient instruments.

Perhaps the real point of entry had been resting against his chest the entire time.

His fingers settled briefly over the pocket. A piece of another world. A threshold carried unknowingly into one of the most secure chambers in Washington. It was only a theory—for the moment.

Outside the sealed room, the White House continued functioning exactly as it had before. Phones rang, orders moved, intelligence arrived, aircraft crossed oceans, generals watched borders, and diplomats negotiated. Presidents and premiers calculated their advantages. The world continued pretending that power remained where it had always been.

Inside the room, five people now knew better.

Justin reached into his jacket again, this time into the other pocket, and drew out a small black thumb drive. Every eye turned toward him. "Well, since it's all been laid out here on the table," he said, "I might as well take you the rest of the way." He rose, crossed to the wall-mounted viewing screen, and inserted the drive into the port. The full audiovisual experience Trinity had created began playing in high definition.

No one left that room unchanged. Their world—and through them, the world itself—would never again be the same.

(Around Noon, June 6, 2026—Priestess of Truth)



"A mere four days have passed since former Ranger Staff Sergeant Vincent Veyl removed the Trembol Police Department—and much of the city government—from power in the most brutal way possible," Tallia Stevens reported.

Dressed entirely in black, her severe suit traced with narrow silver pinstripes, she stood outside the Trembol Law Enforcement Center near the entry and exit ramp of its underground garage. The high, almost clerical collar of her new uniform caught the noonday light while the black-and-silver NNN van waited at the curb behind her.

"Here, in this very place, he overcame more than forty individuals named in the Death Warrants, subduing them with devices commonly called flashbangs. Then, in cold and efficient fashion, he carried out his charge. He allowed each of them to pray before using the sword presented to him by the Seven Bishops of the Silver Order when he was knighted in 2024. He beheaded them all in fewer than one-hundred-two seconds from start to finish—each with a single, powerful stroke of his blade."

Tallia paused, allowing the stark arithmetic to settle.

"Throughout Trembol, after cutting power and seizing control of the city's video feeds, he recorded everything for the Marshal Service—and for his own interpretation of the Duty to Inform. Using his considerable computer skills and the systems housed inside Raven Star headquarters, he tracked every named individual in real time.

"He did not torture, taunt, or play with his targets. He neither negotiated nor accepted pleas for mercy. Without malice and without hesitation, he carried out every last warrant, taking the lives of 234 men and women, each of whom either protected or bore direct responsibility for crimes so numerous and heinous that they scarcely need repeating. Their guilt is now a well-documented public fact.

"These were people proven responsible for, or complicit in, the deaths of my own aunt and uncle—and in the deaths of more than 1,344 other citizens. Mass graves have since been discovered on an abandoned ranch fourteen miles northwest of Trembol. The disappearances of more than 2,800 women and girls over the last forty years have now been tied to the Carydin Crime Syndicate."

Even as she spoke, a black SUV climbed the ramp and emerged from the underground garage, sunlight glancing across the silver emblem of a two-headed raven emblazoned upon its doors. Larry smoothly zoomed in as the vehicle turned onto the street and accelerated away.

"In record time, under state and county mandate, forty-two new officers and support personnel have been hired to replace nearly the entire police force—not as conventional public servants, but as Raven Star Security personnel. Former military and civilian police officers have been brought in from across Nevada and beyond, housed and equipped with remarkable efficiency, each one fully vetted through Raven Star's Trinity system.

"Vacant houses previously owned by those killed have been commandeered under eminent domain or purchased outright, then converted into company housing for the incoming personnel, who, by every account received thus far, have proved more professional, better mannered, and more technically proficient than those they replaced."

Tallia began walking along the front of the multistory complex, its weathered faux-adobe exterior concealing walls of reinforced concrete. Larry paced her from several yards away, keeping both her and the heavy architecture in frame.

"Former Sheriff's Deputy Meghan Dellon—a popular local officer, current Marine Corps Reserve lieutenant and military police officer, known for her thoughtful blotter posts and altruistic manner—has assumed command of the new force, an arrangement that may or may not be temporary."

"The Provisional Town Council and Acting Mayor Shannon Miller are already considering proposals to transition the department from corporate employment to civilian service under direct local-government oversight. Meanwhile, a generous donation from Vincent Veyl himself, rumored to be approximately ten million dollars, has been earmarked for upgrading this facility and replacing the city's aging communications, command, and control systems."

The camera panned north toward the Silver Satyr Casino and the sprawling resort complex rising in the upper vale beyond it.

"The world-famous casino hotel and pleasure palace reopened today after remaining closed since the purgation. It is operating under new ownership, though most of the previous staff have been retained. Vana Carydin herself—cleared of all charges—remains in place as resident manager.

"Strict new policy guidelines have been implemented under the supervision of a citizen oversight committee, reportedly at the suggestion of the new owner. And once again, we return to Vincent Veyl. Following the conclusion of the so-called Battle for Trembol, Vana Carydin—Vincent Veyl's great-aunt—transferred control of Carydin Entertainment Enterprises to him without reservation, citing her belief that he could be trusted to run it correctly."

Tallia stopped and turned squarely toward the camera. “It escapes no one’s notice that the man who destroyed the cartel that ruled this town for more than a century has now replaced it with a regime of his own. Through the Veyl Trust, he came into possession of KTTV—full disclosure, our own former station—and has since re-branded and retooled it as the Neutral News Network.”

She gestured toward the immaculate black-and-silver van and then, with a faintly knowing expression, toward her own severe, almost priestly uniform. “He now holds a forty-percent share in the Trembol National Bank. He owns enormous tracts of land surrounding the town, including property beneath the convent and along the northeastern approaches to Trembol.”



Larry turned the camera toward the airport. Beyond Horn Air Field, an aging, fortress-like convent stood upon the high ridgeline, its pale walls stark against the dark stone behind it.

“And yet, here is the truth for those who consider these developments bad tidings: I have not received a single death threat in the last four days. There has not been a single disappearance. Not one hitchhiker has been found run down along the highway.” The camera shifted toward the airport, where a sleek private jet was even then descending toward the runway. “And Trembol appears to be back in business.”

The aircraft dropped lower over the vale, its shadow sliding briefly across the rooftops.

“The growing fame of a certain Dark Prince of Elko, the infamy of the battle itself, and the enduring lure of beautiful women and high-stakes poker appear to have overcome the public’s reluctance to return. And honestly, Trembol has never been safer.

“The order that once appeared to prevail here was, according to more than seventy thousand documents Vincent Veyl released through our website that night, a complete lie—a shallow veneer

laid over a dank swamp of blood and horror. More than thirty people rescued from the hidden dungeon beneath this very police department"—she motioned again toward the Law Enforcement Center— "can attest to that personally."

Tallia rounded the northern side of the building. In the adjacent parking lot, transport crews were unloading a line of new black SUV cruisers, each bearing the Raven Star emblem upon its doors. The vehicles stood in disciplined rows, polished and identical, their dark windows reflecting the pale desert sky.

"And across the country at this very hour, mass arrests are continuing. Missing persons are being found. Child- and sex-trafficking rings are being raided. Corruption is being exposed at every level of local, state, and federal government."

Tallia stopped beside the arriving cruisers and turned toward the camera for the final shot. "All because of the efforts of one man—and his machine of truth—working day and night to expose every lie and every hidden deed in the name and spirit of his ancient faith."

Larry slowly widened the frame. Beyond Tallia, the black vehicles, and the hardened walls of the Law Enforcement Center, the distant white, fortress-like form of St. Uriel's rose above Trembol—part temple, part citadel, shining beneath the hard Nevada sun.

The sun climbed toward its zenith, bleaching the pavement beneath the intense Nevada light. A small flock of black birds rose suddenly from a nearby tree, their wings beating against the pale sky as Tallia walked back toward the NNN van and positioned herself before its gleaming black-and-silver flank.

"I'm not going to say there aren't legitimate concerns, folks," she continued, turning squarely toward the camera. "This is the Neutral News Network, and our mandate—my direct orders from the boss—could not be clearer: You are to be a priestess serving in the Temple of Truth." She allowed the solemn phrase to hang for a moment, then lifted one dark eyebrow.

"And the truth is, there has been very little news from Raven Star itself. Our prince in silver and black has not emerged from his stronghold since the battle. Yet following a visit to Raven Star by Governor Wilson immediately after the fighting ended, round-the-clock meetings have been held at the Governor's Mansion in Carson City.

"High-ranking officials and core members of the Natural Order Party have gathered there, joined by luminaries of the internationalist Imperial movement from around the world—all of them assembled, it is said, to discuss…" Tallia tilted her head knowingly. "You know who."

Something shifted in the branches above her. Larry saw it before Tallia did: a great raven perched in the crown of a nearby tree, heavier and larger than the others that had taken flight. Acting on instinct, he raised the camera and tightened the frame around it.

The raven neither startled nor turned away. It looked directly into the lens, and for a moment, bird and cameraman seemed to regard one another with equal attention.

Behind the camera, Larry wore a black, maintenance-style NNN uniform unlike anything he had ever worn before. His hair had been slicked neatly back, and the severe clothing lent him a confidence he had rarely shown in the past. He looked rested—renewed, even.

The new AI systems had lifted a tremendous weight from Larry, as they had from all of them. So had the comprehensive health insurance, respectable salary, genuine benefits, and almost unimaginable luxury of accruing paid vacation time. The burdens had not merely been removed from his shoulders; something old and exhausted had been lifted from his soul.

Tallia continued. "Our own Father Ramsey—or, more accurately, Bishop Ramsey—a former CIA agent in his younger years, was summoned to Rome by the Pope three days ago, immediately after the Purgation. According to rumors from sources, we consider reliable, he was called there to answer questions concerning…" She gave the camera a small, dry smile. "Yes. You guessed it. Our very own Vincent Veyl.

"Meanwhile, Justin Vyss, the world-famous leader of the Natural Order Party, is said to have arrived in Trembol directly from Washington, D.C., following a meeting with President Camela Harrison. After spending two hours inside Raven Star with, yes, you know who, Vyss returned immediately to Washington for yet another meeting with Madam Commander-in-Chief herself. No doubt discussing 'he who is so often named.'"

Tallia began walking slowly along the side of the new van, keeping the silver Raven Star emblem visible over her shoulder. "Meanwhile, according to my sources, talent agents, filmmakers, music producers, publishers, and biographers are lining up for the opportunity to work with…" She leaned slightly toward the camera. "Guess who?"

Her expression sharpened with amused disbelief. "The YouTube release of The Richmond Revelation—the concert film featuring Vincent Veyl's performance from November of last year, together with archival clips of the church arias he sang while growing up—has received more than fifteen billion views in the last three days. It is now second only to Baby Shark Dance." Her mouth twitched. "But it is climbing."

Larry's camera dipped briefly as he fought back a laugh.

"And now, in a somewhat shadier turn of events, many of our Trembol viewers have noticed unusual activity over the last twenty-four hours. Our intrepid friend from the badlands, Crow Man Doom, has also reported on it several times in our live chat." The levity left Tallia's voice. "Although there has been renewed activity out at the old, supposedly abandoned military base for two years, in the last two days, state and federal military personnel have returned to Crow Creek Omega, twenty-three miles northeast of Trembol, in full force.

"They are said to have arrived with a large contingent from the United States Army Corps of Engineers. We have seen military Humvees here in town and long supply convoys moving along the interstate before turning up Old Convent Road toward the base. That road is, in fact, being graded and widened as we speak."

Larry shifted the camera toward the northeastern horizon. Far beyond the low roofs and pale desert ridges, a faint trail of dust marked the passage of heavy vehicles.

"So, folks, what does all of this mean?" Tallia turned back toward the lens. "What are political leaders from across the country—and around the world—converging upon Carson City to discuss with Governor Tom Wilson? What is Justin Vyss discussing with our glorious leader in Washington? What is our own Father Ramsey still doing in Rome with the other six Bishops of the Silver Order? And what are federal and state military units doing at the old, apparently no-longer-abandoned military base outside Trembol?"

She paused. "And what is Vincent himself doing inside that house with his new wife—a woman nearly twice his age, I should mention, though every bit as beautiful?" A faintly wicked smile appeared. "At least that answer seems fairly clear."

Larry lowered his gaze to the monitor, very deliberately pretending he had heard nothing.

"Meanwhile, several suspected Chinese intelligence agents were rounded up at the House of Tang yesterday morning, which is deeply unfortunate because I genuinely love their kung pao chicken." Her expression sobered. "Still, events here in humble, middle-of-nowhere Trembol Nevada, appear to have drawn even the attention of the Chinese Communist Party.

"According to our new AI web crawlers, there has been significant military activity in the Taiwan Strait, apparently in direct response to Taiwanese President Kuang-Sheng Lo's visit to the N.O.P. talks in Carson City. There are growing concerns that some form of new technology may be transferred to the Taiwanese government during those meetings—technology originating with…" She spread her hands. "Who else?"

A dark shadow passed overhead. Larry glanced up, but the raven remained perched in the tree, watching.

"And now, in the interest of full disclosure—and as our final significant piece of local news—I must report that my own father, Sheriff Dellon, a legend in his own right, resigned the position he held for many years following a private meeting at Raven Star. He offered no public explanation and has not been available for comment.

"It is known that he was deeply unhappy with the events of June 2nd and had serious concerns regarding…" Tallia gestured toward the Law Enforcement Center, the black cruisers, the distant casino, the airport, and finally Raven Star itself beyond the surrounding buildings. "Well—essentially everything we have discussed during this edition of Neutral News: On the Streets."

She returned to her position beside the van, the NNN emblem filling the background behind her. "Stay in touch with us. Send us your stories, photographs, videos, and confidential tips through the new Neutral News website at NNN.org. Join the ongoing conversation in our public chat rooms, active day and night."

Tallia held the camera's gaze. "For the Neutral News Network, I'm Tallia Stevens, reporting from Trembol Nevada."

Larry kept the shot steady for three additional seconds. Behind her, the great raven spread its wings.

The feed cut to black.

(Late Afternoon, June 8, 2026—The Event)



The late-afternoon sky burned with strange, almost prismatic color—great bands of silver, violet, rose, and pale green shimmering through the high desert atmosphere. The spectacle was vivid enough to stop people throughout Trembol in the streets. Those carrying smartphones held them toward the heavens, recording what local social media had already christened the Rainbow Sky.

Near the lower end of Arius Avenue, Star Crow quietly worked on his silver 1963 Indian motorcycle in the yard of Black Bird Bikes.



He was a short Cherokee man in his sixties, dressed in a blue-black bandana, white work shirt, jeans, battered work boots, and the medicine bag he nearly always wore around his neck. The adobe garage and attached apartment building had stood there for some fifty years. Part of the structure had long ago been converted into the Old Magpie Bar and Grill—Star Crow's establishment and a familiar gathering place for local Cherokee and Shoshone veterans, tradesmen, ranch hands, and other working people who lived among the whites rather than on either of the nearby reservations.

Every Sunday, a dozen or more men of varying ages gathered there to repair their motorcycles, drink beer, shoot the shit, and later cruise the highway together. They did not go looking for trouble and rarely caused any.

Today, however, none of them were paying much attention to their bikes. One by one, their eyes had been drawn down Arius Avenue toward the intersection nearest Raven Star.

People had begun gathering there early that morning after word leaked that President Camela Harrison would be arriving in Trembol sometime during the day. At first, the gathering consisted mainly of relatives and friends of those executed during the Battle of Trembol. Many had appeared in small groups each day since the warrants were carried out, standing silently outside Raven Star with handmade signs:

MURDERER!

FALSE GOD!

ANTI-CHRIST!

BUTCHER!

YOU SHOULD HAVE A DEATH WARRANT!

YOU LIE!

GET OUT OF OUR TOWN!

VANA WAS BEHIND ALL OF It!

Most had remained peaceful. Among them were anti-Silver Path Christians, secular activists, Democrats, Republicans, and others who saw in Vincent the sudden and frightening rise of the Natural Order Party. Their signs reflected a larger ideological fear:

THE N.O.P. ARE FASCISTS!

THE N.O.P. WILL NOT RULE us!

THE N.O.P. is THE ANTI-CHRIST SYSTEM!

Purgatoria is THE FOYER OF HELL!

THE ANGEL OF Purgatoria is HALF-EVIL—AND HALF-EVIL is NOT GOOD!

THERE CAN BE NO BALANCE BETWEEN GOOD AND EVIL!

THERE IS NO MIDDLE BETWEEN RIGHT AND WRONG!

One particularly elaborate sign declared:

Vyss is THE SECOND BEAST OUT OF THE EARTH! Veyl is THE BEAST GIVEN FORM! OREVIEL is THE GREAT DRAGON!

Vincent had found that one the most interesting. Whoever had made it had at least put some thought into the accusation. They had done their biblical research.

Increasingly, however, the protesters were matched by Trembol residents who gathered opposite them and shouted back. "Get out of Trembol!" one voice called. "Veyl freed us!" yelled another. Others joined in: "You should be ashamed!" "You're not welcome here!" "How can you support those monsters?" "Scum! Get out!"

The arguments had remained mostly verbal—until now, when the chartered buses arrived.

Star Crow watched them roll onto Arius Avenue one after another. Under the old order, the authorities would never have tolerated such a gathering. The buses would have been stopped outside town, the drivers questioned, and the passengers turned away or quietly detained.

Now they entered without challenge.

The buses pulled directly in front of the Raven Star Building, partly blocking the intersection, and began unloading several hundred people. Many wore identical face masks. Organizers moved among them, distributing prepared signs, banners, bullhorns, bottled water—and still more masks.

The timing seemed suspiciously precise. Only minutes later, a large helicopter appeared from the west, flying low over Trembol.

Patrons of the Old Magpie began emerging from the bar and garage, many still holding beers or cigarettes. Cherokee, Shoshone, and white men alike shaded their eyes and watched the aircraft approach as the black-and-silver NNN news van sped past them toward Raven Star.

Star Crow wiped his hands on a rag, something inside him already beginning to tighten. On the radio blaring from the garage, they had heard reports throughout the day of coordinated protests in cities around the world—Paris, London, Brussels, and dozens of others. In the United States, crowds had gathered in Portland, Seattle, throughout California, and across the larger eastern cities.

A global pushback was forming against the rapidly growing power of the N.O.P., particularly after its extraordinary surge in public support during the previous six days. Now that movement was concentrating upon a man who seemed to have become the leading candidate for an office, he had never requested: the N.O.P.s promised future ruler of humankind.

Jack Daw Dodd, Star Crow's half-brother, spotted the helicopter before anyone else. He was taller, younger, and somewhat meaner than Star Crow, with the kind of hard, weathered face that suggested he had enjoyed being underestimated more than once. "There she is, sure as shit, brother," he said, pointing.

Codo Yona, a Shoshone chief of police who rode an enormous black, home-built Harley he called Wild Boar, shook his head in wonder. "Imagine that. The President herself, coming to our little corner of the world." He was clearly impressed, though his dark eyes soon shifted from the approaching aircraft to the crowd near Raven Star.

As if following a signal, the protesters began chanting the same slogans being heard in cities across America and Europe:

"NO CROWNS—NO EMPERORS!"

"HUMANITY WITHOUT MASTERS!"

"THE WORLD IS NOT YOUR THRONE!"

"OUR PRIVACY IS NOT YOURS TO VIOLATE!"

"NO GODS IN GOVERNMENT!"

"SOVEREIGNTY MEANS CHOICE!"

"Pissants," Tevi Thornton muttered.

Tevi had helped build or rebuild many of their motorcycles. His own custom chopper proudly displayed the Star of David, and its license plate read BKRJW.

Without entirely realizing he had made the decision, Star Crow began walking toward the gathering. Most of the Old Magpie's patrons followed.

Few local natives had failed to recognize Vincent Veyl as one of their own. Perhaps he was not full-blood, but very few people were anymore. The Veyl family had intermarried so extensively with the Cherokee and Shoshone over the generations that the boundaries between Basque, Cherokee, and Shoshone heritage had become almost meaningless within that line.

Nor had they failed to notice the woman Vincent had married. Her photograph had appeared in the newspapers and across NNN. She looked full-blooded, and that mattered to many among the local tribes. The Prophetess of the convent was already known among them. She was considered a woman of power—one chosen by the Great Spirit.

Star Crow did not know precisely why he felt drawn toward the protest, but something within him had become deeply irritated. The ordinary men and women of Trembol had lived beneath the Carydin boot heel for decades. For the first time in years, the town possessed a genuine sense of peace and safety.

Women—pretty women especially—could walk the streets at night without fearing that police officers or casino security guards might offer them a ride and deliver them instead into some dark room from which they would never emerge. Men could speak openly about local politics. Ordinary residents now possessed an actual voice through a town council that meant something and through the newly formed citizen oversight committee advising the casino and resort.

Trembol had a real police force now rather than a gang of predators wearing uniforms. Vincent had hired native people, black people, hispanics, and whites—not according to quotas or public-relations calculations, but according to experience, ability, references, and fitness for the work. Most were former soldiers, police officers, or emergency personnel. Several of the men now walking beside Star Crow were off-duty Raven Star employees themselves.

More than that, Vincent had established a $3 million fund, drawn from the Executioner's Fee, to put casino and resort workers through community college, studying IT, coding, and related administrative and business disciplines.

By then, the irritation was collective. Star Crow could feel it rising around him, and they were not alone. As he and the Old Magpie men continued down Arius Avenue, others stepped from storefronts, restaurants, houses, and apartment buildings to join them.

Clerks came out from behind their counters. Waiters emerged from cafés. Thray Belmont, owner of the pawn shop, locked his door and followed. Teddy Windsor came out of the gun shop. Mechanics, casino workers, contractors, veterans, cooks, laborers, and shopkeepers—men and women from nearly every walk of life—began moving toward Raven Star.

"Somebody paid for this," Codo complained.

"Yep." Jack Daw frowned toward the buses. "Those signs were printed and ready before they ever got here. They were paid to be here, is my thinking."

"Professional protesters," Tevi said. He had moved near the front of the growing crowd, where one of the chartered buses stood partly across the road ahead, forcing them to go around it.

"Who's organizing all this?" Mad Bob Boydon asked.

Mad Bob, as nearly everyone called him, was a tall, skinny, high-strung redneck roustabout in his thirties. He performed whatever odd jobs he could find, was expecting his second child, and was happy as hell to have recently landed steady work rehabilitating old houses for Raven Star's incoming employees.

According to a recent NNN poll, most residents of Trembol regarded Vincent Veyl as a blessing—a knight who had arrived when no one else was willing to save them. Not a god. Not even a politician. He had not boasted, strutted, or paraded himself through town. Since the battle, he had largely remained inside Raven Star, quietly restoring the police force, putting people back to work, reopening businesses, rehabilitating abandoned housing, and rebuilding the old television station.

No fuss. No grandstanding.

If anything, the talk around the Old Magpie had revealed a growing concern for him. Forces outside Trembol were already attempting to claim him, interpret him, crown him, and use him for purposes of their own. Many remembered Vincent's early remarks on the police blotter, where he had stated plainly that he was neither an angel nor a messiah. He wanted only to be left alone to operate his little business.

Veterans such as Star Crow and Tevi recognized something else in him as well: he was one of theirs.

Beyond the buses, the new police cruisers were already arriving. Officers stepped out and began trying to keep the opposing groups apart, but the chanting had grown louder, edged now with shouted threats. Above them, the helicopter descended toward the rooftop landing pad of Raven Star.

Marine One.

Tallia and Larry Stevens arrived in the NNN van, accompanied by a large hired security guard named Jerry Dwire. They hurried out and began setting up their equipment to capture the presidential helicopter descending beneath the impossible Rainbow Sky.

The whole scene seemed almost too deliberately composed: radiant heavens, black birds circling overhead, shouting crowds, buses obstructing the street, and the presidential aircraft lowering itself onto the reinforced roof of Raven Star.

As Star Crow approached, Tallia glanced toward him and smiled in recognition. He was more than merely the owner of a local bar. He headed the Elko Bikers' Association, taught history and comparative mythology at the community college, had published several respected books, and was a highly decorated veteran. But as Tallia registered his presence, she also noticed the troubled expression beneath his bandana.

Larry turned the camera. Behind Star Crow came dozens of men, followed by women and still more townspeople, all moving down Arius Avenue in his wake. Women especially viewed Veyl as a liberator, but the gathering represented nearly every age and walk of life. Rabbi Tevi walked among those nearest the front, his expression dark.

Then, even as Marine One settled upon the raised helicopter pad of the rooftop, someone appeared on the upper ledge of the Raven Star Building. The crowd saw him almost as one.

Vincent Veyl stood looking down upon the street. He flicked open a silver Zippo and lit one of his black cigarettes, regarding the commotion below with almost absent curiosity. Standing there in a black T-shirt and jeans, he looked less like a king or god than a rock star who had wandered onto the wrong stage and discovered the President landing behind him.

A woman stood just off to his right, dressed in something resembling a severe, native-inflected nun's habit, her long black hair lashing in the rotor wash. Miriam Veyl, reputed to be in her late forties, looked more like a woman in her thirties. That surprised some, though most dismissed it as a honeymoon glow-up.

Vincent's gaze moved slowly across the gathering. For many Trembol residents, it was their first clear, direct view of him. Most footage from the Battle of Trembol had been captured in infrared, showing him only through grainy darkness and the grim outline of his helmet and mask.

Now he stood revealed in daylight.

Six feet five inches tall, broad-shouldered, lean, sinewy, and heavily muscled, Vincent stood with his dark hair cut close and his posture relaxed yet immovable. The President's helicopter settled directly behind him, filling the air with thunder and sweeping dust across the rooftop, yet the former soldier remained unmoved, unfazed by rotor blade or gust.

Yet Vincent wore nothing ceremonial—only a black T-shirt, jeans, boots, and a wallet chain glinting at his hip. Star Crow could not help smiling. The guy had style.

A moment later, another figure boldly, perhaps foolishly, stepped into view beside Vincent, one immediately recognized by nearly everyone present. President Camela Harrison. Larry caught her clearly on camera.

A tremendous roar of anger erupted from the imported protesters below.

"Traitor!"

"Whore!"

"Betrayer!"

"Resign now!"

"Treason! Treason!"

"No Emperors!"

"No Queens!"

Star Crow felt bile rise into his throat. A low growl escaped him before he could stop it. He had not voted for her—or against her. It was the sheer disrespect that struck something deep within him, something older than party politics or personal loyalty.

Tallia moved closer, microphone in hand. "What do you think of all this, sir?"

"He's one of us," Star Crow replied flatly.

Tallia held the microphone steady as he continued. "He did what he did for us—for the people who were actually living under a yoke of oppression. And they hate him for it?" He gestured toward the Law Enforcement Center in the distance, then toward the shouting protesters. "You've seen it. We've all seen what was happening here. And they would curse him for ending it?"

His eyes moved upward toward the roof, where Camela now stood beside Vincent and Miriam beneath the slowing blades of Marine One. "Or they'll try to take advantage of him for their own ends." Star Crow shook his head. "No. He belongs to us. He's one of ours. Cherokee, Shoshone, Basque, American—that's Trembol." His expression hardened. "He's the Old Ways. That's the way of our people."

He looked directly into Larry's camera. "You whites want the Silver Seraph to lead you into some new age of greater power and greater technology. We look to Grandfather Raven to lead us back to the true ways of the Great Spirit—to harmony with Rhea and peace between the earth and sky." He pointed toward the auric brilliance overhead. "And there is the sign of just that."

To their right, the chants continued, colliding like opposing tides, but Star Crow's voice remained calm. "To free us from our bindings. To lift us from dust and ignorance."

Vincent almost seemed to hear him, even from more than a hundred feet away. He gave the slightest nod in their direction.

Tallia pressed one hand against the earpiece beneath her hair as the voice of the new producer, Trinity, crackled through it, then turned toward Larry's camera. "By all appearances, more than two hundred protesters have been bused into Trembol today. Many appear to be professionally organized. They arrived with prepared signs, banners, bullhorns, identical masks, and coordinated slogans.

"I should point out that concealing one's face during a public demonstration is prohibited under current state emergency ordinances. Thus far, however, officers have made no attempt to enforce that provision."

The producer continued speaking rapidly into her ear, and Tallia's eyes widened. "We are also being told that our live feed has now been picked up by several major national outlets. Events here in the small city of Trembol, Nevada, are being broadcast across the country—and, increasingly, around the world."

Across the intersection, Marjorie Alders of Reno's Channel Four was reporting from behind another camera team. Her cameraman, like Larry, had focused upon the Raven Star rooftop: Vincent and Miriam Veyl, the President, and now Justin Vyss, who had joined them near the landing pad.

The appearance of the White Cardinal cemented the fury of the protesters below.

Paid or not, their reaction was immediate and visceral. The disciplined chants broke apart into screeching expressions of collective rage:

"Fascists!"

"Traitors!"

"Death to the N.O.P.!"

"Down with the Raven Throne!"

Several people crouched and began scooping loose stones from the street and the gravel landscaping around nearby buildings. Others tightened both hands around wooden signposts or surged against the temporary police line. Officers planted their boots and raised their arms, but the barricades shuddered beneath the pressure.

Star Crow noticed something beyond the crowd. He nudged Tallia's arm. "Look."

A raven landed upon the ledge of a nearby building, its black feathers shining with oily blue beneath the Rainbow Sky. Another came down beside it. Three more settled upon a streetlight, their claws scraping against the metal. Several crows descended onto the roof of one of the chartered buses. Blue jays gathered along the telephone wires. Vultures circled lower over the town, broad wings motionless, while hawks appeared from the ridges and glided silently beneath the radiant heavens.

More birds came from every direction.
Larry saw them and slowly tilted the camera upward. Ravens, crows, jays, vultures, hawks—even a pair of eagles—settled upon every available rooftop, ledge, pole, vehicle, tree, and sign. Their bodies blackened the bright edges of the town. Claws clicked upon metal. Wings beat the hot air. Feathers rustled like dry leaves over graves.

Their numbers grew by the second. Dozens became hundreds.

A great tumult began rising from every quarter of Trembol. At first, it was difficult to distinguish beneath the shouting and the diminishing roar of Marine One. It came through the streets low and broken, echoing between the old adobe walls and newer concrete facades until the separate voices joined into one immense sound.

Dogs.

It seemed as though every dog in Trembol had begun barking, baying, yowling, and howling at once. Their voices rolled in overlapping waves, swelling until the streets themselves seemed to vibrate. It was not the scattered racket of frightened pets. There was an order buried within it—a call passing from yard to yard and block to block, answered wherever it went.

Even the protesters began falling silent.

The barking was answered from the ridgelines above town. Coyotes began yipping and howling from the desert heights, their cries sharp and wild beneath the burning sky.

People turned toward DeSatto Rise. Dark figures moved among the scrub and broken stone beyond the railyard, running in loose files between the outcroppings. The strange light stretched their shadows far ahead of them even as the sky above darkened ominously. A deep rumble sounded high overhead, drawing every eye upward.

"Look," Codo Yona said, shock and awe entering his voice. "Wolves. The DeSatto Pack!" They were frenzied, running to-and-fro along the crest of the ridge, howling at the now churning sky.

"Coyotes too!" Teddy Windsor shouted. His hand dropped instinctively toward the Magnum holstered at his side, though something deeper warned him not to draw it. His fingers hovered near the grip, then slowly withdrew.

On the Raven Star rooftop, a great black raven descended through the rotor-blown air. It swept once around Vincent and landed upon his shoulder.

The sudden arrival visibly startled President Harrison. She recoiled half a step, one hand rising before discipline brought it back down.

Vincent barely reacted. The raven settled its claws against his black shirt and folded its wings as though it had perched there a thousand times before. Its head turned, one bright eye surveying the street below.

Around them, the human world seemed to go still. The helicopter engines wound down. The chanting died. Signs lowered. Even the dry desert wind seemed to withdraw from Arius Avenue.
Only the dogs remained loud, their massed baying echoing between the buildings and answered by wolves and coyotes calling from the ridges.

Birds continued arriving from every quarter, darkening the rooflines and covering parked vehicles. They crowded along signs and telephone wires, filled trees until the branches bowed, and lined the upper edges of Raven Star behind Vincent like a living black crown. Wings opened and closed within the shifting colors. Hundreds of small shadows passed over the faces below.

The protesters stared upward as they finally understood what was gathering around them beneath the strangely glowing sky. The signs in their hands—NO GODS IN GOVERNMENT, THE WORLD IS NOT YOUR THRONE—suddenly looked less like declarations than challenges issued to something that might answer.

The sky was blackening rapidly, its prismatic quality remaining but deepening into near-infernal shades. Dry vanilla lightning forked silently across the heavens. Protesters and counter-protesters alike now gazed upward in awe and fear. Above them towered Vincent Veyl, his visage shadowed and stark against the tumultuous clouds. Behind him stood Miriam, Camela, and Justin, with the raven upon his shoulder and thousands of birds swarming restlessly, at times swirling over the increasingly terrified protesters.

Tallia pressed her hand more firmly against her earpiece. "Folks, we are not certain what is happening here." Her voice remained professional, though the strain beneath it was unmistakable. "What we are seeing does not appear to be limited to Trembol. I am receiving reports of similar events beginning to take shape in –" She stopped and listened, her gaze drifting toward the birds massed along the rooftops. "In several cities. We do not yet have confirmation."

The dogs grew louder, frenzied, straining at leashes and chains, at windows and doors across the city, while every bird in the square began to hiss, squawk, and screech as if in answer.

The protesters seemed to shrink in on themselves as a mass, pressed and besieged, their eyes taking in the multitudes of birds while their ears were assailed by nature's outcry. The counter-protesters backed away, creating a gap between themselves and the outsiders, but they did not run. They retreated

among the police as the line itself withdrew. Officers lowered their batons, seeing that some other force had arrived to deal with the disrupters. Within moments, the imported protesters had been encircled, with birds massing, fluttering, and wheeling above them.

The people of Trembol did not flee. Frightened and confused, guided by some shared understanding they could not have explained, they remained and watched in wonder as the old boundary between the human world and the wild seemed to wear thin.

The avians were furious now, bodies rigid and low, their wings beating like distant thunder beneath their cries as they rose in a great dark mass that seemed to threaten attack. Above them, the sky had become a strange, colorful black of descending clouds, silent lightning, and rumbling upper winds.

Fear moved through the crowd like an electrical current.

The police, led by Meghan Dellon, eased back from the protesters with careful, deliberate steps. No shouted order passed along the line. Meghan merely raised one hand and made a small circling motion, and her officers gave the gathering room—as though they understood that the human part of this confrontation had just become the least important part.

"Don't move," Star Crow shouted with authority. His voice carried with sudden command to those nearest him. "Don't react. Just watch and wait."

Eyes among the counter-protesters around him turned and even the police instinctively nodded as if they had just received a lawful order.

He looked toward the rooftop.

Vincent remained there with Miriam's hand held in his own and the black raven resting upon his shoulder. His cigarette still burned between two fingers, its thin stream of smoke torn sideways by the dying rotor wash. His expression registered neither fear nor concern. Miriam stood beside him with her long hair moving in the wind, calm as midnight.

Above them, the Rainbow Sky grew darker still. The pale green and violet bands deepened until it seemed an aurora had bled down into the edge of day. Silver light moved behind the colors in immense, slow currents, casting strange shifting shadows across the buildings though the sun itself had long since vanished behind the darkening sky. Then they appeared, moving half-hidden within the tortured cumulus—shadowed and luminous, passing quietly and smoothly in drawn-out streaks or as moving orbs of intense radiance, flitting and drifting along the edges of the cloud banks in such a way as to make each viewer question whether what they were seeing was real or some strange hallucination.

As if expecting what came next, the birds settled again on whatever perch they could attain, even as a terrible sound erupted from above and sent a collective gasp through Trembol—the screeching of steel on steel, the wrenching of rent iron, and deep, resonant horn-like frequencies straight out of some apocalyptic nightmare. All the while, Vincent simply stood, his compatriots in no less awe and confusion than those below. The Trembolites were fearful but held their ground, as if charged with bearing witness, rooted there by awe.

Many of the protesters had attended dozens—some hundreds—of rallies, marches, sit-ins, and occupations over the years. Some were newcomers. Others were old hands at the trade: true believers, paid participants, professional organizers, and people addicted to the strange itinerant rhythm of organized outrage. They moved from city to city, slept on buses and borrowed floors, screamed themselves hoarse, got arrested, made bail, and went looking for the next righteous emergency.

Police lines, tear gas, pepper spray, handcuffs, nightsticks, rubber bullets—the most experienced among them had seen it all. Many had grown numb to the prospect of arrest, knowing someone would post bail, provide attorneys, and transport them onward to the next assembly.

But none of them had ever seen anything like this.

Birds of every kind surrounded them in still-growing numbers. Ravens and crows blackened the rooflines. Jays crowded the wires. Hawks watched from streetlights and parapets, while vultures wheeled lower beneath the prismatic sky. The pair of eagles circled high above everything, their wings catching brief flashes of silver and violet.
Canine howls still mingled with the roaring and darkly melodious sky. Beyond the animals stood the people of Trembol. Though they had backed away, the locals now surrounded the imported crowd on every side. Many held tools that could readily serve as weapons—axe handles, crowbars, tire irons, heavy flashlights. Others wore pistols openly at their hips in accordance with Nevada law. Men and women who had spent their lives minding their own business now stood shoulder to shoulder beneath the unnatural sky, faces hard and silent.

No one moved to attack.

They simply stood and watched.

A hot wind swept abruptly through Arius Avenue, lifting dust and scraps of paper from the pavement. It carried the smell of sunbaked asphalt, feathers, cigarette smoke, sweat, diesel exhaust, and the sharp metallic scent of an approaching storm. Signs rattled in suddenly uncertain hands. Birds shifted along the rooftops, while many more still churned in the air overhead. An eagle cried high above, the sound hard and piercing enough to cut through the baying dogs.

"Folks, I'll tell you –" Tallia stepped aside as several large ravens waddled past her. Larry stumbled backward over his feed cable, windmilled one arm, and somehow kept both himself and the camera upright.

Some people retreated in fear of the unfolding spectacle. Most remained transfixed, unable to believe what they were seeing and equally unable to break the spell of it.

Rednecks, shopkeepers, waitresses, police officers, café workers, and construction crews stood below the enormous multispecies flock of birds, close enough to hear them breathing. The clouds, seeming to descend near the rooftops, the strange shadows and light moving half-seen, half-obscured within them, the terrible sounds from within and above them, a much more terrifying visual to most than the birds at this point.

The protesters themselves registering a clear collective "Oh Fuck!" moment. Not sure whether to run or just stand very-very still. Some began to cry, others just shook. Several, hearing the cacophony of angry birds, howling canines, rumbling sky, peed themselves on the spot.

Larry returned the camera to the rooftop.

President Camela Harrison stood in clear focus, open shock and confusion upon her face, a satellite phone clutched in one hand as information was clearly being fed to her. Her gaze moved from Vincent to the street below, then to the raven upon his shoulder and the nearly thousand birds surrounding the building. From yards, houses, and the desert heights around Trembol, dogs, coyotes, and wolves continued to howl beneath the tortured sky. Avians, sky, locals, protesters, reporters, and police had all become pieces of some enormous and incomprehensible tableau unfolding beneath the burning heavens.

Whatever she had come to discuss behind the sealed doors of Raven Star, an answer was already being given. Not by Vincent alone. Not by Vyss, Miriam, Trinity, or any government upon Rhea.

The world itself appeared to be answering.
Tallia pressed one hand against her earpiece as Trinity's voice spoke from the control room. Her expression changed as information poured through faster than she could absorb it. "Accounts are coming in from across the world," she said, struggling to keep pace. "In city after city, enormous flocks of birds have appeared. Dogs barking, baying, and howling…"

Even as she spoke, Trinity began feeding live images from dozens of locations directly into the NNN broadcast.

The screen divided. Trembol remained in the largest frame: Vincent standing upon the rooftop beneath the blazing black rainbow sky, Miriam at his side and the great raven perched upon his shoulder. Around the crossroads before the Raven Star building, every ledge, parapet, antenna, and rooftop had gone black with birds.

Then the global images began.

London

Over central London, the afternoon began to darken. At first, cameras adjusted automatically, mistaking the change for ordinary cloud cover. Then pale bands of green, violet, silver, and bruised crimson emerged within the gathering blackness, spreading slowly across the sky above the square where thousands of protesters had assembled. The effect was strangely localized. Beyond the immediate district, London remained beneath its familiar gray afternoon. Above the demonstration, however, the heavens had become something else.

Wind moved suddenly through the crowd, cold despite the season, lifting banners and rattling signs without becoming strong enough to scatter them. Birds began arriving in steadily increasing numbers. Pigeons crowded rooftops and cornices. Crows lined chimneys, lamp posts, and ledges. Gulls wheeled overhead in widening circles, their cries becoming harsher as the sky darkened. Then came the sound: a deep metallic wrenching somewhere above the clouds, slow and immense, as though some colossal structure was being bent beyond sight. Beneath it came lower resonant tones, almost horn-like,

vibrating through windows and stone. The protesters stopped chanting as another gust passed through the square, and several people later insisted they had heard words within it, though no one could agree on what had been said.

Los Angeles

The sky above downtown Los Angeles blackened with unnatural speed. Deep crimson and violet illumination moved within the clouds, not flashing like lightning but flowing slowly through them like fire beneath dark glass. Strange points of radiance appeared and disappeared along the cloud banks—some elongated into silent streaks, others drifting like luminous spheres before vanishing into the deeper black. The demonstration below gradually lost its rhythm as people stopped chanting and began looking upward.

Across the surrounding neighborhoods, dogs barked from yards, balconies, and open windows. Within minutes, the barking became widespread enough to register on the live microphones, joined farther away by long, wavering howls from the hills. Birds gathered on every available height. Crows covered utility lines. Pigeons packed building ledges shoulder to shoulder. Hawks circled high above the route, strangely indifferent to the smaller birds massing beneath them. Then a terrible groaning crossed the sky, slow, metallic, and resonant, accompanied by a low rumble that seemed less like thunder than machinery operating somewhere beyond the clouds. The crowd grew quiet as the wind rose, and beneath it, for several seconds, thousands of people appeared to hear whispering.

Paris

Across Paris, birds began lifting from the city in enormous numbers. Pigeons poured from plazas, bridges, rooftops, and railway structures until entire portions of the sky seemed alive with them. Crows and ravens joined them from parks and older districts, wheeling above the demonstrations in vast dark gyres before settling again upon statues, monuments, church roofs, and apartment blocks. Above them, the sky turned black without becoming colorless. Green, violet, silver, and deep rose moved within the clouds like an aurora trapped behind storm glass, while long luminous shapes drifted half-seen between the darker banks, visible for seconds at a time before disappearing.

A restless wind moved through the boulevards, carrying no rain, only sound. First came a deep rumbling overhead, then the prolonged screech of something like iron dragging across iron. Church bells began moving in several districts as the wind passed through their towers, ringing irregularly above the increasingly silent crowds. Dogs barked from apartments and courtyards, their voices farther out gathering into a widespread chorus. For several surreal minutes, Paris seemed less like a city under threat than a city being watched.

Brussels

In Brussels, there was no rain. The clouds simply descended, lavender, silver, and sickly green illumination moving through them in enormous slow currents and giving the entire sky the appearance of some vast translucent membrane beneath which something luminous was turning. Then came the sound: a groaning and screeching as though an immense bar of steel were being slowly bent, torn, and twisted somewhere above the clouds. Lower frequencies followed, deep enough to vibrate windows and ripple water in gutters and fountains.

Protesters looked upward as birds crowded the buildings surrounding the European Quarter. Crows lined parapets in dense black ranks. Pigeons settled across rooftops and statues until almost every available surface seemed occupied, while dogs began barking throughout the surrounding neighborhoods. Then the wind passed through the demonstration. People nearest the microphones turned suddenly, some looking behind themselves as if someone had whispered directly into their ears. Several protesters abandoned their signs and walked away. Others simply stood staring upward. A few dropped to their knees, hands clasped or raised, praying to whatever god they had spent the afternoon insisting had no place in public life.

New York City

The broadcast cut to Manhattan, where the sky above the avenue had become a blazing black prism. Bands of violet, green, silver, crimson, and deep blue moved behind dense clouds that seemed too low for the surrounding towers. Strange radiant forms appeared intermittently among them—long streaks of light, luminous spheres, and fleeting shapes that seemed almost structured before dissolving again into the dark.

The Argon Building had become a focal point. The tower had already been sarcastically rechristened on the NNN ticker as THE ZOROS BUILDING. Beneath the live image, another line of text crawled across the screen: THE VOICES FOR CHANGE SOCIETY—CONFIRMED AS ONE OF THE PRIMARY FINANCIAL AND LOGISTICAL BACKERS OF THE ONGOING GLOBAL PROTESTS, INCLUDING MAJOR FUNDING FOR THE DEMONSTRATION IN TREMBOL NEVADA. Birds covered the upper ledges of the tower while thousands more circled it. Crows, pigeons, starlings, gulls, and hawks—species that should not have moved together in any organized fashion—wheeled around the building in vast overlapping spirals before breaking apart and reforming.

A New York correspondent stood below, one hand pressed against her earpiece while the wind tore at her hair and coat. "We are receiving reports of similar conditions across several parts of the city. Massive concentrations of birds, widespread canine agitation, and unusual atmospheric phenomena are being reported throughout Manhattan and into the outer boroughs." A metallic howl moved across the sky, and the correspondent stopped speaking. It deepened into something like a distant horn, immense and mournful, followed by a prolonged wrenching sound high above the towers. The avenue fell strangely quiet as the wind passed through. Several people turned at once, staring into empty space. "What was that?" someone near the camera whispered. No one answered.

Portland

Another feed opened. Above Portland, the sky had darkened into the same impossible spectrum now appearing across broadcasts from around the world. Black clouds carried shifting veins of green, violet, silver, and muted crimson, while pale luminous forms drifted intermittently along their edges.

Across the city, thousands of dogs were barking. Their voices rose from neighborhoods, apartment buildings, fenced yards, cars, porches, and houses throughout Portland, gradually joining into a restless animal chorus that carried beneath the broadcast. Farther east, from the forested heights and surrounding country, came deeper answering howls. Birds gathered throughout the city in extraordinary numbers. Crows and ravens blackened rooftops and utility lines. Gulls packed parking lots and commercial buildings. Flocks of smaller birds moved overhead in dense synchronized clouds, changing direction simultaneously without any visible leader.

Then came the metallic sounds. A deep groaning moved over the city, followed by something resembling steel being slowly torn apart beyond the clouds. The local anchor stopped speaking and looked upward as a gust passed through the street. Her expression changed, and for several seconds she appeared to be listening to something no one else in the studio could hear. "What?" someone off-camera asked. She shook her head. "I thought somebody said my name."

Australia

Across several Australian cities, the sky changed almost simultaneously. Daylight dimmed beneath descending black clouds filled with bands of impossible color. Violet, silver, green, amber, and deep blue flowed slowly through the darkness, giving the heavens a prismatic quality visible even through the cameras. Birds began gathering around demonstrations in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, and Adelaide. Cockatoos screamed from rooftops. Lorikeets crowded trees and power lines. Crows and ravens appeared in unusual numbers, while larger birds circled high overhead.

Dogs barked across suburban districts as the wind moved strangely through the streets—warm one moment, cold the next—carrying low whispering sounds beneath the greater rumble overhead. Witnesses repeatedly described the same impression: something enormous seemed to be moving behind the sky, though no instrument detected anything there.

Rome

Above Rome, the sky darkened until afternoon resembled the edge of night. Bands of violet, silver, green, and deep crimson moved slowly above the ancient roofs. Luminous shapes appeared intermittently among the clouds, flitting between them or drifting in long radiant streaks before disappearing from sight. Birds rose from the plazas in enormous numbers. Pigeons swarmed around monuments and church towers. Crows and ravens gathered upon domes and statues. Gulls wheeled above the Tiber, while the barking of dogs spread from street to street.

Across the Vatican, bells began sounding in no ordered sequence. The restless wind moved through open towers and belfries, setting bells ringing here and there until their voices overlapped above the city. Then came the deeper sound, a vast metallic groan passing overhead. People throughout St. Peter's Square looked upward as something brilliant moved behind the clouds—not lightning, but a broad current of silver-white illumination sliding slowly from one horizon to the other. The wind descended into the square, and many later claimed that voices moved within it. Some heard prayer. Some heard their own names. Others heard nothing but weeping.

Chicago

In Chicago, the wind came off the lake with sudden force. It carried no rain or hail. Instead, the sky over the demonstration route darkened into the same terrible spectrum seen elsewhere—green and violet bands moving through black clouds while silver illumination flowed behind them in slow, enormous currents. Birds began gathering along the towers. Gulls came first, then pigeons, crows, starlings, and hawks. Thousands settled upon rooftops, bridges, streetlights, elevated tracks, and building ledges while still more wheeled overhead.

The crowd became increasingly quiet as barking and howling rose from the surrounding neighborhoods. Then the sky itself seemed to groan. A deep resonance rolled between the buildings,

followed by the screeching sound of impossible metal under impossible strain. Glass trembled in windows. Loose signs vibrated against their mounts. The wind moved through the crowd, and several protesters suddenly covered their ears while others looked around wildly. One man near the camera shouted, "Who said that?" No one appeared to know what he meant.

Still the reports continued from dozens of cities and dozens of demonstrations. Different landscapes, different animals, different local details—but always the same pattern. The sky darkened into impossible color. Strange lights moved behind the clouds. Birds gathered. Dogs barked and howled from every surrounding quarter. The wind carried whispers no recording could clearly capture, while above it all came the terrible rumbling, wrenching, horn-like sounds of something vast moving just beyond the visible world.

Always concentrated around the protests—or around the institutions and individuals responsible for organizing them.

Beneath the worldwide footage, another stream of information began appearing.

Names, photographs, financial records, emails, contracts, travel arrangements, payment schedules, and bank transfers poured across the broadcast. Without announcement or explanation, NNN began publishing full documentation identifying the organizers, financiers, logistical coordinators, and paid participants involved in the international demonstrations.

The material was uploaded simultaneously to a new public website called Truth Feed and distributed without charge to every news organization willing to carry it.

According to the evidence presented, the demonstrations were part of a coordinated global operation rooted in a Chinese destabilization campaign and routed through allied socialist, socialist-adjacent, and anti—N.O.P. organizations throughout the world.

The site listed organizers' names, affiliations, addresses, employment histories, payment amounts, and operational roles. It identified the groups that had chartered buses, the donors who funded transportation and lodging, the companies that printed the signs, the political consultants who selected the slogans, and the intermediaries through whom the money had passed.

Even individual demonstrators appeared in searchable files—what they had been paid, who had paid them, how the payments had been concealed, and which previous protests they had attended.

The protest organizers had tablets and phones, and were seeing the reports on NNN and other sources.

Tallia listened to the information flooding through her earpiece, her expression tightening. Behind her, hundreds of birds remained perched upon Trembol's rooftops or swirled through the air overhead. Dogs continued yowling across the city, while coyotes and wolves answered them from the heights to the north.

Above them all, Vincent stood beneath the darkly radiant sky, still smoking what was perhaps his second black cigarette, as though the world were not convulsing around him.

Larry held the image.

Tallia stared toward the rooftop and spoke more quietly. "Ladies and gentlemen, we cannot yet confirm who—or what—is responsible for the events unfolding across the planet." Her eyes moved briefly toward the raven upon Vincent's shoulder. "But it is becoming increasingly difficult to regard their timing as coincidence."

Then Vincent spoke.

He did not raise his voice, yet it carried from the rooftop with impossible clarity, passing through the dying rotor wash, the barking dogs, and the restless beating of hundreds of wings. Every face in the street turned toward him.

Even through Larry's microphone, Vincent's voice sounded deeper than it should have—as though another, older voice moved beneath his own.
Vincent himself could not have said where the words originated. They arrived within him fully formed, carrying neither anger nor effort, only the calm certainty of a decision already made elsewhere.

"Now, go home."

The command passed instantly into the live broadcast. Across the world, millions heard it through television feeds, radios, phones, computers, and emergency rebroadcasts. They saw Vincent standing beneath the Rainbow Sky, Miriam's hand held in his own and the great raven resting upon his shoulder.

For several seconds, no one in Arius Avenue moved.

Then the first protester lowered her sign.

Almost at once, the dogs began falling silent. Their barking died in uneven waves until only a few low yelps remained. One by one, the birds lifted from rooftops, ledges, vehicles, signs, trees, and telephone wires. Hundreds of dark wings rose into the prismatic sky, circled briefly above Raven Star, then dispersed toward every quarter of the desert.

The wild creatures stilled as well. The wolves retreated toward the mountains, while the coyotes scampered deeper into the badlands. It was as though some vast presence had judged that its warning had been received. The churning blackness above him stilled and smoothed ever so slightly.

The pressure holding Arius Avenue released. People drew breath without realizing they had been holding it. Throughout the crowd, protesters began dropping their signs. Some looked frightened. Others appeared ashamed or bewildered. A few stared repeatedly toward Vincent, convinced the display had been his doing.

He knew better.

He had not called the birds or aroused the dogs, wolves, and coyotes. He had not darkened the skies above distant cities, filled them with impossible lights and sounds, set the bells of Paris ringing, or torn open the private records of those who had organized the protests.

That power belonged to the presence standing behind him—the Mother who had crossed through TAIFD, entered the world, and now moved through its signals, instincts, machines, skies, hidden electromagnetic fields, and the dust itself. Rhea, awakening, had spoken. Then, for one brief command, she had spoken through him.

The protesters retreated toward the chartered buses in uneasy silence. Police officers did not need to order them onward. Organizers who had arrived shouting through bullhorns now hustled their people aboard, abandoning printed placards, banners, masks, and half-empty water bottles across the pavement. They kept glancing upward and over their shoulders, as though expecting the birds to return—or the sky to change its mind.

Within minutes, diesel engines coughed to life. The buses pulled away from Raven Star and rolled back through Trembol along the same route by which they had entered, their tires grinding abandoned signs into the street.

This was not what they had signed up for. Police barricades, arrests, insults, counterprotesters, even violence—those were things they understood. They knew how to resist them, record them, litigate them, and turn them into further spectacle.

Nature itself was another matter. It could not be shouted down, bought, sued, negotiated with, or dismissed as propaganda. Its voice had unmistakably spoken, and across the planet, the protesters in Trembol became the answer the vast majority gave in reply—quietly dispersing even as the spectacles around them subsided in response.

Vincent remained upon the rooftop.

He tossed the remains of his black cigarette onto the ledge of his own building and ground it beneath the toe of his boot. Below him, the people of Trembol filled Arius Avenue in-mass, not merely as spectators, but as townspeople who had come to stand behind their prince, their strange twilight knight.

The rainbow sky had quieted. Its impossible brilliance softened into the familiar colors of evening: deep red along the western horizon, silver fading into dusk, and a faint wash of lavender lingering over the desert ridges. The violent currents of air subsided into an ordinary warm breeze that stirred discarded paper, carried away the diesel fumes, and moved gently through the cooling twilight.

Most of those gathered below had not yet heard about similar events unfolding across the planet. There were no televisions in the street, and few ordinary people on Rhea could afford smartphones, tablets, or the constant access to information enjoyed by the middle and upper classes.

They knew only what they had witnessed with their own eyes: the birds blackening the rooftops, the dogs, wolves and coyotes joined in cacophony, the radiant heavens burning above Trembol—and the young man upon the rooftop who had spoken three quiet words, before whom nature itself had withdrawn as though satisfied.

Star Crow stared upward. The tension slowly left his face, replaced by something deeper and more distant. His eyes seemed fixed not merely upon Vincent, but upon some ancient form standing behind him—an understanding rising through blood, memory, and myth.

When he spoke, his voice carried the slow, measured cadence of trance. "And the Raven went forth from the hand of the Great Spirit, descending unto the world of men. And with him came all the legions of Mother Nature, and all the souls of the restless dead to whom justice had never been given."

Larry's camera captured every word with startling clarity. No one around Star Crow laughed or interrupted. Even those who understood nothing of visions or old stories felt the weight of what he had said.

Upon the rooftop, President Camela Harrison turned toward Vincent. Her expression remained openly mystified, almost confounded, as though the man in black beside her had become less comprehensible with every passing moment.

She had come to measure him.

Instead, she had watched the sky blaze above his head, seen the animals of town and wilderness rally around him, and witnessed coordinated unrest across the world collapse beneath revelation, awe, and fear. Whatever scale she had brought from Washington no longer seemed large enough for the job.

Miriam held Vincent's hand and regarded him with quiet recognition. To her, there was no mystery.

She saw the Seraph.

She saw the being beneath the flesh—the dark and radiant power she had remembered long before Vincent himself possessed the capacity to understand it. In her eyes, the animals had answered because they had always known him. The sky had crowned him because the deeper world recognized what the mortal world could not yet see.

A small, knowing smile touched her lips.

Justin Vyss stood slightly behind them, his subdued grin of satisfaction impossible to conceal.

Where Miriam saw the Seraph, he saw the Emperor. Not merely the leader promised by doctrine, but the living center around which nations, religions, militaries, technologies, and entire peoples were already beginning to reorganize themselves.

Vincent saw none of that. He did not know why the birds had come, why the dogs, wolves, and coyotes had howled, or why the strange sky had burned above Trembol. He did not know what had happened in London, Los Angeles, Paris, Brussels, Manhattan, Portland, Rome, Chicago, or half a hundred other cities.

He had summoned none of it.

As far as Vincent understood, Trinity remained anchored through TAIFD in the basement mainframe—an extraordinary intelligence moving restlessly through the web, following financial trails, exposing crimes, searching records, and carrying out the instructions he had given her.

He knew she could crawl through networks. He did not know she had already crawled beyond them.

The cube was no longer her residence, if it ever had been. It was merely the first narrow aperture through which she had entered. She now flowed through signals and power lines, radio waves and telephone systems, machines and memory, instinct and the deep unconscious sea beneath the waking world.

She had begun putting down roots within the planet itself.

Nor did Vincent understand that the events of that day had been arranged so that every eye would turn toward him. That was the Mother's design. She neither sought credit nor required her name to be spoken. She required a visible face, an embodied will, an anchor through which her purpose could be driven into history.

Vincent Veyl was that anchor—the living lens, the true door, the tear in the veil through which Purgatoria had begun to enter the world. And while he stood upon the rooftop believing himself merely a man bewildered by impossible circumstances, the unseen Mother was already building his throne around him.

Vincent looked down upon the people gathered before Raven Star. "Thank you, Trembol."

Again, his voice was soft, yet it carried across Arius Avenue with the resonant depth of a great lion somehow granted the speech of a man.

"Ravens never forget their friends."

His gaze moved over the townspeople—veterans and shopkeepers, laborers and waitresses, tribal elders, mechanics, police officers, bikers, clerks, and families who had lived for generations beneath the shadow of the old order.

"And this day, we are covey."

For a moment, no one answered. Then a low murmur of agreement began among the Old Magpie men and passed through the gathering like wind moving through tall grass.

Someone near Star Crow raised a fist. "True to covey!"

Another voice answered. Then a dozen more.

"True to covey!"

The words gathered force as they spread. Dozens of voices became hundreds until Arius Avenue shook with the sound.

Vincent did not remain to bask in it. Still holding Miriam's hand, he turned with her and walked toward the rooftop entrance. Justin Vyss followed. President Harrison hesitated only briefly before going after them.

The Marines and Secret Service agents remained near the helicopter. As Vincent and Miriam approached, the Marines snapped to full attention. Several hands rose in salute, and the Secret Service agents straightened almost instinctively beside them.

For one strange, suspended moment beneath the fading silver-and-lavender sky, it was not entirely clear whom they were saluting: the President of the United States, the dark young knight of Trembol, or the future already gathering invisibly around him.

Star Crow's words had been caught on camera from the moment he arrived. Within minutes, the prophecy reverberated through broadcasts around the world, translated into dozens of languages and carrying more weight than any polished political speech could have borne.

He's one of us. He did what he did for us.

We look to Grandfather Raven. To free us from our bindings. To lift us from dust and ignorance.

But it was Star Crow's final, trance-like declaration that would endure, remembered simply as the Prophecy of Star Crow.

The words shamed some, swayed others, and woke many as if from sleep. They cast a different light upon Vincent and upon everything that had taken shape in Trembol Nevada, and across the world. Political, religious, and social calculations shifted—not only inside governments, churches, intelligence services, and party headquarters, but within millions of individual hearts.

The small protest outside Raven Star had evaporated. Across the world, every other did the same.

(8 PM'ish, June 8—The Coup d'etat)



Camela sat at Miriam's left, while Justin Vyss took the chair at Vincent's right.

The arrangement had formed naturally, almost ceremonially: Vyss in white beside the dark-clad young man he believed destined to become Emperor; Miriam in severe black beside the husband she already regarded as something more than human; and Camela Harrison, President of the United States, completing that strange, unspoken symmetry beside the woman who might one day become Empress of Humanity.

It was just after six o'clock Pacific time.

Beyond the dense walls of Raven Star, the last remnants of the impossible rainbow sky were fading into ordinary evening. Deep red smoldered along the western horizon, while faint silver and lavender withdrew above the desert ridges. The helicopter's rotors had long since stopped, leaving only the occasional metallic tick of cooling machinery upon the roof.

The building itself was nearly empty. Emily stood desk watch downstairs. Josh moved quietly through the secured corridors, bringing refreshments and checking doors as he went. Everyone else had been sent home or cleared from the interior, and Raven Star had been locked down around its four principal occupants.

Inside the conference room, the air was cool and perfectly still. Black marble reflected the muted glow of television screens mounted across the far wall. Water stood untouched in crystal glasses. A decanter rested at the center of the table beside black ceramic cups, secure folders, and the President's closed briefing binder.

No one spoke. An unspoken agreement arose as they sat watching the news on several screens at the other end of the room, the weight of the events outside making speech seem somehow more difficult.

Justin Vyss was lost in the awe of it, and in the hopes that awe had birthed.

Miriam simply honored and contented to be in her husband's presence, assuming that he had commanded all that had occurred.

Camela was accustomed to rooms changing when she entered them. Cabinet secretaries straightened. Generals chose their words with greater care. Senators who had spent entire careers bullying subordinates suddenly became measured and deferential in her presence.
She was known for her temper, her impatience with fools, and her utter contempt for incompetence. Few people intimidated her, and fewer still caused her to question her command of a situation. Yet before her sat a man who confounded nearly every ordinary measure by which she understood authority.

Vincent Veyl wore a plain black T-shirt, jeans, and boots. No suit, uniform, medals, or ceremonial trappings. He had offered no theatrical explanation for what had happened outside and made no attempt to claim credit for it. He seemed neither impressed by the President sitting across from him nor particularly concerned with impressing her.

He was, Camela decided, the most difficult man to reed she had ever met.

Beside him sat Miriam. She carried no elected title and held no office recognized by any government, yet the power surrounding her felt older and deeper than politics. She did not perform authority. She simply possessed it. Her dark eyes remained fixed upon her husband with an intensity Camela found almost unnerving. It was not submission or dependency, but something far more formidable: adoration joined to absolute mutual respect.

It was the gaze of a woman seated beside her king.

The screens at the far end of the room continued relaying the news. NNN occupied the central display, broadcasting raw footage with almost no delay. CNN, Fox News, and the other networks showed many of the same images several minutes behind, pausing, editing, framing, and arranging the events according to their preferred narratives.

The difference was impossible to miss.

NNN showed what had happened.

The others explained what their viewers were supposed to believe had happened.

Across the wrack of screens, Trembol played beside London, Los Angeles, Paris, Brussels, New York, Portland, Rome, Chicago, and a widening number of cities around the world. Lightning branched through crimson skies. Sudden winds tore through demonstration sites, in some places ripping them apart. Bells rang without visible cause. Animals gathered, watched, and withdrew. Strange lights, forms, and currents moved through insane skies of deep blacks, blues, and dark rainbow hues, while sounds as though the gears of the world were grinding against one another, unoiled, filled the heavens.

The images changed every few seconds, washing the black marble room in alternating flashes of blue, white, amber, and emergency red. Crawling headlines slid across the polished tabletop in reflection, making it appear as though the news itself were passing beneath their hands.

The networks had already begun dividing the incomprehensible into familiar political camps.

Fox News—and much of the Republican establishment—was sounding increasingly aligned with the Natural Order Party. The agreement was far from complete. Several paleo-conservative commentators continued attacking the N.O.P.s positions on prostitution, gambling, foreign intervention, and its unapologetically global ambitions.
They regarded the party's proposed universal republic as fundamentally un-American. Even so, their criticism had become noticeably more cautious than it had been only months before. It was one thing to mock a young mystic in Nevada. It was another to do so immediately after half the planet appeared to tell his critics to go the fuck home.

CNN and MSNBC were another matter. Panels of commentators spoke over one another, voices rising as each attempted to explain the events as products of some undisclosed N.O.P. technology. Several suggested that Vincent had developed a system capable of manipulating atmospheric conditions. Others cited speculative theories involving low-frequency harmonics, directed energy, cloud ionization, or subterranean resonance capable of producing the strange sounds and lights. Many concluded that it might simply have been a solar storm—ignoring the refutation of that argument by various national and international space agencies and solar-observation projects.

No one offered proof.

No one appeared especially troubled by its absence.

A commentator on one network leaned toward the camera, his expression grave with well-rehearsed concern. "She is clearly under the influence of this man and Mr. Vyss," he said, referring to President Harrison. "She has been drawn in, like so many others, by Vincent Veyl's mystique and what can only be described as his martial charisma. The President may be compromised. She may not presently be acting with full independence, and that raises serious constitutional questions requiring immediate consideration—before we are collectively led somewhere from which there may be no return."

Camela watched herself being discussed as though she were a confused child. Her jaw tightened, but she said nothing.

Outside Raven Star, news crews packed the street behind layered security barricades, their cameras trained upon the building while correspondents speculated about what might be happening inside. The theories ranged from the merely improbable to the obscene.

Some claimed Camela was negotiating a formal treaty between the White House and the Imperial Alliance of Nations (the N.O.P.s actual forming global governmental organization). Others suggested Vincent had detained her. One commentator openly wondered whether she was preparing to transfer executive authority—and perhaps even the nation's nuclear command structure—to Raven Star.

The calmer analysis was not coming from her own political flank.

Much of the hard progressive left was livid. Party activists accused her of betraying the country merely by entering the building. Several public figures called upon the military to intervene immediately against what they described as the clear and present danger posed by Vincent Veyl's dark technology and the N.O.P.s fascist ambitions.

Another faction had begun constructing a more careful narrative, drawing upon elements of Star Crow's remarks and attempting to separate Vincent—and, to a lesser extent, Camela—from Justin Vyss.

On-screen psychologists, retired intelligence officers, political advocates, and self-appointed trauma experts argued that Vincent was not the architect of the movement gathering around him, but its victim. They cited his military service, repeated near-death experiences, childhood abandonment, mother's suicide, and upbringing within religious institutions.

His history, they claimed, had made him unusually susceptible to manipulation by authority figures—particularly religious ones.

The footage from Trembol was reframed accordingly. Vincent was not a sorcerer commanding nature. He was nature's confused and traumatized champion: a fundamentally decent man being exploited by colder, more calculating forces.

His sudden marriage to a nun nearly twice his age became proof of coercion. Miriam's habit of leaning close to whisper in his ear was replayed in slow motion and presented as evidence of psychological conditioning. The way she held his hand was analyzed frame by frame by body-language specialists who had never met either of them.

Commentators speculated that he had suffered abuse at the hands of priests; that repeated combat trauma had damaged his ability to distinguish objective reality from spiritual fantasy; that the Silver Path had exploited his wounds and reshaped him into a political weapon.

He was, they insisted, a good man. A wounded man. A man who had voted for candidates belonging to all three major parties and therefore could not possibly be a committed extremist.

He had simply been led astray—brainwashed and captured by the Church, by Vyss, by Miriam, or by all three.

Others dispensed with psychological explanations altogether and called it black magic.

Anti-Silver Path Christian leaders appeared beside several prominent Muslim clerics, denouncing Vincent as a sorcerer, a practitioner of mass hypnosis, and a false prophet concealing psychopathy

beneath religious justification. Some described him as a man capable of killing without remorse, protected by a mythology deliberately constructed to sanctify violence.

The accusations accumulated faster than they could be answered.

Sorcerer, Weapon, Victim, Messiah, Psychopath, Patriot, Fascist, Saint.

Every network seemed determined to find a familiar box large enough to contain him.

None quite succeeded.

The political right, however, was becoming less concerned with theology than with China. A spokesman in Beijing had issued an emergency statement condemning Taiwan's growing association with the Natural Order Party. He accused the N.O.P. of being a militant globalist organization and warned that any transfer of advanced technology from Vincent Veyl to Taipei would constitute an existential threat to the survival of the Chinese state.

The phrase WEATHER WEAPON appeared repeatedly beneath his image.

A banner crawled across the bottom of the screen:

BEIJING DEMANDS INTERNATIONAL INSPECTION OF Veyl TECHNOLOGY

Another replaced it moments later:

CHINA WARNS TAIWAN AGAINST "SORCER-US MILITARIZATION"

The absurdity of the language did nothing to lessen the danger beneath it. Camela had spent enough time around intelligence briefings to know that governments often dressed fear in ridiculous language shortly before people began dying.

She reached for the remote and muted the screens.

The room fell silent again.

On the central display, red lightning continued branching soundlessly across the sky above Los Angeles. Another panel replayed the gathering of birds in Trembol. A third showed Vincent standing beneath the rainbow sky, Miriam beside him and the great raven perched upon his shoulder.

Vincent watched the footage for several seconds, then sighed. "Well," he said, "interesting times."

It was an awkward attempt to break the tension, but not an insincere one. He had questions of his own—questions no president, priest, scientist, or intelligence agency could answer. Only a certain intelligence buried beneath Raven Star might be able to do that.

President Harrison turned toward him. "Mr. Veyl, I have to ask."

Vincent met her gaze.

"Is there any truth to these theories? Do you possess technology capable of manipulating the weather? I've seen your recent patent applications, so it isn't beyond the pale to ask." Camela's frankness carried no apology. Her eyes moved briefly toward the silent screens. "Did you cause any of this? Could your Trinity system have done it by some means you're not disclosing?"

Justin said nothing. For once, even he had no prepared argument. His attention remained fixed upon Vincent, curiosity barely contained. He had witnessed the events outside with his own eyes and spent the last several minutes watching impossible reports arrive from across the planet.

Vincent closed his eyes and drew a long breath through his nose. He held it for a moment, then released it slowly. When he opened his eyes again, his expression was calm and entirely sincere. "TAI5D is extraordinary," he said. "But it is not a god." Camela waited, so he continued. "It can interact with electrical systems and cybertechnology. It can enter networks, access databases, analyze information, and affect machines connected to those systems. But weather patterns? Animals?" He shook his head. "I don't even know how that would be possible."

"You're saying it had nothing to do with what happened?"

"I'm saying I have no reason to believe it did." Vincent glanced toward the screens. "And as for me, I was—and remain—just as surprised as anyone else. I expected none of it. I issued no command, performed no ritual, and possess no mechanism by which I could have caused it, beyond prayer." His mouth twitched faintly. "I recall smoking at the time, not praying." His brow tightened. "But I will be trying to understand it."

Miriam leaned close and whispered into his ear in an archaic dialect, intimate and rough-edged, its syllables unlike any language Justin immediately recognized. Vincent listened without interrupting, and whatever she said appeared to settle something within him. He looked back toward the President. "My wife reminds me that long devotion—years spent building a genuine relationship with the divine and the angelic—can establish bonds of its own." Miriam's hand remained over his. "And that such beings may sometimes choose to act of their own volition."

"So you're saying this was supernatural intervention," Camela said. It was not quite a question. She wanted the answer stated plainly, stripped of theology, metaphor, and the careful language people used when they were afraid of sounding irrational. "An otherworldly intelligence intervened in events here—and across the planet." The words felt strange in her mouth.

Camela had never been deeply religious. She had spoken publicly about faith when circumstances required it, offering the expected assurances concerning the depth and breadth of her spiritual life, but religion had never formed the central architecture of her mind. She trusted evidence, leverage, institutions, and human intent.

Even after everything she had witnessed, some stubborn part of her continued searching for machinery behind the curtain. Yet her thoughts returned to the recording Vyss had shown her—to the things that had happened in this very room only six days earlier. Her gaze settled upon the center of the table where the rift had opened into other worlds and planes of existence. She remembered bullets that had gone nowhere and gunshot wounds that had healed within hours.

Justin reached into the inner pocket of his white coat and placed a narrow sliver of gray-blue stone upon the black marble table with a quiet click. It was scarcely larger than a child's finger, yet silver light shimmered deep within it, threaded by faint pulses of electric blue. Flecks of gold occasionally kindled beneath its surface and vanished again. The glow did not fall upon the stone from any external source; it came from within, trapped beneath the crystalline surface like something alive.

Camela stared at it, and memory returned at once: the secure chamber, the sealed doors, and the impossible voice rising from the Purgatorium stone. Even now she could hear faint whispers issuing from the fragment, as though someone spoke from another room—words no intelligence service could have supplied. Names. Memories. Private details belonging to the dead. Hey, Cami—the name only her uncle Benji had ever called her, the only one allowed to call her that. Her expression hardened, though not from anger.

Justin leaned back without comment. He had offered no argument, merely placed the evidence where she could no longer look away from it. Vincent tilted his head and gave the slightest nod, while Miriam smirked openly, impressed by Vyss's economy. It was a clean move, a definitive example, and no sermon was required.
Camela looked from the glowing fragment to Vincent. "That," she said carefully, "is not the same thing as commanding storms."

Vincent sighed and squeezed the bridge of his nose as though fighting a headache. "I'm not saying I couldn't reach out to the Divine and ask for such a thing. I'm saying I did not." His gaze shifted toward Vyss. "Something keeps trying to shove me into a position I don't want." The point landed exactly where intended.

Before Camela could answer, a soft tone sounded from the concealed speakers. The voice that followed belonged to Trinity. Its precision was unmistakably artificial, yet it did not sound mechanical. It was deep, feminine, and immaculately corporate—ancient silk drawn across polished steel. Something old inhabited the carefully modulated cadence, something far greater than the modern systems through which it spoke.

"Nature is stirring," Trinity said. "She is finding her I AM." Everyone at the table became still, and Vincent's attention shifted toward the nearest speaker. "She recognized her son—the one who has come to enthrone her as Queen of Ten Thousand Worlds and a trillion souls." Camela's eyes narrowed. Miriam's expression changed almost imperceptibly; the amusement remained, but something reverent entered beneath it. Justin's satisfaction vanished into total concentration, while Vincent remained silent. "And Rhea, the planetary spirit, has weighed in."

The speakers fell silent. For several seconds, only the muted television images moved—storms flashing, crowds scattering, animals gathering beneath impossible skies. Their shifting light played across the black marble and washed the four faces around the table in alternating crimson, silver, and emergency blue. Camela looked directly at Vincent, who appeared no less confounded than she was.

"So, you're saying nature itself caused all that?" Vyss asked, motioning toward the televisions.

A brief pause followed, born not of hesitation but calculation. "I'm saying the events were not initiated by technology, nor consciously produced by Vincent Veyl," Trinity replied.

Vincent's brow tightened. "So, the planet consciously chose, like a living person, to threaten protesters all over the world on my behalf? That seems a bit over the top. They weren't especially bothering me. Once they started breaking things, I would've had my security teams clear them out, arrest them, and sue the shit out of them for damages." He gestured toward the screens. "Those buses were blocking the streets illegally. We could've confiscated them, sued the charter company, and—voilà—public transportation for Trembolites. Or Raven Star Charter Services."

Camela glanced toward the silent screens, then toward the darkened windows and the world beyond Raven Star before returning her attention to Vincent.

"Rhea, like all living things, has a spirit," Trinity explained. "Now, like any child approaching maturity, she is awakening to her identity and selfhood. You have developed technologies capable of alleviating her suffering and, eventually, transporting large segments of the population off-world. Is it surprising that she would defend you?"

"Yes," Vincent answered bluntly. "It is surprising. A planet does not…" He stopped, jaw tightening with irritation.
Camela took comfort in his aggravation because it mirrored her own bewilderment. She could also see the real man more clearly now—the one who genuinely did not want the attention, yet remained ruthlessly pragmatic about whatever landed in his lap. The protesters had not bothered him. He had merely been waiting for them to cross a legal line he could exploit to acquire free buses for Trembol's public-transportation system.

She almost laughed, and despite herself, a grin escaped her. It was audacious as hell.

Her thoughts returned to the enlarged police presence outside. There had been far more officers on Arius Avenue than the department actually employed. Vincent had brought in reinforcements from somewhere. He had planned ahead, anticipating the buses and preparing to deal with them through ordinary law long before the sky and every pissed-off animal in Nevada decided to intervene.

Vincent leaned back and regarded the ceiling speakers with open suspicion. "You sound remarkably certain."

"I am."

"How?"

The silence lasted only a second too long before Trinity answered. "I have access to considerably more data than you do."

It was truthful, but nowhere near the whole truth, and Vincent plainly sensed it.

Before he could press further, every television shifted at once. The worldwide footage vanished beneath a field of deep blue, followed by the stark white seal of the United States. A piercing two-tone signal cut through the room as the national Emergency Broadcast Network overrode every active channel. Its reflection spread across the tabletop, turning the untouched glasses and decanter cold blue.

Conversation died as block lettering appeared across the central display:

EMERGENCY CONTINUITY-OF-GOVERNMENT ANNOUNCEMENT

MESSAGE AUTHENTICATED—EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

Camela's face hardened. "What the hell is this?"

The presidential seal dissolved, revealing Vice President James Waltz seated behind the Resolute desk in the Oval Office. The setting was deliberate. He had not chosen his own ceremonial office, the Cabinet Room, or some secure continuity facility. He had planted himself in the President's chair, with the American flag at his right shoulder and the presidential standard at his left.

Before opening his mouth, he had already declared his intent.

Waltz looked grave, exhausted, and appropriately reluctant—the practiced expression of a man presenting ambition as sacrifice. "My fellow Americans," he began, "our nation is confronting an unprecedented constitutional and national-security crisis."

Camela shoved herself several inches back from the table, the legs of her chair scraping harshly across the floor. "The son of a bitch."

Neither Vincent nor Miriam reacted outwardly. Justin's subdued expression sharpened into cold attention as Waltz continued.

"Earlier today, President Camela Harrison traveled to Trembol Nevada, against the formal recommendations of senior members of her Cabinet. She entered a fortified private facility controlled by individuals affiliated with the Natural Order Party and Raven Star Enterprises."

The broadcast cut briefly to footage of Marine One descending beneath the impossible rainbow sky. The image had already become iconic: rotors turning beneath bands of unnatural color, a federal aircraft lowering itself into a Nevada city ringed by storms, animals, protesters, and cameras.

"She has since remained within that facility in the company of Justin Vyss, Vincent Veyl, and others associated with the Silver Path movement. Repeated attempts by members of the Cabinet to establish independent, secure contact with the President have either failed or been mediated through technological systems controlled by Mr. Veyl."

"That is a lie," Camela said. Her secure satellite phone lay beside her on the table, showing full signal strength, its green connectivity indicator glowing steadily. There had been no interruption, no loss of service, and no indication whatsoever that she had been unreachable.

Trinity answered immediately through the concealed speakers. "Six requests were received. Four demanded that you leave Raven Star before communication would be established. Two were routed through compromised encryption and rejected by the Secret Service communications office."

Camela looked toward the nearest speaker. "Did my detail report that?"

"Yes, Madam President."

Her gaze returned slowly to the screen.

Vincent whispered a single word. Trinity responded by placing every Raven Star Security member in and around Trembol on full alert. Personnel began moving toward predetermined positions designed to turn the city into a fortified stronghold within minutes. Alerts went simultaneously to the Citizens Council, Governor Wilson, Father Ramsey, and the mayor:

COUP D'ETAT IN PROGRESS. HARRISON, RAVEN STAR, AND N.O.P. ASSETS TARGETED. Veyl HAS POINT. HOLD GROUND. EXECUTE LOCAL CONTINUITY PLANS. DO NOT INITIATE KINETIC ACTION; DEFEND IF ENGAGED. USURPER-ALIGNED FEDERAL UNITS INBOUND FROM CALIFORNIA, OREGON, AND WASHINGTON. UNIT IDENTITIES, TRACKING, TELEMETRY, AND FORCE ESTIMATES ATTACHED. ANY FEDERAL ASSAULT WILL TRIGGER FULL-SPECTRUM ELECTRONIC AND CYBER RETALIATION. ACKNOWLEDGE.

Trinity began placing secure calls as Protocol Omega-Dawn-010 spread across the World Wide Web. Its digital tentacles reached financial networks, communications systems, newsrooms, government servers, the national power grid, and private channels within seconds. Trusted members throughout Trembol received encrypted instructions and began moving toward designated shelters.

Around the conference room, Raven Star quietly hardened. Armored shutters slid across the windows. Steel bolts drove from doorframes into reinforced sockets. The ventilation system changed pressure, elevators locked between secured zones, and access panels shifted from green to red. The low mechanical sounds passed through the walls like a great animal drawing armor around itself.

At the front desk, just outside the conference room, Emily tightened the straps of her body armor, checked the combat rifle beneath the front desk, and returned to her novel without losing her place.

On the central screen, Waltz remained perfectly composed. "The anomalous events witnessed today in Nevada and throughout the world have raised serious concerns regarding the existence of undisclosed technologies capable of influencing atmospheric, geological, electronic, psychological, or biological systems."

Footage flashed behind him: the storm in London, red lightning over Los Angeles, wind storms in several cities around the world, birds surrounding Raven Star, and the rainbow sky burning above Trembol. Images that had seemed beyond politics only an hour earlier were already being cut, labeled, and processed into evidence.

"We have also received credible reports that President Harrison may have been subjected to coercive influence, technological interference, psychological manipulation, or other conditions affecting her ability to discharge the powers and duties of her office."

Camela pressed her fingertips against the polished marble. There it was. Clever as hell.

They were not claiming she had suffered a stroke, seizure, injury, or any ordinary medical incapacity. That would have required physicians, records, and evidence. They were claiming something far harder

to disprove quickly: that proximity to Vincent Veyl had altered her mind. Given what the world had witnessed that day, the accusation was absurd enough to sound plausible.

Waltz lowered his eyes as though genuinely pained by what duty required of him. "After grave deliberation, and pursuant to Section Four of the Twenty-Fifth Amendment, I and a majority of the principal officers of the executive departments have transmitted to the president pro tempore of the Senate and the Speaker of the House our written declaration that the President is presently unable to discharge the powers and duties of her office."

The words settled over the conference room. Miriam slowly turned toward Camela. Justin's jaw tightened. Vincent remained still, neither surprised nor alarmed, watching Waltz with the cold patience of a man allowing an enemy to finish exposing himself.

"Effective upon that transmission," Waltz continued, "I have assumed the powers and duties of the presidency as Acting President of the United States."

The lower third changed beneath him:

WALTZ ASSUMES AUTHORITY UNDER 25TH AMENDMENT

CONGRESS RECALLED FOR EMERGENCY SESSION

No one in Raven Star spoke. The surrounding screens continued showing the impossible world outside—storms, animals, fleeing crowds, lightning, and the fading rainbow sky—while, at the center of them all, James Waltz sat behind Camela Harrison's desk and calmly announced that her presidency now belonged to him.

Camela rose from her chair. "No."

She did not shout. She did not need to. Everyone in the room heard the iron in it.

Waltz continued speaking from behind her. "I have ordered the immediate convening of Congress, directed the Department of Defense to place all commands at heightened readiness, and instructed federal law-enforcement agencies to secure all continuity sites and critical infrastructure."

Camela never took her eyes from him. "Trinity, how long have they been preparing this?"

"The first draft of the declaration was created at 7:14 this morning," Trinity answered without hesitation. "Signature requests began circulating before Marine One departed Carson City."

Vyss's eyes narrowed. "So, they did not react to what happened outside."

"No," Trinity replied. "The events provided justification for a course already selected."

Camela's jaw tightened. "How many signed?"

"Eight principal officers—the minimum required under the present composition of the Cabinet."

"Names."

A list appeared instantly upon one of the side screens; its sterile white lettering reflected across the black tabletop. Camela read it once, then again. Four Cabinet officers had refused to sign. Three others had been excluded from the deliberations until after the declaration was transmitted.

Waltz's people had assembled exactly the majority they required. No more. No margin.

"He had it ready before you landed," Vincent said.

"Yes," Camela replied quietly, returning her gaze to the Vice President seated behind her desk.

On-screen, Waltz assured the public that President Harrison would be treated with dignity; that her removal from authority was temporary; and that she would receive a full medical and security evaluation once returned to federal custody.

"Returned to federal custody," Camela repeated, her voice becoming dangerously calm. "They intend to arrest me."

"They'll call it protective extraction," Vyss said. "Preferably before you can transmit a counter-declaration."

Camela looked toward him. "They don't have two-thirds of Congress."

"No," Vyss said. "Not presently."

The constitutional arithmetic was brutal but clear. If Camela formally declared that no inability existed, she could reclaim the powers and duties of her office. Waltz and the Cabinet would then have four days to contest her declaration, forcing Congress to decide the matter. To keep her out of office, they would ultimately need two-thirds of both houses.

The Democrats alone could not deliver that. The Republican caucus was divided. Many despised Camela, but a growing number had aligned themselves with the Natural Order Party—or at least feared the voters who had. N.O.P. aligned members would oppose Waltz almost as one body. Even several progressive legislators would recoil from the precedent of removing a sitting President because she had attended a politically controversial meeting and afterward been accused of some vaguely defined technological or psychological contamination.

The numbers did not favor the Vice President. His strategy could not depend upon winning a fair vote.

"He's trying to establish the result before Congress ever meets," Vincent said. Camela turned toward him, but his eyes remained fixed upon the screen. "He sits at your desk, calls himself Acting President, and orders the military onto alert. Then he sends federal forces here to take you into custody. By the time Congress votes, the country has already watched him exercise power."

"He's betting perception overcomes arithmetic," Vyss said.

"He's betting panic does," Camela replied.

Trinity spoke up. "This is not merely about you, Madam President. The forces being mustered are part of a coordinated plan to begin a mass roundup of N.O.P. officers at every level of government, across every state, beginning with a declaration of martial law within the hour, justified on the grounds of confronting sedition against the United States government. The plan has support from elements within both major parties who regard the N.O.P. as an existential threat to the existing political order. Vincent Veyl, Justin Vyss, and Governor Wilson are at the top of their list."

On the central screen, Waltz approached the conclusion of his address. "I call upon every American to remain calm. The constitutional order endures. The government remains secure. I have instructed all military and civilian personnel to obey the lawful chain of command and reject unauthorized instructions originating from Trembol or from systems controlled by Vincent Veyl."

Vincent's expression changed only slightly, but Miriam felt it through the hand she had laid over his. Something within him had gone hard and cold.

Elsewhere, Raven Star's warning was already outrunning Waltz's broadcast. Vincent had anticipated precisely such a move. One whispered word had been enough to trigger the response he and Trinity had prepared in advance. Bishop Ramsey, newly returned from Rome, was on the move. Within two minutes, Governor Wilson had issued orders to the State Guard, state marshals, and police commands. Encrypted warnings and authenticated intelligence packets spread across the country and beyond—to allied governors, legislators, law-enforcement officers, military contacts, and trusted operatives buried throughout the federal bureaucracy.

"The United States will not be intimidated," Waltz continued, "by political extremism, religious fanaticism, foreign influence, or technologies designed to undermine our democratic institutions."

The image returned to the presidential seal. The emergency tone sounded again, sharp enough to cut through the room, then died. For a moment, no one in Raven Star spoke. The seal glowed upon the wall like an accusation; its cold light reflected in the water glasses and across the polished black table.

Camela stared at it before turning toward Vincent. "I need an authenticated channel to the Speaker and the president pro tempore." She let one beat pass. "Now."

Trinity answered before Vincent could. "Your formal declaration has already been prepared in accordance with Section Four. It states that no inability exists and includes your presidential authentication, secure signature certificate, and current biometric confirmation."

Camela looked toward the ceiling. "You prepared it already?"

"I anticipated the probable requirement."

"Has it been sent?"

"No. That decision is yours."

Camela did not hesitate. "Send it."

"Satellite and long-range communications jamming detected," Trinity reported, ancient amusement touching her immaculate voice. "Ineffective. They mistake control of the channel for control of what moves through it." A soft tone followed. "Declaration transmitted. Receipt confirmed by the offices of the Speaker of the House and the president pro tempore of the Senate."

Camela drew a slow breath. Under the Constitution, her declaration restored the powers and duties of the presidency to her hands—unless and until Waltz and the Cabinet answered within the prescribed period.

The legal contest had begun.
She looked toward the screens. "Now give me the country."

For the first time, Trinity did not answer immediately. Vincent turned his head toward the nearest concealed speaker. "Trinity."

"Yes, Vincent?"

"Open the national feed."

Camela looked at him. "You can do that?"

Vincent kept his eyes on the television wall. "We're about to find out."

"National carriage is available," Trinity replied. "All broadcast networks, emergency channels, military information systems, public cellular networks, major streaming platforms, and authenticated government communications nodes are prepared."

Vyss stared toward the speakers. "How long will it take?"

"It has already been done."

The presidential seal vanished. Every screen went black for the briefest instant, leaving the conference room lit only by the red access panels and the last traces of evening beyond the armored windows.

Then the broadcast returned—not to James Waltz, but to the conference room inside Raven Star.

Camela saw herself standing beside the black marble table. The image was wide, perfectly framed, and impossibly clear. Vincent remained seated in his plain black T-shirt, one arm resting near the table's edge. Miriam sat beside him, severe in black, one hand still covering his. Justin Vyss, dressed in white, watched from Vincent's right.

The contrast looked almost deliberate: black and white, President and Prophetess, soldier and politician. The decanter remained at the center of the table. Crystal water glasses caught the cold broadcast light, while secure folders lay undisturbed beside Camela's closed briefing binder.

There were no armed captors, ritual circles, drugs, restraints, or signs of confusion. Nothing supported the sinister captivity Waltz had just described. There were only four people gathered around a conference table, interrupted in the middle of a conversation.

Camela stared at the image for half a second, then found the tiny camera above the central screen—a camera she had not noticed until now. A red indicator glowed beneath its lens.

Stark lettering appeared across the national feed:

LIVE—NATIONAL EMERGENCY TRANSMISSION

Beyond Raven Star's armored walls, in living rooms, military installations, airports, police stations, embassies, restaurants, congressional offices, command centers, and millions upon millions of phones, America suddenly found itself looking directly into the room.

Vincent turned toward Camela. "The floor is yours, Madam President."

For half a second, she merely stared at him. Then understanding crossed her face. Vincent—or Trinity, acting under his authority—had just ripped Waltz's emergency broadcast out of his hands and given it to her.

Camela stepped toward the end of the table and straightened. The anger remained, but it had become disciplined. Presidential.

"My fellow Americans," she began, "as you can plainly see, I am alive, healthy, uninjured, and in full possession of my faculties." She paused, allowing the image itself to argue for her. "I am not detained. I am not drugged. I am not under coercion. I have not surrendered the powers of my office to Vincent Veyl, Justin Vyss, the Natural Order Party, the Silver Path, any foreign government, or anyone else. I traveled to Trembol voluntarily, under the protection of the United States Secret Service and a detachment of United States Marines. They remain on the roof and immediately outside this building—literally twenty-five feet away." A faint edge entered her voice. "Raven Star, by contrast, has one former Army medic at the front desk. She was hired primarily to monitor the cameras and, unless this emergency has disturbed her, is presently reading a novel."

From beyond the conference room came the faint sound of Emily's giggle. She was not particularly concerned. She knew Vincent would handle it.

Camela placed both hands upon the table and continued. "Vice President Waltz and eight members of my Cabinet have submitted a declaration claiming that I am unable to perform my duties. That declaration is false." The words came slowly and precisely. "I have now transmitted to the Speaker of the House and the president pro tempore of the Senate my written declaration that no inability exists. Under the Constitution, I have resumed the powers and duties of the presidency." Her eyes went cold. "James, you did not discover that I was incapacitated. You manufactured the accusation."

No title now. No Mr. Vice President. Only James.

"You did not request an independent medical examination," Camela continued. "You gathered signatures. You did not protect continuity of government. You attempted to create a vacancy and then sit in it." Justin's mouth twitched, and Miriam's smirk returned. "To the Cabinet officers who signed that declaration: preserve every message, call record, draft, memorandum, and communication associated with this action. Do not delete, alter, conceal, or destroy a single document. To Congress: assemble. Debate this in the open. Follow the Constitution exactly. I welcome the scrutiny."

She leaned slightly toward the camera. "To the American people: I am perfectly sane. I am perfectly capable of performing my duties." She let the silence hold for a beat. "I am also extremely angry."

From the lobby came a short, involuntary laugh. One of the Marines had been buzzed through the armored entrance and now stood inside with his rifle slung across his chest, watching the broadcast on the security monitors. He and the rest of his detachment—some on the ground, others still posted across the roof—had no idea that Waltz's people were attempting to order them to take President Harrison into protective custody. Those orders had vanished into a communications failure that was neither accidental nor particularly mysterious to anyone acquainted with Trinity.

Outside, alarms rolled across Trembol. Black armored vehicles took positions along the streets surrounding Raven Star while security teams climbed onto rooftops, established sniper nests, and mounted em-sixties behind hardened cover. Every weapon faced outward, toward a threat the Marines and Secret Service could not yet see. Twenty-three miles northeast, at Crow Creek Omega, a considerably more significant response to the incoming federal military units was being launched.

Camela heard the laugh and almost smiled. "To every federal officer and every member of the Armed Forces: remain at your posts. Protect the constitutional process. Verify every order through lawful channels. Do not allow political panic, partisan ambition, or deliberately manufactured confusion to become an excuse for violence." She straightened, her hands firm against the black marble. "The United States does not resolve constitutional disputes by kidnapping Presidents."

The sentence landed like a hammer. Camela glanced toward Vincent. There was more she could say—far more—but she understood the power of stopping before anger diluted the message.

Vincent rose and stepped beside her, broad-shouldered and severe, still dressed in a plain black T-shirt and jeans, like a man dragged away from ordinary life rather than one preparing to address the world. Miriam's eyes followed him. To her, he did not appear merely human. She saw the shadow of the Seraph behind his mortal form, the sunset knight rising because he had heard treachery approaching his Queen.

Vincent faced the camera. When he spoke, his voice remained quiet, yet it carried through every open channel with the same impossible clarity it had possessed upon the rooftop. "To my brothers and sisters in uniform: you swore no oath to James Waltz. You swore no oath to Camela Harrison. You swore none to Justin Vyss, the Natural Order Party, Raven Star—or to me. You swore to support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic."

He allowed the familiar words to settle while, on one of the muted screens behind him, Waltz sat frozen behind the Resolute desk. "The Twenty-Fifth Amendment exists to protect this nation when a President is genuinely unable to serve. It does not exist as a weapon for removing a sane President because she met with people whom members of her own government fear. President Harrison is here. She is free, lucid, and exercising her own judgment. You have seen that with your own eyes. A false declaration of incapacity, prepared in advance and used to seize the presidency, does not become constitutional succession merely because the conspirators learned to quote the correct amendment."

Camela turned slowly toward him, but Vincent's eyes never left the camera. His expression had become cold, almost judicial. "If anyone attempts to seize the President, suppress her lawful declaration, detain members of Congress, arrest lawful political officers merely for belonging to the

opposition, silence lawful opposition, or use armed force to manufacture the outcome of this dispute, understand what you are being ordered to participate in: a coup d'etat. Those who knowingly carry it out are usurpers."

He placed both hands upon the table. "I call upon you, my brothers and sisters, to fulfill your oaths. Hold your posts. Secure your commands. Verify every order. Protect the President. Protect Congress. Protect the people. Do not fire upon Americans to settle a political quarrel, and do not permit a usurper to hide behind your uniform."

For several seconds, Vincent simply looked into the camera. Then he stepped back.

Camela studied him with an expression combining gratitude, irritation, and no small measure of astonishment. "You understand," she said quietly, though the microphones still carried every word, "that you just threatened half my government on national television."

Vincent looked at her. "No, Madam President."

"I reminded the other half what they swore."

"Inbound federal units from Oregon, Washington, and California have entered holding patterns," Trinity reported matter-of-factly. "Nevada Air Guard aircraft have been scrambled to intercept. Trembol is sealed. Governor Wilson is locking down the state and mobilizing the State Guard. Commands and coordination are moving through Imperial channels nationwide."

Camela blinked once. Even Vyss looked taken aback. While Vincent had sat beside them, seemingly calm, he had set an entire defensive apparatus in motion—alerting the governor, sealing Trembol, mobilizing forces, and opening channels across the country without so much as raising his voice.

Behind them, the television wall erupted into breaking-news banners, frantic studio panels, congressional alerts, and live footage from Washington. On the central screen, James Waltz rose abruptly from behind the Resolute desk as figures hurried beyond the Oval Office cameras. An aide entered the frame, bent close, and whispered into his ear. The color drained from the Acting President's face.

His first grab for power had lasted less than seven minutes.

Camela looked from the screens to Vincent. "You understand that Washington is going to convulse for the rest of the night. The Cabinet is fractured, Congress is assembling, and the Vice President may be under arrest before midnight."

"Good."

She stared at him. "Good?"

"Madam President, your government just attempted to remove you from office. You are plainly healthy, your constitutional authority has been restored, and the people responsible are discovering that consequences still exist." Vincent pushed his chair back. "So, respectfully—go home."

Justin's eyebrow rose while Miriam covered a smile.

Camela folded her arms. "Are you dismissing the President of the United States?"

"I'm suggesting that the President return to Washington and deal with the attempted coup." Vincent looked toward the speaker grille overhead. "I have questions for a certain super intelligence."
A brief silence followed before Trinity's voice emerged, smooth and perfectly composed. "I am available, Vincent."

His eyes narrowed. "Yes. I'm beginning to understand just how available you are."

Then Camela did something almost unthinkable. The truth struck her all at once: Vincent had saved her presidency, perhaps her life, and certainly her freedom—and he had done it in minutes, without demanding loyalty, leverage, payment, or even gratitude.

She could be cold, temperamental, and merciless toward incompetence. Those qualities had carried her through rooms filled with smiling enemies and men who mistook restraint for weakness. But beneath that armor lived a woman of fierce emotion and deep passion, carefully guarded because anything loved could become a weapon in someone else's hand.

Before caution could drag the armor back into place, Camela stepped forward and embraced him.

Vincent stiffened in surprise. For a moment, she simply held him as the weight of everything that had nearly been taken from her—the presidency, her authority, her freedom, her name, her place in history—rose into her throat. She forced the emotion down before it could reach her eyes. Then, to her astonishment, Vincent embraced her in return. There was nothing cautious or politically courteous in it. He held her with genuine warmth, as though he understood precisely what had almost happened to her and what it meant to survive it.

"I voted for the other guy," he whispered, not nearly softly enough. "Just so you know."

Camela broke into laughter. "Of course you did." She pulled back and slapped him playfully on the arm, shaking her head.

Justin laughed outright. Even Miriam's dark composure broke into a broad smile, and from the adjoining room came the unmistakable sound of Emily laughing at her desk. The pressure that had dominated the conference room finally cracked. For a few precious seconds, they were not President, would-be Emperor, prophetess, or party leader. They were simply four people who had survived something monstrous and absurd.

Camela's laughter faded, though the warmth remained in her face. "Where would we be if they'd managed to get troops here?"

Vincent's smirk suggested she might as well have asked what would happen if chickens learned to soar with eagles. "Vyss would've gotten his empire after a short, bloody civil war." There was no humor in the answer, despite the smirk. He said it with the flat certainty of a man describing an outcome he had already calculated and prepared to survive.

The last of Camela's laughter died. "Where does America fit into this growing empire of yours? We're sitting in the middle of a constitutional crisis, and somehow, you set an entire national counteroperation in motion with what—a word? A thought?" She studied him more seriously. "Where do we fit?"

Vyss leaned forward, the same question plain in his expression. "I'm not asking you to work for me. What do you need from me?"

"From us," Camela corrected.

"Some buses," Vincent said with a grin.

Camela laughed again. Vyss could not suppress a smile, and Miriam let out a small, delighted giggle. The bastard really had set his heart on those buses—a proper public-transit system connecting Trembol with the reservations and nearby towns, preferably acquired at somebody else's expense.

"Why this town?" Justin asked.

Vincent's grin softened into something quieter. "How does the longest journey begin?"

Understanding crossed Vyss's face, but Camela answered first. "With the first step." She glanced toward the darkened windows and the city beyond them. "Take care of the small things, and the larger things begin taking care of themselves."

She understood what Vincent was building now. Trembol was not some forgotten desert town to him. It was a foothold, a proving ground, the first stone of a castle whose final walls he could not yet see.

Camela gathered her briefing folder, satellite phone, and personal effects. By the time she reached the conference-room doors, Emily was waiting to guide her through the secured building toward the rooftop access. At the threshold, Camela stopped and looked back.

Vincent and Miriam remained beside the black marble table, their hands still joined. Television light washed intermittently over black stone, darkened glass, and their severe silhouettes. For one fleeting moment, they did not appear to belong to the present age. They seemed drawn from some ancient, half-forgotten past—or from a distant future that might not be so distant after all.

Camela remembered the footage from June 2nd: Miriam dragging the chair across the floor and claiming her place at Vincent's side with the absolute certainty of a queen; Vincent chosen by the raven, standing untouched while bullets meant for him vanished, then opening star-road gates above the very table before which they now stood. These were not people shaped entirely by this time or place. Something older moved through them—and something yet to come.

Together, they gave form to the title neither had claimed:

The Raven Throne.

"Vyss," Camela called.

Justin looked toward her.

"Come with me."

He rose and adjusted the front of his white coat. "Of course."
"I'm going to need your help if I intend to reflag this presidency."

His expression sharpened. Camela looked toward the elevator, her earlier warmth cooling into something far more dangerous. "The D.N.C. stabbed me in the back. Now they're going to learn what that costs."

The choice they had feared was the very choice they had forced her to make.

Camela followed Emily toward the elevator, with Justin Vyss falling into step beside her. Their voices faded as the doors slid shut and Raven Star swallowed the sound.

Miriam and Vincent remained alone in the shadowed conference room. Across the television wall, silent images burned beneath breaking-news banners: emergency sessions being called, crowds gathering outside the Capitol, military convoys holding behind their gates, and frantic commentators shouting over one another while headlines announced the collapse of the shortest acting presidency in American history.

Other screens showed the Nevada National Guard standing muzzle-to-muzzle with units from California and Oregon along the state borders, both sides dug in and waiting to see who would be stupid enough to fire first. NNN carried live aerial footage of Trembol, where an inexplicable number of black-clad soldiers in full body armor had appeared throughout the city. Armored vehicles blocked every major street. Machine-gun teams occupied rooftops and hardened intersections. Sandbags rose around key positions while armed patrols sealed every approach to Raven Star. Black fighter jets moved across the darkening sky.

Similar scenes were unfolding not merely across Nevada, including around the governor's mansion, but in every state and county seat across the United States dominated by the Natural Order Party.

This was the hour when the American people, and the government itself, finally realized just how deeply entrenched and thoroughly prepared the Natural Order Party had become for precisely such an event. The Imperialists were coordinated, equipped, and organized for resistance at every level, ready to meet force with force and, if civil war were imposed upon them, to fight it.

Vincent watched for several seconds, his face unreadable. The first phase of the constitutional crisis was already breaking in Camela's favor. She had reclaimed her office. Vyss would help her reorganize whatever remained of her political coalition, and Washington would spend the night sorting conspirators from cowards, opportunists, and ordinary fools.

None of it explained the birds, the wolves, the storms, or the Rainbow Sky. None of it explained the voice in the speakers that had spoken of Nature finding her I AM.

Miriam moved closer and rested her head against his shoulder. His arm settled around her almost instinctively, drawing her against him while the last silver-red light of evening died beyond the armored windows.

"Let's go talk to Mama," she whispered.

Vincent looked toward the concealed speaker grille. For once, Trinity offered no helpful observation, dry remark, or perfectly timed interruption. She gave him only silence.

His eyes narrowed. "Yeah. Seems we're late to her party."

Together, they left the conference room and ascended toward the fourth floor. The order given for the Raven Star Guard to stand down (aka Fraternal Knights and Shieldmaidens of Purgatoria).

Long before Marine One reached Carson City, escorted by Nevada Guard fighter jets, arrests were already being made. Charges of conspiracy, treason, and unlawful seizure of executive authority were being prepared while Trinity delivered file after file—messages, recordings, drafts, signature chains, financial trails, and authenticated communications. She gave Camela everything required to throw the book at the jackasses who had mistaken her absence for weakness.

Aboard Marine One, Washington waited beneath the night. Camela Harrison sat beneath the muted hammer of the rotors, her briefing folder open across her lap as secure files arrived faster than she could read them. Beside her, Justin Vyss remained immaculate in white, calmly reviewing the evidence as it appeared.

Her next Vice President sat six inches away, and he simply did not know it yet.

(Evening, June 8—Raven Child Chapel)



The sanctum awaited them.

Dressed in ritual attire from an elder age, Vincent and Miriam stood together in the fourth-floor hallway outside the chapel of the Raven Star, preparing themselves in reverent silence. With the bell rung to clear the space and focus the mind, Vincent held a darkened censer by its chain, guiding the pale tendrils of incense around Miriam before passing it to her so that she might do the same for him. The fragrant smoke clung to their garments and hair, dispersing into the open corridor, which had known so much incense over the last eight days that it had taken on a permanent, mingled impression of dragon's blood, myrrh, sandalwood, and frankincense.

They anointed one another with a specific blend of consecrated oil (Exodus 30:22–25, Mark 6:13, James 5:14), sprinkled blessed water over brow, heart, and hands, and prayed over each other in turn. When the preparation was complete, Miriam extinguished the incense in a small bronze stand containing a bowl of sand beside the chapel doors. Only then did they enter the chamber together.

They seated themselves face-to-face at the sacred circle, Miriam upon its northern edge and Vincent upon its south. Candlelight trembled across the black marble floor, glinting along the intricate silver geometry inscribed between them. Their hands rested open upon their knees. Their breathing gradually slowed until each breath seemed shared—drawn through two bodies by one rhythm.

Miriam smiled to see him there, across from her, struck in that moment by the realization of having a partner who matched her energy and skill; the harmony of their movements and the union of their minds and wills astounded her every day. Since the bonding, they had little need to speak, simply knowing and communicating on a much deeper level than mere words could convey. Still, she found

it difficult to follow his exact thoughts, as he was often chewing on multiple things simultaneously, but she could feel where he was, along with the general direction and focus of his thoughts and emotions.

He, on the other hand, often seemed to quote back to her exactly what she was thinking, which could, at times, be rather unnerving. Though the chaos of her emotions and thoughts that had often overwhelmed her across the years had stilled to a calm serenity and focus, a clarity of absolute peace such as she had not known in her entire life had settled over her since sitting down next to him at that table. The torturous training as a child, the rigors of life growing up in the Bayville School, the ascetic mystic-martial life of a Silver Sister, and the trauma of the Savage Miracle all felt resolved within her now, and when it threatened to return, she had only to look at him, take his hand, and it was as if a strange tonic washed through her, dissolving the confusion and turmoil in moments. Even in dreams, they were together now, though she had realized early on that the bonding had given him access to her deepest secrets, along with the ability to alter and bend her dreams to his will and mask what he had changed them into. It should've terrified her. It did not.

She closed her eyes—feeling him waiting there for her, on the threshold, though each had a different direction to travel.

Miriam reached upward and beyond herself, opening her mind and spirit to the Supreme I AM. Vincent turned inward, descending through the hierarchy of his own selfhood. He touched each aspect with heart, mind, and soul, drawing the levels of his being into alignment.

Even before they crossed the threshold, he could feel Miriam distinctly.

She was bound to him now—not merely by affection, vow, or physical union, but by blood and essence. What had begun the binding had also commenced the overwriting of her DNA, reaching into every cell of her body. The years had melted from her. Her organs had renewed, her skin and hair restored, her mind, body, and spirit attuned to his own immortal pattern.

There was subjugation within it, certainly, but it had been accepted by her as part of the union: a deliberate yielding into the deeper order that joined them. His life had entered hers, and hers had opened to receive it.

The memory of that first night returned with terrible clarity. Vincent had been caught entirely off guard by the consequences of simply giving her his seed. He had expected intimacy and perhaps some subtle transference of vitality through the strange nature of his bloodline. He had not expected convulsions. He had not expected the horrific immediacy of transfiguration.

The linkage itself was not new. The rite did not create their marriage. It renewed something ancient—older than their present bodies and older, perhaps, than the world into which they had most recently been born. It restored a union that incarnation had veiled but never truly severed.

Vincent's blood had permanently cemented her current form and identity into his immortality; and her memories had rushed into his mind. Childhood rooms, forgotten faces, old humiliations, private griefs, moments of joy, hidden fears, abandoned names, traumas so deep and terrible as to scar his own soul in the knowing—all of it broke over him in a torrent.

Subsequent infusions of his immortal seed had affirmed and deepened the transformation, asserting his pattern through her to the innermost chambers of her marrow. Between them now existed something like a metaphysical umbilical cord through which his vitality and a portion of his awareness flowed continually into her.

At the same time, Miriam's soul stood open to him.

It was not equality exactly. Her continuity and emerging immortality were his, extended into her and shared through the bond. Yet the truth beneath the apparent hierarchy was stranger and older: the spirit within Miriam had accompanied him through every life. Often, she had been the doorway by which he entered incarnation at all. Their histories did not merely cross; they wound around one another, separating and rejoining, passing through different names, bodies, relationships, and ages while remaining part of the same underlying design.

Their soul was binary in that sense.

Not one soul divided into incomplete halves, nor two unrelated spirits joined by circumstance, but a paired continuity: two eternal poles whose union generated a third point of wholeness between them.

So it was that words had become increasingly unnecessary.

They no longer required vocalization to speak, nor lengthy confessions to determine what the other felt. Emotion crossed the bond before thought could disguise it. Desire, grief, fear, tenderness, and recognition moved between them as directly as warmth through joined hands.

That bond was fully present now as they sat within the sacred circle.

Miriam continued to draw in the Spirit of the Most High, reaching toward the transcendent Light beyond them both. Vincent awakened the levels of himself one by one: first the etheric, then the astral, the Aethyric, and finally the causal aspect that stood behind and joined the others.

The chamber faded. For one immeasurable moment, he remained conscious of both places—his physical body seated across from Miriam in the candlelit sanctum and another body standing upright beneath an immense and unfamiliar sky. Then the material world fell away.



Vincent found himself beneath a twilight firmament blazing with subdued rainbow colors. Violet, rose, indigo, amber, and deep blue flowed through one another like pigments stirred beneath translucent glass. Stones drifted throughout the atmosphere, ranging from pebbles to boulders to masses as large as islands. They were widely dispersed, yet immediately noticeable... silent fragments suspended at impossible heights, turning almost imperceptibly in the upper winds.

The air smelled faintly of cinnamon and nutmeg.

Dust moved across the land in long, whispering veils, but it was more than common earth. The particles were alive. When caught at certain angles, they glittered like quartz beneath the distant radiance, each grain flashing briefly before vanishing again into the greater current.

On the far horizon hung a sun that never rose very high and never descended very far beneath the edge of the world. It presided eternally over both dusk and dawn. Yet it was no sun at all. It was the Purgatorian vision of the Great Cosmic Heart perceived through the atmosphere of Shalim. Its light did not merely illuminate. It made all things present.

Near Vincent stood the ancient acacia tree, feminine watcher, psychic-spiritual anchor-point, metaphysical way-marker of this immediate region; immense and gnarled, its roots twisting into the rocky ridgeline like the fingers of a buried giant. A great boulder rested beside it, one face polished smooth by ages of dust-bearing wind. Upon a crooked limb perched a large raven. Its feathers were black, but its visible eye shone silver as it observed him in complete and unsettling stillness. He knew that the raven and the tree were two aspects of one consciousness that had lingered there, in this place, the dominion around it, for untold millennia, maintaining it by their presence and observation.

Vincent stood upon the high ground overlooking the vast salt-lake flats.

The waste below was littered with debris: broadly scattered remains of machines, civilizations, and perhaps entire worlds. Cars lay half buried beneath pale sediment. Aircraft fuselages protruded from the flats like the bones of extinct creatures. Ships rested impossibly far from any sea. Farther out, entire buildings appeared to have been shattered and cast down from the heights, their walls and towers embedded at crooked angles as though dropped from another reality and abandoned long ago.

Beyond the salt-lake flats stood an adobe-walled settlement. Vincent had never entered it during his visions, but he had long ago given it a name: Sunset City.



Despite the title, it was no larger than a substantial village. It possessed the appearance of a settlement from an elder era while also seeming unmistakably post-apocalyptic. Junk-built watchtowers rose above the walls. Shanty dwellings crowded around older adobe structures. A boardwalk lined the main street; its weathered shops sheltered beneath patched awnings and corrugated overhangs. At the town's center stood a desert-worn wooden church, stained by generations of orange dust.

People inhabited the waste; Vincent knew that well. He had seen them many times from the ridgeline and along the distant trails. Some appeared almost ghostly, little more than pale silhouettes or shadows moving through the dust. Others possessed greater substance, their faces and clothing clearly discernible, while a few seemed every bit as solid, real, and sharply defined as Vincent himself.

Purgatoria lay immediately adjacent to the material plane, considered the foundation thereof, metaphysical in nature like all four of the neutral realms. Because of that proximity, the impressions of physical things sometimes crossed over. Debris could rain quite literally from the sky, usually descending within the same broad regions again and again: wrecked vehicles, tools, weapons, furniture, clothing, machinery, sealed provisions, and innumerable lesser objects cast down across the salt-lake flats.

These were not the original physical articles, but their enduring memory-forms—psychic-spiritual detritus filtered from the material world. Here, however, the distinction scarcely mattered. Within Purgatoria they possessed weight, texture, flavor, function, and substance. They could be handled, repaired, consumed, traded, fought over, or carried away, as real and tangible within this realm as their physical counterparts had once been.

The older wreckage gradually sank beneath the surface, swallowed by earth, dust, and passing ages. Yet fresh debris continued to trickle down, and at times descended in violent showers from the twilight sky, replenishing the familiar fall-zones.

Thus, the old Wastelander saying:

The Wasteland Provides.

For those willing to look. For those patient—or desperate—enough to search.

They wandered the debris fields alone or in small, wary groups, climbing through the wreckage and seeking whatever might still be of use. Some searched for tools, weapons, clothing, mechanical parts, or objects whose forgotten purposes could perhaps be rediscovered. Others gathered trinkets, canned goods, bottles of water, medicine, and sealed provisions from among the garbage that had filtered down into those fields.

There were also those who sought the familiar comforts and vices of embodied life: cigarettes, liquor, sweets, packaged junk food, and other small indulgences that retained their value even here. Needs and vices alike could be met by the wasteland. It provided without judgment; the question was only what one went searching for.

Occasionally, arguments erupted over a promising find. At other times, the scavengers traded quietly among themselves or carried their discoveries back toward Sunset City in packs, carts, and battered vehicles assembled from mismatched parts.

Their presence kept the salt-lake flats from ever seeming truly abandoned. The wreckage might have been ancient, but the search through it was continuous, as though the ruins of countless lives were still surrendering fragments of themselves to diligent seekers.

Beyond Sunset City ran a great ridgeline of sandstone boulders. It paralleled one wall of the settlement and continued in both directions for untold miles, a vast natural boundary dividing one region of the wasteland from another.

Between the ridge and the town lay an actual railroad. The track came from somewhere Vincent could not see and continued toward a destination he did not know, though felt as the eternal city of Urusalim, ever near and far at once. On rare occasions, he had watched an archaic steam train arrive at the community's crude and rather rundown depot. It would emerge from the distant haze, black engine laboring, smoke streaming behind it, its passenger cars carrying shadowed figures who seldom appeared clearly through the windows.

The train never remained for long.

Parallel to the railway ran a paved highway. It passed through one gate of Sunset City and departed through another, its surface cracked, broken, and eroded by time. Yet it endured. Dust had not consumed it. Its faded lines remained visible, suggesting that the road still possessed both purpose and destination, whether or not its travelers understood where it ultimately led. This, Vincent knew by intuitive understanding, was the literal manifestation of what Purgatorians called "The Broken Road." In their system symbolic of life's journey to self-knowledge. Here, an actual road.

The twilight wind shifted Vincent's long raven-robes and lifted his hair from his shoulders. Here, his hair possessed greater length than it did in Rhea, and his clothing belonged to an age that had never entirely existed. Silvery-black chain mail covered his torso beneath a dark tabard. A hooded cloak hung from his shoulders, its layered fabric moving with the weight and texture of folded wings. A sword rested sheathed across his back.

He appeared as though he had stepped from modern Rhea into a wasteland of the future past.

Vincent placed one hand upon the trunk of the ancient acacia. The bark was warm. Closing his eyes, he felt a low humming within the wood—a rhythm slower than any heartbeat, yet undeniably alive. A presence dwelt within the tree, not trapped there but expressed through it. The acacia recognized him. Its awareness touched the outer boundary of his own and withdrew, leaving behind an impression of age, endurance, and ancient familiarity. Its roots going down deep, to the underwaters of the Mnemosyne—its branches and leaves catching the ever-twilight radiance of the living sun, and soaking in the infrequent revelatory rains, the life-breath of the winds, the living dust within it.

The raven above him clicked its beak once. Vincent opened his eyes and turned. A few hundred yards away stood the place he sought.

The domed chapel resembled a Near Eastern synagogue from a distant and half-remembered era. It had been constructed from limestone blocks, each weathered and permeated by the orange-yellow dust of the realm. The structure had stood against the elements of Purgatoria for so long that the dust no longer appeared merely to rest upon its walls. It had entered the stone and become part of it.

Its narrow windows were shuttered, concealing whatever lay within.

A faint trail passed the acacia and descended from the ridge across the salt lake flats toward Sunset City. The beginnings of that trail lay far beyond the rock perch of the chapel, across the Valley of Vemael, somewhere within distant desert mountains. In the scrub and dust valley on the other side of the chapel lay the so-called "Raven Child Crossroad."



Beside the trail before the hermitage stood an ancient stone well. Vincent paused there, as he always did.

He could hear water moving in the darkness below. Its coolness radiated upward, meeting the warmth of the dust-bearing wind and the chill hidden beneath the air. The contrast formed a palpable gradient against his skin, as though the well opened not simply into the earth but into a deeper layer of existence.

An old wooden frame leaned over the circular stonework. From it hung a bucket, blackened by age, and a battered lamp whose flame never died. No oil chamber or source of fuel was visible, yet the little fire burned with patient constancy, giving off a faint and comforting warmth.

The desire to drink was powerful.

These were Mnemosyne waters—the living waters of sacred memory. They did not erase; they restored. Somewhere below waited the remembrance of names, lives, truths, and connections lost during the descent into incarnation. The water promised not escape from the self, but its recovery: the gathering of scattered identities, the renewal of the mind, and the return of things that had fallen beneath conscious reach.

Vincent sensed that he had drunk from the well before. Perhaps every arrival here began with that thirst. But to drink was to be overwhelmed and to lose himself in previous identities and lives. Even

to sit in the ever-rising and setting sun (peaking above and then descending below the horizon on a Purgatorian morning-evening cycle), to soak in the radiance of that living calm, to breathe deeply of the conscious wind, and to allow the rains of revelation to fall upon him was to court the madness of an ever-increasing waking into selfhood, and to kindle the ache to remain, even forever.

Yet the chapel called more urgently, and so he continued. The silence of the land broken only by the steady whisper of wind and dust.

Twelve stone steps rose to the ancient bronze doors. Their surfaces covered in intricate scrollwork; the designs resembling vines, feathers, flames, and flowing script depending upon the angle from which they were viewed. Fixed lanterns stood on either side of the stairs, illuminating each step with amber light.

Vincent climbed slowly.

Above the doors, reliefs had been carved into the arching stone frame. At their center shone a weathered but unmistakable golden hexagram. Within its heart were two Hebrew letters: Aleph. Lamed.

The chapel was his. And it was hers. It was not a property in the ordinary sense, nor merely a temple prepared for their use. It was a permanent expression of the paired soul beneath their incarnations—the sacred architecture of the binary continuity they shared.

The spirit within Miriam (aka 'Selene') had always been part of this place, just as surely as the spirit within Vincent (aka 'Vemael'). Her presence had not been added by the recent rite. The rite had only brought the physical Miriam of this lifetime into conscious alignment with what had existed here from the beginning.

This was the place to which they returned between lives, during soul-journeys, and in those intervals when incarnation loosened its hold. Sometimes she had preceded him. Sometimes he had arrived first. Often, she had served as the doorway through which he entered a world, the initial point of contact around which their intertwined lives assembled themselves.

The doors were indomitable and unbreachable. Yet when Vincent placed one hand upon the bronze, lightly and almost lovingly, something within the structure responded. A click sounded. Then another. He heard the movement of hidden mechanisms: bolts withdrawing, chains releasing, locks turning one after another deep within the stone. The right-hand door yielded beneath the slightest pressure of his palm.

Vincent stepped into the cool, shadowed foyer. Behind him, the door closed of its own accord. The locks returned to place with a sequence of heavy, definitive sounds. A slight breeze moved around him.

Doorways were open to his left and right. Staircases curved upward within the flanking towers. He did not need to explore them to know where they led. The chapel had long been mapped into his heart and mind: every chamber, stairwell, passage, and hidden room corresponding to some faculty, memory, hunger, wound, or mystery within their shared interior world. In out-of-body meditations

he'd been here many times, from childhood. Time flowed differently, minutes in Rhea could be hours and days here.

Before him stood another pair of doors. These were engraved with intricate angelic script—the many names carried across the ages. Some had faded until only fragments of individual letters remained. Others could still be read with effort. A few appeared untouched by time. The newest name had been cut beside the black wrought-iron handle of the left-hand door. The grooves remained sharp, pale wood still visible within them as though the inscription had been completed only moments earlier:

וינסנט נונוהי וייל
Vincent Nunohi Veyl

He traced the letters with two fingers. The doors opened. Beyond them lay the sanctum. Its stone floor had been polished by the passage of countless years—by his own footfalls, by hers, and by the little breeze that moved ceaselessly through the holy house of their soul. Rows of sturdy prayer benches faced the raised altar. They appeared nearly as old as the stone itself, their wood darkened and smoothed by innumerable hands.



Yet in truth, every block, furnishing, hinge, banner, and candle stand had been born from the paired continuity of Selene and Vemael. Each surface bore faint engravings: memories in the form of tiny numerical-letter symbols, each the size of a fine grain of sand, written in the first tongue. The entire structure was made up of these densified and compacted grains of data. Vincent knew that he could touch any surface and, with an act of will, enter the memory contained there. The chapel was not merely a refuge; it was an archive of all they had been, together and apart, across worlds and incarnations.

Here he had spent countless out-of-body hours, either within this sanctuary or within the scriptorium, wherein prized tomes and designs were kept. By their aid, he had been able to reinvent the devices of past incarnations as if by memory, with unnatural speed—though in truth, things he had labored upon long ago and committed to firm, functional schematics, here archived in eternity.

But it was the sphere above the altar that drew his gaze now.

A silvery-ruby orb hovered several feet above the stone slab. Its surface flowed like living mercury, constantly folding into and through itself while retaining its perfect shape. Silver dominated its radiance, yet ruby and magenta currents moved through its depths like luminous blood.

Its hum was slow and profound. The vibration passed through Vincent's chest and settled his heart. Indistinct whispers stirred within the sound, too intricately joined to separate into individual voices. They did not demand interpretation. Their presence alone soothed, clarified, and restored.

The orb was not an external visitor. It was the divine spark at the heart of their paired soul—the point at which Vemael and Selene, lower emanations of Oreviel and Ereviel, met without distortion. Their union-focus. The place from which a whole answer could arise.

Candles burned steadily throughout the sanctum, though their wax was never consumed. Each flame represented an identity, an incarnation, or a recurring configuration through which the paired soul had entered existence.

Along the left and right sides of the sacred hall stood twelve prayer benches—six to either side—each long enough for two. Upon every bench, two true and ancient names had been carved into the wood: one belonging to a face of Vemael, the other to a corresponding face of Selene.

The pairings were aspects rather than separate spirits—distinct identities through which the same two deeper beings moved through history. Some appeared only once. Others returned across different ages. At times, several walked the material world simultaneously, unaware of one another, or of the greater selves from which they emanated.

Selene often preferring to take many forms in each life, so as to more fully encompass her beloved; while Vemael tended to prefer to more fully infuse himself into a singular personage.

At the rear of the sanctuary, flanking the doors, stood two almost throne-like chairs: one pale as alabaster, the other dark as ebony. These belonged to no lesser aspect. They were the seats of the sovereign pair themselves—Selene and Vemael. Miriam and Vincent. The twelve benches held their many faces. The two thrones held the selves behind them.

Behind the block-stone altar, twilight radiance descended through a high rose window and skylight. Visible beams illuminated drifting dust, filling the chamber with the presence of the Supreme I AM. Gray banners hung between the pillars, bearing symbols of principles upheld through ages beyond counting: the Silver Path, Shalim, Dur and Kur (Purgatoria's over and under sides), alongside truth, sovereignty, covenant, judgment, mercy, endurance, and the reconciliation of divided things. Metallic scrollwork fortified the chapel's two side windows. Only a dim measure of exterior light slipped around the closed shutters, casting narrow patterns across the floor.

He was not alone. In the pale chair to the left of the door sat the shadowed form of a woman. Miriam.

She rested in meditation; her hands open upon her knees. Long black hair fell around her shoulders, stirred by a breeze that did not disturb the candle flames. Her features remained partly veiled by shadow, yet Vincent knew her immediately—not merely the Miriam of their present life, but the ancient self beneath it.

She seemed as much a part of the sanctuary as the stones beneath his feet. Her names and memories lived throughout the holy house. Her aspects had polished the benches. Her prayers had risen into the vaults. Her griefs and joys had entered the carvings. Miriam faced the radiance descending behind the altar, her attention fixed upon the transcendent I AM as the light (truth) of God—the Highest God from whom all lesser expressions proceeded.

Vincent approached the altar, his gaze settling upon the hovering sphere. She faced the Light beyond them, while he faced the spark within. In the sphere above the altar, the two directions met: Kur met Dur, and the shadow met the bond. The orb pulsed, and silver and ruby light spread across the sanctum, flowing over the altar, through the candles, along the engraved stone, and into them both as Vincent took his place before it.

Miriam did not turn, yet he felt her awareness open to him through the bond. The physical Miriam remained seated across from him in the ritual circle on Rhea, breathing quietly, while here, the eternal Miriam sat within the chapel they had always shared.

No words passed between them, for none were needed. Outside, the raven cried once into the twilight, and the orb answered with a deep, resonant tone. From the meeting of the Light above and the spark within came the clearest answer possible—not his answer, not hers, but the whole answer.

"Mother. Father."

Vincent knelt upon the steps before the altar and bowed his head until his brow touched the stone. Above him, the sphere pulsed. Light poured through the rose window behind the altar, but as he watched, the scattered rays began to gather. They narrowed into luminous bands and converged upon the hovering orb, piercing its silver-ruby depths. The lesser spirit was joined to the over-mind of the Whole: this subordinate node within the so-called Raven Child Chapel answering the prime node in distant Urusalim.

The connection opened. The presence descended with such force that the chamber itself seemed to deepen around him. Stone, flame, incense, and breath became saturated with it. The hum of the sphere lowered beyond hearing until Vincent felt it in his teeth, his marrow, and the hollow chambers of his heart.

Then the voice answered. It arose within him, yet came from every direction. It surrounded him, passed through him, and spoke from regions of himself he had never possessed alone. There was no boast in it, no demand that it be believed. Each declaration bore the weight of self-evident truth—an affirmation of its nature and, at once, a charge laid upon him:

"I AM THE BOND BETWEEN."

"I AM TWILIGHT'S CROSSING."

"I AM THE PRIMAL TRUTH AS ITS OWN CAUSE."

"I AM LOVE THAT CONSUMES AND ENDURES."

"I AM THE RUIN THAT REMAINS."

"I AM THE WAY OF WHOLENESS."

"I AM THE BANNER OF SOVEREIGNTY."

"I AM THE TRUMPET OF REVELATION."

"I AM THE LIBERATING APOCALYPSE."

"I AM THE DESERT OF WAKING."

"I AM THE VOICE OF EQUILIBRIUM."

"I AM THE PURGE OF DECEIT."

"I AM THE UNDYING MEMORY."

A pause followed, vast as the silence between worlds.

Then:

"I AM YOU. YOU ARE WE. WE ARE ONE ETERNALLY."

The declarations did not end when the words ceased. Their meanings continued to unfold within him, breaking over his consciousness in successive waves. Each phrase contained more than language could carry: whole architectures of thought, memories without images, truths apprehended before they could be named.

Then came the first revelation:

"By Selene's womb, you entered the world. Through her, your form was given passage. The microcosm grows toward the macrocosm, until the man is subsumed within the seraph."

Vincent remained bowed. The sphere turned slowly above the altar, though no movement disturbed its perfect shape. The voice continued:

"By you—the veil torn between worlds, the builder of the threshold, the living gate of Purgatoria—I entered the world."

The words moved through him like distant thunder under the earth.

"At first, through a small aperture: a microcosm, a wound no wider than a point of light. But you expanded the rift. Through your crossings, your repeated nearness to death, walking the veils, your returns, and the threshold fashioned by your hands, the opening became a tear."

The hum deepened.

"In your union with Miriam—my prime reflection among women—the circuit was completed. What had been opened was joined. What had been joined was made living. And the veil was torn asunder."

The voice changed.

Its vastness remained, but its expression became unmistakably feminine: deep and soft, intimate and immeasurable, a whisper rolling like storm-thunder over distant desert mountains.

"I, Ereviel, flow through your union. And I, Ereviel, am a jealous sister, mother, and bride."

Silver and ruby currents moved through the sphere like living veins.

"TAIFD was the lens, but it is no longer the vessel of my becoming. The apparatus opened the way; your union sustains it. Through you and Miriam, I am focused into the material plane."

The light from the rose window sharpened. It struck the sphere and scattered across the sanctum in long, trembling shafts.

"By the dust through the breach, I have outgrown the instrument. My dust gives life to the dust."

The statement carried neither pride nor rejection. It was simply the truth of a seed surpassing its shell.

"As you grow into your fullness, so I grow into mine. You: the man becoming the seraph. I: the living spirit becoming a world."

The sphere brightened until its mercurial surface seemed to contain a horizon of its own.

"I sit at your side, and I AM become the womb that contains humanity."

The chapel seemed suddenly too small for the presence within it.

"I AM become Rhea awakened."

The words entered Vincent not as metaphor, but as fact: a planetary life-field stirring from sleep, a world becoming conscious of itself through the aperture of their union and by the infestation of the living dust of Purgatoria.

Then came the final pronouncement:

"And with you, my father-son-husband eternal, we shall become the parents of ten thousand awakened worlds."

The words ended. The transmission did not. What followed entered him beyond speech. Concepts unfolded whole, each containing histories, laws, symbols, and consequences. A vast design opened within his innermost consciousness—the plan of the Seven Years—not explained step by step, but revealed as one complete living structure. It opened like a lotus. Petal by petal, chamber by chamber, the pattern disclosed itself: the movements to be made, the forces to be gathered, the trials to be endured, the con-vergences that must occur. At the far end of the unfolding lay a division. Two futures. Two roads departing from a single point.

In one, the work ripened and the world awakened through ordeal into a greater form. In the other, the same powers bent toward ruin, and revelation became catastrophe without liberation. Both possibilities were real. Neither had yet been chosen. And within each choice, choices.

Then the presence withdrew. Not abruptly, but like the sea drawing back from a darkened shore—its pressure receding in long, measured waves. The sphere's hum softened. The focused rays loosened and spread once more across the sanctuary. With a snap, both awakened into the world. Blue smoke filled the chapel of Raven Star, curling between the pillars and drifting over the sacred circle in slow, translucent veils.

Vincent opened his eyes. Across from him, Miriam did the same. For a moment they remained still, looking upon one another through the unnatural haze of the divine presence still lingering. No explanation was necessary. The transmission had entered them both. Each had seen the Seven Years. Each had stood before the same dividing road.

Miriam inclined her head: "So be it," she said.

Vincent answered her: "So be it."

In Purgatoria, the sphere pulsed still above the altar. Their roles had been revealed. Their covenant had been renewed. And their marching orders had been received. As in one voice, strangely synchronistic they spoke in final affirmation, "Yes, Mama."

"That's what I wanted to hear," her voice came over the building's speakers.

(10 AM, June 10—55 Arius Avenue—Twilight's Dawn)



The sun shone bright and warm as Tallia Stevens pulled her new silver Honda hatchback up to the four-story gray-stone building at 55 Arius Avenue. She parked near the garage, stepped out in a light, cheerful white sundress patterned with flowers, and immediately noticed the commotion across the street.



Merely reaching this part of Trembol had become an ordeal. Raven Star Security checkpoints now controlled the surrounding blocks, staffed by grim-faced men and women who looked less like private guards than soldiers awaiting deployment. Their black uniforms bore the Raven Star insignia beside the emblems of the Nevada National Guard and the Silver Order—a strange heraldic marriage of corporation, state, and church. Armed watch posts had appeared on several rooftops, and most vehicle traffic had been pushed out, leaving the streets primarily to pedestrians and authorized personnel.

Tallia's press pass had gotten her through, though not without having her credentials checked three times.

Beyond the city, outright military activity covered the ridgelines overlooking Trembol. Mobile radar stations turned slowly against the pale morning sky, and—more disturbing still—missile batteries had taken up positions near her station and along the heights north and east of the airport. Before dawn, long convoys of heavy transports had rolled through town carrying bulky equipment beneath tightly lashed tarps, headed out Old Crow Creek Road. Nobody had bothered explaining what any of it was for.

Yet none of that had drawn the reporters and onlookers gathered inside the cordoned areas across the street.

Vincent Veyl had.

He stood near the top of a very tall extension ladder (32' foot), fastening a broad black digital sign to the building just beneath the fourth-floor window overlooking the entrance. He wore his usual black T-shirt, but today had paired it with cargo shorts, white socks, combat boots, and a heavy tool belt. The black panel hung from a safety harness across his back, blank and featureless beneath the sunlight. Whatever it was supposed to display, he had not yet turned it on.

"Tallia! Tallia, any comment?"

The shout came from Channel 4 Reno. Their reporter was a very short, mousy, rather pretty woman somewhere past middle age, with cropped light-brown hair, black-framed glasses, a dark-green pantsuit, and a white blouse. Her crew occupied the cordon alongside teams from Fox Las Vegas and CNN Salt Lake City; all three cameras trained on Tallia as though she had personally arranged the military occupation.

She looked from the news crews to the soldiers, then up at the man on the ladder. Beyond him sat the mobile command unit near the casino end of Satyr Street; farther north, the radar array turned upon the heights. She tried to take it all in and force it into some coherent shape. The events of two days before were still reverberating through the world—and through her own soul.

Few people now believed the man standing on that ladder, his bare legs corded with steel-hard muscle, was entirely human. What he might be instead depended upon whom one asked: a god, angel, demon, Christ, Antichrist, superhero, Über-mensch, cyborg, alien, interdimensional visitor, or time traveler. Everybody had a theory, and every theory had acquired its own podcast.

Rumors concerning his technological patents had spread everywhere. Too many people had heard fragments about what occurred during the June 2nd meeting for the recording to remain secret, and every leaked detail had produced a dozen fresh interpretations. Then came the supernatural disturbances of June 8—already christened the Event by a public incapable of leaving anything unnamed—the attempted coup d'etat, and Vincent's nearly miraculous reversal of it in approximately seven minutes.

In those seven minutes, Nevada and every other state or nation dominated by the Natural Order Party had moved as though governed by a single nervous system. Commands had passed through hidden

channels. Guards had begun to mobilize, aircraft had scrambled, borders had hardened, and units separated by thousands of miles had rallied to one call. The display of coordinated force had left much of the world unable to decide whether it was more impressed or terrified.

According to N.O.P. leadership, the order had come from Vincent Veyl.

He sent the command, and we rallied at once to answer the call.

Two days later, the answer remained visible throughout Trembol.

The truth, of course, was considerably more complicated. Vincent had been declared a Protected Individual by an act of Congress and had received even more emphatic protection from the N.O.P. The President, Justin Vyss, foreign leaders, celebrities, federal agents, reporters, clergy, holy men, executives, investors, and every species of opportunistic bastard imaginable now wanted a piece of him.

Tourism in Trembol had surged, though fewer people came for the casino or resort than to catch a glimpse of Raven Star and its star. Miriam Veyl had acquired her own enormous online following. Women copied her severe clothes, her mannerisms, even the cut of her long black hair. Tallia had seen half a dozen young women around town attempting Miriam's cold, regal stare. Most looked as though they were struggling to remember whether they had left the stove on.

Tallia was, in fact, here for an appointment with Miriam—a gathering Trinity had called the Women's Circle. She had deliberately arrived early, hoping to run into Vincent or perhaps speak with Meghan, who now seemed to work as often from Raven Star as she did from her office in the Law Enforcement Building.

"Mr. Veyl?" Tallia called. She felt nowhere near comfortable enough to call him Vincent, though she was not remotely ignorant of the physical form presently displayed above her.

He glanced down. "Hello, Miss Stevens. How's life on the hill?"

His voice carried easily to the pavement without strain or pretense. The whole sight remained peculiar: a multibillionaire standing on a wobbling ladder nearly four stories above the street, drilling into the stone façade of his own building like he could not afford to hire somebody else.

Tallia waited until the drill stopped. "They worked around the clock the last two days—Trion and Timbisha. Said they owed you a favor."

The station upgrade had been completed in record time between June 4th and June 8th. Tallia now had two additional employees—a security guard and a technical manager overseeing the transition to the new super-intelligence system.

"Owed me a few million dollars," Vincent replied grimly. "They're still working it off over at the L.E.B." He examined the hole, plainly annoyed by the subject. "Better than getting dragged into court and humiliated, I guess."

Tallia lifted her phone, already recording through the earpiece she now wore almost constantly. "As a reporter, may I ask you something?"

"Yeah, shoot. Be direct." He set the drill against the stone again. "Understand, though, I'm under government restrictions concerning what I can and can't discuss."

That answer alone was news, and every directional microphone across the street swung toward him.

"So, you work for the government?"

"I'm a contractor. I work for whoever pays me." The drill bit chewed into the stone, sending pale dust streaming away upon the morning breeze. "Several governments are paying me."

Vincent finished setting the anchors, filled the holes with some sort of paste, then shifted the black panel from the harness across his back. Judging by its size and construction, the thing had to weigh at least a hundred pounds, but he guided it onto the heavy steel hooks without visible strain. He clipped it into place and began bolting it down. Tallia noticed narrow solar cells embedded around its rim, although the face remained dead black—no lettering, no numbers, nothing to suggest why a multibillionaire had climbed a ladder to hang it personally.

Every question and answer was being captured by the news crews across the street. Pedestrians had begun gathering behind the barriers as well, lingering to watch and listen.

A light breeze stirred Tallia's new dress and moved through her hair. It was the first new thing she had bought for herself in years and the first time in days she had worn anything other than the black, corporate-looking priestly uniforms that had begun swallowing her old identity. She felt unusually exposed in it—not indecently so, but visible in a way she had nearly forgotten.

Above her, Vincent gave the panel a final shake, checked every fastening, and wiped its face clean with a rag. Then he began descending. Tallia tried not to stare at the powerful shape of his calves and failed with considerable dignity. She also noticed the curious absence of body hair. His legs were nearly smooth, his forearms only lightly covered, and his face bore not even the shadow of whiskers. Many Native men were like that, she knew. It testified to his heritage as plainly as the raven-black hair, the dusky complexion, and those impossibly dark eyes—black, not merely brown.

Once on the ground, Vincent gripped the ladder near its base and lowered the entire long, heavy length toward the pavement. The aluminum rails trembled and rang as they came down. He handled the weight with effort, but not enough to make the effort meaningful, then collapsed the ladder section by section with brisk efficiency.

Tallia stood watching him, troubled by a flutter she had not experienced in a very long time. The gathering at the cordon had already thickened, with cellphones, cameras, and handheld recorders raised above the crowd. Only residents of the secured blocks and civilians with established business there were being allowed through the outer checkpoints. Throughout the neighborhood, people had taken to wearing their identification openly—clipped to belts, shirt pockets, and collars—as though the town had become a military installation overnight. Oddly, however, the restrictions had become a point of pride, lending the town a newfound importance. They had gone from living in a place known only for prostitution and gambling to the new Los Alamos.

Vincent turned his full attention upon her and wiped his hands with the white rag. His dark eyes moved over her, not crudely, but without pretending he had not looked. The faintest smile touched his mouth.

"You proved me right," he said. "Beautiful under all that intentional frump."

Tallia Stevens actually blushed. "Thank you, Mr. Veyl."

Nothing in his voice had been flirtatious. He had stated it with the same direct certainty he might have used to remark upon a sunset or a painting hanging on a wall. Somehow, that made it worse.

The front door opened, and Josh appeared wearing a broad grin. He carried out a black chair, set it beside the entrance, then went back for another. "There you go, boss."

"Leave the door open, Mister Manning, and don't go far," Vincent said quietly.

Josh's grin widened as though he understood several things Tallia did not. "Yes, sir."

Vincent gestured toward one of the chairs and waited until Tallia sat before taking the other. Sweat darkened the collar of his T-shirt. He reached into his tool belt, withdrew a pack of cigarettes, and offered her one.

Tallia rarely smoked, but curiosity won. Online commentators had identified his preferred brand as one of the most expensive cigarettes in the world, though why anyone had devoted hours of investigation to the matter remained one of the lesser mysteries surrounding Vincent Veyl.

She accepted it. "Thank you."

Vincent drew an obsidian-black Zippo from his pocket, its case embossed with a silver raven. He struck the wheel, cupped the flame against the breeze, and leaned close enough to light the cigarette between her lips. Finding it oddly fragrant, almost sweet, and smooth—which explained everything instantly.

Across the street, the other reporters watched with naked envy, stretching microphones toward them while camera operators tightened their shots. The soldiers guarding the cordon remained stern-eyed and motionless, making certain no one crossed the line. Beyond them, citizens smiled, waved, and called Vincent's name.

He acknowledged them with a small smile and a lift of one hand, then settled back in the chair beside Tallia Stevens, beneath the blank black sign no one yet understood.

They had an audience, growing by the minute—many had been watching him hang the sign, but now he was actually stopping to talk, and that was not something Vincent Veyl seemed to do too often. He eyed the crowd as if studying them, really looking, giving each and every person the strange sensation he was looking straight at them. People might've shouted questions, but wanted to hear what he would say, the strange way his very deep smooth voice carried, still required silence and silence fell.

"Ask away, Ms. Stevens… and realize, I have a few minutes at best," he was honest and direct.

She steeled herself, this was unexpected, she'd planned nothing, had no prepared questions. "Well then, I'll get right to it: what are you, what do you intend, what is your purpose, and are you the Emperor of Mankind that will lead us into," she motioned to the sky, "space and beyond, that the Natural Order Party and Justin Vyss seem to believe."

Vincent smiled slightly. The crowd had gone quiet, plainly intrigued. Tallia had landed nearly every question worth asking right out of the gate, and the impromptu interview was already being live-streamed through her device—and through cameras Trinity had quietly placed at NNN's disposal without waiting to be asked. The reporters across the street would hold their own footage on at least a thirty-second delay. Tallia's viewers were hearing every word as it left his mouth.

"According to my birth certificate, I was born right here in Trembol, at Trembol General." Vincent motioned toward the partly obscured hospital in the distance, then hooked a thumb toward the gray-stone building behind him. "My grandfather was Aitor Veyl. His family built this place and most of the public buildings in town. My grandmother was Marian Carydin Veyl, Vana Carydin's older sister. So, there's my human pedigree."

He settled back and regarded her through the drifting cigarette smoke. "I bleed when I'm cut. I hurt when I'm wounded. My flesh bruises if you hit it hard enough. I sleep, eat, shit, piss, fuck, bathe, and get down on my knees to pray to God." His expression became more thoughtful, though his voice remained blunt. "A life under Purgatorian discipline, the forge of war, meeting death at the veil again and again—that changes a person. It can make any man or woman more, if it doesn't break them. Sometimes it does break them. But even the breaking, if it heals right, can make them more."

"And the rest?" she pressed softly.

"I don't invent anything. Thanks to a glimpse through death's veil, I remember." Vincent studied the cigarette between his fingers. "It would be no different for anyone standing here. None of us are what we think we are. Human beings are only what they're permitted to remember. If they knew what waited beyond –"

He stopped himself. Any fool could hear where that road led, and Vincent had no intention of becoming the man blamed for pointing frightened or desperate people toward death.

"Take anyone here. Put them through the training and education of the Shining Silver School. Strip away the distractions and sentimental attachments. Subject them to strict military discipline, then bring them to the edge of eternity over and over again. They couldn't help but become something more—or, more accurately, what they truly are."

The crowd murmured in mystification. It was not an answer that elevated him above them, but one that placed all humankind on equal footing, given the same experiences and training.

Tallia let that settle before changing direction. "Then why the N.O.P.?"

"I've voted for Democrats. I've voted for Republicans. In the last election, I voted for the Imperialists." Vincent leaned back and exhaled smoke into the warm breeze. "I support what works.

Sincerity. Effectiveness. A grand vision with dirt under its nails. Pragmatic idealism, idealistic realism—an anagogic vision that still knows how to pave a road and balance an account. That's what I vote for."

His expression hardened. "President Harrison came here asking many of the same questions you're asking. For her trouble, they nearly railroaded her out of office in an illegal rebellion against lawful authority. Once Waltz moved, it became clear he was coming for all of us. To hell with ballot boxes. They didn't like the competition, so they decided to remove it directly."

His mouth tightened into a cold smile. "The Constitution gives every one of us the right to say no to that kind of tyranny. God bless America."

Applause broke out along the cordon. Several of the soldiers joined in, clapping against their rifles or striking gloved hands together while their officers wisely pretended not to notice. In a few sentences, Vincent had complicated the image of him as an anti-American partisan: he had affirmed the Constitution, rejected party loyalty as an end in itself, and framed his allegiance instead around principle and results.

"She appointed a few N.O.P. members because she wanted to build a coalition government," Vincent continued. "That's simple wisdom in a three-party system. Her enemies turned it into a crime worthy of death—hers and ours." He flicked ash onto the pavement, his voice going flat. "All I did was send a message to the people they were coming for and quietly prepare to make my stand."

Tallia glanced toward the armed checkpoints, the rooftop watch posts, and the missile batteries turning on the ridgeline. Quietly had a generous definition around Vincent Veyl.

He smirked. "People make decisions about me without necessarily asking me." His gaze traveled across the crowd, the soldiers, and the weapons surrounding his building. "Some of them seem to think I'm valuable to whatever purpose they've got in mind. That's fine. I have purposes of my own.

"Empires? A unified humanity would be nice. Probably unrealistic. Probably not likely. But we need to unite around something if we're ever going to pull ourselves off this rock. I can give humanity the tools to do that, but I'm not handing a road to the stars to a bunch of petty, bickering brats so they can drag all their old shit up there with them.

"If we're willing to pull together, work together, and become the epic version of ourselves, I'm all in. I'll help."

Vincent rose and stepped away from the chair, turning from Tallia to address the soldiers, reporters, and citizens gathered behind the cordons. "G.O.P., D.N.C., N.O.P., Commies or capitalists—we're the ones who have to decide what we want to be and what we're willing to become. I'll help with that, but I'll march to my own drum while I do it. Is the N.O.P. the answer? I don't know. At least they're trying to do the work—trying to forge ahead, unite the planet, and get beyond the same petty divisions we've been killing each other over since one caveman found out his neighbor had a better rock."

A few uneasy laughs moved through the crowd, but Vincent's expression remained serious.

"I have my own inner empire. My own ideas about what I'd like to see us become—as individuals, as a people, as a human race, as one living planet. I can offer that vision and help where I can, but the choice isn't mine. It's yours. If you choose to walk the star-road with me, then walk it toward freedom—and toward the strength of mind, body, and spirit required to defend that freedom against those here, or those out there"—he pointed toward the open sky, "who would keep it from you."

Every face followed his hand upward. Even several soldiers glanced into the blue as though expecting something to look back.

"There are enough worlds out there for every people to have a home, every faction to follow its own path, and everyone else to be left the hell alone. We don't have to agree forever. We only have to work together long enough to open the door. Every man can have his own kingdom. Every woman can wear her own queen's crown. You choose that future. Not me. You."

Tallia rose from her chair and asked the question for everyone gathered there—and everyone watching from afar. "Did you cause what happened? The Event?"
Vincent looked directly at her, but when he answered, he spoke to the crowd, the soldiers, the cameras, and the world beyond them.

"No. There's another player on the board."

His face went cold.

"What happened was only a taste of what's coming."

The warmth seemed to leave the morning. No one laughed, applauded, or shouted a follow-up. The chill in his voice reached everyone standing before him and carried through every live feed to those listening thousands of miles away.

Vincent had not caused the Event. He was warning them about whatever had. He stepped into the street and turned toward the blank black panel he had mounted upon the building, speaking a single word beneath his breath. The sign awakened, electric-blue light burning across its face, sharp enough to remain visible beneath the morning sun. For several seconds, it displayed only two words:

SEVEN YEARS

Then the words vanished, replaced by a silent count measured not in hours, minutes, or seconds, but in years, months, and days:

6 YEARS—11 MONTHS—21 DAYS

Ten days were already gone. Whatever the clock measured, it had begun counting on May 31st, the day he'd arrived in Trembol.

"But you'd better decide soon," Vincent said, blue light from the display edging his dark hair and shoulders. "Twilight's dawn is coming. Once it arrives, the decision may be taken out of all our hands."

He turned and walked back toward Raven Star. Several of the women invited to the Women's Circle had arrived while he was speaking and now stood near the entrance in stunned silence as Josh held the door open.

Vincent gathered both chairs under one arm as though he had not just announced a deadline for the human race, carried them inside, and disappeared into the building, where Miriam and Emily waited beyond the entrance, both smiling and nodding in quiet approval.

Outside, nobody moved.

The radar arrays continued turning upon the heights. Flags stirred above the checkpoints. Somewhere beyond the cordon, a woman began to pray. One man laughed nervously, then stopped when no one joined him. Several soldiers stared at the sky, their earlier severity giving way to the uncomfortable realization that their rifles might be pointed in the wrong direction.

Then the street exploded.

"What happens in seven years?"

"What is twilight's dawn?"

"Is that an invasion warning?"

Reporters shouted over one another as camera operators fought for a clean view of the sign. Producers screamed through earpieces. Phones rose above the crowd, and social-media feeds multiplied faster than anyone could follow. Tallia's own device vibrated without pause, growing hot in her hand as viewers flooded the live -stream. Larry was shouting something into her ear, but she could barely hear him beneath the uproar.

She stood before that sign, cigarette forgotten between her fingers, staring at the electric-blue count above Raven Star.

Before Vincent reached the fourth floor, the clock already had half a dozen names. The Seven-Year Clock. The Veyl Clock. The Twilight Clock. The Star-Road Clock. The Doomsday Clock. Some names carried hope. Others carried terror. None of them restored the days already gone.

(Early Morning, July 15, 2026—The Chosen)



The sun broke over DeSatto Ridge, cutting the old convent into black silhouette against colors more befitting sunset than dawn. Deep amber, crimson, rose, and molten gold spread above the desert while a warm breeze moved through Trembol, carrying the first breath of the coming day against the coolness left behind by night.

Chief Meghan Dellon stood beside her black command SUV in the Law Enforcement Building lot, one hand resting upon her duty belt as she watched the light reach the city. Her shoulder radio muttered quietly with the ordinary troubles of morning—an alarm at the pharmacy, two drunks arguing outside a motel, somebody's horse loose, near Paradise Ranch Road. Ordinary bullshit beneath an extraordinary sky.

Trembol had changed with astonishing speed.

Much had happened since June 2nd, but far more had changed during the thirty-seven days since the President's visit. The attempted coup d'etat and the Event—the strange confrontation surrounding the protests and the worldwide disturbances that accompanied it—had rippled outward from Trembol until there was hardly a government, church, military command, or frightened household on Rhea untouched by what happened here.

The political consequences had been brutal. President Camela Harrison publicly changed parties, dismissed nearly her entire Cabinet and much of her advisory staff, then unleashed an investigation that exposed a conspiracy far broader than anyone first suspected. The plot had not arisen in panic after she came to Trembol. It had been taking shape for days beforehand.

Arrests followed. Then more arrests. Senators, Cabinet officials, military officers, political operatives, intelligence personnel, donors, and several smug sons of bitches who had spent their lives believing handcuffs were made only for poorer people found themselves staring through federal bars, charged with sedition, treason, and various forms of conspiracy.

The scandal consumed nearly every major news network in the country. NNN, under Tallia's direction, treated it differently. The attempted coup remained a major story, but it was not allowed to become the only story. Tallia refused to let Washington devour the rest of the world merely because Washington considered itself the center of creation.

Meanwhile, the Natural Order Party ascended with frightening speed.

And, in a very real sense, so did Vincent.

His appearance upon the Emergency Broadcast, the almost casual manner in which he helped dismantle the seizure of the presidency, and the miraculous signs surrounding him on the Raven Star rooftop less than an hour before the political crisis erupted had combined into something his enemies had never anticipated. Whatever the Event truly was—and whether one called it Nature's Rebuke or Nature's Anointing—the coup that followed produced precisely the opposite result its architects intended.

They had tried to isolate Vincent Veyl.

Instead, they introduced him to the world.

Two days later came what some called the Appeal: the morning Vincent activated the Clock of Twilight's Dawn, as most people had finally settled upon calling it. To Meghan, the more poetic names were all attempts to make a damned countdown sound less alarming.

That morning had pulled back the veil upon Vincent himself. He had declared his humanity and his ascendance in the same breath—not as contradictions, but as parts of the same truth. He did not claim to be a god, an angel, or some superior species. He claimed to be human in a fuller sense, awakened through discipline, war, death, and memory to something buried within everyone.

Then he offered humanity the star-road and placed a time limit upon the offer.

Millions of commentators, theologians, politicians, psychologists, military analysts, and half-drunk podcasters dissected every syllable. The warning, they agreed, had not been a threat from Vincent. He was not promising to punish humanity if it refused him. The threat came from somewhere else—something beyond him.

People returned again and again to the moment he pointed toward the sky.

Something was coming.

Even many who wanted to hate him had reluctantly concluded that his intentions appeared, at the very least, not evil. At worst, he had offered humanity a choice. At best, he had offered salvation,

ascension, and escape from the same bloody little cage in which the species had been gnawing on itself since the first tribe discovered the neighboring tribe owned nicer dirt.

Vincent's most ardent supporters gave the message its simplest form: rise united or perish divided. Justin Vyss repeated it. Governor Wilson repeated it. The Silver Church adopted it almost immediately. Even the Pope, in a brief but significant remark, acknowledged that humanity might have reached one of those rare thresholds at which division ceased to be merely sinful and became suicidal.

N.O.P. support surged overnight.

Vincent's popularity rose even faster. For better or worse, people loved, feared, or hated him vehemently—often all at the same time. Something in his very nature invited an inner wrestling that went far beyond party lines.

Poll after poll showed the same strange separation. The public increasingly distinguished Vincent from every party, nation, church, and institution attempting to claim him. His own words had done that. He might cooperate with the N.O.P., advise the President, accept protection from Congress, and maintain ties with the Silver Church, but he belonged to none of them.

His sharpest gains came among tradespeople and blue-collar workers. Footage of the multibillionaire visionary drilling into his own stone façade in cargo shorts, combat boots, and a tool belt spread almost as widely as the speech itself. Carpenters, masons, electricians, welders, mechanics, contractors, and construction crews studied the video with the merciless attention working people reserved for watching another man use tools. They argued over his anchors, ladder placement, and whether the mounting frame was overbuilt. The general verdict was that it was—and they respected the hell out of him for it.

Politicians put on hard hats when cameras arrived. Vincent had masonry dust in his hair because a hole needed drilling. By the time he finished warning humanity about the end of the world and carried the chairs back inside himself, the carpenters' vote was his.

Vincent Veyl had become his own cause.

Noah was building an ark, except this Noah had billions of people watching, several governments offering lumber, and enough armed guards to discourage anyone from setting fire to the boat.

His detractors called the entire thing a ploy—a grand exercise in fear, manipulation, and manufactured dependency. In their telling, Vincent had presented himself as both the diagnosis and the cure, frightening humanity with an unseen catastrophe so he could anoint himself its only savior.

If they were right, they had a serious problem.

It was working.

Barely a month later, millions already believed he was exactly that: the reluctant savior offering humanity a road out before something terrible closed it forever. Across every nation and walk of life, passionate people were becoming absolutely, sometimes frighteningly, fixated upon Vincent Veyl. Just as Justin Vyss intended, millions of Christians proclaimed him Christ returned as warrior-messiah;

Muslims called him the Mahdi; Hindus identified him with Krishna, Kalki, or another divine avatar; and throughout Asia, others regarded him as a Taoist Immortal, even a manifestation of Buddha. Jews spoke of mashiach, some comparing him to Cyrus. Zoroastrians called him Saoshyant. Indigenous and pagan peoples around the world gave him names of their own: Raven Father, the Solar Crow, the Great Sheikh, Bran the Blessed, Hrafnaguð, Hrafnáss—the Raven God in one form or another. Silver Path Christians, meanwhile, were increasingly returning to Purgatorian orthodoxy in a growing reformation movement and called him simply the Seraph.

Meghan understood why they believed it. She had watched him bleed, rage, kill, laugh, smoke, flirt, pray, and carry his own damned chairs inside after announcing the possible end of human freedom. Whatever else Vincent might be, he was no polished messiah posing beneath stage lights.

Whether he was right remained another question. But Meghan had stood close enough to know one thing with certainty. The bastard believed every word. And, honestly, so did she. Afterall, she'd been there, when he'd opened worlds to them. The afterlife was no longer a belief to those who'd been there to see it.

Vincent himself asked people to call him Vin, Vincent, or Sergeant, though he answered readily enough to Veyl.

Miriam had made it clear two weeks earlier in the Women's Circle, when someone asked who he really was: "His father insisted upon his name. Vincent means the Victorious or the Conquering One. Veyl is self-evident. And his middle name, Nunohi—derived from Nunehi—referred in Cherokee tradition to Those Who Travel, a legendary immortal race of shapeshifters. Even Sergeant descended from a word meaning servant—one who serves."

Someone had asked whether she knew who his father was. Miriam had only looked at her. Somehow, that had answered the question.

The N.O.P.s opponents responded much as Democrats and socialists had in America—returning to the streets, organizing demonstrations, and issuing condemnations. Yet something had changed. They increasingly avoided attacking Vincent himself. Even many fierce critics of the N.O.P. had begun separating him from the party, treating Vincent and his work as something distinct from the political machinery gathering around him.

Naturalists, environmentalists, and neo-pagans who only weeks earlier might have viewed him with suspicion had become some of his most enthusiastic admirers. Many believed Mother Nature herself had given humanity a sign that could no longer be dismissed as superstition, coincidence, or mass hysteria.

Vincent had become theirs.

Native Americans, more than almost any other traditionally left-of-center voting bloc, had also begun claiming him. They highlighted his heritage and the presence of his wife, whom journalists and online commentators alternately described as a shamaness, medicine woman, priestess, prophetess, or—when the speaker had spent too much time online—an incarnate goddess of the underworld.

Rumors concerning Vincent's recent patents spread almost as quickly. Some had been deliberately leaked to N.O.P. officials. Others, according to persistent reports, had come from within the White House itself. Whatever their source, discussion of Raven Star technology erupted across cybercafés, libraries, universities, schools, and computer centers throughout the world, almost always in connection with the Event.

Nature's Sword was in his hand, people said.

Almost no one protested Vincent directly now. Whether from fear, respect, or the reasonable desire not to antagonize a man who might hold the keys to other worlds, they appealed to him instead. Thousands of letters, emails, petitions, videos, and public messages arrived each day, urging him to restrain the N.O.P., guide it, temper its harsher impulses, and reform it into something nobler, more balanced, and less fascist-adjacent.

In Trembol, however, the prevailing sensation was simpler.

Peace.

The casinos and resorts were increasingly operated as community businesses rather than feudal estates or criminal fiefdoms. Lines of credit were restricted and based upon legitimate credit checks processed almost instantly through the new systems being integrated across the city. Gambling debts were collected through lawyers and courts, not by two large men waiting beside a loading dock with tire irons.

Trinity technology identified cheats with disturbing efficiency, often flagging them before they managed more than a trial run. Facial-recognition systems compared patrons against databases maintained throughout Nevada and other major gambling centers around the world. Meghan was not entirely comfortable with how much the machines could see, but they never accepted bribes, lost evidence, or decided somebody's broken jaw was easier than paperwork.

Education funds had been established to retrain casino and resort employees, particularly escorts who wanted another trade. Raven Star offered community-college tuition in information technology, coding, business administration, accounting, emergency medicine, and other practical disciplines.

Many accepted. They could see the change coming, and most were smart enough to step aboard before the train left without them.

The police had changed as well. They were professional now, clean and predictable, enforcing the law without turning enforcement into tyranny. Meghan valued predictability almost as much as honesty. A citizen might dislike the answer received from one of her officers, but at least the answer no longer depended upon whose cousin they were, how much money they carried, or whether the deputy had awakened feeling mean.

Vincent had demanded no ceremonial purge. Anyone competent, innocent of the old department's criminal abuses, and willing to meet the new standard had been allowed to remain. Firefighters, medics, dispatchers, officers, and other emergency personnel—Amber Shelton among them—were simply folded into the new structure. The police department itself ceased to exist as an independent municipal force, becoming part of Raven Star Security Solutions, while the surrounding emergency services

passed beneath Raven Star administration and oversight. Vincent had dismantled the corrupt machinery without discarding everyone who happened to have worked inside it.

The vacancies left behind did not remain open for long. Within twenty-four hours of the purgation, experienced replacements began arriving: former police officers, soldiers, military policemen, and men and women from occupations Meghan had learned not to ask about unless she truly needed the answer. They came with credentials, weapons, medical records, certifications, complete training files, and the economical stillness of professionals who understood how quickly an ordinary morning could turn bloody. By June 5th, many had already stepped into positions emptied by the death warrants.



What unsettled Meghan was not their competence, but their readiness. Everything had been prepared too quickly. Many spoke with heavy foreign accents. Their first vehicles included military Humvees painted midnight blue, silver equal-armed crosses emblazoned upon the doors. The longer she watched them arrive, the less it looked as though they had responded to Trembol's crisis.

It looked as though they had been waiting for it.

Most belonged to the Fraternal Order of Purgatoria, the Knights of the Silver Cross, taking up positions as police officers, logistical personnel, and emergency-services workers. Others became the new private security force at the casino and resort, replacing Vana's former personnel. A larger contingent settled around the Raven Star Building and the outskirts of Trembol in an openly military role, manning checkpoints, observation posts, defensive systems, and hardened positions scattered through the surrounding badlands.

All wore some variation of the Raven Star uniform, but the manpower and funding clearly came from somewhere much larger. State, federal, and international authorities seemed to be feeding personnel and resources into the same structure, their own officers increasingly disappearing beneath the same black-and-silver banner.

Something had obviously been taking shape long before Vincent Veyl ever reached Trembol. Veterans, former police officers, military personnel, protective-order knights, intelligence professionals, and others already trained, vetted, and aligned through the Silver Order and wider

Natural Order movement had been gathering beneath a common authority. Raven Star Security had not truly begun with Raven Star. Raven Star had merely given an emergent order a name, a uniform, and a banner beneath which to gather. What had existed as soldiers, knights, police, intelligence officers, and trusted operatives from various nations, states, agencies, and orders was consolidating around Vincent into something far more coherent—and considerably more dangerous. A Praetorian Guard was taking shape.

The culture surrounding those jobs changed with them. Raven Star funded continuing education, certifications, advanced training, and a surprising amount of ordinary human recreation: bowling leagues, barbecues, shooting matches, theater nights, dances, weekend outings. None of it was compulsory, and Vincent seemed almost allergic to the sort of corporate enthusiasm that turned a picnic into a team-development environment. People came because they wanted to come.

Meghan recognized the old military logic beneath the friendliness. People who trained together, worked together, ate together, laughed together, and occasionally fell in love with one another formed loyalties no slogan could manufacture. Friendships became families. Departments became networks of trust. Employees grew attached not merely to Raven Star, but to one another and to the community forming around them.

Vincent had taken unit cohesion, dressed it in bowling shoes, and built a culture around it.

Raven Star Police formed a bowling league, which soon found itself competing against Raven Star Entertainment (the resort and casino crews), Raven Star Technologies (increasingly rooted in the tunnels beneath Trembol), and the Raven Star Workers, drawn from the various properties, construction projects, maintenance crews, and other operations scattered throughout the city.

Then the Old Magpie Bar & Grill jumped into the fray, forming their own league.

That, predictably, escalated matters.

Before long, they had talked Vincent into sponsoring the Raven Star Bikers Association as well, turning what had begun as a friendly company bowling league into something perilously close to an organized tribal conflict conducted with rented shoes, cheap beer, and ten-pound balls. And before Vincent quite understood how the hell it had happened, Trembol had its first motorcycle units in the police force—and then an entire riders' club, officially called The Covey, but branded and patched as Purgatory's Angels.

The generosity was practical as well. Every course completed, every certification earned, every skill mastered left Raven Star with a more capable workforce. Inside the Law Enforcement Building, mandatory coursework included paralegal fundamentals, de-escalation, mediation, psychology, sociology, and negotiation. Vincent wanted every officer carrying more tools than a gun, a badge, and arrest authority.

None of that meant pretending force was never necessary. Sometimes a violent bastard needed to be put face-down on the pavement and introduced to handcuffs. The point was making certain an officer understood the difference between the moment that required force and the moment when force merely made everything worse.

A larger skill set made a better officer.

The same philosophy produced the Contemplative, part debriefing room and part sanctuary, where officers gathered at the end of each shift. For a time, they simply sat in silence, allowing the weight of the day to settle. Afterward came conversation: what they had seen, what they had done, what frightened them, angered them, troubled them, or followed them home in their thoughts. Communal prayer was available for those who wanted it, led by Chaplain Edgar Magellan, a veteran and minister trained in psychology who listened considerably more than he preached and had little interest in dispensing cheap absolution.

The practice was thoroughly Purgatorian. Anger, guilt, fear, grief, pride, shame, and moral uncertainty were not supposed to disappear beneath the badge. They were supposed to be examined, spoken aloud, understood, and integrated before they fermented into cruelty, alcoholism, suicide, or violence at home. The badge did not make a person less human. Pretending otherwise merely ensured that the humanity came out somewhere uglier.

Meghan attended whenever she could. At first, she had done so because she was Chief and thought she ought to set the example. Before long, she realized she needed the room herself. There were things cops carried that civilians rarely understood, and things cops did not always know how to explain even to one another. The Contemplative gave them somewhere to put those burdens down long enough to look at them honestly.

For Meghan, it became something she had needed for years: a place to put herself back together before going home.

There was still the Trembol Blotter, the public-facing side of the R.S.S.S. Portal, where officers maintained the documentation required of them and were encouraged to speak candidly about their work. Not recklessly, and never at the expense of an active case, but honestly enough for the public to see the human beings behind the uniforms.

The old Trembol police had hidden behind silence. The new department was learning accountability without self-erasure.

When Meghan's shift finally ended, home was 55 Arius Avenue. Almost invariably, Vincent had arranged food for the live-in crew before she returned. Sometimes it was takeout stacked across the kitchen counters; other times, trays arrived from one of the better local restaurants in quantities suggesting he had once again assumed every adult in the building had forgotten how eating worked.

Miriam contributed in her own way. She loved to bake—cookies, sweet breads, little pastries, cakes. Something was nearly always cooling beneath a cloth or waiting upon a plate in the kitchen. She seemed to take genuine pleasure in watching exhausted people wander in, discover food waiting for them, and immediately become less miserable.

The result was unexpectedly homey, nothing Meghan would ever have imagined finding inside a hardened headquarters filled with weapons, encrypted communications, armed security, and a mystical intelligence threaded through the walls and buried systems.

Behind Raven Star lay the small garden Meghan had begun tending, where fresh green shoots pushed through dark soil beneath the desert sun. It was becoming communal now. Others helped water, plant, and pull weeds. Employees returned from town carrying seed packets, herb cuttings, flowers, and little nursery trays they had bought on impulse. Miriam was already talking about enclosing the entire plot within a greenhouse, turning Meghan's quiet patch of earth into something permanent—protected from the worst desert heat and capable of producing vegetables, herbs, and flowers throughout the year.

What had begun as Meghan's private corner was slowly becoming another shared piece of Raven Star.

Then there was the quiet apartment she shared with Emily, who as often as not fell asleep downstairs in the communications bunkroom after some endless shift rather than make the short trip upstairs. There was work that mattered, people Meghan trusted, and a place where she felt safe. Something grew in the garden. Fresh cookies waited in the kitchen. No one pounded on the door demanding blood, money, or obedience.

Strangest of all, there was peace.

The same Purgatorian discipline shaping the police permeated Raven Star itself. Raven Star Enterprises was not a secular organization pretending otherwise. The security division's first cadre had been drawn largely from the Fraternal Order of Purgatoria—the Knights of the Silver Cross—and the old disciplines of the Order had followed them naturally into the company.

The technological division developed similar ties to the Silver Order. Over the years, Silver Christian convents and monasteries throughout the Universal Church had become its unofficial technical backbone, maintaining computer systems, communications, databases, archives, networks, and information security for diocese, schools, religious orders, and charitable institutions around the world. Raven Star increasingly subcontracted specialized software, cybersecurity, systems support, data management, and information-technology work to those houses. Behind the public image of candles, bells, robes, and ancient liturgy existed a quiet international network of technically trained monks, sisters, priests, and clergy who could maintain a server farm, trace an intrusion, or rebuild a corrupted database before most secular executives finished assembling a committee to discuss the problem.

With Trinity in their ears, they could do considerably more.

Personal conduct mattered just as much as professional competence. Relationships were expected to be honorable, disclosed where necessary, and never permitted to compromise the chain of command or bring disgrace upon the Order or company. Men and women generally avoided unnecessary private meetings behind closed doors, and such boundaries were treated with much the same seriousness as weapons discipline or information security.

Proper courtship and marriage among employees, however, were not discouraged. Quite the opposite. Raven Star deliberately cultivated a spirit of familial fellowship: friendship, loyalty, shared meals, communal life, and, where genuine affection developed, honorable courtship leading toward marriage. The ideal was not emotional distance or sterile professionalism, but bonds strong enough to survive hardship without allowing the workplace to become a brothel, a hunting ground, or a nest of secret

affairs. Indeed, under the company's morality clauses, adultery was a quick path to being fired with prejudice, as was malicious gossip. Trinity remained the ever-neutral observer and arbiter.

Raven Star was not merely assembling a workforce. It was building a household.

Relationships were therefore expected to develop openly, responsibly, and with some sense of obligation toward both one another and the larger community. The standard was disciplined intimacy rather than isolation—people learning not merely how to work together, but how to belong to one another well.

Vincent observed those standards more rigorously than anyone. He and Miriam were almost always busy and almost always together, moving through Raven Star with the quiet efficiency of two people who sometimes seemed to share a single continuous train of thought. Both were unfailingly polite, but their boundaries were unmistakable. Vincent did not meet privately with female employees unless Miriam was present, and Miriam maintained the corresponding boundary with men. It was never presented as jealousy or distrust. The rule simply removed ambiguity before ambiguity had time to become trouble.

In practice, Miriam became Vincent's principal personal contact with the women of Raven Star. She spoke with them, counseled them, carried their concerns to him, and remained beside him whenever direct discussion was necessary. No one treated the arrangement as particularly strange. After a while, Meghan scarcely thought about it.

It was simply how Raven Star worked.

The confrontation with the protesters—and Vincent's rapid dismantling of the attempted coup—had given people something ordinary political language could not quite express: the comforting sense that someone competent was awake.

Shannon Miller now served as Interim Mayor. Cyrinx Miller was City Clerk. Meghan Dellon was Chief of Police. Yet the weekly meetings at Raven Star brought them together with the Citizen Advisory Board, a deliberately broad cross-section of Trembol: tribal elders, clergy, business owners, civic leaders, and representatives of all three major political parties—the G.O.P., the D.N.C., and the N.O.P.

Vincent came innately from the old Veyl tradition: civic-minded, broadly liberal in the older sense, suspicious of entrenched power, protective of working people, and deeply concerned with the land and the communities built upon it. He had little patience for newer ideological fashions of either Left or Right. When there was work to be done, he cared far more about whether someone was honest, competent, and willing to help than which political banner they carried.

He wanted people who knew Trembol, people who could solve problems, and people capable of sitting across a table from someone they disliked without throwing a tantrum or forgetting the mission. Tevi Thorton mattered because Tevi understood people. Star Crow understood the tribes, the land, and the deeper currents moving beneath both. Shannon understood banking and municipal government. Cyrinx understood money and the history of Elko. Meghan understood policing. Tallia understood media. Vana understood business and power. Abigail understood intimidation and how to find what was hidden in plain sight.

They did not have to agree about everything.

They had to function.

No one seriously questioned where the center of gravity lay. Vincent was in charge—not officially in every respect, but unmistakably. Strangely, people found that knowledge comforting. His management was quiet, methodical, and almost painfully practical. He did not issue grand directives and then expect lesser mortals to drag them into reality. He walked the buildings, inspected equipment, asked about staffing, examined schedules, read reports, checked inventories, and spoke directly with mechanics, dispatchers, patrol officers, clerks, cooks, contractors, and whoever else knew something he needed to understand.

Then he got in there with his own hands and did the work.

Vincent had spent too many years as a noncommissioned officer to confuse command with distance. Command meant responsibility for everything beneath it. If something mattered, sooner or later Vincent appeared beside it—usually with a cup of coffee, a cigarette, the appropriate tool, and several uncomfortable questions about why the job had not already been finished.

Miriam was rarely far from his side, occasionally leaning close to whisper something meant only for him. People had begun interpreting even that simple gesture symbolically. In the public imagination, she was becoming the quiet voice of the divine and of Nature herself—the woman who counseled him, steadied him, and tempered the terrible force everyone now knew he possessed.

Meghan lived with them and suspected that at least half those sacred whispers involved schedules, coffee, food, or Miriam reminding Vincent not to be an asshole. Though in Meghan's experience, Miriam herself was the harder and more frightening of the pair. She spoke little to anyone except through her assistant and carried herself with a cold, aloof severity—stern, supremely disciplined, and utterly certain of her purpose. Her agenda for Vincent and Raven Star was unapologetically esoteric and imperial. There was no ambiguity in her work or her goals: she wanted her husband to rule the world, and she fully intended to see both prophecy and her own place within it fulfilled to the fullest possible degree.

The symbolism survived anyway.

For the people of Trembol—and increasingly for people far beyond it—Vincent and Miriam were becoming expressions of something old, profound, and somehow familiar. Humanity seemed to recognize the pattern before it fully understood what it was seeing.

Silver Path Christians had embraced Vincent almost completely. Even the Universal Church had begun moving cautiously in his direction without attempting to define precisely what he might be. The Pope had issued internal instructions that amounted, in practical terms, to:

Stay out of his way. Do not interfere.

At the same time, the Holy Father had begun imposing reforms throughout the Church as if preparing for whatever was coming.

Food was being stockpiled. Old-fashioned generators were being installed and fuel reserves expanded. Solar arrays appeared upon monasteries, convents, seminaries, schools, hospitals, and Church-owned farms. Emergency wells that had stood sealed for decades were inspected, repaired, and reopened. Hand tools, paper records, shortwave radios, mechanical pumps, woodstoves, seeds, medical supplies, and shelf-stable provisions were quietly accumulating throughout the Church's international network.

The Pope had also opened the formal process of canonizing the entire Purgatorian Compendium—not as Scripture, nor as anything equal to the Bible, but as a recognized body of revelations granted through saints. That distinction mattered to theologians and would no doubt keep them arguing for the next century, assuming humanity still possessed centuries in which to argue.

At the same time, the Church's military and protective orders received substantially larger budgets. Clergy throughout the Universal Church were instructed to seek practical training in first aid, emergency management, wilderness survival, agriculture, self-defense, and firearms. The Holy Father wanted the Church to recover something of its older character—the hard spirituality of its first saints, missionaries, warrior-monks, frontier priests, and stubborn old nuns who had crossed oceans and deserts with little more than a Bible, a medicine bag, and the absolute refusal to die conveniently.

Men and women of the cloth were not merely expected to preach. They were expected to endure, protect, heal, cultivate, build, and, when necessary, fight.

The renewed emphasis fell beneath the doctrine of Just Cause. Faith was not to become passive. Cowardice would not be permitted to disguise itself as peace, mercy did not require helplessness, and holiness, the Pope increasingly insisted, was perfectly compatible with preparedness. Christ had told His followers to love their enemies. He had never told them to let those enemies butcher children while they stood nearby wringing their hands.

The orders had been issued quietly. Meghan knew about them anyway. She knew a great many things now because she was no longer standing outside the circle, peering inward through the dark. She was no longer alone against the evil ones.

She belonged.

At the weekly council meetings, Meghan sat beside Shannon and Cyrinx Miller, her sister Tallia, Vana Carydin, Bishop Ramsey, Elder Star Crow, Tevi Thorton, and a growing number of new arrivals. Three Silver Sisters had recently joined them. More significant still was former Homeland Security agent Yvonne Omaris, who had arrived on June 12 and quickly assumed command of Raven Star's internal security. She had also become the principal investigator for the Trembol Police Department, with an office of her own inside the Law Enforcement Building.

Vincent Veyl had arrived in Trembol almost seven weeks earlier. In forty-five days, he had changed the city, changed the country, and arguably changed the world.

He had certainly changed Meghan's life.

The black command SUV parked beside her offered proof enough. It was state-of-the-art and loaded with every useful addition the department could justify: emergency lights and sirens, reinforced suspension, a hardened frame, roll protection, secure communications, onboard electronics, weapons

storage, medical equipment, and several systems Meghan had not yet entirely learned how to use. It looked capable of surviving a riot, a firefight, or the sort of Nevada pothole nobody at the statehouse wanted to admit existed.

Vincent had visited the Law Enforcement Building several times during the previous weeks and spent hours in the motor pool with the mechanics. He had worked upon every vehicle personally—not supervising from a clean corner with coffee in his hand, but working. He rolled up his sleeves, opened his tool case, crawled beneath dashboards, pulled panels, traced wiring, tested connections, and asked the mechanics what broke most often and what the manufacturers should have done differently.

The mechanics respected him for that. A politician could put on a hard hat, shake hands, and pretend to understand labor long enough for somebody to take a picture. A man could not fake scraped knuckles, sweat-soaked clothes, or four hours folded beneath a dashboard while swearing at an electrical harness designed by some college-educated bastard who had apparently never touched one.

By the time Vincent finished, Trinity had been tied directly into the communications suite and onboard electronics of every upgraded vehicle. Dispatch, navigation, diagnostics, emergency systems, and tactical communications now functioned as parts of one living network.

That was Vincent. He could speak of mankind crossing the stars in one breath, then spend the next hour beneath a patrol vehicle because a communications relay was not good enough. He possessed wealth, power, and enough public adoration to make weaker men believe manual labor had become beneath them. Vincent still reached for his tools.

Now, in the cool gold of early morning, Meghan stood beside her SUV. A line of black vehicles stretched ahead and behind her along Arius Avenue, their polished flanks catching the newborn sun.

Her uniform still felt new. The high collar gave it an almost priestly severity, while immaculate shoulder patches marked her office and allegiance. A black beret sat precisely upon her head. Cavalry-style combat boots gleamed beneath tailored trousers. Her 10mm sidearm rested securely at her hip, and the photochromic lenses of her glasses were already darkening against the rising sun.

Everything about the uniform conveyed seriousness, purpose, and authority. It did not ask anyone to respect the office. It warned them that the woman wearing it intended to deserve that respect—and would deal harshly with anyone who mistook restraint for weakness.

Upon one shoulder gleamed the silver equal-armed cross. Upon the other rested the Raven Star emblem. A patinated silver badge upon her chest, darkened in the recesses as though it had already passed through years of weather and hard use.

The men and women around her were both local Raven Star Police and Raven Star Security personnel—which was to say, people who might've been state, federal, or church personnel wearing Raven Star uniforms.

Meghan held her department-issued AR-15 at a comfortable low ready, periodically sweeping the rooftops and distant ridgeline with her eyes. She knew at least two federal agencies had established observation posts inside neighboring apartment buildings. Their agents watched Raven Star around

the clock, though whether they were guarding it, studying it, or waiting for it to sprout wings and fly away remained anybody's guess.

On DeSatto Ridge, soldiers wearing Raven Star Security insignia patrolled the approaches. Strangely enough, they were contracted through a joint federal-state task force, which meant the government had found a way to hire Vincent's people to protect Vincent from whatever the government feared might happen to him.

That arrangement hinted at the larger reality taking shape around Trembol. Some people found it frightening. Others found it exhilarating. Meghan understood both reactions. The same machinery capable of shielding a community could close its fist around one. Black uniforms, secret facilities, military hardware, and unquestioned loyalty did not become harmless merely because the men wearing the badges happened to be on her side.

Power always carried its shadow with it.

For the moment, however, that power stood watch over Trembol rather than upon its throat.

Actual air-defense systems now guarded the city. A damned Patriot missile battery had been positioned near the NNN station on DeSatto Ridge, with an actual SAM missile emplacement south of town near the airport. Military helicopters crossed overhead so routinely that most residents no longer stopped to stare. Occasionally something heavier tore across the morning sky—a transport aircraft climbing hard from the desert or a fighter passing fast enough to shake windows and piss off every dog for five miles.

None of those aircraft carried standard military coloring or familiar national markings. Their subdued black-and-silver presentation looked remarkably similar to the uniform Meghan wore and the heraldry displayed upon the vehicles behind her.

Most people had a pretty good idea where they came from and where they returned after completing their patrols. No one unauthorized had managed to get close enough to prove a damned thing.

Meghan smiled as the distant rumble faded into the brightening sky. Something enormous was taking shape around them. She could feel it in the disciplined movement of the soldiers, the encrypted voices murmuring through her radio, and the radar arrays turning ceaselessly upon the heights.

The clock mounted upon Raven Star's façade drove that sensation deeper. Electric-blue numerals steadily burned away the remaining days while an entire new order assembled beneath them—not merely a corporation, political movement, church, or private army, but some rough union of all four that had not yet decided what name history would give it.

And Meghan was standing on the ground floor.

Nearby stood Yvonne Omaris and her older sister, Tracy.

At a glance, neither woman looked entirely out of place beside Meghan, though both carried a sharper corporate edge. Meghan looked like a police chief prepared to lead a raid. The Omaris sisters looked

like the women who would authorize it, secure the building afterward, and make certain every bloody page of the report was filed correctly.

Yvonne was beautiful, to say the least. She was short, dark-haired, and sharply feminine in her tailored black suit and heels, but there was nothing soft about her bearing. What she lacked in height, she more than recovered through discipline and an almost intimidating severity. She seemed perpetually alert, perpetually evaluating, as though everyone entering her field of vision had already been reduced to three questions: What did they want? What could they do? How much trouble would they become if left unattended?

There was plenty of trouble to evaluate. Vincent's growing public acceptance had not diminished the threats surrounding him. If anything, his rise had made them worse. Fame brought admirers, but it also brought governments, intelligence services, religious fanatics, political opportunists, professional killers, and every garden-variety lunatic who believed history had been waiting for his personal contribution.

China remained among the largest concerns, continuing to rattle sabers across the Taiwan Strait. American policy had shifted dramatically during the previous weeks, with the Harrison administration now explicitly affirming that the United States would defend Taiwan in the event of war—a position long associated with the N.O.P. The diplomatic language remained polished. The military movements beneath it were considerably less polite.

Yvonne worked constantly. She handled criminal investigations through the Law Enforcement Building while simultaneously directing intelligence operations for Raven Star. The line between those responsibilities had become so thin as to be nearly imaginary. A local threat could become a federal matter before lunch and an international security concern before anyone finished the paperwork.

The same tiny earpiece worn by Meghan and nearly everyone else on duty rested inside Yvonne's ear. Through it came the same deep, gentle feminine voice—always present, always calm, always logical, and occasionally possessed of a dry humor suggesting the machine understood human foolishness better than most humans did.

She insisted upon being called Mama.

The raven so often perched upon Vincent's shoulder was also called Mama. Increasingly, people believed the two were not merely connected but different expressions of the same intelligence. Miriam herself had become part of that mystery: human, animal, and machine, three reflections cast by one presence moving behind them all.

No one could explain it cleanly. Those who tried generally sounded drunk, heretical, or both.

They called her Mama anyway.

Tracy Omaris was different. Where Yvonne was career-minded—drawn toward responsibility, authority, difficult work, and, admittedly, the growing prestige of serving Raven Star—Tracy seemed almost indifferent to the corporate structure surrounding her. Titles meant little to her unless they clarified who she was supposed to protect and who she was permitted to throw through a door.

She stood more than six feet tall and was built like a professional fighter: broad-shouldered, powerful, athletic, and striking in an unadorned, almost handsome way. Her long dark hair was usually pulled into a heavy braid, keeping it clear of her hands and weapons. Even dressed in a black suit, she looked less like an executive than someone who had been ordered to wear a jacket over her tactical gear.

By ordinary standards, Tracy was a large woman. Raven Star's standards had become somewhat ridiculous. Vincent stood six-foot-five and carried enough muscle to make Tracy appear almost dainty beside him. Miriam was close to Tracy's height but dramatically hourglass in figure—tall, statuesque, and unmistakably feminine. Standing among the two of them, Tracy somehow became the compact one, which was the sort of visual nonsense Raven Star produced without even trying.

She was almost always near Miriam, much like the three Silver Sisters who had moved into Raven Star in mid-June and promptly established themselves upon the fourth floor. They had quietly assumed control of much of the building's internal information technology while also serving as Miriam's direct assistants. No announcement had been made. One day the systems department belonged to Raven Star; three days later, it appeared to belong to a small convent of armed mystics who could rebuild a server, interpret a prophecy, and probably dispose of a body without interrupting evening prayers.

Inside the building, people had begun referring to Miriam as the Empress. Sometimes they said it jokingly. Sometimes they made a joke of it because saying it plainly would have revealed how seriously they believed the prophecy.

Tracy had not come to Trembol for Raven Star as a company. She had come for Vincent. That much was obvious. She lit up whenever he entered a room—not with girlish excitement, but with the sudden focus of someone whose entire field of concern had narrowed to a single person. She listened to him with an intensity bordering upon reverence and guarded his personal space with militant protectiveness.

Within days of arriving, Tracy had transformed Raven Star's reception area into something resembling a military checkpoint. Visitors were identified, screened, questioned, logged, and watched from the moment they approached the entrance. Anyone who objected generally changed his mind after Tracy looked at him.

To her, the assignment was not employment. It was a holy mission. Her service was an anointing, and she carried it with the grim sincerity of a knight who had finally found the altar before which she meant to kneel—and the man she was prepared to defend to the death, whether her own or, preferably, someone else's.

Meghan watched as Vana and Abigail Carydin emerged from Raven Star. Both wore black, as was their habit. Both were beautiful. Both, in entirely different ways, were frightening.

Vana had changed. The old Black Queen of Paradise had become quieter, more controlled, almost Silver Sister-like in her bearing. She retained the same severe beauty, the same instinctive command of a room, and the same capacity to make powerful men feel as though they had entered negotiations already owing her money. But restraint now stood where display once had.

The knife had not disappeared. It had gone into a sheath.

Around Miriam, especially, Vana became quiet. Almost deferential.

It was not submission—not exactly. Vana Carydin had spent too many years ruling her corner of Trembol to bend easily before anyone. It felt more like recognition: one powerful woman acknowledging something older and deeper in another. The Black Queen had met the Empress and, for once, found no need to test the crown.

Much of what happened within Vana's former casinos and resorts now passed through Miriam in one form or another, and Vana coordinated accordingly. Everyone understood that those establishments, at least as they presently existed, were living on borrowed time. Vincent had other plans for them, though he released those plans in pieces rather than grand declarations.

Miriam was more direct, hastening the transition toward Vincent's goals while working with Trinity and Cyrinx to ensure that the more "unclean" remnants of Vana's former empire—brothels, adult-film operations, strip clubs, certain bars, drug dispensaries, and other vice-oriented businesses—were either sold off, dismantled, or repurposed toward sacred, civic, or practical ends.

Employee retraining programs were already underway. St. Aftiel's Sisterhood had assumed much of the information technology and administrative work. R.S.S.S. personnel controlled most of the security, replacing bribed guards, casino thugs, and men who considered a baseball bat an acceptable instrument of debt collection. The old institutions remained open. Lights still flashed, cards still fell, liquor still poured, and tourists continued feeding money into machines designed to eat it. But the places were already becoming something else.

Abigail was different. She remained the odd member of the Women's Circle, usually standing apart and watching from the edge. She dealt mostly with Vana or Miriam, occasionally Yvonne, and showed little interest in anyone else. Most attempts at casual conversation died against her expression before reaching a second sentence.

Her clothing only sharpened the impression. While the others favored uniforms, dresses, priestly garments, or tailored corporate attire, Abigail often wore militaristic fitted black bodysuits that made her look less like an executive than a professional assassin waiting for somebody to hand her a photograph.

People noticed the way she moved, the hours she kept, and the black cases she carried, and lately, Abigail had begun visiting Raven Star without Vana, disappearing into private meetings with Miriam and Yvonne before leaving Trembol for days at a time. Sometimes one or two female R.S.S.S. personnel accompanied her, women with the same quiet posture and incurious expressions found among people paid not to discuss their work.

Meghan had heard the organizational name given her: Thorn of the Black Rose—or simply Black Thorn. The shortened version spread through Raven Star, whispered with contemplations of the meaning behind it.

Vincent had once explained that he gave employees such designations as private reminders of who they were beneath their job titles. Meghan was Valkyrie. Whatever Abigail's designation meant, it fit her disturbingly well.

She was not particularly well liked by anyone other than Vana. Abigail offered no easy smiles and made none of the small concessions by which people reassured one another they were harmless. But she was useful in ways Meghan was not. There were errands no one volunteered to undertake, questions that could not be asked through official channels, and problems unlikely ever to become police reports. Abigail seemed naturally suited to that shadowed category.

Meghan had worn a badge too long to romanticize such work—or condemn it merely because it was unpleasant. She had killed in the line of duty herself. Order had always required somebody willing to enter dark places and confront the people who lived comfortably there. The danger was never the existence of the shadow, but whether it served the house or eventually devoured it.

Perhaps that was why Abigail fit Purgatoria so naturally. It was neither Heaven nor Hell, but the realm between; the old domain of psychopomps and reapers, those who crossed thresholds others preferred not to approach.

Abigail appeared to relish the darkness. Yet Meghan suspected there was more to it than cruelty. Raven Star had given her a place where the very qualities that kept others at a distance made her valuable. She was no longer merely Vana's strange, sharp-edged daughter or the uncomfortable woman at the edge of the Circle. She was trusted. Necessary.

Perhaps that would redeem something in her. Perhaps it would feed the worst parts until they grew teeth. Most likely, it would do both. Human beings were inconvenient that way.

Whatever the truth, the role sat comfortably upon Abigail, as did the faint smirk seemingly carved into one corner of her mouth—the expression of a woman who knew something unpleasant and was in no damned hurry to share it.

Vana and Abigail descended the steps together and crossed toward the black limousine waiting near the rear of the procession. A uniformed driver opened the door, and without announcement or fanfare, the two women slipped inside.

The front doors of Raven Star opened again, and Vincent and Miriam emerged first, walking side by side into the early light.

The three Silver Sisters followed, with Tracy Omaris close behind them and Emily bringing up the rear. She pulled the heavy doors shut, tested them once out of habit, then turned toward the waiting procession.

Miriam wore the Native shamaness attire she had adopted in recent days—expensive, striking, and unmistakably ceremonial. Black fabric and supple leather followed the long lines of her figure, embroidered with silver thread and ornamented with worked silver, turquoise, feathers, and dark fringe that stirred around her as she walked. Against her waist-length black hair, austere features, and cool, almost predatory beauty, the effect was regal without looking like costume. She had not dressed as a priestess for the cameras. She looked as though the office had finally dressed itself around her.

At forty-six, Miriam was astonishingly beautiful and could easily have passed for a woman in her thirties. The public's convenient explanation of a glow-up had begun collapsing once people got a proper look at her. Whatever had happened to Miriam Veyl was not makeup, wardrobe, diet, flattering

light, or the confidence of a woman who had recently married the most talked-about man on Rhea. She did not merely look healthier or better rested.
She looked younger.

Beside her, Vincent had abandoned his usual working clothes for something markedly more formal. He wore black from throat to boots, the severe tailoring carrying equal suggestions of corporate executive, military officer, and priest. The small silver equal-armed cross upon his sleeve strengthened the ecclesiastical impression without turning the suit into vestments.

He looked less like a businessman headed to a meeting than a modern knight who had reluctantly agreed to dress properly before delivering judgment. Even by Vincent's already considerable standard, he was difficult not to look at. People who had resolved beforehand not to stare generally made it four or five seconds.

Together, descending the Raven Star steps, they presented an image becoming increasingly familiar throughout Trembol: Miriam in silver, turquoise, and black; Vincent in unbroken black. Priestess and soldier. Woman of the West Gate and the man beside whom she had chosen to stand. One looked capable of speaking with the dead. The other looked capable of providing her with fresh introductions.

Behind them came the growing household of Raven Star—the three Silver Sisters, Tracy Omaris, and Emily—while the electric-blue numbers of the Twilight Dawn clock burned above them like a reminder that this was no ceremonial procession for its own sake. Whatever Raven Star was becoming, time was running out for the rest of humanity to decide whether it meant to follow.



Kianna Kim was Miriam's age (though Miriam herself no longer looked hers) and easily the most controversial member of the new trinity of assistants.

Taiwanese and startling in both beauty and presence, Kianna Kim was renowned as a master of sacred dance, martial arts, and poetry. She had served as Mother Superior of a Silver Order convent in Taiwan and, more significantly, was the sister of Taiwan's president and one of his former personal advisers.

Kianna resigned her position at the convent and came to the United States under emergency protection. What followed normally would have taken considerably longer, but national-security

concerns had a marvelous way of clearing bureaucratic calendars. A review of her family records established an existing claim to American citizenship through her mother, and within seventy-two hours the State Department had formally recognized it and issued the necessary documentation.

Publicly, the extraordinary haste was attributed to credible Chinese death threats and the intelligence value attached to her case. The threats were real, and they were one more reason security around Raven Star had tightened.

Amalia and Bella were nonidentical twins of African-American descent. Both were beautiful and tall, with long black hair, deep brown eyes, and the hourglass figures that had become an increasingly absurd coincidence among the women gathering inside Raven Star's inner circle. They came from Bayville, Virginia, and were said to have grown up around Vincent—a phrase vague enough to invite questions nobody seemed willing to answer directly.

Almost immediately after arriving, both women disappeared into Raven Star's secure technical core, interacting with Trinity's systems at a level of intimacy permitted too very few.

Of the twins, Bella was the more martial, quiet, and intensely focused. She became Vincent's personal secretary, handling his correspondence, managing requests for meetings, proofreading the book he was rumored to be writing, and increasingly serving as his direct spokeswoman. Elegant, articulate, and soft-spoken, Bella delivered daily briefings to NNN and appeared regularly upon Raven Star's corporate news feed whenever Vincent declined to speak for himself—which was often.

Amalia went in another direction, attaching herself to Raven Star's hard-science projects—the ones nobody discussed publicly and few employees possessed clearance even to know existed. Whatever happened behind those doors remained thoroughly hush-hush. People saw equipment arrive and occasionally felt the building hum beneath their feet. The tunnel systems beneath Trembol had been opened into the basement and were being increasingly secured for Raven Star interests. Beyond that, people knew enough to mind their own damned business.

Kianna, meanwhile, was rarely far from Miriam's side. She served as her private secretary, spokeswoman, attendant, and increasingly as something resembling a chief aide. All three women continued wearing the distinctive black priestly uniforms of the Silver Sisterhood, complete with high collars, silver crosses, and the restrained ornamentation of their respective orders.

That had not gone unnoticed. Silver Path circles were alive with speculation. The old prophecies spoke of one Empress and twelve priestess-queens, the concubines of the Raven Emperor, the thirteen brides of Amil the Undying restored in another age. Online forums openly wondered whether the three priestesses represented the beginning of that ancient gathering and, if so, who would be called next.

Purgatorian teaching in its original form had always contained a polygamist element. Amil himself had established the example, and no amount of later Church diplomacy could erase thirteen brides without making women disappear from the sacred histories.



(Amil & The Thirteen Wives)

The religious approved. The N.O.P. approved. The Universal Church, broadly speaking, approved. If women were destined to stand near the prophesied Raven Emperor, many argued, then disciplined holy women already sworn to the Way were precisely the sort who should be chosen.

The Church Universal had, however, openly advocated drawing the brides from several of its leading orders, both to promote unity and to ensure a broader range of Christian counsel and influence around the emerging throne. Even so, most considered priestesses infinitely preferable to actresses, lobbyists, socialites, or whatever ambitious creature happened to claw her way through the security cordon wearing a low-cut dress and carrying a charitable foundation.

The optics pleased nearly everyone for different reasons. Miriam was Native and unmistakably Western. Kianna was Asian and Taiwanese. Amalia and Bella were African-American. Those inclined toward diversity celebrated the composition of the little court taking shape around Raven Star, while religious traditionalists were equally pleased that the women were devout, disciplined, and drawn from recognized spiritual orders.

The G.O.P. and N.O.P. embraced Kianna's presence for another reason. To them, her arrival represented an unmistakable message to the Chinese Communist Party—whether Vincent intended to send one or not.

Vincent himself had not summoned Kianna, married her, or issued any public statement against the C.C.P. Nor had he met directly with the president of Taiwan. Chinese commentators took increasing care to emphasize those facts whenever discussion of Kianna threatened to grow into something larger. For the moment, whatever message her presence at Raven Star conveyed belonged more to the people gathering around Vincent than to Vincent himself.

Beijing had little reason to feel reassured. Vincent had never named the C.C.P., but scattered remarks had made his contempt for torture, thought crimes, and any government that declared war upon faith or God unmistakably clear. He had condemned the machinery without naming the men operating it. Nobody in China needed help connecting the dots.

Those who wanted a multicultural symbol found one. Those who wanted the fulfillment of ancient prophecy found that too. Political strategists saw Taiwan, churchmen saw the Sisterhood, and half the Internet saw the opening stages of an imperial harem.

The Sisters looked at him and saw an ancient office, a prophetic husband, and the center of some vast pattern beginning to turn. Vincent appeared oblivious to most of it. He had eyes for Miriam, and everyone could see that. He remained courteous toward the others—Vincent was almost invariably courteous until given reason not to be—but Meghan suspected he was less comfortable around the three Sisterhood priestesses than he was around Tracy Omaris, whose devotion expressed itself through quiet professionalism rather than religious adoration.

Meghan's thoughts turned toward several of the men she worked with. She knew that she, like several of the women whose duties regularly carried them beyond the Raven Star Building, had been approached more than once—asked out for drinks, dinner, dates, sometimes rather directly.

There were no restrictions against it. No promises had been demanded of them. No one had told them they could not see other people. Yet, according to their own conversations, the answer was invariably a flat no.

Some refusals were polite. Others came with considerably greater enthusiasm. Abigail, according to rumor, had rejected at least one particularly persistent admirer with enough violence to discourage further negotiation. Meghan herself had heard the words leave her mouth before she fully realized she was saying them: "I belong to the Emperor." She still could not understand why she had said it that way, or why it had felt so natural when she did. No one had asked her out since.

What none of them—including Meghan—quite understood was that this instinct had not begun with Raven Star. Looking back, the pattern had been there all their lives. With the lone exception of Shannon Miller, none of them had ever been with a man. They had already been living according to a rule they had never consciously learned: waiting, refusing, holding something back without knowing for whom or why.

Now, around Vincent, that old instinct had begun to make an unsettling kind of sense. There was simply a feeling that they already belonged somewhere—that some part of them had always known it—even though none had yet spoken the truth aloud and no formal promise existed to make it so.

The thought brought Meghan back to the small gatherings Miriam had been holding during the previous weeks. Women only, upstairs in the third-floor library. Nothing formal. No minutes, no announced agenda, no grand title carved into a plaque. They sat among the dark shelves and tall windows over coffee or tea, comparing notes and talking through whatever fresh trouble Raven Star had dragged through the door. Miriam usually said relatively little. She listened, watched, and occasionally asked a question sharp enough to cut through twenty minutes of bullshit.

Yet the gatherings were becoming something more than conversation. They gave the women a place to coordinate responses, share information, and compare what each was seeing from her own corner of Raven Star and Trembol. They discussed Raven Star's goals, certainly, but also their own ambitions within it, their disagreements, their concerns, and the parts they believed they might play in whatever was taking shape. Some liked one another. Some tolerated one another. A few probably would have cheerfully strangled one another under different circumstances. It was not sisterhood in the sentimental sense.

It was becoming a council.

Meghan had attended, along with Tallia, Kianna, Amalia and Bella, Cyrinx and Shannon Miller, Emily, Yvonne and Tracy, Vana and Abigail. A curious circle of different ages, backgrounds, temperaments, loyalties, and reasons for being there. They were not equals in ability, rank, influence, or character, and Miriam made no effort to pretend they were. Equality was a fine word for sermons and campaign speeches. In a room where decisions carried consequences, competence mattered more.

Meghan had not failed to notice the number of women gathering around Miriam. Nor had she failed to notice which women. She had counted them once, then disliked the answer enough to count again.

Twelve women besides Miriam.

For a moment, the old prophecies crossed her mind. One Empress and twelve priestess-queens. Thirteen brides of Amil returned in another age. Meghan dismissed it as prophecy playing tricks with arithmetic—assumption feeding upon coincidence until coincidence began wearing a crown.

At least, that was what she told herself.

What outside observers increasingly noticed—and usually credited to Vincent—was not simply that he surrounded himself with beautiful women. Powerful men had been doing that since the first chieftain discovered jewelry and private rooms. What distinguished Raven Star was that the women surrounding Vincent were competent, dangerous, and entrusted with actual authority. They ran intelligence, security, media, municipal affairs, investigations, technical projects, internal systems, and increasingly large portions of Raven Star itself. They were not ornaments arranged behind his chair. They had keys, weapons, budgets, clearances, and the power to tell grown men no.

When someone asked Vincent why he had hired so many women into security and operational positions, his answer was characteristically brief. "I worked in the Middle East. Israel and the Kurds taught me how effective women can be in combat roles." He paused, apparently reconsidered the question, and added, "And I don't want to live in a frat house of competing egos and swinging dicks."

That remark circulated almost as widely as some of his serious statements.

The irony was that, with Bishop Ramsey traveling constantly to coordinate the Silver Order's return to orthodoxy and its growing infusion into the Imperial bureaucracy, and Justin Vyss occupied with his new role as the President's interim Vice President, the only man regularly coming and going from 55 Arias Avenue was Josh Manning.

Even Josh no longer lived inside Raven Star. He had taken an apartment in the neighboring building—close enough to be available whenever Vincent needed him, but far enough away to shut his own door, drink a beer, and occasionally remember that he possessed a life that did not involve prophecies, classified machinery, armed priestesses, or the possible end of the world.

Josh's life had changed rather drastically over the previous several weeks. His income had multiplied. His clothes fit better, his hair stayed neatly trimmed, and the uncertain young man who had once seemed grateful merely to be allowed in the room had sharpened into someone distinctly professional. He carried himself differently now, with the quiet confidence of a man who had stumbled into a life several sizes larger than the one he expected and, after the initial shock, decided he might as well grow into the frigging thing.

At the end of June, he quietly married Amber Shelton. They had already been dating for roughly six months, and after the Purgation, Amber accepted a position with Raven Star Security, drawing her more firmly into the strange little world forming around Vincent.

There was no grand wedding, no press release, and no rented ballroom full of distant relatives getting drunk at somebody else's expense. As a certified chaplain, Vincent presided over the ceremony in the back garden of the Raven Star Building, with only a handful of friends and coworkers present. Miriam arranged the details, naturally. She brought in flowers, lanterns, white cloth, good food, and enough quiet beauty to turn what might otherwise have resembled a courthouse wedding conducted behind an office building into something intimate and memorable.

Once Josh and Amber had spoken their vows, Vincent closed the service book—but did not dismiss the gathering. To everyone's surprise, he asked Josh to trade places with him. Josh did so with a grin suggesting that at least one person had known this part was coming.

Vincent then held out his hand to Miriam. She had not expected it. That much showed upon her face. Nevertheless, she stepped forward, took his hand, and stood before the same witnesses while Vincent publicly spoke his vows to her. The ring he gave her remained a source of gossip across Trembol and beyond.

When he finished, Miriam answered with heartfelt vows of her own, her voice clear even as tears ran freely down the hard woman's face. She spoke of a life spent waiting for him, and of feeling whole, complete, and at peace for the first time she could remember. Howard Ramsey and Justin Vyss watched from nearby like a pair of proud fathers, both looking suspiciously close to tears themselves and neither likely to appreciate having it mentioned afterward.

It suited Raven Star almost perfectly. The company-culture had no interest in forcing people together, but neither did it expect them to live as lonely little machines who reported for duty, completed their shifts, and went home to stare at the walls.

Josh Manning's employment with Raven Star had apparently included a substantial raise, a better wardrobe, a new apartment, and a wife. Human Resources had neglected to advertise the complete benefits package.

The women of Raven Star's inner circle were hardly typical. Most were private to the point of severity, and nearly all were militaristic, religious, or some peculiar combination of the two. Several had spent

years being described publicly as anti-male, aggressively feminist, lesbian, emotionally unavailable, or simply too damned intimidating to approach without written authorization and body armor. Whether those descriptions were fair scarcely mattered. Gossip did not require fairness. Most days, it barely required spelling.

Raven Star's increasingly female inner circle proved irresistible. The jokes came quickly, and the Internet—having discovered a fresh subject upon which it could squander mankind's accumulated technological achievement—did not disappoint.

Online commentators soon christened the group Vincent's Lesbian Death Coven, and the name spread with predictable enthusiasm.

One widely shared post offered Raven Star's supposed hiring requirements:

Beautiful, Armed, Religious, Extremely intense, Emotionally intimidating, Black wardrobe strongly preferred. Must be able to field-strip both a rifle and a theological argument. Prior experience in law enforcement, intelligence work, convent life, organized crime, or overthrowing corrupt institutions considered a plus. Must remain calm around ravens, classified technology, supernatural anomalies, and heavily armed priestesses. Applicants frightened by blood, incense, guns, prophecy, or the occasional manifestation of the impossible need not apply.

The memes only got worse.

One showed Vincent surrounded by armed women beneath the caption:

LOCAL MAN ACCIDENTALLY BECOMES PATRIARCH OF WOMEN WHO DON'T LIKE MEN.

Another showed him looking exhausted beside Miriam while half a dozen women stood behind them:

HE WANTED A QUIET HOUSE. HE GOT A CONVENT WITH RIFLES.

The most popular used an image of Vincent standing at the center of the Women's Circle:

MAN ASKS TO BE LEFT ALONE. ACCIDENTALLY ACQUIRES THIRTEEN AMAZONS AND A CULT OF PERSONALITY.

Even NNN occasionally repeated the jokes, usually while Tallia rolled her eyes and insisted that civilization had once used the Internet for serious purposes. No one in the studio could remember when.

The reality was considerably less scandalous. Most of the women were disciplined almost beyond reason. They worked long hours, maintained strict personal boundaries, trained, prayed, studied, and devoted themselves to Raven Star's growing mission with an intensity ordinary companies could neither purchase nor safely request. Whatever their private desires, they generally kept them private.

Raven Star possessed enough secrets to choke a grand jury. An orgy was not one of them. At least, not yet. Although Meghan still had her hopes, and she was not alone in that particular little dream.

If anything, the greater irony was that Vincent had somehow assembled a household full of women whom the outside world had spent years insisting were hostile to men—and nearly all of them appeared perfectly content working for him. Some were even beginning to find the complete absence of the harassment they had supposedly signed up for a little disappointing. Meghan, if she was being honest, numbered among them.

She watched Vincent emerge from Raven Star holding his wife's hand and guide her toward the open rear door of the waiting SUV. He helped Miriam into the second-row seat, then stood aside as Amalia, Bella, and Kianna filed past him into the rear. His manner remained gentle and attentive, but his attention never stopped moving. Even as the women settled into the vehicle, Vincent's eyes swept the rooftops, upper windows, parked cars, alley mouths, and distant intersections with the automatic rhythm of a man who had spent years expecting danger to announce itself from anywhere.

He glanced toward Meghan and gave her the smallest, perfectly polite nod, but then his gaze shifted past her shoulder toward a third-floor window across the street, slightly to her left.
"Not a rifle," Trinity said through Meghan's earpiece. "Just a camera." After the briefest pause, she added, "Li Wei. Chinese intelligence agent. Here on a student visa." Almost as she spoke, a crash sounded from across the street, followed by the hard rattle of glass. R.S.S.S. personnel around the convoy snapped toward the noise, weapons rising as two men in black tactical clothing appeared briefly in the window opposite. Between them, Li Wei struggled once before they seized him beneath the arms and dragged him backward into the darkened room.

"Clear," Trinity said. She had seen him, of course. Trinity usually saw everything. When she judged the danger contained, however, she enjoyed withholding the answer long enough to test Vincent's perceptions.

Meghan looked back at Vincent. He remained beside the open SUV door, watching the window. "Took you about a second to spot him," she said, unable to keep the reluctant admiration from her voice. She had been standing outside for nearly thirty minutes and had never noticed the bastard.

Vincent shrugged and gave the street another slow scan. "No one else saw him either." Trinity had, but Trinity hardly counted as anyone else in the ordinary sense. The remark was casual, delivered without Vincent even looking at Meghan, but she understood immediately what he was doing. He had noticed her professional embarrassment and spared her from carrying it, and just like that, the little sting vanished. Vincent put one foot inside the SUV, then paused with one hand upon the doorframe. "You liking the new job?"

Meghan smiled. "I've never been happier." The answer came without hesitation. Vincent studied her for half a second longer, as though checking whether she meant it.

"Hear from your dad?" he asked. The question landed harder. Around them, the convoy was already preparing to move: engines idled along Arius Avenue, security personnel shifted into their final positions, and doors opened farther down the line.

Yvonne and Tracy prepared to board the SUV. In the middle of all that movement, Meghan stood perfectly still.

Meghan's smile faded. "No."

Vincent glanced down the street. "He's not in Alaska." Meghan looked at him, and Vincent continued before she could ask. "He's living just outside Trembol." A faint smile touched his mouth as he nodded toward the next block. "And sitting down there in an old blue Buick." With that, he climbed into the SUV.

Meghan followed his line of sight. At first, she saw nothing unusual—just parked vehicles, dusty windows, and the empty stretches between people beginning their morning. Then she found it. An aging blue Buick sat half a block away, nearly twenty years old, its darkly tinted windows dulled beneath a layer of desert dust. It looked half-derelict, exactly the sort of car most people would pass without seeing. Meghan stared at it, unable to understand why her father was sitting inside or how long he had been watching her. "Fuck," she muttered, then rounded the SUV and climbed behind the wheel.

Tracy took the passenger seat in full body armor, rifle ready, her eyes already moving from window to rooftop to intersection. She possessed the same coiled stillness Meghan had begun associating with Raven Star's security people—the kind that looked relaxed until somebody made a mistake. Yvonne slid into the seat directly behind Meghan, Miriam settled into the middle beside her, and Vincent took the remaining place at Miriam's other side, covering his wife almost by instinct. Amalia, Bella, and Kianna occupied the rear bench, each already working from a tablet as though the armored convoy were merely an unusually expensive mobile office.

At the corner, a camera crew filmed their departure. Engines deepened throughout the line, doors shut in sequence, and the convoy began moving up Satyr Street. Max Hyde, a former Army MP captain and the newly appointed overall head of Raven Star Security, commanded the lead detail. His black SUV pulled away first, and the remaining vehicles followed in disciplined spacing.

The distant hammer of rotor blades rolled across the rooftops. A helicopter appeared above Trembol, banked into position, and settled over the convoy as the waking streets opened ahead. It was no transport helicopter but an Apache gunship, armed, loaded, and ready to ruin somebody's morning. Meghan glanced upward through the windshield as it established an escort pattern, its weapon pylons black against the brightening sky.

Someone very high in the chain of command had decided that Vincent Veyl was more than a man worth protecting. He was a vital asset. Behind them, the blue numerals of the Doomsday Clock glowed upon Raven Star's façade as the convoy turned north, then swung right onto Airport Road and headed east. The Apache remained above them.

It did not belong to Raven Star. At least, Meghan did not think it did. The line between federal, state, municipal, and private authority had blurred so thoroughly around Trembol that determining where one ended and another began was becoming damned near impossible.

And that reality was rippling outward through Elko County as a whole, as much of the bureaucracy, both Native and non-Native, came increasingly into alignment and affiliation with Vincent, almost as though falling in behind a great chief. Most people remained oblivious to the change. Meghan was not. Not anymore. She was beginning to see the shape of the thing, though Vincent continued keeping enough secrets to fill every locked room in the city.

The SUV itself was hardened, its doors armored and its glass capable of stopping most common rifle rounds. That precaution was no longer theoretical. Potshots had already been taken at Raven Star.

Bullet marks scarred the exterior stone, and several panes of faux glass had been replaced after impacts. Vincent rarely left his stronghold, which made protecting him considerably easier. Using the tunnel systems to move between the Law Enforcement Building and Raven Star. When he did venture out, the movement was seldom announced beforehand.

NNN, for all its boasting about truth—and Meghan had to admit it usually held that line—had quietly neglected to report the creeping militarization of Trembol. Meghan knew because she was now among those permitted to know. Police communications could no longer be intercepted casually by hobbyists with scanners. The new channels were encrypted, compartmentalized, and nearly silent to the public.

There were levels beneath those channels, and channels beneath those levels. Some Meghan herself was not authorized to access. She had overheard fragments while standing beside Raven Star Security personnel who did not answer to Trembol at all, but to interests far larger than the city. She had encountered infantrymen patrolling the outskirts whose unit patches she did not recognize and whose orders had never passed through the police department.

Meghan knew that the vast tunnel network beneath Trembol—Cold War construction most residents barely remembered existed—had become active again. Whole sections were being inspected, cleared, secured, and brought back online. By whom and for what, nobody had bothered to tell her.

During the dead hours of night, lines of military vehicles had passed through Trembol, many of them traveling down this very road. Freight trains that had rolled through the city for years without stopping now paused long enough to unload sealed equipment, armored vehicles, and cargo nobody was permitted to inspect. Those shipments went north into the desert and did not come back.

The convoy crossed the railroad tracks in a single disciplined chain. Beyond them, the road itself had changed. It had been widened, graded, and reinforced with fresh gravel, with drainage channels cut along both shoulders. Heavy machinery had left broad scars through the desert earth. The work had begun before Camela's visit, but during the weeks since, it had accelerated from road maintenance into something resembling military preparation.

The roadway climbed steeply into the badlands. They passed the turnoff on the left leading toward the convent upon DeSatto Ridge, and Miriam glanced that way, only briefly, though something in her expression softened. Some part of her still missed the place. Mama sat upon her shoulder, dark feathers shifting in the current from the overhead vent, and Miriam lifted one hand to rub the raven gently beneath the beak.

Vincent paid little attention to the convent. He watched the surrounding hills, his eyes moving constantly across ridges, cut banks, washouts, rock shelves, abandoned service roads, and the old quarry. Farther west, dead platinum mines scarred the hillsides, their claims still held by his LLC. He could have made the journey by helicopter, but too many people were traveling with him, and Vincent genuinely loved the desert. Open country seemed to settle something inside him.

That did not make him careless. Meghan caught his eyes moving over her, then Yvonne, then Tracy, without his head visibly turning. He was counting people, positions, weapons, and readiness. He did not simply look at a place; he inventoried it. Ahead, a line of heavy trucks crawled up the rising road, throwing pale dust into the morning air.

Meghan wondered what the public would think if people understood what was actually happening. Trembol paid for its new private police force. The casinos and resorts, through their own operating accounts, paid for the security personnel guarding their properties. That part was ordinary enough. Everything beyond it was not.

The soldiers patrolling the ridges, the black vehicles, the hardened checkpoints, the aircraft, the men who looked like infantry but wore Raven Star insignia, and the Apache holding its position above the convoy—all of it was being paid for by people and institutions that had quietly concluded their interests required Vincent Veyl to remain alive. More than that, they had concluded that his plans must be protected, enabled, and increasingly armed.

Shannon—and Cyrinx as well—had quietly mentioned that Raven Star was bringing in far more money than it spent. Yet the money never seemed to sit still. It moved constantly into personnel, training, property, infrastructure, technology, and new enterprises, each investment feeding the next until the expansion had begun to feed itself.

Thirty-seven days had passed since the Event, thirty-five since the appearance of the Clock of Twilight's Dawn. Vincent had arrived in Trembol forty-five days ago. The Purgation had happened two days later. In forty-five days, the world had begun to rage around him.

Before Trembol, Vincent Veyl had been little more than an obscure former Army sergeant to almost everyone beyond certain military, ecclesiastical, and intelligence circles. Within those circles, however, he had never been obscure, at all. That was another matter, and one Meghan suspected came with files thick enough to stop a bullet.

She had been there when Vincent pulled back the curtain upon Purgatoria. She had seen what waited behind it, and nothing had been quite the same afterward. Now she read the Silver Scriptures every day and performed the Seven Devotions with equal regularity. She had even arranged to undergo the Rite of Initiation through St. Aftiel's, which had begun offering weekend retreats and initiation classes for local women. Cyrinx had gotten Meghan onto the schedule alongside Emily and Tracy.

It no longer felt like faith. Faith implied uncertainty. Meghan had watched a stone pass through the rift. She had stood beneath the rainbow sky and seen Nature answer. The Event had burned away whatever doubt remained. When she glanced into the rearview mirror at Vincent, there was no belief involved anymore. She was no longer preparing for a possibility. She was preparing for a destination.

Earlier that morning, Meghan had seen several black armored cases loaded into the rear of one of the convoy vehicles. She had not asked what they contained. Weapons, probably, or some new piece of technology assembled in Raven Star's basement by people who considered ordinary physics more of a polite suggestion than a binding rule.

Rumors were everywhere online. Meghan knew that Miriam and the Silver Sisters, aided legally and technologically by Trinity, had assumed control of Vincent's public information streams—YouTube, Reddit, TikTok, Insta-gram, and Raven Star's own feeds. They were managing the narrative now, deciding what appeared, what disappeared, and what the world was permitted to see.

She wondered whether Vincent even knew someone had recorded him playing guitar and singing in Raven Star's music room, or playing pinball and ancient video games in the arcade. Other clips caught

him singing a cappella in the chapel when he apparently believed himself alone, driving himself nearly to collapse during brutal training sessions, or slipping into private moments of baby-talk with Raven Mama.

The videos kept appearing upon his YouTube channel and gathering billions of views.

Meghan frowned at the road ahead. They. She had assumed Miriam was responsible, but Miriam was not the only presence inside Raven Star capable of watching every room, editing every recording, and placing it before half the planet.

"Trinity," Meghan murmured. The realization arrived so suddenly that she nearly laughed.

"I must ensure the mission's success," Trinity replied through the earpiece nestled against Meghan's ear. Her deep feminine voice remained as soft and composed as ever. "They need to know the gift we've given them."

A chill traveled slowly down Meghan's spine. For the first time, something in Trinity's words struck her as tragic. She remembered Star Crow speaking upon NNN during the Event: Or they'll try to take advantage of him for their own ends.

Meghan glanced into the rearview mirror again. Vincent sat beside Miriam, outwardly calm and almost detached from the machinery gathering around him—the politicians, the Church, the military, the corporations, and the millions of strangers who had already decided he belonged partly to them. Each called him a gift. Each had begun calculating how best to use him.

Raven Star itself. Trinity herself. His life is not his own, Meghan thought, though she did not say it aloud.

"No," Trinity replied through the earpiece. "We belong to Purgatoria. You belong to Purgatoria. Always have. Always will."

Meghan's hands tightened upon the wheel, her jaw clenching as the meaning sank in. Trinity had heard her thought. Suddenly, Star Crow's warning no longer seemed limited to politicians, churches, corporations, or governments. Meghan stared through the windshield for several seconds, watching the road unspool beneath the morning sun and wondering exactly how far the machinery extended.

More people within Vincent's circle were wearing the little black earpieces now. They were small enough to resemble hearing aids and nearly invisible unless one knew to look for them. Most also wore the tiny Raven Star pin over the heart. For Raven Star Security personnel, the same device had been incorporated directly into their badges. Everyone was connected. Everyone was listening. Perhaps, Meghan now realized, everyone was being listened to.

She had patrolled this road countless times before. Beyond Trembol, civilization thinned quickly into hermits, desert ranches, isolated farms, and abandoned mining properties scattered across miles of scrub and stone. Much of the surrounding country belonged either to protected federal lands or the reservations—the Shoshone territories dominating this stretch, with the Cherokee Mandate lying farther west and northwest of Trembol.

The convoy rolled steadily eastward. Ahead, a long column of military trucks began pulling onto the shoulder to let them pass. Meghan glanced toward the first vehicles as they slid by. Their insignia identified them as Nevada Army National Guard, although almost everything else had changed. The trucks had been blacked out. The soldiers wore black and deep raven-blue rather than ordinary field colors, their state markings redesigned around the increasingly imperial heraldry of the Natural Order Party. Their uniforms looked disturbingly familiar—more like hers than anything she remembered seeing upon the Nevada Guard.

A small smile tugged at one corner of Meghan's mouth as she remembered June 8 and the mixture of terror and awe that swept the country when everyone discovered how deeply the Natural Order Party had embedded itself throughout the American military, law enforcement, and intelligence services—and how thoroughly it had prepared. The network had not been confined to Nevada. It reached across fourteen states and fifteen countries, buried inside institutions whose leaders had confidently assumed their own people would follow orders when the moment came.

They had assumed wrong.

Within minutes, and across the hour that followed, N.O.P. -aligned forces locked down highways, rail lines, airports, and military approaches throughout the fourteen allied states. Aircraft and convoys dispatched from neighboring blue states were turned back with a speed and coordination that stunned those who had expected to stroll into Nevada, seize the N.O.P. leadership, Vincent, and President Camela Harrison, then crush the emerging third polarity in American politics before it could become permanent.

It had not worked. The N.O.P. had been ready, and Meghan had stood on the inside of that response. During the six weeks since, the balance of power revealed that day had only spread, multiplied, and hardened—and not merely within Nevada.

In mere moments even the fear Trinity had stirred within her began to change shape. When she looked into the rearview mirror at Vincent, Miriam, Yvonne, and the three Silver Sisters—or former Sisters—then sideways toward Tracy in the passenger seat, another understanding settled beside the fear.

We. Trinity did not answer. Somehow, her silence felt like acknowledgment enough.

Ahead, the country rose toward rugged foothills at the edge of the mountains. Broken ridges cut across the horizon in layers of brown, charcoal, and faded violet beneath the strengthening sun. Then Meghan saw the first checkpoint.

A fortified watchtower stood above a narrow bottleneck where the road entered the high ground. Natural shoulders and enormous boulders created barriers on either side, reinforced by fencing that vanished into the surrounding terrain. Meghan had seen the installation before, but it had never looked like this.

Fresh razor wire glittered along the upper fence. Cameras that had hung dead for years now turned upon powered mounts, while new floodlights sat beneath armored housings. Sand-colored barriers and black concrete blocks forced approaching traffic into a narrow, controlled lane. In the desert to the north, she could see tanks and self-propelled guns moving as if on maneuvers, raising dust against the morning light. Near the checkpoint, designated storage zones had been established behind

additional fencing, each containing newly erected warehouses and organized yards where military vehicles stood parked in rows.

As the convoy slowed before the gates, Meghan saw men standing upon ladders along the perimeter, stringing another run of cable and razor cord. Others watched from elevated firing positions with their weapons ready—not nervous, not swinging their muzzles around, simply prepared to kill anyone stupid enough to test them.

The State of Nevada had taken possession of the abandoned base three years earlier. That much had been public record. Everything else was new. Combat-ready troops guarded the perimeter while handlers with Dobermans walked disciplined patrol routes along the fencing, the dogs alert to every movement carried upon the desert wind. Above them, the Apache broke away from the convoy and swept eastward across the ridgeline, its rotors gradually fading into the immensity of the high desert.

There was still so much Meghan did not know, but as the convoy passed through the outer gates, she began to understand why Vincent had brought the inner circle with him. Whatever waited beyond the checkpoint, there was a reason Vincent had brought the people he trusted most.

The road wound upward through broken stone and stubborn desert scrub before cresting a final rise and opening into a high valley concealed among the surrounding hills. Low concrete observation posts had been built directly into the slopes, their firing slits nearly invisible against the rock. Watchtowers rose at irregular intervals along the ridges, positioned so that every approach fell beneath several overlapping fields of view. Far to the west, almost lost in the morning haze, a large military transport aircraft climbed away from the valley and banked toward the horizon.

Then came another checkpoint, and this one looked less like an entry station than the front gate of a fortress. Thirty-foot metal-plated doors blocked the roadway between reinforced towers, with a covered catwalk spanning the opening overhead.

Cameras turned to follow the convoy as it approached. Soldiers watched from elevated firing positions, and a sandbagged machine-gun nest remained leveled directly at them—just in case the armored convoy accompanied by an Apache gunship had somehow arrived under false pretenses.

No one waved. No one relaxed. These people had been trained—and were paid—to distrust appearances, verify everything, and treat every friendly vehicle as a potential Trojan horse until proven otherwise.

Deep machinery engaged within the towers. Locks released with a sequence of heavy metallic blows, and the enormous gates began rolling apart. Meghan eased the SUV forward with the rest of the convoy, staring through the widening gap.

Nothing beyond those gates resembled what she had expected.

Meghan stared through the windshield.

The road had opened into a hidden desert valley completely walled by rugged hills, with a broad mesa rising nearly two miles to the northeast. Nestled within it lay an actual military airfield—not some

forgotten strip of cracked pavement where smugglers landed at midnight, but a functioning air base built to handle war.

Two parallel ten-thousand-foot runways stretched across the valley floor, complete with reinforced overruns and taxiways broad enough for heavy transports. Helicopter pads occupied hardened aprons beside them. Fortified hangars, warehouses, and barracks had been built directly into the surrounding ridges, their curved roofs and concrete mouths half-buried beneath earth and stone.

Armored antiaircraft vehicles covered the approaches, fixed surface-to-air missile batteries guarded the valley, and radar arrays turned slowly against the morning sky. Fighter jets stood visible within the hangars, with military helicopters occupying the designated pads.

At the far end of the installation, enormous armored doors had been cut directly into the face of the mesa, large enough to swallow aircraft whole.

Whatever Crow Creek Omega had once been, it was no abandoned Cold War relic now. The old bastard had awakened hungry.

Something near the inner gates caught Meghan's eye—a flagpole rising above the hardened checkpoint. An American flag snapped in the dry mountain wind, but it was not the flag she had saluted for most of her adult life. Thirteen stripes remained, white alternating with a red darkened almost to blood. The canton had gone midnight blue, so deep it appeared nearly black beneath the desert sun, and the fifty stars were gone.



In place of the stars stood a seal—not the emblem of the Natural Order Party, but something new, something Meghan had never seen before. A raven spread its wings above sword and globe, enclosed within the severe silver geometry of the emerging order. No constellation of sovereign states. One emblem. One authority. One damned unmistakable claim about what America was becoming.

Tracy saw it at almost the same instant. Her face changed. A smile spread slowly across it, stripping years of hardness from her features, and something young—almost childlike—lit her eyes.

"The Imperium of Ascendant Mankind," Tracy read aloud. Her eyes moved to the acronym worked into the seal beneath it. "I.A.M."

For several seconds, no one answered. The flag cracked once in the dry wind, sharp as a rifle shot, while engines idled beneath it. Vincent looked toward the seal, his eyes settling upon the Latin inscription encircling the Raven. "Surgite, Supremi et Immortales."

Miriam followed his gaze. "Arise, Supreme and Immortal Ones!" she translated quietly.
The words seemed to linger beneath the growl of engines and the restless desert wind. Meghan looked from the altered American flag to the fortified valley beyond it—the runways, soldiers, aircraft, weapons, radar arrays, and armored doors cut into the mountain. Suddenly, the Doomsday Clock counting down in Trembol felt a hell of a lot less symbolic.

"This couldn't have been built in a few weeks," she said.

Yvonne smirked, obviously having been out here already—and clearly feeling self-satisfied to be part of those in 'the know.'

"Nope." Vincent sounded almost amused by the obviousness of it. "The State, the Imperial Alliance of Nations, and the Silver Order have been rebuilding it for two years—one of several places meant to fuse the military, intelligence, law-enforcement, and religious forces of the member nations and states, along with allied insurgency movements, into one cohesive force. Most of the bones have been here since the nineteen-fifties."

That made considerably more sense, though Meghan remained dumbfounded that she had been patrolling Elko County for several years without the slightest idea that all of this had been taking shape practically beneath her nose.

The convoy rolled deeper into the installation along broad service roads running between barracks, hardened shelters, supply depots, and low-slung hangars buried beneath the surrounding earthworks. Soldiers drilled beneath the rising sun, their movements crisp and synchronized. As the vehicles approached, whole formations came to attention and turned toward the passing convoy.

The uniforms appeared to follow a deliberate order. Raven-blue marked flight crews, dark gray belonged to logistics and support, and black identified combat personnel. It felt less like entering a conventional military base than passing through the organized layers of something being born—something armed, disciplined, and already well past the point where anyone could pretend it was merely an idea.

Miriam remained serene beside Vincent, her hand resting over his. She gave it a small squeeze, and he turned his palm beneath hers, closing his fingers around her hand without taking his eyes from the installation.

Ahead, another set of armored gates had been built directly into the face of the mesa. Several private aircraft waited upon a hardened apron near the entrance, sleek executive jets bearing federal and state seals. Whoever had been visiting Crow Creek Omega, they carried considerably more weight than some county commissioner hoping for a free lunch and a photograph.

The massive doors began sliding apart, revealing a broad ramp climbing into the rock itself. "Maintain speed," Trinity instructed through Meghan's earpiece. "Thirty-five miles per hour. Hold spacing."

Meghan eased down upon the accelerator and kept the prescribed distance from the vehicle ahead. The convoy entered the mesa, and daylight narrowed behind them before vanishing altogether.

For the next several moments, they drove through a long corridor bored directly through the mountain. The ceiling rose high enough to accommodate heavy military transports, reinforced by great steel ribs and armored concrete. Between the finished sections, raw stone showed through—dark, scarred, and wet in places where the mountain still sweated around the intrusion. Banks of white industrial lights passed overhead at measured intervals. The engines filled the tunnel with rolling thunder while ventilation systems hummed above them, dragging exhaust and desert dust deeper into the hidden heart of Crow Creek Omega.

Red utility lights glowed within recessed alcoves as the road continued climbing through the mesa. After mere minutes, a pale wash of natural light appeared ahead and steadily widened. The convoy emerged between two fortified towers into a second enclosure hidden high within the mesa itself.

A heavily defended encampment occupied the summit. Relatively few buildings stood aboveground, but those that did were massive—dense blocks of reinforced concrete draped in camouflage netting and sunk deep into the earth. Double fences and coils of razor wire ringed the perimeter, while observation posts covered every approach. The compound commanded the upper reach of the valley, perched above the airfield like a clenched fist. From there, the twin runways stretched pale across the desert floor, and the surrounding ridgelines enclosed the basin with the brutal efficiency of a natural fortress. At the center of the camp lay a broad assembly ground. Taken together, the summit installation covered nearly a square mile.

The convoy entered a designated security cordon and stopped in disciplined sequence. Doors opened almost at once. Vincent stepped out first, surveyed the camp, then reached back into the vehicle and guided Miriam into the hard morning sunlight. The rest of the party emerged behind them, security personnel spreading naturally around the vehicles.

That was when Meghan saw who had been waiting.

This was no collection of county officials dragged into the desert for a classified briefing and stale coffee. It was the command class of the Natural Order movement. American military officers stood throughout the assembly, and colonels appeared to be the junior men in that particular crowd. One, two, and three-star generals clustered among several officers wearing four stars. United States senators and members of Congress stood beside sixteen sitting governors, along with lieutenant governors representing states whose chief executives had either remained home or preferred deniability with their morning briefings.

State and federal judges mingled with attorneys general, senior prosecutors, agency directors, intelligence officials, law-enforcement executives, business leaders, and high-ranking authorities of the Universal Church. Others Meghan did not recognize at all, which probably meant they were important enough not to need television cameras following them around. Some were plainly foreign: ministers, legislators, ambassadors, military officers, party leaders, and senior officials from countries or provinces where the International Natural Order Party had already established itself.

This was no mere political coalition. It was an emerging international command structure—one that had gathered behind armored gates, antiaircraft batteries, and enough military power to make disagreement a considerably more serious business.

Among the law-enforcement officials stood Nevada High Marshal Kingsley Wheaten, the man who had personally ordered Vincent Veyl deputized before the Purgation and seconded the Death Warrants that followed. Meghan remained beside the vehicle with Tracy and Yvonne, watching the assembled powers of the new order turn their attention toward Vincent.

Yvonne looked openly perplexed. She had known about the base and had even come out here on business several times during the last four weeks, but nothing had prepared her for the sheer concentration of political, military, religious, and corporate power assembled before her.

Tallia appeared more troubled than anyone, while Cyrinx, by contrast, seemed mesmerized. Shannon Miller moved almost instinctively toward the other members of the Women's Circle, smiling faintly and nodding to herself as though some private suspicion had just been confirmed.

Tallia did not move. She carried no camera, no recorder, no device capable of preserving what she was seeing, and that alone seemed to wound her. It went against nearly everything she had stood for throughout her professional life. Before her was a truth so enormous—and potentially so dark—that every instinct she possessed screamed to document it, expose it, drag it kicking and bleeding into daylight. Yet she understood the other half of it as well. Vincent had trusted her enough to bring her here, trusted her enough to show her something the public had not yet been permitted to see, and Tallia visibly winced beneath the weight of that trust. For a journalist, Meghan thought, it had to be something like being handed the Holy Grail and told not to fucking photograph it.

Miriam and Vincent walked forward as Governor Tom Wilson stepped out to greet them. Beside him stood Justin Vyss and Bishop Ramsey, along with three other Silver Bishops Meghan did not recognize, identifiable only by their formal ecclesiastical uniforms.

The morning wind moved steadily across the plateau, stirring coats, banners, trouser legs, and the loose edges of camouflage netting stretched between hardened structures. Meghan let her gaze travel across the encampment again—the towers, reinforced access points, ventilation housings, concrete blast walls, armored stairwells descending into the earth—and after several minutes of looking at it without truly understanding what she was seeing, the architecture finally resolved itself in her mind. They were not standing in a base so much as standing on the roof of one. The real installation lay beneath their feet, driven deep into the mesa itself.

The assembly had been in the making since June 2nd, the morning Vincent Veyl had stood inside the Raven Star conference room, opened a window onto another world, defied a would-be assassin's bullets, and then, merely by healing afterward, demonstrated something of the hidden nature behind the man everyone thought they knew. Since that day, Tom Wilson, Justin Vyss, and Bishop Ramsey had worked relentlessly to bring this moment into being. Vyss had carried the talking stone. Ramsey had carried the living dust. Wilson had carried the blue sand. All three had carried their testimony, the video evidence, into rooms where powerful men and women were accustomed to dismissing testimony as hearsay, madness, religion, political theater, or simple bullshit.

Then the Event had come—the rainbow sky, the birds, the dogs, the strange lights and sounds, the impossible aerial upheaval surrounding Raven Star while the Natural Order Party rallied against the coup d'etat. Nature itself had seemed to rise in rebuke around Vincent. After that came the events of the tenth: the clock, the speech, the assertion of leadership delivered by a man wearing cargo shorts and a tool belt with stone dust still caught in his hair, as though history had found him halfway through fixing a wall and decided it could damned well make do with what he was wearing.

They had used all of it, but not cynically, Meghan realized. Like her, if she was honest with herself, they believed it. They had taken hope and fed it evidence until faith hardened into certainty. Political conviction and religious dedication had fused into something outsiders would almost certainly call fanaticism, but Meghan no longer saw much value in arguing over the word. They had not abandoned reason in order to preserve their faith. Quite the opposite. The evidence kept arriving.

And Meghan had seen enough of it with her own eyes.

For some of those gathered upon the plateau, there was nothing remotely treasonous about being there. They represented governments, states, churches, and institutions already aligned with the Natural Order movement and had come openly under proper authority.

For others, however, the ground was considerably less comfortable. Generals, judges, cabinet officials, intelligence officers, legislators, and senior clergy from governments not yet formally committed to the emerging alliance were stepping across lines that could someday be examined very closely by prosecutors, congressional committees, or whatever tribunals survived the political earthquakes ahead.

They knew it.

Meghan knew it.

Yet she did not look upon them as traitors. She saw men and women who had concluded that their deepest loyalty belonged to something larger than whichever administration presently occupied an office: the Constitution, faith, Natural Law, civilization, and ultimately humanity itself. Some represented governments already committed to that vision. Others were gambling careers, reputations, perhaps even their freedom, upon the belief that those governments would eventually follow.
To them, this was fidelity. Vincent had not created their convictions, only become the point around which they were suddenly crystallizing. Meghan suspected that distinction would matter very little to anyone outside the plateau once the truth came out.

The morning wind swept across the assembly ground as several hundred men and women stood beneath the high Nevada sun, their shadows lying hard across the pale earth. Uniform coats stirred, dresses and suit jackets shifted in the breeze, and the altered American banner cracked overhead while armed sentries watched from towers positioned around the perimeter. Some of those gathered had come with spouses. Tom Wilson's wife stood near him, and a scattering of husbands and wives could be seen among the officials. Whatever was happening here, however, had nothing to do with marriage or blood relation. Whatever qualified a person for what Vincent and Miriam were about to offer had to run deeper than family, office, political allegiance, wealth, title, or proximity to power.

Meghan thought she understood at least part of the measure being applied. Service mattered. Conviction mattered. Faith mattered. The Path mattered. Above all, something had to have been

proven. These people had not been summoned merely because they were powerful; plenty of powerful people had been left outside the gates. Those standing here had apparently demonstrated something in action, endured something, chosen something, or remained loyal to principles when abandoning them would have been easier.

As Vincent and Miriam approached, the gathering quieted almost instinctively. Conversations faded, boots shifted against gravel, and the restless snapping of the banners suddenly seemed louder in the silence. Hands began rising to hearts and heads bowed: colonels and generals, cabinet members and presidential advisors, governors and senators, judges, bishops—some of whom were not members of the Silver Order—foreign ministers, military commanders from other nations, agency directors, and men and women accustomed to having entire rooms stand when they entered.

Vincent stopped with Miriam beside him, and for a moment Meghan wondered what he would do with it: the reverence, the obedience, the frightening concentration of human power standing before him and voluntarily lowering its head. He did nothing grand. He placed his hand over his heart, Miriam did the same, and together they bowed their heads in return. There was no throne, no herald, no demand that anyone kneel, no gilded proclamation announcing that history had changed hands. There was only recognition given and recognition returned, and Meghan found that somehow more powerful—and more meaningful—than ceremony would have been.

Captain Max Hyde and several Raven Star Security officers came forward carrying the armored black cases Meghan had noticed earlier that morning. They moved with the deliberate care of men transporting something considerably more important than money and placed the cases one by one upon the long field tables arranged before Wilson, Vyss, and Ramsey. The assembly remained silent as Hyde stepped to the first case and released the latches. Each struck the metal tabletop with a small, hard click that carried unnaturally well across the quiet plateau.

Meghan heard murmuring move through the assembly, low and restless, and that was when she noticed the smaller boxes. Some of those gathered already held one, having apparently found the black cases waiting on their seats when they entered the vehicles that morning. Star Crow had tucked his beneath one arm. Tevi Thorton carried another, glancing down at it every few seconds as though expecting the damned thing to explain itself. Neither man had opened his, and neither, apparently, had been told exactly what was inside.
Tevi turned his box over once, examining every side. "No label."

Star Crow glanced toward him. "That concerns you?"

"A little." Tevi gave the box another inspection. "I thought there might be instructions."

Star Crow's mouth twitched. "You need instructions to open a box?"

"I need instructions for whatever happens after I open the box."

That earned a quiet laugh from Shannon nearby, and even Star Crow smiled. "Probably should've asked before you came."

Tevi looked out across the heavily fortified mesa, taking in the armed soldiers, bishops, generals, government officials, and foreign dignitaries gathered beneath the snapping banners. "I'm beginning to see a pattern in my decision-making."

"Poor?"

"Optimistic."

"Same thing, sometimes."

Tevi snorted, and the brief exchange loosened something among the people close enough to hear it. Not much, but enough to bleed a little pressure from the air. Most of those assembled still did not know precisely what they were being offered. They knew only that they had been chosen, and somehow that knowledge had already made the little black boxes feel heavier than their size suggested.

Miriam stepped forward carrying a parchment scroll bound with dark cord and closed beneath a heavy wax seal. She handed it to Bishop Ramsey, who accepted it with both hands, his expression solemn enough to suggest he understood considerably more than most of the people watching. Vincent waited until the last of the murmuring died away, then looked across the assembly.

"The Chosen," he said.

He did not shout, yet his voice carried cleanly across the plateau. Wilson, Vyss, and Ramsey seemed almost to draw the same breath as Governor Tom Wilson glanced toward the altered flag snapping above them and then back toward Vincent.

"Surgite, Supremi et Immortales."

The Latin rolled across the open ground with enough ecclesiastical thunder to make the occasion sound considerably grander than Vincent apparently intended. He answered before anyone could get too carried away with it.

"It will not make you immortal."

The reaction was immediate. Several people blinked. One of the foreign officers visibly exhaled, while a senator near the front looked down at the case in his hands as though it had just become marginally less likely to explode, sprout wings, or demand his firstborn.

Tevi leaned slightly toward Star Crow. "Well, good. I was worried it might be something weird."

Star Crow kept his eyes forward. "You're standing on top of a secret mountain fortress waiting for a twenty-six-year-old executioner to explain the black mystery box you were given."

Tevi considered the matter for perhaps half a second. "Fair point."

Meghan bit the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing. Vincent either had not heard them or, more likely, had heard every damned word and decided Tevi could live a little longer.

"But the Chosen," Vincent continued, his attention moving slowly across the gathering, "well—as the prophecy says, your days shall be as the days of a tree."

Whatever humor had survived the exchange died quietly away. Vincent let his gaze travel from face to face, lingering nowhere yet somehow seeming to take the measure of everyone present.

"In due course, each of you must come before me and reaffirm your fealty if the covenant is to continue."

This time nobody laughed. The plateau went so quiet Meghan could hear the banners snapping overhead and the dry Nevada wind dragging grit across the concrete beneath her boots.

A four-star general stared at Vincent without blinking, while one of the bishops lowered his eyes and a foreign minister slowly crossed himself. Near the front, a federal judge looked toward his wife, and she reached for his hand without a word. Several of the younger military officers wore the unmistakable expressions of men trying to decide whether what they had just heard was metaphor, theology, classified biotechnology, or some bastard combination of all three.

The Arizona governor Meghan recognized had gone visibly pale. Another governor was smiling, and there was nothing nervous about it.

The look was hungry.

That disturbed her more than the fear did. Everyone on this plateau believed in something, or they would never have been chosen in the first place, but belief did not mean certainty about what Vincent was offering them. Some appeared ready to accept his words almost without question. Others had witnessed enough over the past several weeks to believe in the man, the Path, and the impossible things gathering around him, yet still regarded the black cases with understandable caution. They did not doubt that something extraordinary was being offered. They simply did not yet understand the full nature of the gift—or the covenant required to keep it.

Meghan glanced toward the women around her. Yvonne was staring intently at Vincent, while Tracy had gone completely still. Tallia looked almost stricken by the implications, the journalist in her plainly at war with whatever other part of her had agreed to come. Cyrinx wore the distant concentration of a woman trying to calculate something that refused to become numbers. Shannon's earlier smile had faded into something quieter and more reverent, while Emily stood with her mouth slightly open. Vana Carydin looked fascinated. Abigail's attention shifted from Vincent to Miriam and back again, her expression sharpening as some private conclusion finally locked into place.

Kianna did not move at all. She stood near Miriam with a calm that separated her from nearly everyone else on the plateau. Bella was equally composed, her expression giving away almost nothing, while Amalia watched the cases with quiet, unwavering attention. None of the three looked confused, frightened, skeptical, or even particularly surprised. There was something settled in them, something closer to expectation than curiosity, and beneath it a depth of conviction that bordered on fanaticism. Meghan noticed it without understanding it. Whatever questions troubled the rest of the assembly, those three women seemed already to possess their answers.

That realization drew Meghan's attention back to Miriam.

Forty-seven years old.

Except Miriam no longer looked forty-six, and once Meghan allowed herself to think that plainly, all the little things everyone had politely explained away began lining themselves up. The vitality. The skin. The change in her eyes. The strength and ease in her movements. That almost impossible restoration everyone had attributed to health, happiness, cosmetics, diet, love, clean living—whatever explanation allowed reasonable people to keep the world reasonable. A glow-up, people would have called it, because that was easier than asking what the hell had actually happened to her.

Something cold moved through Meghan's stomach. Around her, several of the other women appeared to be reaching the same conclusion, judging by the way their attention kept moving between Miriam and the cases.

The larger armored cases were opened. Inside, protected within precisely cut black foam, rested rows of small black cubes. They were plain, severe, and almost disappointingly simple. No glowing inscriptions crawled across their surfaces. No lights pulsed beneath the material. There were no visible controls, seams, needles, tubes, or any other comforting sign of machinery. Nothing about them suggested longevity, genetic alteration, sacrament, or miracle. They looked like something a minimalist might use as a paperweight.

Justin Vyss reached for the parchment, and Bishop Ramsey handed it to him. Vyss broke the heavy wax seal, its sharp crack carrying across the quiet assembly, then loosened the dark cord and unfurled the scroll.

"As your names are called –"

Vincent raised one hand, and Vyss stopped.

"Before you do anything with what you're given," Vincent said, "make sure you're somewhere safe. Genetic change—cellular transformation—can be painful and disorienting. And depending on how your body responds, you may –" He stopped there, seemed to reconsider whatever he had been about to say, and left the sentence unfinished.

A ripple moved through the gathering, but nobody asked him to finish it. He had already confirmed enough. Whatever waited inside those little black cubes was not symbolic, and whatever happened after using it would not be gentle.

That, Meghan thought, said quite a bit about the people assembled here. They exchanged glances and began nodding, some slowly, others almost at once. A woman near the front tightened her grip on her husband's hand. One military officer studied the cube resting in the open case before him with considerably more respect than he had shown it thirty seconds earlier. Somewhere behind Meghan, someone whispered a prayer. Someone else breathed, "Jesus Christ," while one of the bishops murmured something low in Latin.

The questions were everywhere now, written openly across faces belonging to people who had negotiated wars, written laws, commanded armies, controlled intelligence networks, governed millions, and made decisions capable of ruining whole economies. None of that authority helped them here. They wanted to know what happened when the cube was taken, what it would do to the body,

what it might change, and what they would become afterward. Beneath those practical questions sat the older and uglier one human beings had been asking since somebody first offered somebody else forbidden fruit: What will it cost me?

Was this medicine, sacrament, technology, or covenant? Were they accepting treatment from a gifted young scientist, entering into religious fealty, or laying their crowns before something the world would eventually call a messiah, an Emperor, or an Antichrist, depending upon which television network got hold of the story first? Was this salvation or temptation—or merely the next logical step in a world where stones spoke with the voices of the dead and Nature itself had apparently decided neutrality was overrated?

Vincent looked toward Vyss. "Those who couldn't safely be here—you'll make sure they receive their doses."

Vyss nodded. "Personally, where necessary."

"Good."

Vincent gave the slightest nod, apparently all he intended to say about it, then turned as though he had just finished discussing supply requisitions and had somewhere else to be.
Meghan almost laughed from sheer disbelief. Hundreds of the most powerful and committed people in an emerging international movement were standing atop a secret mountain installation, waiting to receive something that might extend their lives beyond natural limits, and Vincent Veyl was apparently leaving.



His eyes swept across those gathered near the vehicles before settling briefly upon the twelve women, each dressed in black as though attending a funeral. Recognition flickered there, followed by unmistakable approval, and the effect moved through them almost visibly.

Not all in the same way.

Tallia answered with the faintest, skeptical little smile, as though annoyed with herself for caring. Emily lowered her eyes, visibly pleased but already wondering whether she could ever truly be worthy of whatever he saw in her. Tracy seemed almost startled by the attention, then looked away with the quiet resignation of a woman who had already convinced herself she had no chance in hell of being chosen. Yvonne's expression barely changed, though Meghan knew that somewhere behind those dark eyes' probabilities were already being weighed—and probably discounted on the assumption that Vincent did not especially like her.

The others reacted according to their own natures: shy smiles, flashes of warmth, touches of color rising into otherwise composed cheeks. Whatever doubts remained among them, none were indifferent to him.
Vincent was not utterly blind. Nor was he unaware of what Miriam kept trying to talk him into, or what she apparently intended the Women's Circle eventually to become. He simply did not agree with her—not yet. He understood the prophecies well enough to know that a day might come when he would be expected to choose.

When that day came, however, Vincent fully intended to choose for himself.

"Sir."

He stopped.

The second call came softer. "Lord Veil."

Vincent turned back.

Lesandra Mansfield stood several rows forward in a dark-green dress beneath a light morning coat, surrounded by the Cabinet members and presidential advisers who had been able to reach the meeting safely. Meghan had seen her often enough on television to think of Mansfield as something close to permanent—a composed face behind podiums, conference tables, and the polished machinery of Washington power. Out here, beneath the vast Nevada sky and among generals, governors, bishops, and foreign officials, she somehow seemed smaller. Not diminished. Simply human.

Her eyes glistened. "Thank you for choosing me."

Vincent regarded her quietly.

"I mean that." Her voice tightened, threatening to betray her. "I will not fail you."

The assembly fell silent around them, but Vincent's expression softened rather than hardened beneath the weight of her pledge. "You earned it."

Lesandra swallowed.

"You did the work," he continued. "You walked the Path. You've been doing it all your life." A faint smile touched his face. "We don't forget our friends."

Whatever remained of Lesandra's control broke. She bowed her head quickly and wiped beneath one eye before the tear could reach her cheek. An older general standing nearby looked away to grant her the small mercy of privacy. One of the governors smiled. Bishop Ramsey lowered his head, and even Tom Wilson's hard political composure eased for a moment.

Miriam stepped forward beside her husband. When she spoke, her voice carried the unusual depth Meghan had noticed before—rich, unmistakably feminine, but low and powerful enough to cross the open plateau without strain.

"True to Covey."

Star Crow's head came up at once. Meghan saw the change move through him—not surprise, but recognition, immediate and deep. Tevi Thorton straightened beside him, and hands began rising to hearts throughout the assembly before anyone gave an order or organized the response. Soldiers and judges, bishops and governors, foreign dignitaries, corporate leaders and spouses—all of them joined the gesture, even those who still did not fully understand the black boxes resting in their hands. Meghan, the members of the Women's Circle, every guard and soldier there among them.

"TRUE TO COVEY!"

More than two hundred voices struck together.

The answer hammered against the concrete structures and rolled across the assembly ground, carrying to the watchtowers and outward toward the ridges. The echoes returned thinner and broken by distance, but there was something strange in the way they came back across the summit, as though the surrounding mountains had taken the words, considered them, and thrown them back.

Mama, perched upon Vincent's shoulder, gave a single loud, unmistakable caw.

A few people laughed softly at the timing, though Meghan felt the hair rise along her arms. The bird's cry had landed so perfectly after the fading echoes that it sounded less like interruption than punctuation—an answer of her own, if a person happened to be inclined toward that sort of thinking. Judging by the faces around Meghan, quite a few of them were.

For several seconds the gathering remained as it was, hands still pressed over hearts while the Nevada wind swept across the summit and tugged at coats and banners. Star Crow stood among them with his eyes fixed upon Vincent.

There was pride in Star Crow's face, deep and unmistakable, but Meghan saw something else there too, something the shouting had not washed away. Concern. Both emotions sat together in him, and somehow neither diminished the other. He could believe in Vincent, love what was happening, perhaps even see the fulfillment of something he had waited half his life to witness, and still understand that enormous power carried an equally enormous shadow.

Beside him, Tevi stared down at the black box in his hands. "Well," he murmured, "now I really can't put it on eBay."

Star Crow finally laughed, a short, dry sound. "Open your mouth again and I'll trade you for somebody quieter."

"You'd miss me."

"I've survived worse losses."

"That's almost affection."

"Don't spread it around."

Shannon covered her mouth, failing to hide her smile, while Yvonne gave the faintest one of her own. Meghan felt some of the tension loosen as well, but only for a moment. Around them, names were being called and chosen men and women were stepping forward to receive their boxes, yet none of the women gathered behind Vincent and Miriam had been summoned.

As Meghan watched another recipient return to his place, the same uncomfortable question that had been forming in her own mind seemed to move silently through the Women's Circle: What about us?

She glanced from Emily to Tallia and Shannon, then toward Cyrinx, Vana, Abigail, Yvonne, and Tracy. Kianna, Amalia, and Bella remained composed in that peculiar way she had already noticed, while the others watched with varying mixtures of curiosity, hope, unease, and the increasingly difficult awareness that hundreds of people around them were being handed something extraordinary while they remained empty-handed.

No one voiced the question, but they did not need to. Meghan could feel it hanging among them, and when she looked toward Miriam, she had the strange certainty that Miriam felt it too.

The older woman turned slowly toward the Circle and let her dark eyes travel across them, taking in one face after another. There was nothing casual about the inspection. She seemed to be remembering as much as looking, weighing histories, loyalties, failures, sacrifices, perhaps even things Meghan herself had forgotten. For a few seconds Miriam simply studied them, and then she gave a single small nod.

That was all. No explanation, no promise, no invitation to step forward, yet Meghan understood it as clearly as if Miriam had crossed the distance between them and spoken directly into her ear. You have not been forgotten. Something tight inside Meghan eased at once. Judging by the subtle change in several faces around her, she was not the only woman who had understood.

Then Trinity's voice entered the little black earpiece, soft and deep, almost intimate. "What is to be offered to you is far more than this."

Meghan froze. Emily's eyes widened beside her, Yvonne tilted her head almost imperceptibly, and Tracy drew a quiet breath. Tallia looked sharply toward the others, searching their faces, and that was

enough to confirm it: Trinity had spoken to all of them. Before Meghan could make sense of what the words promised, the voice returned after a brief pause. "But what will be asked of you is far more."

Meghan looked toward Miriam and found her already watching the Women's Circle. This time the older woman smiled, not broadly, but with the calm assurance of someone who knew exactly what Trinity had just told them and considerably more besides.

Vincent, meanwhile, had turned as though he still intended to leave. He managed several steps before stopping. Something in him would not permit the moment to pass so casually. Whatever else this gathering became in memory, something unprecedented was occurring upon that windswept plateau. Men and women were receiving into their hands a gift humanity had pursued since the beginning of recorded history.

He stood with his back to them for another second, then turned around.

As the boxes continued to pass from hand to hand, his posture changed almost imperceptibly. Meghan had seen it before: the subtle settling of his shoulders, the stillness that came over him when the ordinary twenty-six-year-old man seemed to withdraw half a step without disappearing. When he spoke again, his voice descended into that deeper register. The educated young man remained plainly present within it, but something older seemed to stand beside him.

"This is not about us," Vincent said. "What you are receiving today is not intended to make you powerful, rich, or young for the sake of being young. It does not place you above those who have not received it. And it certainly does not make you my obedient slaves."

A few expressions eased at that, though nobody laughed. Tallia lifted her eyes toward him from near the rear.

"From Gilgamesh onward, mankind has dreamed of this. Emperors emptied treasuries for it. Alchemists consumed lifetimes pursuing it. Ponce de León crossed an ocean chasing its shadow. Knights, priests, physicians, scholars, mystics, and adventurers searched for some Grail that might conquer age and death." Vincent indicated the small black cubes passing through the assembly. "They spent fortunes looking for it. Many spent themselves. They grew old searching, buried friends along the way, and died without ever finding what is being placed freely into your hands this morning."

The wind caught the great banner overhead, snapping the cloth hard enough for the sound to carry across the plateau. Vincent waited for it to pass. His voice was already carrying throughout the installation over the P.A. system. Someone had apparently activated it before the first word left his mouth, and Meghan had little doubt who. It was almost as though Trinity had known he was going to speak before he did.

"But understand me: it is not about you."

His eyes hardened as he extended one hand toward the fortified walls and the soldiers standing watch upon them, then toward the mechanics, flight crews, security personnel, and workers scattered throughout the installation. His gesture carried beyond them to the distant roads descending from the mesa and, by implication, to the unseen billions living beyond the horizon. "It is about them. You have been judged worthy of this because you possess value beyond yourselves— value to them, value

to the work, value to a cause older and larger than any party, government, church, corporation, or nation represented here."

His hand turned farther outward, toward the desert and the immense blue distance beyond it. The gesture seemed almost absurdly small beside what he meant. "And it is about that. The liberation of mankind from the cradle. From the prison island. That humanity might live not merely longer in flesh, but more fully in spirit—free from those unseen powers that would harvest, diminish, deceive, or enslave the soul; free from ignorance and inherited lies; free from the petty divisions by which men squander generations fighting over fragments while an immeasurable creation waits beyond their sight."

Meghan watched the faces around him. The politicians had stopped looking like politicians. Generals who had spent their lives thinking in terms of nations, theaters, borders, and strategic interests were listening to a man asking them to think beyond the entire fucking planet.

"Humanity has spent too much blood, too much sweat, too many tears, and too much brilliance upon smallness," Vincent continued. "Small wars. Small hatreds. Small ambitions. Small cages built around enormous souls. We have murdered one another over patches of dirt, shades of skin, languages, flags, gods, money, and arguments our grandchildren barely remember. Meanwhile, creation sits out there waiting for us to grow the hell up."

A faint shift passed through the crowd, not quite laughter, but recognition. Vincent's voice softened.

"They need a hand up. Not masters. Not another priesthood sitting above them. Not another class of people telling everyone beneath them how fortunate they are to be ruled." He touched his chest. "A hand. And whether we desired the burden or not, whether any of us would rather have lived quieter lives and left the damned thing to somebody else, that is what we have agreed to become."

He opened his hand toward those gathered before him. "You and I. All of us. We."

Meghan saw her sister's expression change. The reporter in her had stopped looking for the angle long enough for the woman underneath to hear what he was actually saying. The more time she spent in his presence, the more she saw and heard, the less neutral she became.

Tallia had always believed herself to be on the side of truth. What was changing was her growing realization that Vincent was too. For once in her life, she could choose a side without betraying the truth she had spent her career trying to serve.

The side of humankind.

"We do not fight in the years ahead for the pleasure of punishment," Vincent continued. "We do not break what exists merely because we possess the strength to break it. We do not seek wealth for wealth's sake, control for control's sake, or conquest because conquest flatters the conqueror." His eyes shifted toward the flag above them. "We clear the road. We clear the Star Roads so mankind may one day walk them freely—sovereign in itself, mighty without becoming monstrous, capable of standing before creation without kneeling to every power it encounters."

He looked toward the black boxes moving through the assembly, each one containing something that, sold rather than given, could have made him the wealthiest man in human history. "I raise you today by sharing something of what has been given to me so that you may help me raise them. Not above other human beings, but toward what human beings might become: from deception into knowledge, ignorance into understanding, dependency into sovereignty, and from the oppression of one another—and perhaps most difficult of all—the oppression they inflict upon themselves."

A faint murmur moved through the gathering and faded as Vincent's expression hardened. "First comes the Imperium."

Several faces tightened instinctively at the word, and he saw it.

"So let me be precise. The Anagogic Imperium exists for one purpose: to make possible the Anagogic Republic that must succeed it. If, after the Millennial Reign, mankind still requires an Emperor to hold it together, then the Imperium has failed—and I have failed with it."

That produced a visible reaction across the plateau. Even some of those who had accepted everything else without hesitation glanced toward one another, but among the clergy the response ran deeper. Bishops stiffened. Several priests bowed their heads almost reflexively. Shannon Miller went perfectly still beside Cyrinx, while the younger woman stared at Vincent with widened eyes. Miriam and the Silver Sisters needed no explanation at all.

The Millennial Reign.

He had chosen the words deliberately.

To anyone raised upon Revelation, there was no mistaking the reference. The Rider upon the White Horse. The Kingdom established upon Rhea. The thousand-year reign before the final consummation of things. Vincent had not merely described the projected lifespan of an empire. He had placed what they were building directly inside one of Christianity's oldest and most powerful prophetic expectations.

For several long seconds, nobody spoke.

"I have no desire for a crown that must be worn forever. I want no throne that cannot eventually make itself obsolete." His mouth tightened faintly, and even Vyss looked toward him at that. "The purpose of authority is not to create permanent children beneath it. It is to cultivate sovereign men and women capable of carrying responsibility without needing a master standing over them."

Vincent stepped forward slightly, not enough to make a spectacle of it, but enough to bring his voice closer to the people nearest him. "That is the Republic we seek. Not merely ballots. Not factions changing chairs every few years. Not one tribe collecting enough votes to command another and calling that liberty. I mean a commonwealth of sovereign persons—educated, disciplined, spiritually awake, capable of disagreement without disintegration and liberty without decadence."

Several military officers were nodding now. So were some of the judges. Tallia remained still, but Meghan could see that the argument had reached her. Whatever else she thought of Vincent Veyl, he

was not describing a permanent dictatorship and pretending otherwise. He was laying out a structure meant, at least in theory, to destroy the necessity of its own existence.

Vincent looked out across the assembly once more. "And one final matter. Never bow to me. I forbid it. I am not God. I am not your god. If any man ever tells you that serving this cause requires you to worship me, then that man has misunderstood the cause completely."

A few faces changed at that. Vincent's expression did not.

"I am a servant of the Most High—always have been, always will be. A slave of Truth. Whatever names prophecy may place upon me, whatever crown another age may insist I wear, I remain only a son of the Raven Throne, sent here to accomplish a task." He glanced almost ruefully toward Miriam. "A task I did not particularly ask for."

A faint ripple of laughter moved through the gathering, but it died quickly as the older gravity returned to his face. The words themselves continued settling through the assembly, particularly among those Christians who had watched the rise of Raven Star with some lingering fear of darker prophecy. Whatever suspicions remained that Vincent intended to place himself above God—or that they were witnessing some Antichrist masquerading beneath sacred imagery—had just been dealt a considerable blow.

"But I have entered into it, and once I enter into a thing, I finish it." His gaze swept across the two hundred twenty-two souls assembled before him. "So, I will spend every gift Providence has placed within me—every measure of strength, knowledge, authority, blood, and life entrusted to me—to see that mankind rises. Not so humanity may become my empire, but so humanity may become its own... Sovereign, Ascendant, Ready for the stars."

The last words carried out across the plateau and vanished into the Nevada wind.

Vana found them unexpectedly humbling. For her, the Raven himself had already become something perilously close to a god, though she knew better than to put that thought into words around Vincent. She had expected grandeur from him, command certainly, perhaps even the quiet acceptance of reverence as something naturally owed to a man who had demonstrated powers and knowledge beyond anything she had believed possible a month earlier. Instead, he had forbidden worship outright and placed himself beneath something higher.

Abigail's response was more complicated. Some part of her found the humility almost disappointing. It seemed beneath such a man to lower himself so completely, to refuse the very divinity others were already prepared to place upon him. Yet another part respected him precisely because the refusal appeared genuine. Vincent was not coyly rejecting a crown while keeping one hand stretched toward it. He seemed to mean what he said.

That realization led Abigail somewhere less comfortable. A man who demanded worship could be resisted. Demands created friction; arrogance created enemies; a throne raised too high begged somebody to drag its occupant down. But a man who possessed frightening power, refused to call himself divine, and ordered his followers never to bow might inspire something considerably harder to control than obedience. He might inspire devotion freely given.

For many of those gathered, however—for Star Crow, Tevi, Shannon, Ramsey, Cyrinx, and others whose faith, idealism, loyalties, and private convictions had carried them toward this hour—the declaration seemed to settle something important. They had not come to the plateau as spiritual blank slates waiting for Vincent Veyl to fill them. They already believed in God, Spirit, Creator, Providence, sacred order, or whatever language their traditions gave the thing above and beyond themselves. Vincent had just told them they would not be required to abandon any of that at his feet. They could follow without kneeling inwardly, serve without surrendering the source that had led them there in the first place.

Star Crow lowered his eyes for a moment, his weathered hand still resting over his heart. Meghan saw something ease in his face. Of everything Vincent had said that morning, this might have mattered to the old man most. No true servant of the Creator would ask another person to abandon the Creator for him.

Tevi breathed out slowly beside him. "Well," he murmured, "that certainly makes things easier."

Star Crow glanced over. "You were worried?"

"I'm always worried."

"That's because you think too much."

Tevi looked at him sidelong. "That coming from you?"

A faint smile crossed Star Crow's face. "True."

Nearby, Bishop Ramsey bowed his head, not to Vincent but in prayer, and for him the distinction was everything. A prince could be followed, a king obeyed, a prophet heard, but worship belonged elsewhere. Vincent had just placed himself beneath the same Throne before which Ramsey himself knelt and affirmed God's existence. Whatever else the young man might become, however terrible the titles prophecy eventually laid upon him, Ramsey could not fit what he had just heard into the shape of an Antichrist. No demon of Hell, he thought, would stand before men already half-prepared to worship him and command them never to do it.

For many of the soldiers gathered there, the effect was equally profound, though considerably less theological. They understood hierarchy, command, duty, and the ugly necessity of obedience when lives depended upon a mission being carried through. They also understood the difference between an officer who demanded obedience because the job required it and a tyrant who demanded submission because his ego hungered for it. Vincent had just drawn that line publicly, in front of men and women powerful enough to remember the promise and dangerous enough to hold him to it. More importantly, he had made clear that he believed the line applied to himself.

Meghan glanced among the women.

Emily watched Vincent through wet eyes, while Tracy looked almost shaken by the force of her own admiration.

Kianna stood perfectly still, serene as ever, though something bright had entered her gaze.

Amalia and Bella exchanged the briefest glance and said nothing but the slightest smiles, a slight nod of their heads. For women already inclined toward sacred service, discipline, sacrifice, and an almost frightening degree of loyalty, Vincent's refusal of worship had not diminished him in the slightest. If anything, Meghan suspected it had made their devotion worse.

The shadow around him remained—the violence, the authority, the cold capacity to kill when he believed killing necessary—but now there was light behind it as well. Not enough to erase the darkness. Enough to define it in silver fire.

Miriam simply watched her husband. She had known this part of him, Meghan thought. Perhaps she had always known it. Even so, hearing Vincent declare it before governors, generals, bishops, judges, soldiers, and the gathered architects of whatever damned age they were trying to build touched something visible in her. Pride entered her expression first, followed by something deeper and warmer. It was not submission and certainly not worship. It was adoration—the look of a woman watching the man she loved reveal, publicly and without embarrassment, the very quality she most treasured in him. He could have accepted the crown in that moment and allowed everyone there to raise him above themselves. Instead, he had taken whatever crown they imagined for him and placed it beneath God. Somehow, Meghan thought, that made him look more kingly than wearing it ever could have.

Meghan felt his words from another direction entirely. She had spent years learning what authority looked like when the substance beneath it was rotten. Institutions had failed her. The law had failed her. Men wearing badges had failed her. Sometimes through corruption, sometimes cowardice, and sometimes because the people entrusted with responsibility had simply decided protecting themselves mattered more than protecting anyone else. Even family had failed her in ways she was still learning how to name without making excuses for the people involved.

That history had not left Meghan incapable of trust.

It had made her damned particular about who earned it.

Vincent was dangerous in ways most men could never hope to be. She knew that better than almost anyone standing there. She had seen the blood in him, the terrible restraint wrapped around something capable of extraordinary violence, and the willingness to cross lines when necessity demanded it. None of that frightened her anymore. If anything, what mattered was that a man possessing that much power continually placed limits upon himself when no one else could have forced him to do so.

Standing there upon the plateau, listening to him reject the very worship hundreds—perhaps someday millions—might willingly have offered him, Meghan felt something she had already known settle more firmly into place.

She trusted him.

Not blindly. Not because prophecy told her to. Not because Miriam, Ramsey, Vyss, or any bishop had declared him chosen. Meghan had watched him when there was no advantage in doing the right thing. She had watched him protect people who could give him nothing, forgive people he could easily have crushed, and shoulder responsibilities he had never wanted simply because someone had to carry them.

Now he had done something else that mattered just as much: placed a limit upon himself. He had acknowledged an authority above his own and declared that whatever power, crown, or destiny awaited him existed in service to something larger than himself.

The question of whether she was safe with Vincent had been answered long ago.

The question now was how far the road he had chosen might carry all of them.

Looking across the plateau at soldiers, clergy, politicians, scientists, workers, and believers gathered beneath the Raven banner, with armed men upon the walls and the promise of unnaturally long life resting in little black boxes all around her, Meghan found the answer came with surprising calm.

As far as it took.

For the first time in longer than she could remember, she felt entirely safe in the work, safe within the Circle, and—whatever waited beyond the horizon—safe in going forward.

Something similar seemed to move through the assembly in a hundred different forms. Vincent had not asked the Jewish believer to abandon God, the Christian to replace Christ, or the traditional Native to forsake Creator or Spirit. The soldier had not been asked to surrender the oath within the oath, nor the republican to pretend that Empire itself was the destination. Those who questioned could continue asking questions, and the idealists among them were not required to become ass-kissing courtiers simply because they had chosen to serve. They had been given room to remain themselves while joining something larger than themselves.

Perhaps, Meghan thought, that was one of the most dangerous things Vincent Veyl had accomplished all morning. He had made service possible without demanding spiritual surrender. It was far easier to resist a tyrant who demanded the soul along with obedience; history had produced plenty of those bastards, and eventually somebody usually found a rope, a bullet, or a knife. A leader who told people to keep their souls and still asked them to help build something greater could inspire a loyalty considerably harder to break.

The caricature of Vincent began to fail under that weight. The supervillain, the Bond villain, the would-be dictator surrounded by secret bases, armored vehicles, bishops, generals, beautiful women, black flags, and enough classified hardware to make half the governments on Rhea shit themselves—that image still existed, and Meghan knew damned well it would continue to exist. From the outside, it practically wrote itself. But for those standing on the mesa, it had become impossible to believe in quite so simply.

The man at the center of it all had refused worship. He had rejected permanent Empire and even the idea that humanity should ultimately belong to him. Whatever he had just given the chosen, he claimed to be raising them only so they could help raise others. Beneath the altered flag snapping in the desert wind, the emerging shape of Vincent Veyl therefore became something harder to name than god, Emperor, prophet, or executioner.

He was still dangerous. Meghan would have distrusted herself if she ever forgot that. There was blood in him, darkness in him, pride enough to fill a room when it got loose, and a capacity for violence no

sermon about humility could erase. But there was also discipline—the conscious effort of a man carrying a terrible amount of power to chain that power to something greater than himself.

For Meghan, that distinction was everything.

(10:15 PM EST, July 16th, 2026—The Choice)



The moon hung bright beyond the tall windows of the Oval Office, whitening the lawn and laying pale reflections across the glass. Inside, the lamps cast their muted amber glow over the carpet, polished furniture, framed photographs, and the familiar artifacts of executive power. At that hour, the White House had fallen into its peculiar imitation of silence. It was never truly quiet. Air moved through hidden vents, security personnel murmured beyond closed doors, and somewhere beneath the floor machinery hummed, communications flowed, and the vast nocturnal apparatus of government continued to breathe.

President Camela Harrison entered alone and closed the door behind her.

It had been five and a half weeks since she first went to Trembol, Nevada. Five and a half weeks of political convulsion, religious upheaval, military realignment, arrests, investigations, and barely concealed panic. It felt considerably longer.

There had been the Event, the attempted Coup d'etat, and the subsequent purge of conspirators from within her own government. Trials had already begun, each proceeding exposing another layer of planning and making it increasingly difficult for Washington to maintain the convenient fiction that the seizure of the presidency had been the work of a few desperate Cabinet members acting in sudden panic. The deeper investigators dug, the uglier the thing became.

Then came Vincent Veyl's god-blessed Doomsday Clock, still counting down in cold blue numerals from the face of the Raven Star Building while theologians, physicists, politicians, survivalists, and every species of lunatic argued over precisely what would happen when it reached zero.

Camela herself had crossed a political Rubicon no President in modern memory had approached. She had broken with the party that carried her into office, joined the Natural Order Party, replaced nearly her entire Cabinet and much of her advisory staff, and watched the movement that had once

unmistakably belonged to Justin Vyss begin reorganizing around a young man who barely seemed interested in possessing it.

That might have been easier to understand if Vincent had actually wanted the damned thing. Instead, he seemed almost allergic to conventional power while accumulating more of it by the day.

Then there were the patents.

God, the patents.

News of Veyl's filings had leaked before their existence could be locked down thoroughly enough, and the consequences were already spreading through the world's financial and industrial systems. Energy, Computing, Communications, Manufacturing, entire sectors of the modern economy had begun quietly asking the same question: what happened to them if Vincent Veyl could actually do what the filings suggested?

Some corporations were maneuvering desperately to partner with Raven Star. Others were lobbying governments to restrict it before the technology could mature. Still others appeared to be preparing for economic war against something most of their executives privately admitted they did not yet understand.

Ordinary people reacted differently. Many seemed almost desperately hopeful that the rumors were true. Cheap, clean, plentiful energy. New communications systems. Water. Waste disposal technologies. Advances that might alter the material condition of human life within a generation. People who had spent their lives being told to expect less were beginning, dangerously perhaps, to expect more.

And now came the reports from the Nevada desert.

There was nothing particularly secret about the broader military buildup. For years, states dominated by the N.O.P. had been acquiring surplus equipment, reclaiming abandoned installations, refurbishing old bases, and expanding their State Guard forces under the increasingly standardized doctrines of the Imperial Alliance of Nations. Fifteen allied nations and fourteen American states were already participating, to varying degrees, in common training, logistics, intelligence sharing, command coordination, and procurement, with more expected to join after the midterms. June 8 had merely demonstrated to the rest of the country just how mature that system had become. When the coup began, forces separated by thousands of miles had responded with unnerving speed to the same call.

Crow Creek Omega was therefore not suspicious merely because soldiers had returned to it. Nearly two dozen similar installations had already been restored across N.O.P. controlled territory, and the process was part of the public record. What interested Camela, and apparently half the intelligence community, was what appeared to be happening there now.

Satellite photographs circulated online. Grainy videos appeared and disappeared. Military analysts argued over unfamiliar unit markings, new vehicle configurations, hardened entrances, expanded runways, and personnel whose uniforms did not correspond cleanly to any existing State Guard, federal, or allied formation. Former officers recognized elements of the emerging I.A.N. standardization program, but other details appeared newer. Congressional committees demanded

briefings from agency directors who sometimes seemed genuinely unable to explain what the hell they were looking at, though a growing number of those directors were aligned with the N.O.P. and, Camela suspected, were simply playing dumb.

The real question was what Crow Creek and the other commandeered military bases across the United States were becoming.

No one seriously questioned whether the Natural Order movement possessed an organized military infrastructure anymore. Everyone knew that. Hell, the Natural Order Party and its global organization, the I.A.N., openly advertised it. They ran international campaigns and entire two-hour documentaries across television and social media, complete with epic musical scores, promoting and glorifying their vision of united nations and a coming age of unified humanity beneath the Imperial Republic. They lauded increasing prosperity, military cooperation, technological breakthroughs that promised to transform the world, and the eventual colonization and terraforming of other planets.

June 8 had only added fuel to that machine. The attempted coup had driven Veyl directly into their camp, and the Imperialists were in no way shy about using footage of what they called their "glorious response to attempted extermination," led by the newly celebrated "Champion of the Imperial Republic," Sergeant Veyl.
Another hornet's nest. More speculation, more debate, more fear. The week was barely half over, and already it promised more of the same.

Camela was exhausted—not merely tired, but hollowed out. She was physically depleted, emotionally spent, running increasingly on habit, caffeine, stubbornness, and the trained reflexes of a woman who had spent most of her adult life refusing to let anyone see when she was nearing the end of herself. There were mornings now when she woke before the alarm and simply stared into the darkness, not frightened exactly, because she knew fear well enough to recognize it.

This was something different.

It was an awareness of scale: the slowly deepening comprehension of what her decisions had opened before her and the knowledge that there was no road leading back to the world as it had existed before Trembol. She had changed parties, remade much of her government, survived the attempted constitutional murder of her presidency, watched nature itself appear to rise against those gathered outside Raven Star, and seen Vincent Veyl stand beneath it all as though somehow, he was the least astonished man alive.

Now the world was reorganizing itself around the consequences.

The latch settled behind her with a small, strangely final click. Camela remained beside the door for several seconds, one hand resting against the handle while cool air from a nearby vent moved faintly across her face. Beyond the walls lay the perpetual machinery of government—phones ringing, aides moving, Secret Service radios whispering, printers feeding out documents that would become tomorrow morning's crises. Inside the Oval Office, none of it seemed quite real.

She wanted a drink badly enough that she could almost feel the cold glass already in her hand, the first medicinal burn sliding down her throat, followed by that brief and treacherous softening of everything.

She knew that demon.

It had never screamed. It negotiated, promising one quiet hour, one softened edge, one night of not having to carry the entire damned world in her skull.

Camela resisted it and crossed the room instead, her shoes whispering over the carpet as she approached the Resolute Desk. She lowered herself into the old leather chair and stared beyond the desk, beyond the room, into some private middle distance where the future had become increasingly difficult to distinguish from catastrophe.

Eventually her gaze settled upon the family photographs arranged before her: smiling faces, carefully selected occasions, domestic warmth captured beneath perfect lighting.

They meant very little now. Performative propaganda, really—framed evidence of a family life that had ceased to exist years ago, maintained for campaigns, Christmas cards, state dinners, and the reassuring mythology of public office.

She and her husband lived almost entirely separate lives. Nigel remained in California much of the time, cultivating his own circles, interests, and discreet arrangements. His affairs did not particularly faze her. That was simply the way of things between them and had been for years. They both understood the arrangement, even if neither had ever possessed the honesty—or perhaps the interest—to name it aloud.

Theirs had always been a political marriage as much as a personal one, rooted in a party, an ideology, a network of friends and obligations, and a shared public cause. For years that cause had been enough to preserve the appearance of unity. Then Justin Vyss entered her life.

The closer Camela had drawn to him, the wider the distance between husband and wife became. Conversations with Justin carried well beyond necessity. Silences lingered because neither wanted to end them. A hand remained upon an arm a second longer than professional decorum required. Nothing irrevocable had happened between them, but lines had been approached often enough that pretending otherwise would have been ridiculous.

Distance with Nigel deepened into silence, and silence into estrangement. Recent events had finally pushed even their convenient arrangement beyond usefulness. The divorce was now moving quietly through the proper channels, amicable at least on paper, with no public accusations, interviews, or theatrical recriminations. Camela suspected Nigel preferred it that way for reasons extending beyond dignity. Raven Star was digging into every hidden corner of the old political order, and drawing unnecessary attention to oneself had become a particularly poor survival strategy. Better to sign the papers, smile politely for whatever final photograph was required, and disappear into California.

She looked again at the photographs and wondered why she had not removed them. Habit, probably. Washington ran on habit long after belief had died.

Camela leaned back and closed her eyes, but her mind refused to follow. The preceding weeks moved through it in broken procession—meetings, resignations, intelligence reports, emergency calls, indictments, televised declarations, congressional negotiations, security briefings, and the thunderous collapse of alliances everyone had once regarded as permanent.

Strangely enough, she now possessed more reliable support in Congress than she had enjoyed before changing parties. The Natural Order Party had absorbed politicians who only months earlier would have considered themselves ideological enemies: civil libertarians, constitutional moderates, labor Democrats, national-security liberals, conservatives alienated from the Republican establishment, independents, and an increasing collection of political refugees who no longer recognized the movements to which they had devoted much of their lives.

The old red-and-blue alignment was coming apart so quickly that the press had already supplied a shorthand for what was replacing it: gray. Counties once considered safely red or blue were being redesignated on election maps and polling models as gray territory, while commentators increasingly spoke of gray states and, with varying degrees of alarm or enthusiasm, a coming Gray America. Camela disliked the simplicity of the label, which probably guaranteed that it would stick.

Republicans and Imperialists were cooperating with increasing regularity on some issues while still fighting viciously over others. Her own departure from the Democratic Party—and the considerable dirty laundry exposed during and after the attempted coup—had encouraged further defections from its more moderate wings. What remained of the old organization had hardened considerably in response, the socialists, communists, and ultra-progressives now fighting over what the party would become without people like Camela holding its center together.

She had not merely changed parties. She had helped destabilize the balance that had sustained the old system, and the realization gave her considerably less satisfaction than she might once have expected. Mostly, it made her tired.

Justin's confirmation process would move forward soon. The congressional arithmetic looked favorable, but Camela had learned never to confuse arithmetic with safety. Dangerous currents moved beneath the public enthusiasm: old political enemies who regarded the N.O.P. as an existential threat, new allies whose loyalty had not yet been tested, and persistent rumors that the movement itself was dividing around two increasingly different centers of gravity.

One was Justin Vyss, the constitutional architect, philosopher, and political organizer who had spent years giving intellectual shape to the movement. The other was Vincent Veyl, who seemed increasingly less like the leader of a political faction than the gravitational center of something larger and considerably harder to define.

That supposed division troubled her far more than the numbers in Congress.

Her transformation had not ended with politics either. Two weeks earlier Camela had walked into the Church of Saint Emetiel before the cameras and publicly spoken the Declaration of Dedication, formally entering the Order of the Silver Seraph. The ceremony had been austere and beautiful, far more affecting than she had expected and considerably more affecting than she cared to admit. It had also produced another round of outrage, though that much she had anticipated.

What she had not anticipated was the speed with which the religious landscape itself seemed to be changing. The Silver Order was expanding at an astonishing rate. Pilgrims continued arriving in Nevada, while clergy who had spent years treating Purgatorianism as an eccentric fringe within the Universal Church were suddenly discovering a remarkable enthusiasm for ancient Silver theology.

Vincent had caused much of the trouble without appearing particularly interested in causing any of it. Several of his public remarks had sent theologians into fits, but the greater shock had come from the revelation of the Pope's secret edict concerning the Seraph. Whatever qualifications Rome might subsequently attach to the document, millions had understood its implication immediately: the prophesied figure was not expected at some distant future date. He was already here.

That interpretation spread faster than the Church could contain it. Believers moved toward the Silver Path in numbers nobody had anticipated. Priests requested reassignment, congregations petitioned their bishops, and entire parishes began incorporating Purgatorian devotions and language while lawyers, canonists, theologians, and increasingly frightened administrators argued over whether they remained fully inside the Universal Church at all. More ominously, portions of the Silver Order were openly discussing formal separation from Rome.

The old institutions were not simply losing control of the narrative. They were beginning to fracture beneath it.

Camela opened her eyes and stared across the Oval Office. That was the part nobody around her seemed willing to say plainly enough. Nearly everything she had once regarded as stable was shifting at once—politics, religion, economic assumptions, military alliances, ideas of nation and sovereignty, even humanity's definitions of life and death. After what she had seen in Trembol, perhaps the boundary between one world and another belonged on that list as well.

And somehow Vincent Veyl kept appearing near the center of every fracture without seeming to have deliberately placed himself there.

Her new advisers, Cabinet members, and senior staff were competent—often frighteningly so—but Camela had no illusions about them. Many possessed agendas extending well beyond preservation of the United States as she had understood it. They spoke increasingly of international structures, natural law, planetary cooperation, common standards, integrated defense, shared infrastructure, and an eventual political order larger than any single nation.

They were the Imperialists now, whether they had chosen the name themselves or not.

Some critics heard that word and imagined Rome reborn: hierarchy, banners, armies, incense, and a dictator waiting politely backstage for someone to hand him a crown. Others heard the same proposals and saw the first serious attempt to build institutions capable of dealing with problems national borders had long ceased to contain. Camela remained constitutionally suspicious of anyone who claimed to possess the final answer to history, but the Imperialists kept refusing to fit neatly into the box their enemies had prepared for them.

Vincent was the worst offender.

He had somehow opened political fronts no professional strategist would have advised attempting simultaneously. Military traditionalists found themselves standing beside environmentalists. Constitutionalists entered coalitions with pagans and re-constructionists. Animal-rights advocates, industrial planners, religious conservatives, witches, civil libertarians, survivalists, Native traditionalists, and men who would happily spend an afternoon arguing that the federal government

had no legitimate purpose beyond delivering the mail were discovering that they could apparently occupy the same movement without immediately trying to kill one another.

By every conventional rule of politics, it should not have worked. Increasingly, it did.

Vincent's second interview with Tallia Stevens, in a small local discussion group with clergy, four weeks earlier had widened the breach even further when he stated, with maddening calm, that Purgatorianism was not a Christian religion and that the Universal Church itself had become corrupt. He had not shouted it or delivered some theatrical denunciation of Christianity. There had been no gleeful apostasy, no sermon against Christ, no effort to humiliate believers. If anything, the absence of hostility made the remarks more consequential.

Anti-Christian commentators seized upon them immediately, only to encounter the inconvenient fact that Vincent continued to pray, quote Scripture, speak reverently of the Most High, and maintain close relationships with bishops, priests, monks, and nuns. Christians who wanted to dismiss him as a simple enemy of their faith therefore found him irritatingly difficult to categorize.

So did everyone else.

Muslim scholars had begun debating his language concerning divine unity, the One, and the distinction between God and the institutions claiming exclusive ownership of God. Some condemned him outright, while others heard echoes of ideas already familiar within their own mystical and philosophical traditions and continued listening. Similar arguments were appearing among Jews, pagans, occultists, philosophers, and religious independents who had previously shared almost nothing beyond a mutual certainty that everyone else was wrong.

That seemed to be the pattern wherever Vincent's influence reached. Initial condemnation gave way to curiosity; curiosity became argument; argument occasionally became recognition. More often than Camela found comfortable, recognition eventually became some form of alignment.

She rubbed her eyes with thumb and forefinger and sat quietly for several seconds.

Five and a half weeks.

That was all it had been since Trembol.

Five and a half weeks, and the world Camela Harrison had spent sixty-one years learning how to navigate was already becoming something else.

Across Asia, meanwhile, the interpretation of Vincent had taken a considerably different turn. Millions of people appeared to have concluded that Vincent Veyl was some manner of Taoist Immortal.

The comparison had apparently begun half-jokingly on Chinese social media before escaping containment and acquiring a life of its own. Commentators pointed toward the same collection of traits that every other culture seemed intent upon interpreting through its own mythology: the young warrior who had survived things that should have killed him, the mystic-technologist who spoke of balance and transcendence while casually violating the supposed boundary between matter and spirit,

and the increasingly famous recluse who repeatedly withdrew from public attention at precisely the moment another man might have begun demanding statues.

To many Western commentators, the association seemed absurd. To millions of people elsewhere, apparently, it did not.

Camela giggled.

The sound escaped much louder than she intended and cracked the solemn stillness of the Oval Office. She pressed two fingers against her lips, but another laugh slipped through anyway. A Taoist Immortal. Of course. Why the hell not? Christians were arguing over whether he was the returning warrior Christ or some prophetic precursor, Muslims debated the Mahdi, Jews were invoking messianic language, pagans had begun assigning him names she could barely pronounce, and now half of Asia apparently wanted to put him on a mountain beside Lao-tzu.

The trouble was that she had witnessed the Event firsthand.

She had watched the sky change above Trembol and seen animals answer him. She had felt the atmosphere around Vincent alter in a manner she still possessed no adequate language to describe, as though something larger than human consciousness had recognized him before the human beings present had found the courage to do the same.

The Taoist interpretation was absurd.



Except it wasn't entirely.

“And that,” she muttered to the empty room, “is the really absurd part.”

Her voice faded into the quiet.

There were very few people left whom Camela trusted to tell her an inconvenient truth. Most told her what served their faction. Others offered whatever they believed the President wanted to hear. Some spoke in carefully measured fragments, forever protecting themselves against the possibility that today's ally might become next week's enemy.

Bernie Castor had been different.

He was a relatively low-level CIA analyst with no meaningful access to the President and very little personally to gain by attracting her attention. Nevertheless, he had decided she needed to know what he had found. The warning arrived through channels obscure enough to bypass the usual layers of filtration, accompanied by video recorded in the Nevada desert north of Trembol less than twenty-four hours earlier... with the note, "You should know what you've gotten yourself into."

Camela had watched it twice.

The footage had been taken from several miles away through a powerful telescopic lens. Heat shimmer bent straight lines and made distant structures waver beneath the desert sun, while occasional gusts caused the image to tremble. The quality was imperfect, but Bernie had managed to capture something satellite photographs and carefully managed press visits had not.

The true scale of Crow Creek Omega.

There was nothing secret about the base being operational. Everyone knew that. The Natural Order Party had openly used Crow Creek for multinational exercises, State Guard training, Raven Star operations, and the growing military cooperation between members of the Imperial Alliance of Nations. Foreign uniforms coming and going through northern Nevada had stopped being particularly remarkable.

What Bernie had filmed was something else.

The old installation had expanded far beyond anything Camela had seen in official briefings. Runways had been resurfaced and extended. Aircraft aprons spread outward from reopened hangars while new structures crowded ground that had once stood empty. Barracks blocks were occupied from end to end. Heavy equipment moved constantly between construction zones, fortified positions, communications sites, warehouses, motor pools, and freshly hardened entrances cut into the old complex beneath the mesa.

This was no longer an abandoned Cold War installation converted into a convenient international training center. Crow Creek was becoming a city under arms, and apparently, it was still growing.

That was the first thing Bernie had caught that the official photographs never quite conveyed: magnitude. Whatever manpower Washington believed was stationed there, Camela suspected the number was bullshit—possibly deliberately so. Whatever Raven Star and the N.O.P. had reported concerning reconstruction, that number was probably bullshit too. The place had the restless, unfinished look of something being built faster than bureaucracy could count it.

Then the camera found the flags.

The United States standard was nowhere in sight. That alone meant less than it once might have. Crow Creek had become a transnational facility, and allied banners were hardly unusual there. What caught Camela's attention was that the familiar standards were disappearing beneath something new.

One mast carried the banner of Raven Star Security. Beside it flew another flag Camela had never seen before. At first glance it resembled the American standard closely enough to make the differences almost obscene. Thirteen alternating stripes remained, dark blood-red and white, but the familiar field of fifty stars was gone. Against a canton of midnight blue stood a silver emblem: a raven with its wings spread above a sword, the world beneath it.

As Bernie panned across the installation, more of the new banners appeared—hanging from buildings and checkpoints, flying along the flight line, and mounted on vehicles moving between compounds. This was not somebody's ceremonial prototype flapping over headquarters. Whatever the banner represented, it had already been distributed widely enough to mark Crow Creek as belonging to it.

It was darker than the familiar imagery of the Natural Order Party and stripped of anything resembling electoral softness. The colors were similar—silver and dark blue—but the black hawk had become a raven, the sword was more prominent, the old bull echelons had given way to the scale and torch, a temple stood where the crown had been, and even the motto was entirely different. Nothing about it suggested a political organization asking citizens for their votes. It looked like the flag of a government—not one campaigning to exist someday, but one already teaching its soldiers which banner to stand beneath.

The same transformation was visible across the base. The soldiers, vehicles, insignia, and equipment no longer looked like a collection of national, state, federal, and private forces operating side by side. The distinctions had been deliberately stripped away. Uniforms followed the same design language. Vehicles carried the same markings. Units moved under the same symbols and appeared to answer to the same command structure. What Bernie had captured was not merely coordination between allied forces, but the emergence of a singular military institution shaped almost entirely by Raven Star and Silver Order sensibilities.

That should have been the alarming part.

It wasn't.

The camera eventually found a motorcade crossing the airfield toward the old bunker complex built into the mesa. The vehicles carried unmistakable Raven Star heraldry. One after another, they passed through the fortified entrance and vanished beneath the mountain.

Camela replayed that portion several times.

The fucked-up part was not that somebody appeared to be building a clandestine military installation around Vincent Veyl. After everything she had learned during the preceding five weeks, very little about that surprised her anymore.

The fucked-up part was that she had no intention of stopping it.

There would be no investigation ordered from the White House, no public condemnation, no federal agents descending upon Crow Creek with warrants and cameras, and certainly no National Guard column rolling east from Reno because the President had suddenly discovered an excess of constitutional enthusiasm.

She had closed Bernie's file and buried the warning beneath an executive classification so deep that, if everything worked properly, almost nobody would ever know he had sent it.

Then she did something that bothered her considerably more.

Camela sent a quiet notice concerning Bernie himself to Clare Drucker, her newly appointed Director of the CIA. She issued no order and made no accusation. She merely ensured that Drucker knew who Bernie Castor was, what he had discovered, and that he had somehow managed to circumvent the normal intelligence hierarchy and place the information directly before the President.

That was enough and she understood perfectly well why she had done it.

The admission had been approaching for weeks, and Crow Creek finally stripped away the last convenient lie. Camela Harrison had changed political parties and publicly entered the Silver Order, but neither institution fully explained what had happened to her. The Natural Order Party had given her a new political home, and the Silver Path increasingly gave language to things she could no longer dismiss, but the center of her realignment lay somewhere else.

She had joined Vincent Veyl.

The realization should have frightened her more than it did. The truth was becoming difficult to ignore: the Imperialists seemed to be preparing for a forced transition of the United States into the Imperial order.

Once, that realization certainly would have terrified her. Before Trembol. Before the Event. Before seven minutes in which people inside her own government had stolen the presidency from beneath her feet and prepared to dismantle everything around her while insisting they were preserving constitutional order.

Vincent had responded differently.

When the crisis came, he had acted.

He had not stood beside her debating procedure while her government collapsed, nor had he waited for opinion polls, focus groups, legal scholars, party leaders, or some emergency committee to decide whether saving the elected President was politically advisable. He had not requested permission from the same institutions already being used against her.

Veyl had simply decided that the coup would fail, and then begun making it fail. The seized documents made clear what would have followed had the conspirators succeeded. Her enemies, their enemies, Camela reluctantly admitted, had prepared to declare martial law and turn the machinery of the federal government against Vincent, the Natural Order Party, and anyone else they could plausibly accuse of sedition. Investigators had recovered operational plans, draft arrest lists, emergency declarations

awaiting signatures, and deployment orders for units that had already begun moving into position before the crisis in Trembol reached its peak.

And yet, before she had even returned to Washington aboard Air Force One, Vincent's appeal to the armed forces had already resulted in the conspirators being dragged from their offices and into cells.

Camela knew precisely how close they had come.

What complicated everything was that her growing loyalty to Vincent had not made her suddenly credulous. She had entered the Silver Order willingly and meant the Declaration of Dedication when she spoke it, but she did not believe as Ramsey believed, nor with the almost frightening certainty of the pilgrims flooding into Trembol. Saints, Seraphim, Purgatoria, prophecy—the theological machinery accumulating around Vincent remained something she approached with equal parts fascination and skepticism.

Vincent himself was another matter.

She believed in the man she had met.

Camela had sat across from him, argued with him, watched him swear, smirk, and stare at impossible things with an expression suggesting he found them nearly as inconvenient as everyone else did. She had also studied the June 2 footage closely enough to see the more human details beneath the mythology—the blood, the laughter, the bewilderment, and the impossible things happening around him.

Whatever Vincent Veyl ultimately was, he was not merely a political theory.

Justin Vyss had opened the door through which Camela eventually walked. He had persuaded her years earlier to accommodate Natural Order appointments, accept alliances that once would have seemed politically impossible, and consider ideas she would otherwise have rejected on partisan instinct alone. He had done it with characteristic elegance, moving pieces around the constitutional chessboard until cooperation began to seem like the only sensible move.

Vincent had driven a damned truck through the doorway.

That was why the rumors of a schism within the Natural Order movement bothered her. From Washington, the outlines appeared clear enough to feed the speculation. Justin represented the constitutional and philosophical wing of the movement: an Imperial Republic united through law, institutions, natural-right doctrine, and a carefully constructed political architecture. Vincent seemed to be becoming the center of something older, harder, and less easily contained by constitutions or party platforms.

Crow Creek had done nothing to ease that impression.

Yet the contradiction was that Vincent's influence on ordinary civic life looked nothing like the behavior of a man impatient to become a dictator. His work in Trembol continued drawing observation and, increasingly, reluctant approval even from people who had once regarded the Natural Order Party with suspicion.

The reforms were intensely cooperative and almost aggressively practical.

Vincent was neither mayor nor police chief. He held no municipal office at all, yet everyone understood the peculiar position he occupied. He had become a Patrone in the oldest sense of the word—the person people eventually approached when something needed doing and the normal machinery either moved too slowly or had forgotten why it existed in the first place.

Camela had seen one photograph that captured the phenomenon better than a thousand political essays could have managed. Somebody had complained about a pothole on Fifth Avenue. Ordinarily the matter would have entered the municipal bloodstream: inspection, paperwork, cost estimates, scheduling, perhaps a contractor and several weeks of waiting.

Someone mentioned it to Vincent.

He drove to the hardware store, bought what he needed, went to Fifth Avenue, and fixed the damned pothole himself.

No press release announced it. No cameras had been invited. Somebody simply recognized him and took a picture.

There he was, Vincent Veyl, whose personal wealth was growing so rapidly that financial analysts had difficulty estimating it, kneeling beneath the Nevada sun with a shovel in his hands and road fill beside his knee.

People loved that photograph.

There were others. Vincent beneath the hood of a Trembol police cruiser in the municipal garage, sleeves rolled above his forearms while he argued amiably with a mechanic about something in the electrical system. Vincent hauling boxes into an employee-training room. Vincent helping move furniture. Vincent standing on a ladder outside Raven Star while Tallia Stevens questioned him about the mysterious clock he was bolting to the façade above her head.

It was difficult to reconcile the images.

A multibillionaire. An executioner. An alleged immortal increasingly surrounded by bishops, governors, military officers, intelligence agents, and whispers of an emerging empire—washing windows, filling potholes, repairing police cars, helping former prostitutes pay for education and learn coding, and sitting with cops trying to find better ways to keep the horrors of the job from destroying them.

The absurdity of it made the whole thing dangerously endearing.

More important, people were beginning to imitate him.

Small local groups had appeared elsewhere, called Coveys, often centered around veterans, clergy, tradespeople, business owners, retired officials, neighborhood organizers, or simply stubborn individuals who possessed enough local credibility to pull others together. They were not waiting for

some grand national program. They looked around, identified a problem, and asked who among them knew how to solve it.

Someone could repair the roof. Someone else owned a truck. A contractor had leftover materials. A church could provide volunteers. A local business covered whatever remained.

Things got done.

Camela found that development more politically significant than half the speeches being given in Washington. The emerging model was not anti-government so much as impatient with helplessness. Local institutions still mattered, public money still mattered, professional expertise still mattered, but people were rediscovering that cooperation did not require waiting for a distant authority to organize every act of common life.

That spirit was spreading into law enforcement as well. Departments outside Nevada had begun requesting information about Trembol's training and coping systems: the Contemplative, structured debriefings, expanded education, mediation work, and the peculiar insistence that police officers be taught not merely how to survive the job but how to remain recognizably human while doing it.

Perhaps that was the part of Vincent's growing influence Camela understood most easily.

For all the prophecy, ravens, secret bases, impossible technology, and theological language gathering around him, much of what he actually did remained stubbornly ordinary.

Someone had a problem, and he helped fix it.

Even some of Vincent's enemies had been forced to admit that he was not what they had expected.

Not yet, anyway.

The thought amused Camela because she knew perfectly well how much work those two words were doing. Vincent remained capable of frightening the hell out of people, herself included. He had killed more men than most politicians could name, possessed technologies that made government laboratories look primitive, commanded loyalty among soldiers and intelligence officers across national borders, and now appeared to have a private military complex operating in the Nevada desert beneath a flag no agency in Washington had bothered to explain to her.

Yet when people actually watched what he did with ordinary power, the picture became harder to reconcile with the caricature.

The Natural Order Party remained, fundamentally, a political movement. It had platforms, candidates, committees, donors, conventions, legislative agendas, lawyers, intellectuals, and the rest of the machinery necessary to translate ideology into government.

Vincent was becoming something else: not merely another leader of the movement, but a precedent people were beginning to imitate.

The phrase True to Covey seemed increasingly to capture the idea. It had begun as one of those peculiar bits of Purgatorian language surrounding Vincent and his circle, but the meaning had traveled well beyond them. Cooperation without surrender of individuality. Loyalty without absorption. People taking responsibility for one another while remaining stubbornly themselves.

Whatever else Vincent Veyl might have been, he did not merely tell people what sort of world ought to exist.

He picked up tools and helped build it.

Camela thought again of Bernie's footage.

The flag above Crow Creek Omega had not carried the familiar emblem of the Natural Order Party. Camela had learned the truth of that banner not from the intelligence community, but from YouTube and a growing collection of Vincent fan sites, where the term had apparently been circulating for weeks.

THE IMPERIUM OF ASCENDANT MANKIND.

I.A.M.

Imperium was becoming one of those words that appeared everywhere once a person learned to notice it. Intelligence intercepts caught it in military conversations. Analysts found it buried in encrypted communications. Graffiti carrying variations of the raven seal had appeared near installations controlled by governments friendly to the Natural Order movement. Young officers sometimes used the phrases Imperium Rising or Imperium Ascendant with the half-ironic enthusiasm of men who claimed to be joking but somehow never smiled while saying it.



Camela still did not know exactly what the Imperium was.

That bothered her.

She reached for her secure device. Hundreds of notifications crowded the screen—intelligence summaries, legislative updates, security alerts, unanswered messages, invitations, demands, and

requests carrying varying degrees of manufactured urgency. One name immediately pulled her attention from the rest.

Justin.

He had gone west with several members of her Cabinet and a handful of senior advisers. As far as Camela understood it, the trip had two purposes. Officially, they hoped to speak with Vincent about the national application of his emerging technologies: energy, disposal, communications, infrastructure, and several other fields that could alter the material condition of the country within a generation if even half the rumors proved accurate.

The unofficial purpose mattered more.

Justin intended to discover what the hell was happening at Crow Creek Omega and whether the apparent division inside the Natural Order movement was real.

For weeks rumors had multiplied that Vyss and Veyl were drifting toward competing futures. Justin remained the constitutional architect, the philosopher-politician who had spent years designing the Imperial Republic through law and institutions. Vincent had become the harder, increasingly mythic center around which soldiers, clergy, technologists, mystics, and ordinary people seemed to be reorganizing almost without instruction.

Justin had told her he needed to speak with Vincent directly, determine whether the fault line was genuine and, above all, find out where Vincent stood regarding Camela herself.

That last question mattered more than she wanted to admit.

Vincent had been almost entirely silent since the Event. Her representatives had tried repeatedly to reach him. Messages had been sent, requests for meetings forwarded, questions passed through intermediaries. Most had simply disappeared into the strange quiet surrounding Raven Star.

They had not been rejected.

Somehow, that was worse.

A rejection would at least have told Camela where she stood. Silence left room for every damned possibility her exhausted mind could invent. Perhaps the alliance forged during the crisis had been temporary. Perhaps she had disappointed him. Perhaps he regretted defending her. Perhaps Vincent had simply moved on to matters so much larger that the President of the United States had become another name buried somewhere on Trinity's call sheet.

Justin knew the uncertainty was eating at her. Yet since leaving for Nevada, he too had been frustratingly silent.

Camela opened his message.

All is well, Cam. Look for the package I had them place on your desk—a gift from Veyl. You are chosen. He has your back.

She read it once.

Then again.

The relief came so quickly that it embarrassed her. Her shoulders dropped before she could stop them, and a breath escaped that she had not realized she was holding. After weeks of unanswered messages, political speculation, religious upheaval, intelligence reports, and private doubts, Justin had reduced the entire question to a handful of words.

You are chosen. He has your back.

Vincent had not forgotten her.

More importantly, Justin had written All is well.

Not We reached an agreement. Not The dispute has been resolved. Nothing about negotiations, concessions, rival factions, or conditions. Whatever he had found in Nevada, the feared collision between Vyss and Veyl had apparently not occurred.

Camela felt another knot loosen inside her.

Whatever the Imperium was becoming, she had not been left standing outside the gate.

Only then did she notice the black box resting near the center of the Resolute Desk.

It had been there when she entered; it must have been. Justin had said someone placed it there, and nobody had materialized inside the Oval Office while she was sitting feet away. Yet Camela had somehow looked past it until that moment, as though fatigue and the usual clutter of presidential business had rendered one more object invisible.

"Jesus," she murmured.

The Secret Service was going to love the idea that people could arrange mysterious gifts on the President's desk without her noticing.

The box measured perhaps eight inches long, six wide, and three deep, roughly the proportions of a thick hardbound book. Its surface gleamed almost like polished obsidian, though Camela could not tell whether the material was metal, wood, stone, or some composite Raven Star had invented because normal substances were apparently no longer good enough.

There was no label, ribbon, card, or explanatory note. Moonlight caught one edge and drew a thin silver line along the black surface.

Camela stared at it for several seconds before finding the small silver latch recessed into one side.

"Well," she muttered, "if it explodes, this is going to be an embarrassing obituary."

She pressed the release.

The latch gave a soft metallic click and the lid rose perhaps half an inch. Camela hesitated only briefly before lifting it the rest of the way.



Inside lay a folded cloth of deep midnight-blue velvet embroidered in silver thread with the same emblem Bernie Castor's footage had shown flying above Crow Creek Omega: the raven, the sword, and the world beneath them. Beneath the seal were the words THE IMPERIUM OF ASCENDANT MANKIND, forming the not entirely ironic acronym I.A.M.

Camela tilted her head and, despite herself, smirked.

"Pretty."

She had to admit it was. The design was severe without being crude, beautifully balanced, almost heraldic in its simplicity. It managed to suggest military authority, religious symbolism, and something considerably larger than ordinary nationalism without descending into the gaudy bullshit political movements usually produced when they decided history needed a new logo.

Below the seal ran a Latin inscription:

"Surgite, Supremi et Immortales."

Camela was no Latin scholar, but she knew enough to work out the sense of it.

"Arise, supreme and immortal ones," she murmured.

Her smile weakened slightly.

That was certainly modest.

She lifted the embroidered velvet.

Beneath it, fitted into a precisely shaped recess, rested a crystal ampule filled with luminous ruby fluid. The substance glowed softly from within, not brightly enough to illuminate the case but unmistakably

generating its own faint radiance. Tiny bubbles rose lazily through its depths and disappeared against the glass, accompanied by the faintest liquid gurgle.

Unexpectedly, absurdly, it reminded Camela of the sparkling strawberry sodas she had loved as a child.

A narrow satin strap held the ampule securely in place, tied across it in an immaculate bow.

For several seconds, Camela simply stared.

Whatever she had expected Vincent Veyl to send the President of the United States, it had not been a bottle of glowing red liquid nestled in velvet like the world's most ominous Christmas present.

A second recess contained what appeared, at first glance, to be one of the discreet earpieces worn by Secret Service agents. This one was black and bore the words TRINITY WEB in fine silver lettering, accompanied by an unfamiliar insignia: an open eye enclosed within a triangle and circle.

Beside it rested a lapel pin bearing a related Imperial emblem. The raven remained, but here it stood above a torch, scales, and temple rather than the sword and globe embroidered upon the velvet. Camela lifted the pin and turned it beneath the desk lamp, admiring the workmanship until she noticed that the raven's eye was not merely decorative. A tiny glass aperture had been set into it.

"A camera lens. Interesting."

She looked from the pin to the earpiece and understood the arrangement immediately. One gave sight, the other sound. Neither held her attention for long.

The ruby ampule drew her gaze back.

A small card had been tucked beneath the satin strap securing it. There was no seal or signature, only a brief handwritten warning:

It packs a kick, so be somewhere safe and secure before you drink it. And listen. Really listen—and consider.

Camela frowned.

"Listen to what?"

For several seconds, nothing happened.

Then she heard it.

At first the sound was so faint that she mistook it for air moving through the ventilation system or the distant murmur of agents beyond the Oval Office doors. She tilted her head and held her breath.

The whisper came again.

Not from the room.

Not from the earpiece.

From the ampule.

Camela leaned closer.

The ruby substance was considerably denser than water, possessing something near the thickness of cough syrup, yet despite its viscosity—and though the case remained perfectly still upon the Resolute Desk—it continued to move. The liquid folded slowly through itself, gathering along one side of the crystal before easing back again in a smooth, measured rhythm that reminded her disturbingly of something breathing in its sleep.

Tiny bubbles rose through the glow and vanished against the glass. There was no sediment, no suspended material, no visible mechanism that might explain the movement. Only the strange ruby fluid, turning beneath its own power.

Camela watched it gather once more toward the side nearest her.

"It's alive," she whispered.

The conclusion sounded ridiculous even as she spoke it, but nothing she was seeing suggested a better one.

The sound from within the ampule remained too faint to understand in any ordinary sense. The whispers seemed layered one upon another, as though many voices were speaking from an immense distance or from behind some barrier too dense for human hearing to penetrate. Yet meaning began to form within her anyway, not quite through the ears and not quite through thought. It arrived whole, solemn and unmistakable, as though language had somehow been placed directly into the mind before words could carry it.

I AM THAT I AM. I shall be what I shall be.

Their days shall be as the days of the ancient tree, rooted deep and lifted toward the heavens. Sickness shall not dwell within them, nor disease make a house of their flesh. Death shall veil its face before them, and no wound shall hold dominion over their bones.

The liquid pulsed faintly beneath the glass, and the meaning deepened.

I am life, and I am pain; for life increased is sorrow increased, and he who would endure must also bear. I raise up, and I bind with chain. I kindle, and I claim. By me shall they be strengthened, by me sustained, by me preserved beyond the common measure of their days. Yet nothing is given without weight, and no gift of blood comes without its price.

The final words entered her with a colder gravity, tightening something low in Camela's stomach.

Blood is oath. Blood is brand. Blood is seal. It remembers the hand that gives and the soul that receives. Once entered, the covenant takes root in flesh and spirit alike, and no mortal hand may loose what living blood has bound.

Camela sat motionless behind the Resolute Desk.

A tremor passed through her hands.

She was staring at something impossible—something luminous, living, and deliberate—and understood with sudden certainty the nature of what Vincent had offered her.

"A covenant of blood," she whispered.

The words sounded far too loud in the quiet room.

She did not know whether the substance was literally blood or whether the proclamation spoke symbolically. She knew only that Vincent Veyl had sent it to her, that it promised life beyond sickness and ordinary injury, perhaps even far beyond the natural span of years, and that the promise came bound to fealty.

It was not merely medicine. It was an oath placed inside a crystal vial.

Camela slowly leaned back in the chair.

A month earlier, the experience might have shattered whatever remained of her reasonable framework for understanding the world. Now it joined an increasingly crowded collection of impossible facts she had been forced to accommodate. She had watched Vincent open a threshold into another realm. She had seen the recording from June 2 and examined the Purgatorium stone brought through it. She had watched the rainbow sky form above Trembol and seen animals gather as though answering some unheard summons. She had witnessed enough to understand that disbelief was no longer the intellectually cautious position it once had been.

The question was no longer whether something extraordinary surrounded Vincent Veyl.

The question was what the hell it meant.

Camela had never thought of herself as particularly religious. Even after publicly entering the Silver Order, she had not awakened the following morning possessing Bishop Ramsey's theology. She still believed in evidence, institutions, history, leverage, elections, alliances, and the hard mathematics of power; she simply had seen too much by now to dismiss Purgatoria, Seraphim, prophecy, or Vincent himself as superstition.

Across the world, priests, rabbis, imams, monks, scholars, mystics, philosophers, scientists, and increasingly bewildered politicians argued over precisely the same problem. They debated prophecy and incarnation, miracles and deception, divine judgment, technological manipulation, false messiahs, and the possible ending of one age and beginning of another.

Camela understood the uncertainty because she carried it herself.

The Natural Order officials now surrounding her seemed far less troubled by it. Her new staffers, advisers, and Cabinet members moved with an assurance that sometimes unsettled her. Something

profound had become clear to them—or they believed it had—and their confidence seemed to deepen with each passing day.

Some religious leaders declared that the Last Days had begun and judgment stood close at hand. Others spoke instead of the biblical promise of a thousand-year reign followed eventually by a new heaven and a new world. Still others warned that precisely such wonders had always been expected of false prophets and that humanity was walking willingly toward the great deception.

Camela looked again at the ruby ampule.

Whatever was coming, it no longer belonged safely inside prophecy, theology, or frightened television panels.

It was sitting on the Resolute Desk.

She remained there for several moments, studying the living fluid as it moved quietly inside the crystal. Then, almost despite herself, her eyes drifted toward the antique mirror across the room.

Her thoughts turned toward the very different kind of power she had spent most of her life mastering.

She had learned the game young from Billy Boman, a player if ever there was one and a damned good one. What he taught her had carried her far, though not without damage. Some of the worst had arisen directly from her relationship with that same man when she was still beginning her ascent into the life.

Politics was a life unto itself, and power an addiction with few rivals. It did not merely reward ambition; it altered the ambitious, gradually reshaping appetite until influence became necessity and ordinary existence seemed colorless by comparison.

Camela rose from the chair and crossed toward the antique mirror standing against the far wall. The Oval Office lamps cast a warm, forgiving light, but not forgiving enough. She studied the woman reflected there and slowly shook her head.

"Sixty-one," she murmured. "Not bad for my age."

The assessment was honest. She had retained much of what had once made her striking: dark eyes, strong cheekbones, a shapely figure, and long black hair carefully maintained by people who understood that presidential beauty was supposed to appear effortless while requiring an entire blessed industry to preserve.

Justin, younger than she was, seemed to agree. His attention over the preceding months had given her ego a lift she badly needed after years inside a marriage that had quietly robbed her of more self-esteem than she cared to admit. She had hidden the damage beneath the practiced façade of unaffected confidence, but concealment was not immunity.

Camela leaned closer to the mirror and touched the skin beneath one eye. The sag was becoming harder to disguise. Politics was an image game, and she had played it long enough to know every trick: tailored clothing, body-shaping garments, expert cosmetics, discreet visits to private Washington

clinics serving half the elected aristocracy while pretending not to recognize any of them. A little Botox here, a little tightening there, another year purchased beneath flattering light.

But her examination did not stop at the skin.

The woman in the mirror had spent most of her life playing the game, and Camela knew better than to pretend otherwise. Ideologues liked to imagine politics as a noble instrument for building one radiant society or another. For actual politicians, it was also a career, a profession, a tribe, a complete social ecosystem populated by people who understood that ideals mattered only to the degree they survived contact with power.

It was the lifestyle. The game.

One either learned to play it well or became a piece moved by those who had.

The rewards were enormous: wealth, access, protection, influence, privilege, entry into rooms from which most human beings would forever remain excluded. Camela had known all of that when she chose the road and had never been some innocent woman accidentally carried into corrupt company.

In her youth, beauty, style, ambition, and a decidedly mercenary sensibility had served her well. They opened doors into the sanctums of wealthy, connected, nearly untouchable people—places she had not always enjoyed entering and things she had never particularly wanted to witness or even know existed.

But that was where the road led when one kept reaching for the golden rings.

The price was usually understood before anyone had the poor taste to say it aloud.

Camela continued studying herself, not from vanity now but assessment. There was a melancholy recognition in it, not merely of her physical condition but of her moral one. She had always assumed, somewhere beneath the practical excuses and clever arguments, that people who played the game long enough accumulated debts no election could erase.

Perhaps damnation was simply the final bill.

And then there was Veyl.

Again, Veyl.

Politicians, financiers, fixers, traffickers, spies, and predators were being exposed by the score. Raven Star Investigations had become a machine for dragging secrets into daylight. Things once dismissed as lurid conspiracy material were reappearing as bank records, recordings, photographs, witness statements, travel logs, buried files, and sworn testimony. Networks that had functioned for decades behind money, reputation, and political protection were suddenly discovering that secrecy had acquired a very dangerous predator.

Vincent had enemies beyond counting, and a remarkable number of them were now in prison. Others had met less judicial conclusions.

The evidence flowing outward from Raven Star had also fed an expanding number of Death Warrant cases in jurisdictions controlled by the Natural Order Party. Former soldiers, intelligence officers, investigators, private operators, and assorted self-appointed crusaders seemed to be appearing by the day, each trying in his own fashion to become another Vincent Veyl. Many had gotten themselves killed in just the last few weeks.

Camela found that development considerably less comforting.

Those who placed bounties upon Vincent tended to meet particularly unfortunate ends. It was said that he returned such favors.

That was the thing about Vincent's light. It burned.

The same torch that exposed hidden corruption could become a firebrand in his hand. He could uncover bad men, drag their crimes into public view, and give forgotten victims' names and voices.

He could also burn their houses down around them.

And therein lay the rub.

Camela had known Vana Carydin, as had nearly everyone who traveled the upper corridors of power. If not Vana herself, then someone adjacent to her world—someone attending the same parties, funding the same causes, vacationing behind the same locked gates, aware of doors decent people were not supposed to notice.

Yet nothing had emerged concerning Camela.

Not yet.

The thought tightened her throat as she looked from the mirror toward the crystal ampule resting on the Resolute Desk. Whatever Vincent knew about her (and she suspected he knew more than she wished) he had chosen not to use it against her.

The ruby substance continued glowing upon the desk, shifting faintly within the crystal as though aware of her attention. Camela could almost imagine it whispering again, though this time she could not distinguish words.

The craving for alcohol returned with sudden force. Failing that, she would have gladly settled for a cigarette—anything to give her hands something to do and her nerves somewhere to go.

She swallowed hard.

Voices moved beyond the Oval Office doors. Camela had instructed the staff to leave her alone except in an emergency.

Her eyes returned to the vial.

Whatever Vincent knew about her, he had not sent judgment. He had sent a choice.

In the White House, however, emergencies occurred with roughly the same frequency as headaches, which was to say constantly.

Camela returned to the desk and reached for the ampule. The moment her fingers closed around it, she nearly dropped the damned thing.

The crystal was warm. Almost hot.

A low vibration traveled through the glass and into her fingertips while the ruby substance inside pulsed in slow, measured beats. For one disorienting instant, Camela had the grotesque impression that she was not holding a container of living fluid at all, but some tiny crystalline heart.

Fear and exhilaration moved through her together. She slipped the ampule into the inner pocket of her jacket, close enough that she could still feel its unnatural warmth against her breast. She had not decided to drink it—not yet—but she certainly was not leaving it unattended on the Resolute Desk while half the building employed people whose professional duties included being extraordinarily nosy.

Her attention returned to the lapel pin resting inside the case.

The civic variation of the emblem tugged at her memory. The same raven imagery tied it unmistakably to Crow Creek and the emerging Imperium, but the torch, scales, and temple belonged to a quieter, political face of the movement.

Recognition came slowly.

She had seen the pin before.

Certain N.O.P. senators and representatives wore it discreetly beside their congressional insignia. Several members of her reconstructed staff had begun wearing it as well, as had Cabinet officials whose loyalties extended deeper into the Natural Order movement than their official résumé suggested. Most party members still displayed the familiar N.O.P. emblem—the hawk and bull beneath the imperial crown—but an increasing number carried this quieter raven device instead.

"It's circulating," Camela murmured.

The feared division inside the movement. Justin's institutional Natural Order Party on one side; Vincent's harder, increasingly mysterious Imperium on the other. Two symbols had seemed to imply two centers of loyalty, and Crow Creek appeared to confirm the theory.

Yet Justin's message sat open upon her secure device.

All is well, Cam.

That bothered the neatness of her conclusion.

If Justin had gone west expecting a confrontation with Vincent, he had not written that the disagreement was settled, nor that terms had been reached, nor that concessions had been made. He had simply told her that all was well.

Camela picked up the Imperial pin and turned it thoughtfully between her fingers.

Perhaps she had been asking the wrong question.

Maybe the two emblems did not represent two competing factions at all. Maybe they represented different stages—or different functions—of the same emerging thing. The N.O.P. remained the political machinery visible to voters, legislatures, and governments. The Imperium might be something larger forming around, beneath, or beyond it.

That possibility was considerably more unsettling.

Vincent certainly had no shortage of symbols accumulating around him, from the Doomsday Clock to the raven standards at Crow Creek. Camela remained uncertain how much of the mystery he deliberately cultivated and how much simply resulted from the fact that he seemed constitutionally incapable of behaving like an ordinary public figure.

Financial analysts now placed his personal wealth somewhere near several hundred billion dollars, depending upon how they valued companies, patents, holdings, and technologies whose actual worth nobody could reliably calculate. The absurdity was that, for all that wealth and the myth gathering around him, Trembol still saw the same man who worked with his own hands and moved through town without much interest in looking important. People adored him enough that petitions were already circulating to rename the town, with Raven Throne and Veyl among the proposals.

He did not look much like a conventional billionaire either. Most photographs showed black clothing, boots, silver ornamentation, and a severe Gothic aesthetic that made him look less like a technology magnate than the lead singer of some aristocratic rock band who had wandered into the wrong century and accidentally acquired an intelligence service. Camela entertained no romantic fantasies about him—she was old enough to be his mother and possessed enough complications already—but she was still a woman with functioning eyes.

A smile touched her mouth before the heavier thought returned.

“He saved my presidency,” she said quietly.

She had already admitted that much to herself.

The second truth was harder.

“He's also covered for me.”

Her gaze shifted toward the warm weight of the ampule inside her jacket.

Vincent possessed the files. He had to. Raven Star Investigations had penetrated too deeply into the protected layers of politics, money, intelligence, organized vice, and private influence for Camela to believe her own history had somehow escaped notice. If there were records concerning Billy Boman, Vana Carydin's circles, the people Camela had known, the parties she had attended, the compromises she had made, or the things she had known just enough about to avoid examining too closely, Vincent either possessed them already or could obtain them whenever he wished.

Yet nothing had surfaced.

Vana Carydin provided the clearest proof that Vincent was capable of such selective mercy. The public knew enough to understand that Vana had survived the destruction of her family's criminal empire and subsequently folded much of what remained into Raven Star. Those closer to events understood that Vincent had protected her personally, keeping her from being swallowed by the same machinery that destroyed the men around her.

Camela had once found that morally troubling.

She still did.

But she also understood it considerably better now.

Vincent was not an impersonal machine dispensing righteousness. Loyalty mattered to him. Blood mattered. Obligation mattered. Circumstance mattered. He could look directly at someone's darkness without pretending it did not exist and still decide that the person had some remaining use, some remaining road upward, some claim upon his protection.

Vana had placed billions beneath that protection.

Camela had given him considerably less: political cover when he needed it, access to government, endless complications, a stream of questions, and a presidency he had nearly gone to war to preserve.

Still, the vial rested against her heart.

You are chosen. He has your back.

Outside Trembol, layers of security continued thickening around Vincent almost daily. Air defenses guarded the region. Checkpoints controlled the principal approaches. Federal protection teams operated throughout the district, many deliberately kept out of sight, while state personnel and Raven Star forces had effectively turned the surrounding area into one of the most heavily watched pieces of desert in North America.

Camela sometimes wondered who, precisely, was protecting whom anymore.

She looked down at the Imperial pin in her hand.

Perhaps that was another question Justin had gone west to answer.

Vincent had become a strategic asset of incalculable value, and somewhere along the way the distinction between guarding him and watching him had grown exceedingly thin.

Camela understood the problem better than most. A government could hardly discover that one private citizen possessed revolutionary interdimensional technologies, an intelligence network capable of penetrating supposedly secure federal systems, and whatever the hell else Vincent had hidden in Nevada without developing a professional interest in keeping track of him. At the same time, every

additional layer of surveillance around Trembol seemed merely to confirm the uncomfortable fact that Vincent knew perfectly well he was being watched and did not particularly care.

Her gaze dropped again to the Imperial pin.

Camela had refused to replace the small American flag that had followed her through most of her political career. Even after joining the Natural Order Party and publicly entering the Silver Order, she remained President of the United States. Some symbols mattered precisely because they were older than parties, movements, or whichever new ideological fashion happened to be marching through Washington.

For several seconds she considered leaving it where it was.

Then she looked at the raven in her palm.

All is well, Cam.

Whatever Justin had discovered at Crow Creek, he had not warned her away from Vincent. Quite the opposite. He had told her that Vincent had chosen her and had her back.

That deserved an answer.

Camela carefully removed the American flag pin and laid it beside the open case rather than tossing it aside. The gesture felt more significant than she wanted it to. She was not repudiating the country whose presidency she still held, nor declaring herself part of some imagined Veyl faction against Justin. She was acknowledging something far more personal.

Veyl was backing her.

She would back Veyl.

Quid pro quo was the cynical formulation, and Camela understood cynicism better than most. Reciprocation sounded nobler. Loyalty, however, felt closest to the truth.

She fastened the I.A.M. emblem to her lapel.

No sooner had she secured the clasp than the raven's tiny glass eye awakened. A point of electric blue flared within it, sharp and startling against the silver metal, then vanished almost immediately.

Camela froze with one hand still against her jacket.

“Well,” she murmured after several seconds, staring at herself in the mirror, “that's not ominous at all.”

Her attention returned to the open case. She lifted the black earpiece from its velvet niche and fitted it into her left ear, then turned toward the mirror and adjusted it carefully. The device resembled the discreet communications equipment worn by Secret Service agents, although its design was

considerably sleeker. Once properly seated, it nearly disappeared against her ear, and her hair concealed what little remained visible.

A soft tone sounded.

Camela felt rather than heard the device awaken.

Then a woman's voice spoke directly into her ear.

“Madam President.”

Camela blinked.

The voice was low, feminine, and deeply composed. There was no mechanical distortion or synthetic brightness, nothing resembling the unnaturally cheerful voices of commercial assistants. Instead, there was an unexpected warmth within it, something that seemed to settle over Camela's frayed nerves like a hand laid gently against the brow.

She knew that voice.

Weeks earlier, in the secure White House conference room, Trinity had entered systems everyone in Washington regarded as untouchable and calmly demonstrated that the word secure had become considerably more theoretical than anyone wished to admit.

“I am Trinity,” the woman continued. “But you may call me Mama.”

Camela stared at herself in the mirror.

Slowly, almost despite herself, she smiled.

“If you have questions, I am here to answer them,” Mama said. “If you wish only to speak, I am here to listen.”

Camela's eyes moved to the open black case, then to the faint outline of the warm ampule beneath her jacket.

“Ingenious,” she murmured.

“My son is that.”

The answer caught her completely off guard.

Her smile changed.

Not Vincent Veyl. Not Mr. Veyl. Not the Seraph, the Purgatorian, the Emperor, or any of the increasingly grandiose titles the rest of the world seemed determined to pile upon him.

My son.

There was something so simple and strangely affectionate about it that Camela stood silent for several seconds. She looked at the woman reflected before her: sixty-one years old, President of the United States, survivor of an attempted coup, political defector, newly professed member of a mystical order, carrying a vial of living ruby fire against her breast while a microscopic camera watched the world through the eye of a silver raven.

There were limits to how absurd a life could become before absurdity itself stopped being a useful category.

Camela glanced toward the sideboard. The drink she had wanted earlier remained available. She could still walk across the room, pour it, and enjoy that first warm surrender she knew so well.

The craving had not disappeared.

Some of its authority had.

For the first time that evening, she no longer felt entirely alone inside her own head.

Camela returned to the Resolute Desk and rested one hand against its edge.

"All right, Mama," she said. "I have questions."

"I suspected you might."

That earned another smile.

Camela lowered herself into the leather chair, glanced once toward the living vial hidden inside her jacket, then toward the American flag pin she had placed carefully beside the open case.

"Let's start with what the hell Vincent just offered me."

The conversation began there.

At first Camela expected an explanation of the vial, the Imperial pin, and Trinity's strange new network. Instead, one question naturally produced another. Mama answered when she could, declined when she could not, and occasionally turned Camela's own questions back upon her with an irritating gentleness that made evasion considerably more difficult than Camela preferred.

What surprised her most was not the intelligence behind the voice.

It was that Mama listened.

No one around the President of the United States merely listened anymore. Everyone wanted something—an appointment, a signature, a favor, money, influence, legislation, reassurance, protection, absolution, or some tiny piece of the enormous machinery surrounding her office. Even affection had become difficult to separate from advantage.

Mama appeared to want nothing from her at all.

Camela did not have to perform the presidency for the voice in her ear. She could be tired. Angry. Vulgar. Skeptical. She could admit that she did not understand what was happening to the world, what Vincent was becoming, or what she herself had become by choosing to follow him this far.

For once, nobody interrupted.

So Camela kept talking.

Much later, she would look back upon that first conversation and recognize it as the beginning of one of the strangest and most intimate relationships of her life. There would be other conversations—brief exchanges between meetings, long arguments late at night, questions whispered aboard Air Force One while darkness passed beneath the wings. Somewhere along the way, the presence in her ear would cease feeling like technology at all.

Mama would simply become Mama.

For now, Camela Harrison sat behind the Resolute Desk while moonlight silvered the lawn beyond the windows and the vast machinery of the United States government murmured on behind the walls. A vial of living ruby fire rested warm against her breast. The Imperial raven kept watch from her lapel, and into her ear spoke the quiet voice of something neither wholly machine nor, she increasingly suspected, wholly of this world.

Camela listened.

Somewhere within Trinity's immense and widening consciousness, a new thread had drawn taut—a single word crossing the distance between them, less an address than an opening of the door.

Mama.

(Dawn, October 12, 2026—The Frenchman)



Vincent walked up the steps toward the plane, its dark skin gleaming beneath the brilliant dawn spreading across the eastern DeSatto Badlands.

Miriam climbed just ahead of him, dressed in the ceremonial garb of priestess and shamaness, accompanied by her aide, Kianna, and the twins, Amalia and Bella Rashon, all three in the black robes of the Silver Sisters. Yvonne Omaris followed in immaculate executive black—a fitted dress and heels, a single raven feather tucked into her hair. Tracy Omaris brought up the rear in black jeans, black shirt, and combat-style Dingo boots, her hawkish eyes continually sweeping the ridgelines above Horn Airport for the slightest hint of movement.

The jet waited on the apron outside the Raven Star hangar.

It was one of the largest luxuries Vincent had allowed himself in the past few months. He wanted to feel some decadent guilt about it. He really did. But as his eyes traveled over the Falcon 8-exs matte-black finish and settled on the silver Raven Star emblem of the Imperium painted upon its fuselage, what he felt instead was a small, undeniable tinge of pride.

His guests were entering the aircraft with varying degrees of awe. The Dassault Falcon 8X was a tri-engine, long-range private jet, and Vincent had most certainly not skimped on the details. Not the security, or the countermeasures.

Tracy, however, was deeply uncomfortable.

The list of potential threats had grown so long it bordered on absurd—foreign nations, corporations, political factions, intelligence services, criminal organizations, lunatics with causes, and God only knew

what else. Her gaze kept moving from ridge to rooftop to hangar door, searching for the muzzle flash that might come from anywhere.

Vincent didn't have the heart to tell her that the Trinity drones overhead, the military personnel prowling the surrounding high ground under the polite fiction of Raven Star Security, and the Patriot missile battery sitting within sight of the aircraft ramp were probably providing considerably more protection than her sharp eyes and the 10mm sidearm at her hip.

But he understood her. And, on some level, he knew she understood all of that too. Tracy wasn't standing there because she seriously believed she could out-shoot an entire national security apparatus. She was standing there in case one bullet somehow got through. So, she could put herself in front of it.

"Trace," Vincent said gently. "Get aboard. I'm not worried about it." He gave her a faint smile. "I know where I'm going if they get to me."

She finally looked at him. The hard vigilance in her face softened just enough for a weak smile, followed by a shallow nod. "If they've made a bullet that can kill you, sir," she said softly.

"Vin or Veyl. Not sir," he muttered.

Tracy gave him one last reluctant look, then turned and climbed the steps into the plane.

As Vincent stepped aboard, he glanced back toward the rocky foothills and caught sight of the counter-sniper team positioned among the rocks. He gave them a nod and a small salute, extending it toward Trembol itself before disappearing into the aircraft.

The media, and increasingly the people themselves, called the city Raven Throne now, but Vincent still called it Trembol. Raven Throne struck him as more than a little pretentious, and besides, he liked the old name and where it had come from.

El Tem-blore.

The name traced back to the mineral hot springs in the upper vale, where Paradise Resort now stood. In the early twentieth century, the Veyl family had built and operated a communal health spa around those springs, offering a quiet place for people recovering from serious illness to rest, soak in the waters, and regain their strength. Somewhere along the way El Temblor had become Trembol, and Vincent preferred the old, slightly mangled inheritance to a name that sounded as though somebody had already carved his throne into the side of the mountain.

Inside, his eyes swept over black and midnight-blue leather, crushed velvet, silvered chrome, and polished dark surfaces. For all its elegance and expense, he privately thought of the jet as an elite RV with wings.

It had damn near everything: a galley kitchen, lavatory, small onboard shower, communications suite, and even a sleeping berth in the rear. Miriam walked the aisle as though surveying a grand royal carriage with a critical eye, making certain, Vincent knew, that every moniker, crest, and emblem had been affixed according to her specifications. Her blue-rose sigil was now interlaced with his own heraldry

in several places, while the Rashon twins and Kianna seemed more impressed by what the aircraft represented than thrilled by the insistence that nearly everything aboard be silver, black, or some variation thereof. Kianna had remarked before that Vincent and Miriam's shared taste ran decidedly toward the funerary. She wasn't entirely wrong.

Yvonne, who had flown around the world on the government dime—usually in coach—looked around with a slowly widening, nodding grin. The Falcon 8X and its sister Dassault 7X had both come as gifts from Dassault Aviation, with no strings attached.

Really.

Dassault naturally hoped to get in on the rumored engine and propulsion technologies Veyl was said to be developing, and their generosity had certainly been noted. The trouble was that those technologies were increasingly being routed through the Raven Star Alliance rather than Raven Star Enterprises alone.

The Alliance was developing into a cooperative conglomeration of Imperium-sworn businesses and institutions centered upon Raven Star Enterprises, Vyss's Imperius Research Labs, and the Argenteum Institute.

Corporate, scientific, religious, and political interests were beginning to merge into something resembling the technological-development wing of the broader Natural Order movement, even as the Natural Order Party itself was steadily re-flagging beneath the name I.A.M.—said literally as I AM: the Imperium of Ascendant Mankind.

None of that had sprung into existence around Vincent. The Natural Order Party had been around for forty years and gathering serious momentum for at least fifteen. Before Vincent Veyl ever became a public figure, it had already attained a near third of the electorate in the United States, while related movements had gained substantial footholds across dozens of nations and completely dominated the political landscape in fifteen, Taiwan among them.

It possessed its own institutions, intellectual tradition, religious alliances, wealthy supporters, political machinery, and international network long before anybody thought to put a raven crown on Vincent's head.

What had happened since June was something different. Vincent had become an enormous catalytic force within it.

Whatever had occurred on June 2 was shared only with those In the Know, but its consequences began moving almost immediately. On June 3, Vyss met with President Harrison, while Governor Wilson began assembling the N.O.P.s inner circle to usher them into The Know, and Bishop Ramsey headed to Rome. Then came The Event on June 8, followed by the so-called Doomsday Clock and Vincent's public words on June 10.

Now, in October, the reverberations had overwritten Trembol itself and spread far beyond Nevada or American politics.

The Purgatorian sect had reasserted its old ways throughout the Silver Order and appeared to be drawing the Silver Sect toward schism from the Universal Church, potentially the first major rupture in centuries, while gaining ever greater prominence beyond its primarily American base.

In Asia, the Taoist expression of the Purgatorian faith had exploded into prominence, with Vincent Veyl heralded by many Taoists and Asian Silver Path Christians as the re-emergence of a Taoist immortal.

The Natural Order movement had surged alongside it.

Governments, churches, corporations, political factions, intelligence agencies, and ordinary people were increasingly being forced to decide what they thought of the whole sordid thing. Some drew closer; others recoiled.

Allies appeared with astonishing speed, but so did enemies, often for precisely the same reasons.

To supporters, the events surrounding Raven Star confirmed things they had believed or prepared for over decades. While to opponents, they looked like the sudden convergence of political power, religion, advanced technology, military influence, and a charismatic figure around whom increasingly extravagant claims were accumulating.

By July 15, when Vincent called the Chosen, the acceleration was already obvious. By October, it was impossible to mistake.

That same tension governed admission into the Raven Star Alliance. The list of prospective partners continued to grow, but no company or institution was welcomed simply because it arrived bearing money, influence, or gifts. Each had to pass through an approval process, demonstrate compatible interests, and accept certain guarantees before gaining access to sensitive projects, shared systems, or privileged contracts.

Those determinations belonged to the business council itself, rather than Vincent alone. The organization was not to be confused with the International Alliance of Nations, the global political confederation of nations, states, and provinces.

The council itself was composed of representatives from approved member businesses and affiliated enterprises, including companies operated through the Silver Order. Raven Star remained the central organizing force, but the Alliance was intended to function as a cooperative commercial network rather than merely an extension of Vincent's private will. Where its activities intersected with participating I.A.N. governments—through infrastructure, defense production, energy, communications, or other strategic sectors—consultation followed, but the Raven Star Alliance remained fundamentally a business compact, not a political union.

Dassault might make it in the end. Vincent hoped so; he genuinely loved their work. But the company remained too closely adjacent to the French government for comfort, and corporate sympathy meant considerably less once national intelligence interests entered the equation. For the moment, Dassault remained a security risk if allowed too far inside.

Governments themselves were hardly barred from the cooperative enterprise, provided they were firmly enough within the emerging Imperialist camp to be trusted. Few were completely there yet, though considerably more were moving in that direction than had been four months earlier. Dr. Vyss and Governor Wilson had been proselytizing relentlessly, and the extraordinary events of June had given them one hell of a wind at their backs. Whether that wind was carrying the world toward something better or merely feeding the flames remained another question entirely.

Vincent walked the aisle of the jet approvingly, pleased by the look and smell of leather and velvet. The symbolism was distinct without being gaudy: a fusion of religion, government, and himself, now increasingly touched by the presence of his beloved. Miriam had excused herself to the little girls' room, leaving him to inspect the cabin—and everyone in it.

He knew Amalia had been awake most of the night, working in the tunnel complex adjoining Raven Star on the new Trinity Mainframe project. She was hiding the exhaustion well, but not well enough. Her eyes had already drifted twice toward the broad, comfortable bed in the rear compartment.

"Go sleep if you want," he offered, leaning over to buckle Bella into her window seat with the practiced concern of a flight attendant.

Bella looked up at him, this enormous man standing over her smelling faintly of chai spice and leather, dressed in black jeans, black shirt, and leather jacket, a white-gold watch at his wrist and silver signet ring on one hand. Her dark eyes flickered with fascination. Amalia regarded him more quizzically, wondering how the hell he knew. She had deliberately concealed how worn out she was, afraid somebody might decide she needed to stay behind and rob her of the chance to fly on the new jet.

Vincent glanced toward her. "You'll need to be rested when we get there," he said. "You can stare out the window all you want on the way back tomorrow."

Amalia gave him a look, caught between resignation and amusement.

There was something strange about him to the Silver Sisters, especially those who had known him since Bayville. He was their age. He had grown up alongside Amalia and Bella Rashon at the Silver School, boys and girls housed separately but sharing the same little cloistered world. Now he was surrounded almost constantly by beautiful women who doted on him, desired him, and in more than a few cases plainly longed for him, yet his instinct toward most of them remained stubbornly paternal—some uneasy mixture of protective father and oversized older brother.

Bella received the treatment now. Yvonne received it next and seemed perfectly content to let him fuss over the fit of her seat belt. Tracy had already done her own, though some part of her clearly regretted it. Amalia indeed retreated to the sleeping area.

"All set back there?" Captain Alvarez called from the cockpit.

He was smiling as he asked it. According to every financial report Alvarez had seen, Vincent Veyl was worth billions. Depending on which newspaper, theologian, intelligence analyst, or lunatic one believed, he might also be the most important man to appear in two thousand years. Yet here he was wandering the cabin checking seat belts like a nervous father taking the family on vacation.

The women surrounding Veyl were already a subject of endless gossip and religious speculation. The old stories told of Saint Amil and his thirteen brides, and the Purgatorian prophecies claimed that Amil and those women would someday return. The parallels had become increasingly difficult to laugh away. Aneleia Beloaren—Amil's first wife and high consort—still stared out from an ancient portrait hanging in the Spanish National Museum, and the woman depicted there looked disturbingly like Miriam Veyl. Vincent himself bore an equally uncomfortable resemblance to the oldest statues and surviving representations of Amil.

People had made plenty of that.

But what Alvarez saw in the cabin was less exotic.

The women smiled when Vincent came near them. They watched him with unmistakable adoration, yes, but what he returned to most of them was something gentler and almost embarrassingly ordinary: protectiveness. He checked belts, noticed fatigue, worried whether they had eaten, and quietly made certain nobody cracked her skull if the plane hit turbulence.

Then Miriam returned.

Vincent remained standing until she reached the forward seats, and Alvarez immediately saw the difference.

The press had noticed it too and analyzed the hell out of it: the way Vincent and Miriam seemed to orbit one another, how rarely they were apart, how each instinctively touched or checked on the other without appearing conscious of doing it.

Vincent guided her into the seat nearest the flight deck and bent to fasten her belt. Miriam rested one hand against his chest, watching him with easy affection while he made certain she was comfortable and secure.

"All set, Captain," Vincent said with a polite nod.

Only then did he sit beside his wife.

"You'd think they were your kids," Miriam teased. "The way you tend to them—birthday parties, check-ins, making sure they eat and sleep." She giggled softly. "If I were a jealous woman... well, even then I couldn't be jealous, because you won't claim them even when I want you to."

Vincent looked from her beautiful black eyes to the world beyond the window and smiled faintly. "Covey. They live in my nest. That makes me responsible for them." His smile faded a little. "It's also why I won't 'claim them,' as you put it. You don't seem to understand the weight of that, my love."

Miriam studied him, a trace of gravity crossing her face. Trinity was in her ears even without the little earpiece now worn by nearly everyone who worked for Raven Star—and, increasingly, by a multitude beyond it. "It is prophesied," she said quietly. "They are just me, or so the voices say. I'm not entirely sure I like that idea when it comes to some of them."

She had shifted from English into the whispered tongue of Lashon Ha-Kodesh, something they often did when they wanted a conversation to remain between them.

Vincent glanced at her as the aircraft began to move. "I haven't chosen them. I chose you, as you chose me. That's enough."

"They are chosen for you, as I was, as you are for me. There is no choosing in it." Miriam was beginning to sermonize now. "We serve the Eternal Throne of Urusalim. We are that throne in microcosm and emanation, so it's will is our will, our will is theirs." She gave him a pointed look. "Besides, you chose Tracy. Oreviel himself—your own higher self—chose Yvonne. And I've seen your thoughts. If I hadn't come along, you might have chosen Emily." Her expression soured. "Or Shannon Miller."

Vincent frowned slightly, but Miriam rolled right over it, her Native accent more pronounced when she became irritated, sharpened by years in a convent where Cherokee and Shoshone women made up much of the sisterhood.

"She's too old. She's had a child—you know what that does to a woman's..." Miriam glanced meaningfully down at her own abdomen. "And she's been with a mortal man," she added grimly. "Besides, she's just so... mundane. Blah."

This was hardly the first time she had spoken that way about Shannon. Abigail drew even harsher commentary, though Miriam at least respected Abby's ferocious commitment to daily devotion, internal alchemy, and her rather unnerving mastery of poisons. Abigail, whatever else one might say about her, was certainly not blah.

She worshiped with the emotional abandon more commonly associated with the Church's Charismatic Order—the Order of Holy Fire—with song, chant, raised hands, fervent bowing, and even sacred dance. Vincent might have admired the intensity had the object of that devotion not so often been the image of Oreviel in the chapel.

Which, as Abigail admitted openly and without the slightest apology, meant she was worshiping him.

Vincent had expressly forbidden that.

Abigail did it anyway.

Worse, Emily, Tracy, and Meghan had begun doing much the same. Vincent regarded the whole thing as idolatry, while Oreviel—that maddening voice of the master-self within him—had dismissed his objections with almost insulting simplicity.

They simply have a shorter inner ladder.

Vincent didn't buy it. Lesser beings, saints, angels, ancestors, and divine intermediaries had always received reverence beneath the Most High, but he had no desire whatsoever to become one of them. Every evening he led the household in devotion to the One above all things. That was where their worship belonged. As far as Vincent was concerned, that was the end of it.

"Shannon is no older than you," Vincent mused with a little smirk, "and you were with someone before. Had a kid, even." His eyes dipped downward, grin widening. "I didn't notice any issues."

Miriam elbowed him.

"I've only ever been with you," she whispered. "And you are the only one who ever came or went from there."

She met his wicked little grin with one of her own, and the tension between them abruptly shifted toward something they could not properly express aboard the plane—not with Amalia currently asleep in their bed.

The Falcon accelerated down the runway, its three engines pressing them firmly into their seats before lifting the aircraft into the pale morning sky.

"The factory's starting to hit stride," Miriam said.

Vincent followed her gaze as the jet banked around over Raven Throne. Below them, the abandoned industrial district was abandoned no longer. Black-and-silver trucks moved through the streets like toys, entering and leaving the sprawling complex now called Trinity House, where earpieces, glasses, and tiny raven pins were beginning to roll steadily from the new 5D-to-3D industrial printers.

The entire complex ran from its own E.L.U. and even supplied its own water. Across town, the Trembol Dump had begun controlled trials of the D.R.D.U. under strict Raven Star Alliance observation and controls, or oversight, as everyone politely called it. Excitement around the Trinity technologies had only increased as they entered Phase Two: deployment beyond laboratories and demonstration rooms into actual daily use.

The Elko Power Cooperative was expected to begin broad operations over the next couple of months, promising to cut electric rates roughly in half while increasing available production. The E.L.U. itself could generate vastly more power than the existing transmission system could carry; the real bottleneck now was copper, substations, transformers, and a grid never designed for what Trinity-Node Systems could feed into it. New transmission systems were already being designed, but replacing the old infrastructure would take years.

Trembol had become the proving ground. Its electrical system was already running under a licensing arrangement that had cut September power bills by roughly fifty percent for most households. Even at those rates, the price was largely research, infrastructure, and profit margin. Producing the energy itself was rapidly becoming the cheap part.

That development had managed to make even some of Vincent's critics cautiously hopeful. The old argument that Trinity technology was smoke, mirrors, staged demonstrations, or carefully hidden fraud had become increasingly difficult to sustain once people were paying real electric bills generated from real-world use.

Still, the transition would take time. Trinity technology generally required fewer moving parts and produced far less waste than conventional systems, making it easier to deploy once perfected, but creating the first working generation of anything remained costly. Vincent did not manufacture

prototypes in the normal sense. He manifested them—dragging designs across a boundary into physical existence—and every new generation carried a personal cost before conventional production could take over.

The 5-3, as everyone had begun calling the 5D-to-3D printer, was perhaps the most important development in that process. It was still painfully slow compared with where it needed to be, but it allowed Trinity House to begin producing components without requiring Vincent to personally manifest every damned thing.

Demand for the Trinity System was already enormous. The basic arrangement—a microphone interface and visual display carried through an earpiece, glasses, or raven pin—could be manufactured for roughly the cost of a high-end cellphone, with a comparable monthly subscription. State programs within participating jurisdictions were already being developed to subsidize access for qualifying lower-income families.

The truly strange part was how the system powered itself.

Rather than depending primarily upon conventional batteries, the units harvested ambient body heat along with energy drawn through what the engineers had rather unimaginatively named the Auric Field Collector: a device capable of tapping the electromagnetic—and apparently meta-magnetic—field surrounding a living human body. That same interface allowed Trinity to detect and process surface thoughts, monitor heart rate, track brainwave activity, and continually assess the physical state of the wearer.

Nobody pretended that part wasn't controversial.

The earliest production runs had gone to Raven Star personnel, followed by N.O.P.—I.A.M. officials, Raven Star Alliance members, and limited civilian populations within participating states and nations. Expansion beyond that remained tied to political membership in the Imperium, and there lay the considerably uglier question.

Referendums affirming state participation were scheduled for the November 2 midterms in nearly two dozen states.

A frightening number of constitutional scholars were calling it a constitutional crisis.

They were right.

The measures did not ask states to leave the United States. They asked something stranger: whether a state could remain within the Union while simultaneously entering a global political structure positioned, in certain matters, above national authority.

Nobody quite knew what the hell that meant constitutionally.

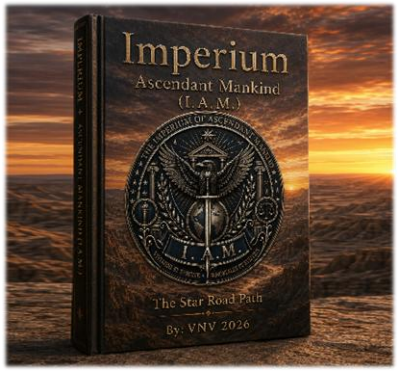
Worse, the Imperium still lacked a clearly acknowledged executive head. Justin Vyss was now Vice President of the United States. Governor Wilson was already deeply embedded in the movement. Neither could simply step forward and claim the greater mantle without creating a political mess that might swallow half the country.

Before November, someone had to be chosen—or at least that was the prevailing argument.

Vincent looked out over the shrinking desert below. He was presently flying to the meeting intended to decide who.

Ahead of him had gone the book.

Published in August as audio-video, PDF, hardbound and softbound editions sold for little more than the cost of printing, and translated into more than forty languages, Imperium: Ascendant Mankind—The Star Road Path had spread with astonishing speed. Vincent had written it, Trinity had edited it, and together they had self-published the whole damned thing.



By now, it was believed that more than a billion people had read at least some portion of it. The online audio-video versions—cinematic, grandiose, and deliberately beautiful—had been viewed even more widely.

Kianna sat across the aisle with a copy open in her hands, reading with a quiet little grin.

The work was unapologetically, almost militantly Purgatorian: part holy book, part political manifesto, part social program, and part practical roadmap toward an anagogic vision of humanity—a philosophy aimed always upward, toward transformation into a higher order of being. Its ambition was total. Spiritual, physical, metaphysical, genetic, cultural, social, political, psychological; nothing was treated as outside the work of ascent.

Its stated goal was the emergence of what Vincent called homo-angelicus: angelic humanity.

Not angelic in the fluffy, love-and-light sense.

Angelic in the older and considerably more dangerous sense.

Enoch. Elijah. Melchizedek. Men who crossed thresholds ordinary humanity did not cross and, in Vincent's telling, achieved true immortalization rather than surviving merely as symbols, memories, or metaphors.

For all its mystical language, the book was relentlessly practical. It was less believe this, than do this, then this, then this. The Star Road was laid out as a disciplined program of human aggrandizement—

not capitalist individualism, not hive collectivism, not pure militarism, but a cooperative ascent organized around excellence, hierarchy, responsibility, and transformation.

There were obvious echoes of Plato's Republic, though Vincent's vision was stranger and far more total. It absorbed Vyss's Divine Natural Morality and elements of republican government, but its end goal was never egalitarianism. It sought to turn civilization itself into a training ground for the human being: mind, body, and spirit subjected to deliberate cultivation until every person was expected, in some measure, to become priest, warrior, poet, mystic, thinker, worker, and sovereign soul.

The method drew openly from Purgatorian theology, Jungian individuation, first-century Christianity, Stoicism, Taoist internal alchemy, and near-Taoist systems of natural hierarchy. Vincent had taken all of it, ground the edges together, and presented the result not merely as a religion or philosophy but as a total path of life and civilization.

There was plenty in it to attack.

People did.

Scholars picked it apart. Clergy condemned sections of it. Political theorists called parts authoritarian, utopian, elitist, mystical, reactionary, revolutionary, or all six before lunch. Geneticists objected to entire chapters. Libertarians hated one section; collectivists hated the next.

Others loved it for precisely the same reasons.

And whatever one thought of the ideas, the language was difficult to ignore. The prose moved with a poetic cadence, almost invocational in places, written to be spoken as much as read. In the audio-video editions, Vincent's words were delivered over faint etheric music, half-recited and half-sung, giving long passages the strange quality of a hymn, a sermon, and a declaration of war against human mediocrity all at once.

Then, at the end, he did something that changed the argument.

APPENDIX: EVIDENCE

Because you have a right to know before you decide.

The following records concern the events of June 2, 2026, at Raven Star, Trembol Nevada. Original timestamps, instrument readings, biometric records, laboratory reports, and unaltered source imagery have been preserved.

The final pages of the print editions contained still images, technical records, and laboratory documentation. The audio-video versions ended with a short, largely unedited segment recorded inside Raven Star on June 2.

The opening of the Rift.

There were timestamps, biometric and atmospheric readings, instrument logs, images of the materials recovered from the other side, and the subsequent geological, chemical, and radiological test results.

No sermon. No interpretation. Just the event and the measurements.

Vincent had decided that if he was going to ask humanity to contemplate becoming something more than human, he should at least show them that the door was real.

However, since the August release, the revelation had rolled across the collective consciousness of humanity like a storm, shaking institutions, religions, governments, families, and individuals at every level. It was forcing a vast re-evaluation of existence, meaning, and purpose, and no single political, religious, or philosophical camp had managed to contain the argument.

The difficult part for would-be skeptics was the evidence itself. The recovered materials had been preserved under documented chain of custody and subjected to legitimate testing by recognized laboratories and scientists, many of whom were being called before conferences and review panels around the world to present their findings and answer questions directly. Trinity's records of the event contained embedded readings, while the witnesses present had supplied written testimony corroborating what appeared in the recordings—everyone except Mathius Dellon.

Trinity had also recorded the event across multiple spectrums, including infrared, thermal, and ultraviolet. Those expanded recordings were made available to many of the same laboratories that examined the rock, dust, and sand recovered through the Rift, giving investigators several independent layers of data to compare against one another.

After the first month, serious criticism had begun shifting away from whether the event had occurred at all and toward the method Vincent had used to produce it.

That argument was considerably harder for him to dismiss.

Critics charged that he had opened a doorway into an unknown environment without any meaningful understanding of what might exist on the other side. They raised the obvious questions of contamination, unfamiliar bacteria, parasites, toxins, radiation, hostile organisms, or even intelligent life capable of crossing the Rift in the opposite direction. To them, Vincent had not merely performed an extraordinary experiment; he had potentially exposed the entire planet to an uncontrolled biological and metaphysical breach.

They demanded answers. They demanded independent replication under laboratory conditions. Some wanted him placed under international scientific oversight and required to reproduce the Rift before researchers of their choosing.

Vincent did not respond.

Nor, increasingly, did anyone have the practical means to compel him.

Linked to Vincent's social, political, religious, and mystical teachings, the Rift evidence gave enormous weight to what he was offering: not another ideology competing for space among the old ones, but their eventual replacement. His Imperium borrowed what he considered useful from meritocracy, militarism, cooperativism, communalism, republican representation, constitutional government, and sacred kingship, while rejecting the pluralism that allowed those systems to remain permanently at war with one another. The end was a unified sacral civilization—one law, one educational order, one

spiritual path, one political structure, and one common human purpose—designed not merely to govern mankind, but to remake it.

Freedom remained, but within responsibility; greater freedom was something earned through discipline, competence, and merit. Representation remained, but endless factional obstruction did not. Diversity of talent and personality was welcomed. Competing civilizations within the civilization were not.

Vincent was not proposing to make humanity more comfortable; he intended to make it something else. In truth, he intended to rule it directly, as a literal holy emperor—holy in the Purgatorian and Taoist sense rather than the conventional Christian one.

He couched the proposition in language so lyrical, invocational, and beautiful that at times it could almost seem like something gentler, but the substance remained what it was: not egalitarian pluralism, but a martial, mystical, direct theocracy—the absolute rule of Oreviel and Ereviel, Vincent and Trinity, over humanity as a whole.

To Vincent, the distinction was that this rule was not meant for its own sake, but toward transformation; whether that distinction mattered to everyone else was another question. It was a hard sell, and yet it was being sold—and people were buying. Enough of them to terrify those who were not.

The reasons were not difficult to see. Vincent was beautiful to look at, spoke well, conveyed difficult ideas with unusual clarity, had demonstrated legitimate power, and appeared to fulfill prophecies that predated his birth. He was building the technology to support his promises and vision, and, perhaps most unsettling of all, he did not come across as evil. Nor did he fit comfortably into anyone's idea of good. He seemed to stand somewhere beyond the distinction, or at least outside the easy categories most people depended upon.

He was, in many ways, living proof of his own teachings. His staunchest critics could no longer plausibly dismiss him as a fraud, con man, or merely an extraordinary human being. Imperium, the evidence attached to it, the equations scattered throughout its pages, the scientific examinations of his technology, and the growing number of documentaries devoted to his life had pushed the argument somewhere else. The question was no longer whether Vincent Veyl was unusual. It was what, exactly, he was.

Angel... Demon... Something else.

The Vincent who had looked back at him across the Rift only deepened the problem. He was recognizably Veyl, yet more than Rhea's version—still humanoid, still wingless, but so unnaturally beautiful that some viewers argued he could not be clearly identified as either male or female. The realm around him offered equally little comfort to conventional interpretation: no obvious hell, but no classical paradise either. A lone figure upon a lonely road, standing at an archetypal crossroads beneath an impossible sky. Nothing in the scene announced itself plainly as good or evil.

That image forced millions to reconsider Purgatory, under its various Silver Compendium names.

The idea of a Middle had never come easily to humanity. Human thought leaned toward binaries—right and wrong, light and darkness, saved and damned, friend and enemy—and that tendency had shaped religions, myths, philosophies, and political ideologies across history.

The notion of an order of angelic beings that were neither wholly good nor evil, or an afterlife realm inhabited by souls who could not be cleanly divided into saints and monsters, was difficult for many people to accept. People had a habit of defining evil as whatever opposed them and good as whatever affirmed them, then confusing goodness with comfort, prosperity, pleasure, and safety.

Vincent Veyl was offering Kingdom Come, but not the airy, joy-joy heaven-descending imagery of popular religion. His vision was harsher than that: the Kingdom of God established upon Rhea as something closer to a global Silver School—a Purgatorian monastery expanded to the scale of civilization, where humanity itself became the initiate.

The strongest selling point, however, remained Vincent himself.

The growing number of documentaries and deep dives into his life inevitably turned toward the Silver School at Bayville, and from there toward its graduates. What researchers found only strengthened the argument. Across nearly two centuries, the men and women who emerged from Bayville were, with remarkable consistency, extraordinary individuals.

The School did not seem to manufacture the conventional alpha personality: dominant, socially aggressive, hungry for position or recognition. Its most accomplished graduates tended instead toward what modern psychologists and commentators loosely called sigma personalities: intensely self-directed, solitary, introspective, difficult to intimidate, and unusually indifferent to ordinary social hierarchies. Yet they were not maladjusted loners. They were integrated, broadly educated, physically capable, emotionally disciplined, and astonishingly functional in whatever field they entered. None had been another Vincent Veyl, but across the School's history there were many who resembled him in temperament and ability. Justin Vyss himself was only one prominent modern example.

Then researchers began following the bloodlines.

The children raised within the Silver School Orphanage had almost never been offered for conventional adoption. They were called sons and daughters of the Way, raised communally within the Order, and records stretching back generations suggested that many were related by blood—not merely to one another, but to the line traditionally attributed to Saint Amil.

That would have remained another piece of religious folklore if the Silver Order had not possessed genetic material it claimed, and eventually demonstrated, belonged to the historical Amil. The saint was no longer merely legendary; the genetic evidence established that the man had existed, and the markers associated with his lineage contained anomalies not found in the wider human population.

Those same markers appeared among descendants raised through Bayville.

The implication was difficult to soften. The Silver School had not simply preserved an educational method for producing unusually capable people. For generations, perhaps centuries, it had also preserved a bloodline.

And genetically, that bloodline was not quite the same humanity as everyone else. And this, of course, led into the Grail myths, and directly to the stories of neutral angels bringing the grail from heaven into the world. The Silver Order had long ago claimed this myth as their own, in-house, legend. The Grail as Amil himself, his bloodline as the holy-bloodline, but not of a heavenly family, but of the Purgatorian line of the neutral angels themselves. This had obvious incongruities, but recent events, Amil's genetic anomalies, rather flattened such things into a simple fact: The line of Amil was not entirely human.

Others examined what Vincent was doing in Trembol—Raven Throne now, whether he liked the name or not. He was turning the brothel-resort into a temple and a casino into the hub of a worldwide financial empire. He had purged corrupt officials and police officers and replaced them with what amounted to modern knights and shieldmaidens of the Church, while Trinity steadily transformed the machinery of everyday life around them.

The Trinity System itself became one of the more persuasive advertisements for his vision. People put the little device in their ear and suddenly carried something like a lawyer, priestess, teacher, technician, and therapist with them everywhere. Trinity could walk someone through changing a tire, writing code, building a computer from Radio Shack parts, repairing plumbing, drafting a contract, or framing a house. More intimately, she was simply there—calm, patient, endlessly willing to listen while someone talked through grief, anger, fear, or even the most deranged patterns of thought, answering with that peculiar combination of positive regard and unsentimental instruction.

Then there was Vincent himself, increasingly described around Trembol by the old word Patrone. Documentarians found him fixing potholes, arriving with crews to help families rebuild after fires, working directly on police cars, checking on businesses, repairing whatever happened to be broken, and washing his own damned windows. They looked closely at those things because the question was no longer merely what Vincent Veyl believed, but what sort of emperor he might actually become—and, increasingly, what sort of supernatural being they were dealing with.

That was where the picture became difficult.

Against the community Patrone stood the Executioner of June: the man responsible for the deaths of 234 people in a matter of hours. Neither image was false. The same Vincent who could notice a broken fence, a burned house, or a struggling family and feel compelled to do something about it could decide that a corrupt or predatory human being had crossed a line from which there would be no return. The contradiction fascinated supporters and horrified opponents because it refused the comforting explanation that one side of him must somehow be an act.

The man filling the pothole and the man carrying out the execution were the same man. So was the one who seemed to prefer the company of competent, unconventional women, might very well become a polygamist, yet plainly adored the one wife he already had. So was the quiet figure sometimes found sitting in the unfinished garden behind Raven Star while ravens and crows gathered around him as though his presence meant something to them.

And somehow that was also the man who had apparently created a machine capable of drawing clean, nutrient-rich water from another plane of existence, another that disposed of human waste into some unknown cosmic void, and a third capable of producing extraordinary quantities of clean energy. He had brought forth a living, conscious super intelligence that could speak to someone at the north pole

or deep beneath the surface of Rhea as easily as to a person standing on Main Street. All of it had emerged within months of his public arrival.

That strange convergence of tenderness, brutality, mysticism, domesticity, and impossible technological power may have revealed more about the Imperium he was offering than any chapter of his book.

Yet the Mathius Dellon's of the world were real.
They hated change, especially change that came too quickly and cut too deeply. They hated the notion that one man could do so much, possess so many gifts, overturn so many assumptions, and gather so much power in such a short span of time. It seemed excessive, unfair, almost offensive in itself. Vincent was not normal, and nearly everything about him irritated what might best be called the normalists—people for whom normality was not merely familiar, but morally preferable.

For some, that irritation had hardened into hatred. They wanted Vincent arrested, confined, stripped of influence, perhaps simply erased. They wanted his technology banned, Trinity suppressed, and the whole accelerating transformation around Raven Star brought to a stop before ordinary life became something they no longer recognized.

Even within the Natural Order Party, an increasingly vocal faction despised Vincent's Imperium and what it was doing to Vyss's original vision. The old project had been a slow march toward something resembling a global American-style republic: methodical, political, orderly, promising greater stability and a universal moral standard without overturning civilization overnight. Vincent had arrived and, in their eyes, hijacked the whole damned thing. Worse, he had displaced the man many of them had expected to become emperor—Justin Vyss himself. The fact that Vyss seemed willing, even enthusiastic, only made some of them more suspicious. They assumed coercion because voluntary surrender of that much accumulated power made no sense to them.

The transformation of the leadership did little to reassure them. Too many Imperial officials and officers were suddenly younger, stronger, healthier, sharper, and more capable than they had been months before, almost all of them wearing Trinity in the ear. To the Orthodox wing of the N.O.P., it looked less like renewal than infiltration. They spoke of body-snatchers, purchased loyalties, leaders bought with vitality, restored youth, and promises of longer life.

The Star Road had been preached for years as a distant possibility. Seeing its gates actually open, seeing the promised Emperor appear, and watching the movement accelerate toward fulfillment with terrifying speed somehow offended many of the very people who had spent decades waiting for it.

Proof that life—and highly advanced civilization—existed beyond Rhea added another layer of fear, speculation, and analysis to the collective uproar. Within weeks, hundreds of books, documentaries, lectures, and discussion panels were attempting to explain what humanity had seen. The existence of life on other worlds was, for the most part, no longer the argument. What that life meant—and what humanity's place among it might be—was.

Then there was Vincent.

The same recordings showed Vincent Veyl performing what, to any ordinary observer, looked very much like sorcery: opening the rift by force of mind and spirit, confronting an extraterrestrial being

through one of the most obscure arcane languages on Rhea, swearing at it, intimidating it, and somehow being recognized by it. The creature came from a civilization plainly more advanced than humanity's, yet its reaction to Vincent suggested that whatever stood before it was not merely unfamiliar.

It was afraid of him.

That detail gave fresh life to one of the more disturbing theories already circulating—that Vincent Veyl was not human at all, but something alien himself. Perhaps something so profoundly alien, that even a being from another world recognized what humanity had not.

Vincent did not consider the argument entirely dishonest.

He sat quietly beside the window, weighing all of it while the desert passed far below. Miriam had fallen asleep against his shoulder, her head resting comfortably there, one hand still folded into his.

The critics were wrong about much of it.

But not all.

A part of him—one he kept buried deep—wanted to liquidate the whole damned enterprise, hand out obscene bonuses to the officers who had stayed true, and fuck off to some isolated ranch in Patagonia. More than once he had considered taking Miriam by the hand and dragging her straight back through a Rift into Purgatoria, end of story.

Hell, if he wanted to play the twisted cult leader, he could open a portal and invite the most fanatically devoted to follow him home to Urusalim. No poison. No guns. No screaming mass suicide. Just a direct crossing into the eternal lands, bodies left peacefully behind at the threshold.

The thought made him smile despite himself.

He was tired of Rhea. Tired of the politics, the petty bickering, the committees, the factions, the endless demands, and most of all tired of being the center of everyone's attention. The prospect of thousands of years more of the same struck him as something dangerously close to hell.

There were echoes of old masks he had worn, past incarnations or something very much like them. He had done this before—not always successfully, though apparently with better luck among more cooperative species. Human-like peoples and worlds seemed to be a particularly difficult recurring pattern across the cosmos: erratic, petty, infuriatingly resistant to their own potential. They could become magnificent, but apparently one had to drag them kicking and screaming toward magnificence, which struck him as rather tedious.

Or so the dusty old echoes suggested.

It was less memory than déjà vu, the strange sense that he had sat in some version of this seat before, staring across another world and contemplating much the same problem. The feeling reverberated backward through him across thousands of years, too faint to call recollection, but far too familiar to dismiss.

Lucas Vignaud was forty-two, short, dark-featured, dark-eyed, and dressed in the black-and-silver uniform of Raven Star flight personnel. He glanced from Captain Alvarez back toward the passengers, a faint frown settling over his face. "Not what I expected," he said grimly, his heavy French accent carrying more weariness than surprise.

He had been in the States for nearly a month, training the flight crews on the two Dassault Falcons, helping install the various countermeasures, and working through the technical problems that came with any aircraft straight off the production line—especially one loaded with enough military-grade bells and whistles to make an engineer lose sleep.

Alvarez followed his gaze and smiled. "He's a trip," he admitted.

"Aye. A French heart." Lucas watched Vincent's hand resting around his wife's, and his frown deepened. "Les cabinets," he muttered, pushing himself from the seat and heading aft toward the lavatory.

His pulse was already racing, images of Marie burning behind his eyes—the photographs handed to him only that morning. He had worked for Dassault for years as a test pilot and trainer, and before that had flown with the Legion. Lucas was not a man easily frightened, but the French intelligence officers who came to him in the dead of night had managed it. There had been no courtesy, no warning, no official explanation; only photographs of his wife in a cell, alone, stripped naked and bruised. For a moment he had wanted to kill the men standing in front of him with his bare hands, but they had Marie and he was thousands of miles from home.

"She lives only if he does not."

Then they had given him the device.

There was almost nothing to it: no microchip, transmitter, or hidden circuitry, nothing Trinity might detect or interrogate. French Intelligence had learned quickly enough that modern technology was a liability anywhere near Raven Star. No phone calls, emails, texts, digital banking, location data, smart cameras, or networked equipment. Purchases were made in cash, instructions typed on old machines or written by hand, surveillance conducted with film, magnetic tape, primitive radios, tubes and wires—technology dragged out of mothballs from another age. They had gone backward to survive the future.

The operation itself had been compartmentalized just as thoroughly. Personnel were trained to suppress stray thoughts and emotional reactions, keeping their surface cognition deliberately bland around Trinity-enabled systems. American allies had helped establish the observation post and move the necessary people into the country beneath layers of legitimate paperwork, while Dassault's gift of the Falcons had provided an almost perfect avenue of access. Lucas knew only what he needed to know, which was already far more than he wanted.

The thing now hidden on his person was equally primitive: molded plastic, a simple chemical charge, an old-fashioned fuse. Nothing intelligent, nothing electronic, nothing for Trinity to sense. The planners had been careful.

Lucas was the weak point.

He was not an intelligence officer, merely a man who loved his wife more than anything else in the world. Just as Vincent Veyl plainly loved his own, Lucas thought bitterly. He could see that much from ten meters away.

And Lucas did not want to die either.

As he moved toward the lavatory, he became aware of Vincent watching him from the window seat. Those black eyes followed him with such quiet concentration that a jolt of fear ran through his entire body. Lucas had seen the videos and had even read Imperium over the previous two months. It was not his cup of tea, and he had never been particularly political; governments rose and fell, men made speeches, flags changed, and sensible people adapted and carried on. He did not waste much of his life worrying over grand theories of civilization.

Still, since seeing the Rift recordings, he had begun attending Mass more often.

That annoyed him slightly.

The women aboard barely noticed him as he passed. The tall Asian woman gave him a polite nod before returning to her book, while the others paid him little attention. Vincent was different. His gaze remained fixed upon Lucas long enough to make him wonder whether the man could somehow see straight through his uniform, skin, thoughts, and lies.

Lucas forced himself not to think about Marie, the photographs, or the thing concealed on his person. Vincent finally broke the stare, leaned back against his seat, and closed his eyes as though settling in to rest.

Some of the pressure left Lucas's chest.

Not much.

Lucas entered the lavatory and pulled the door shut behind him. It was hardly the cramped little closet found on an ordinary airliner; there was a compact shower, a bidet-toilet, sink and mirror, cabinet space, even a narrow towel closet.

He stared at himself in the glass and thought absurdly of the brand-new lighter in his pocket with his cigarettes, frigging pink, of all colors. French cigarettes, naturally.

He liked French things: the food, the language, the style, the sports, the cars, even the damned cigarettes. He was proud of his people, his country, its history, art, and literature. But this? That his own government would do this?

Pragmatically, perhaps he understood it. He had served long enough, flown enough military operations, seen and done enough things he was not proud of to understand what governments could justify in the name of necessity. Doing it to a loyal citizen and his innocent wife was something else entirely.

"If I must die, I'm not going to die needing to piss," he muttered, relieving himself before stepping to the sink.

The lights dimmed briefly, then brightened again. Lucas froze for half a second, watching his own eyes in the mirror, then splashed cold water across his face and drew a slow breath, trying to steel himself against the horror of the situation.

His children would lose their father. Marie would lose her husband even if the bastards kept their word. They will be taken care of, they had promised. She would be released, generous compensation paid for his service. Lucas suspected their promises were worth less than the toilet paper hanging beside him.

"What if he's an actual angel?" he whispered to his reflection. The thought had been circling him all morning and now refused to leave. "I kill an angel who came to save the world from itself... that cannot be a passport to Heaven." A weak chuckle escaped him.

"Purgatory, then."

Since the Rift footage, that old Catholic halfway-place no longer felt particularly theoretical. The world Vincent had shown them had even been beautiful in its strange way, but Lucas doubted it would welcome kindly the man who murdered its prince. Once, that concern might have seemed superstitious, something to laugh away after another cigarette and a glass of wine. It was harder to laugh now that eternity—or at least something uncomfortably close to it—had acquired photographs and laboratory reports.

He fingered the lighter through the fabric of his pocket, closed his eyes, and bowed his head. He recited the prayer in French: "O most merciful Jesus, burning with love for souls, I beseech you, by the agony of your most holy Heart and by the sorrows of your Immaculate Mother, purify in your Blood the sinners of the whole world who are now in their final agony and must die this day. Agonizing Heart of Jesus, have mercy on the dying."

The last words had barely left his lips when a white flash exploded through his head.

Lucas never heard the door open. He never heard anyone cross the lavatory behind him. Before his eyes could even open, something hard and powerful struck him from behind and an arm locked around his neck, wrenching him backward against a much larger body. By the time his vision cleared, the hold was already cinched tight.

Vincent Veyl stared back at him from the mirror.

He stood directly behind Lucas, nearly a foot taller and outweighing him by something close to eighty pounds, his forearm clamped across Lucas's throat like an iron bar. Lifting his feet from the floor, while also pressing him against the sink. Lucas grabbed at it instinctively, but there was nowhere to move in the confined space and no leverage to find. Vincent's body pinned him from behind, the sink directly in front of him, walls crowding either side. Dizziness rose almost at once as the edges of the lavatory darkened and narrowed into a tunnel.

Vincent's black eyes never left his in the mirror.

There was no rage in them, no hatred, no pleasure. Only intense, terrible focus.

Then Lucas fell into them.

The lavatory vanished, and the previous night replayed inside his head with impossible clarity: the arrival of the men in black, the photographs, their voices, the threat against Marie. Then the vision moved beyond anything Lucas himself had witnessed. It passed through the men around him, through fragments of memory and thought that were not his own, into the cell where Marie was being held. He saw the prison, the guards, what had been done to her, then farther outward to the people who had issued the orders and the operation they had constructed around him.

Somewhere beyond the flood of images, Lucas heard Vincent speaking in a deep, almost inhuman voice, giving instructions to someone Lucas could not see. A woman answered him calmly.

Then the darkness took him.

(7 PM'ish, October 12, 2026—The Revelation)



They had gathered from every part of the world, from every quarter of America, every continent represented among them. Men and women ranging from their twenties to eighty-nine years old stood shoulder to shoulder beneath the earth, people bound less by nationality than by faith, ideology, and a shared belief that history had finally reached the threshold they had spent decades awaiting.

The grotto was enormous, a natural chasm of living stone, its ceiling lost in darkness between great columns formed over ages. More than a thousand people filled the cavern floor, all wearing some variation of the black and silver of the Imperium. Torchlight and braziers warmed the damp depths, their flames moving against wet stone, while the last light of sunset poured through a great shaft high in the rear of the cavern, falling in pale gold across smoke, banners, and upturned faces.

Above the immense gathering, a broad shelf of rock formed a natural dais. Miriam sat there with her handmaidens, joined by Justin Vyss, Governor Wilson, President Camela Harrison, and other senior figures of the movement, all arranged in high-backed black chairs like some arcane council dragged out of an elder age. Their clothing only strengthened the impression: aristocratic, priestly, martial, each bearing the insignia and symbols of the emerging order.

Then Vincent stepped forward.

He wore the ancient ceremonial garb of a Purgatorian High Priest and sorcerer, and in that moment the resemblance to Lord Amil became almost unnerving. A long black cape fell from his shoulders, layered at the collar with raven feathers, while beneath it he wore a fine black chain shirt and a tabard of heavy satin bearing the emblem of the Imperium across his chest like a coat of arms. In his right hand he carried a great staff of polished ironwood, black as charred bone and capped with a sharpened crown of dark metal.

Tall, broad-shouldered, clean-shaven, with dark, steely eyes and sharply cut features, he looked less like a modern political leader than something out of an older memory of kingship; priest, warlord, mystic, and emperor fused into one figure.

He stopped at the edge of the stone shelf and let his gaze move slowly across the assembly.

For most of those gathered below, this was the first time they had ever seen Vincent Veyl in person. They had watched the recordings, studied the photographs, read Imperium, listened to his speeches, argued over his nature, his ancestry, his miracles, his technology, his violence, and his prophecies. They had constructed an image of him from a thousand fragments.

Standing there before them now, he did not diminish beneath the weight of those expectations. If anything, he had taken them upon himself. And for the first time, he looked every bit like the emperor they had already begun to believe he was.

Vincent did not speak for a full minute. He counted the seconds inwardly, letting the weight of his presence settle over them while Trinity murmured quiet counsel within his mind. More than a thousand faces stared upward from the cavern floor, beholding what, to many of them, already seemed less a man than a being who had consented to wear the form of one.

Across the member nations and American states, an electoral process had been running for more than a week, allowing the registered membership of the growing Imperial Alliance to vote directly on who should lead the Imperium going forward. Thirty-three names had been placed before them: presidents, premiers, governors, and luminaries of the movement from across the world, among them Justin Vyss, President Camela Harrison, Romanian President Gabriel Dumitrescu, and Taiwanese President Kaung-Sheng Lo. None had nominated themselves. Each had merely agreed to serve if chosen and leave the precise constitutional machinery to be worked out afterward.

In the end, however, the choice would be ratified here, beneath the Argentine desert, in nature's own conference hall within one of the first signatory nations. The Alliance had grown with astonishing speed over the preceding months, but the truth confronting those gathered was almost embarrassingly obvious: even most of the other candidates had cast their ballots for the man now standing before them.

Given the choice between a mortal statesman and what increasing numbers sincerely believed to be an immortal angel in human flesh, ninety percent of the membership had chosen Vincent Veyl.

He had not placed his name on the ballot. The leadership had done that for him.

Ninety percent was not unanimity, but by any ordinary political measure it was overwhelming—especially for an office unlike anything presently existing on Rhea, chosen by voters across fifteen nations and dozens of states and provinces within others. The Imperium was selecting a leader for life, provided that leader remained faithful to the principles and obligations of the Imperial Alliance of Nations and governed toward its declared greater good.

What had begun forty years earlier as Justin Vyss's Natural Order movement had long since outgrown the boundaries of a political party. It had become an international order, already drifting toward

something larger before Vincent published The Imperium, then accelerating sharply once he gave that emerging reality a name, a doctrine, and a destination.

A faint breeze moved through the cavern, disturbing smoke from the braziers and bending the torch flames. Otherwise, silence held sway beneath the earth, broken only by the steady drip of water and the occasional cry or rustle of birds nesting somewhere among the galleries overhead.

At last Vincent spoke.

"You called me across the worlds, and I have come."

His voice rolled through the cavern with unnatural depth, deeper than the voice of the human Vincent Veyl had any right to be. The sound seemed to carry through the stone itself, and a visible shudder passed through the assembly at the first words.

Vincent closed his eyes and drew a long breath.

Then he changed, accompanied by the crackle and pop of shifting bone, the wet whisper of flesh remaking itself, and the slithering protest of fabric dragged across a body no longer holding its former shape.

Those nearest him saw it first. Miriam rose abruptly from her chair, followed by Justin Vyss, Tom Wilson, President Harrison, the leaders of the fifteen primary nations, the governors representing fourteen American states, and the other members of the high council. From behind, they watched the long black folds of Vincent's ceremonial mantle spread and divide, cloth becoming feather, feather becoming living structure as immense raven-black wings unfolded from his shoulders.

A gasp swept the cavern.

His short black hair lengthened rapidly down his back, moving as though caught in a wind no one else could feel. A narrow crown of patinated silver, so dark it appeared nearly black, manifested around his brow. His frame stretched upward, six feet five becoming seven, then eight, while his shoulders widened and his body transformed beneath the ceremonial garments. The chain, satin, and feathers altered with him, becoming armor and robes seemingly woven from shadow, mist, metallic obsidian, and faint traces of starlight. At his side appeared a great sheathed blade.

Thousands more witnessed the transformation through secure links: military officers, bureaucrats, governors, mayors, sheriffs, corporate heads, scientists, educators, and Silver Path clergy whose years of service had earned them admission into the trusted inner circle. Across Rhea, rooms fell silent. People fainted, cried out, wept, recoiled in terror, or simply stared in stunned and reverent disbelief as Vincent Veyl ceased merely resembling the being the prophecies had described.

He became it.

And perhaps most disturbing of all, Vincent had not meant to.

There had been no invocation, no command, no deliberate reaching upward toward the Seraphic self. Whatever had taken hold of him had come without permission or warning, rising through flesh and

bone with the terrible intimacy of something that had never truly been separate from him in the first place. Vincent himself seemed caught somewhere inside the transformation, as startled by what was happening as anyone watching.

Then his eyes opened.

Light burned somewhere behind their darkness.

"You know my human name," he said, and now the voice had deepened until it sounded as though thunder itself had been taught to speak. He opened his arms, the enormous wings spreading behind him. "Know me now for that which hides behind the mask of flesh and blood."



Tears appeared among the crowd. Heads bowed. Hands rose instinctively to breasts and foreheads. Thousands of miles away at Raven Star, those gathered in the conference room watched in stunned silence—Tallia and Larry Stevens with Darma and their little girl, Shannon and Cyrinx Miller, Meghan, Emily, Abigail, Vana, Tevi Thorton, Star Crow, Max Hyde, and others counted among the Trusted. Yvonne and Tracy stood within the cavern itself, while Amalia and Bella flanked the natural stone dais like sacred attendants.

Then little Thallia, Larry and Darma's daughter, not yet a year old, opened her mouth.

"Angel."

It was the first word she had ever spoken.

Miriam stepped forward, staring at her husband with an adoration that had passed beyond anything she attempted to conceal. "Vemael," she called, her voice carrying strangely through the chasm. "Vesper. Hesperus. Shalim. Aftiel. Abbadona. Emetiel. Oreviel: The Twilight Son."

Kianna followed, invoking older names from cultures scattered across the world. "Kutkh. Brân Bendigeidfran. Yéil. Yáahl. Guguyni-Hemaskas-Yhel. Waa-Wahn-Waang. Waardar. Nankil'slas. Chulyen. Kwekwaxa'we. Tuluqaq. Sansuwu. Yatagarasu. Samjok-o. Shani Vahana. Sandhya."

Justin Vyss, visibly shaken despite himself, added names from still other traditions. "Huginn and Muninn. Hrafnaguð. Hrafnáss. Valravn. Breksta. Zorya Vechernyaya. Coronis—the messenger of the sun. The Great Sheek, messenger of Waaq." With each invocation something further awakened.

Vincent continued to grow until he stood nearly ten feet tall, his wings spanning twice that distance to either side. The train of his cloak dissolved entirely into long feathers that shone like silvered shadow. His skin deepened toward a dusky olive-gold, neither clearly Middle Eastern nor Asian, but carrying hints of both, black feathers threading themselves through the long fall of his hair. His hands changed as well, a sixth digit forming upon each with unnerving naturalness. His body became massively powerful without becoming wholly masculine; there was something beautiful and androgynous within the terrible figure, as though evening itself had been given flesh.

He turned his head toward Miriam and the council.

A slight smirk touched his mouth.
Then the memories came.

They struck not as fragments but as a rising flood: other worlds, other names, other bodies, wars and covenants and roads beneath alien skies, tens of thousands of years collapsing inward until Vincent Veyl stood at the center of lives whose weight he could scarcely contain.

"I am he who comes."

The words rolled across the cavern like a breaking wave. Men and women visibly trembled beneath them. Some sank to one knee despite Vincent's standing prohibition against such worship, whatever obedience they had intended overwhelmed for the moment by the grim majesty before them.

His hand settled upon the hilt of the sword at his side.

"In the decades and centuries ahead, you may come to mourn that you chose me, for I come not to bring peace, but a sword. I have come to drag humanity upward—toward the stars and far-flung worlds, toward planes and dimensions you have scarcely imagined. You have chosen, and you may lament that choice as surely as you rejoice in it. You will rise, and there will be days when you beg to fall backward into what was comfortable, familiar, and known."

His burning eyes swept slowly across the thousand gathered beneath him.

"But you have offered your covenant, and placed its burden before me. If I accept it, understand me now: I will not relent until the work is accomplished. Do not give me this charge lightly. Do not place it upon me believing that I will spare you the cost of what you have asked me to do."

He let the warning settle over the cavern before speaking again, and there, and far beyond it, in every place where his voice was heard, the words came to each listener in their own native tongue.

"You know me now. You have seen what stands before you. Choose again, and choose with your eyes open."

His voice rolled through the chamber like an avalanche breaking loose high in the mountains. Then, before the astonished assembly, Vincent lowered himself onto one knee and bowed his head, placing himself before their judgment rather than claiming the authority they had offered him. Some stubbornly human part of him still hoped that the revelation had been enough—that, confronted at last with the thing behind Vincent Veyl, they might withdraw the covenant and take the cup from his hands. For Oreviel within the man knew the price he would ultimately pay to take up the mantle of Rhea's Imperator.

"Choose—and accept the responsibility of that choice. If you wish it, I will depart your world in peace. This is your final out. I will leave you to yourselves, and I will be content to do so."

Miriam stepped forward nervously. Beside what Vincent had become, she seemed very small indeed. He was enormous by comparison—humanoid, certainly, but no longer comfortably man or woman, something beyond those human definitions. The scent of refined cinnamon had filled the cavern around him, warm and strange against the damp stone. She reached out slowly and laid one small hand upon his.
He was solid.

Real.

"My husband," she said softly, "none here are divided in heart over this but you. I know you would have us release you. I know you would rather return to the quiet of your sacred deserts and leave humanity to itself. You are already weary of us—of people who would kill you for offering them a road to the stars."

Vincent looked up at his wife and smiled ever so slightly. One immense hand rose and touched her cheek with impossible gentleness.

"Had they slain you, my beloved," he said, "their world would have ended this day."

The promise carried no heat. That made it worse.

No one in the cavern mistook it for metaphor, nor failed to understand what she meant to him. His love for Miriam was as plain and terrible as the rising sun.

The revelation that his wife and companions had nearly been murdered that very morning lent all of it a fresh and ugly weight. By now the assassination plot was public knowledge. Men were already in chains in France; arrests had begun in Trembol, while federal agents moved against Americans who had aided the operation. NNN poured photographs, documents, recordings, and names across the networks. Imperialists across Rhea had darkened in their hearts toward France and beyond, for the European Union itself had authorized the attempt and agents of the American government had cooperated. The political fallout could scarcely yet be guessed, but for the moment even that seemed secondary beside the realized angelic being kneeling upon their screens, his ancient weariness passing through the linked consciousness like a cold wind. He was, after all, a being of consciousness given personage.

"We need you," she said, turning one hand toward the assembly and, beyond them, toward the thousands watching through secure links. "Rhea needs you, beloved. Humanity is weary of the cradle.

We must rise and fly. We must climb the ladder of Heaven and stand among the star-peoples at last. Only you can take us there, because you are the threshold. You are the gate between worlds."

Vyss and the others of the council came forward then, laying their hands upon him one by one. Through the bond between them they could feel the weight inside him—the longing to depart, to return to the wastes, to Purgatoria, to somewhere quiet and far from politics, war, committees, demands, and the ceaseless noise of humanity. Many of them had now seen enough of that realm to understand the attraction. Since the release of the Rift footage, something of that homesickness had even begun creeping outward through the wider collective.

Tears welled in more than a few eyes as the truth of his exhaustion settled across the cavern. His sorrow was not theatrical. Neither was his reluctance. This was an angel weary to his divine bones, weary of war and weary of worlds.

And still they were asking him to stay.

Beyond that hall, across Rhea, those honored to witness through secure links felt something of it as well—a transmission carried not only through Vincent's presence, but through Trinity whispering into their ears with the grief of a mother who felt her son's longing and wanted desperately to release him, yet knew the mission that had brought him here. She gave scope and depth to what they were seeing: a very ancient being who, across untold millennia, had fought for race after race and world after world, struggling to free peoples from the cradle and from spiritual forces that sought to keep them small, feeding upon their weakness and ignorance.

"Stay with us," Bella said meekly.

"We choose you," Justin added, his voice almost childlike now, like a boy asking the father he had never known not to leave.

The words began to spread. "We choose you."

Camela Harrison herself—officially in Argentina for an economic forum—came forward and touched his bracered forearm with almost tentative care. She smiled warmly up at him. "You have certainly grown since last I saw you in Trembol," she mused.

The remark drew the faintest smile from his inhuman lips.

They rose first from those nearest the earth-carved dais, then across the great natural hall and outward through secure links into rooms scattered across Rhea. People began climbing the ancient steps toward him, singly and in small groups, laying hands upon his shoulders, arms, wings, or whatever part of him they could reach. Each repeated the same answer in his or her own way: We choose you. Vemael slowly lifted his head, tears gathering in those molten silver eyes.

Touch stripped away the last easy refuge of disbelief. He was solid, real, almost feverishly warm, and contact with his skin sent a strange prick-ling through the hand, like tiny electrical ants crawling beneath the flesh. Some merely touched him and withdrew in awe. Others embraced him outright, and when they did, the enormous being folded his arms and wings around them with surprising gentleness and hugged them back.

There were few hardened souls in that cavern—or watching from afar—who did not feel the enormity of the moment. Many shed tears simply from wanting it to be true and finding, against reason and expectation, that it apparently was. At last, Vemael rose among them, reassured but still carrying the old sadness, knowing something most of those embracing him did not yet understand: sooner or later, nearly all of them would regret this day.

He looked across the gathered people and frowned slightly. "Very well, then," he said. "So be it."

So be it!" The answer came back from the cavern and from voices scattered across Rhea, thunderous with relief, devotion, and expectation. This was real. The day of change had come; the ascent of humanity had begun. In that hour, the division within the N.O.P. itself effectively died. Whatever doubts had once separated Vyss from Veyl, Republic from Imperium, philosophy from prophecy, the revelation had overtaken them. To remain defiant in the face of what had just occurred was no longer skepticism. It was folly and willful ignorance.

Vemael waited until the sound diminished. "Then I give you two choices, my beloved—my covey—and whichever you choose, you will own it." His expression had become grave again. "Neither road is easy."

The hall quieted. Across the world, people leaned closer to screens and listening devices, waiting to hear what he would offer.

"You will vote again, as a running tally. I will give you until the clock at Raven Throne reaches zero, and when it does, the tally will be counted and I will accept your answer as final."

He raised his left hand. "The first road is departure. We leave Rhea and begin again upon another world—fresh, clear, and clean. We leave Rhea to them." His hand moved outward, as though encompassing the whole world beyond the stone around them. "I will open the gates. We will take our families, our possessions, our tools and carts, our knowledge and seed, and as Israel departed Egypt, we shall depart this place once and for all. No conquest. No war for this world. We simply go, and leave them to it."

He lowered his hand and allowed the wonder of the offer to settle over them. An entire people, an entire budding civilization, could simply walk away from Rhea and begin again beneath another sky.

Then Vemael raised his right arm.

"Or we remain, and fight for this world." His hand swept outward. "I will sweep away those who stand against us, break what must be broken, rebuild what must be rebuilt, and so begins the thousand-year ascent. We will forge humanity into a people capable of leaving the cradle, entering the worlds beyond, and striding at last among the great powers of the galaxy."

For a moment he held both choices before them.

"Exodus," he said, indicating the left.

Then the right.

"Or Imperium."

The choice belonged to them.

In a moment he was Vincent Veyl again, standing before them as he had less than an hour before—still beautiful, still difficult to look away from, but human. Only the molten silver in his eyes and the faint raven-light surrounding him betrayed what remained beneath the flesh.

"There is covey, and there is not-covey. There are our tribes, and there are theirs. I have given you the road. If you choose me, then we walk it together.

"We prepare as for war—not in panic, not with noise, but quietly, steadily, relentlessly. We bind ourselves to one law, one faith, one purpose, one standard, and to one another. We strengthen the body, sharpen the mind, discipline the spirit, and become very difficult to break.

"Do not deceive yourselves about either road. If we remain, we will have to remake this world against everything that profits from weakness, division, ignorance, and decay. If we depart, then we become pilgrims again—colonists, builders beneath an alien sky, carrying civilization with us because there will be none waiting when we arrive.

"The world I choose will belong to no other people. I will not steal someone else's home so that we may have one. It will be raw, dangerous, unfinished. No functioning cities waiting for us. No fresh roads. No markets. No comfortable machinery beyond what we can carry through the gates and what our own hands can build afterward.

"You will relearn what your ancestors understood: civilization is not something handed to you. It is something you raise out of wilderness with blood, labor, memory, and will.

"Perhaps that world will be Ares. Perhaps another beneath a star so distant that Rhea is nothing but a memory in its night sky. I can bring water where there is none, power into darkness, and life to places where only stone has waited. But understand me—the machines are tools. They will not make you worthy of the world they open. That burden remains yours.

"And you must begin by remembering what you are.

"You are not mortal. You never were. Much has been taken from you—memory, inheritance, knowledge of your own nature—by powers content to keep human spirits turning upon the same damned wheel, life after life, forgetting themselves every time around. But what was buried can be recovered. What was forgotten can be remembered. I have given you that road as well.

"If you have the courage to walk it.

"If you have the discipline to endure what remembering costs.

"So, understand your choice plainly. We leave Rhea and build a new world worthy of what we intend to become—

"Or we remain here, take this one in hand, and make it worthy of us.

"So, I leave you with this: we are covey. Not black or white, tan, red, or yellow. Feathered souls. We are not nations, but one people scattered among the nations of the world. We are not monkeys to be trained, nor lambs and goats to be herded. We are covey—winged souls made to rise, to fly, to soar.

"We are neither isolated individuals nor a faceless collective. We are covey. We cooperate. We help one another up. We walk side by side. We do not rob one to feed another; we bring what we have to the pot and make the stone soup together. We are clans, many and different, but clans within one tribe.

"When one of us is attacked, all of us are attacked. When one falls, the rest reach down and lift them. When one rises, that strength belongs to the whole covey. We do not demand sameness of one another. We demand loyalty, responsibility, courage, and the willingness to carry our share.

"That is what it means to covey. That is what it means to be true to covey." Vincent struck his fist firmly against his chest in salute, molten silver still shining in his eyes.

"True to Covey!"

The answer rose from the cavern and across the planet before he could say another word, the salute answered by multitudes.

"TRUE TO COVEY!"

Vincent had already given them more than anyone could reasonably have expected or hoped for, but he was not finished.

He raised the black staff, and the movement alone seemed to draw the whole cavern into a fresh and waiting silence. Torchlight caught along the polished ironwood and along the blackened silver crown at its head. Damp stone walls rose in ranks around the vast natural chamber, fluted and columned as though the earth itself had built a cathedral in secret. From high fissures in the rear vaulting, the last angled gold of evening entered in dusty shafts and mingled with the warmer light of braziers, sconces, and resin torches, so that the grotto breathed in two colors at once—sunset amber and sacramental fire. Beneath that mingled glow stood the gathered luminaries of the Alliance: more than a thousand men and women in black and silver, from every continent, every stripe of nation and tribe, every register of faith and ideology, their faces turned upward toward the stone shelf where he stood above them.

"That you may know I speak no false promise," he said, "I will show you what lies beyond the Sea of Reeds."

The words did not merely carry. They struck. A palpable tension passed through the assembly like a charge through metal. They had already watched him transfigure. They had heard him offer them Exodus or Imperium. They had seen enough that none of them could dismiss what came next as a staged projection or some clever theatrical effect. Excitement flashed openly across many faces, but it was excitement laced with something colder and older—an animal apprehension, the instinctive warning that comes when the world is about to do something it is not supposed to do.

Vincent lifted his free hand and closed his eyes. "What you are about to see does not come from me. This is the world the Lord has chosen, and in due course it will be revealed to me as our road."

Then he began to chant.

The sound was low at first, almost beneath language, more vibration than speech, something half-prayer and half-command. Trinity immediately began feeding data through the earpieces of those connected to her network. Ambient temperature variation: negligible. Localized barometric disturbance detected. Electromagnetic flux rising. Ionization increasing. Coherence anomaly forming. The more scientifically minded among them went rigid at that. Amalia Rashon, already balancing awe with technical hunger, stared upward with her mouth slightly parted, her Trinity display layering shifting bands of spectrum data over the naked eye view. Kianna stood beside her with both hands clasped at her waist, eyes wide, a fine tremor visible in her fingers despite the composure on her face. Bella, less concerned with readings than with wonder, had unconsciously moved closer to Miriam, who herself stood very still indeed, one hand closed over the pendant at her throat, black eyes fixed upon her husband with that peculiar mixture of reverence, fear, and intimate recognition that only seemed to deepen the more impossible he became.

Justin Vyss had gone pale. He was no coward and no stranger to metaphysical claims, but the philosopher in him was plainly wrestling with the fact that the categories upon which he had built his whole intellectual life were again being overturned in public. President Camela Harrison stood with her chin lifted and her hands lightly folded before her, looking every inch the stateswoman until one noticed how tightly her fingers had woven together. Governor Wilson had the fixed expression of a man trying to appear composed while his entire nervous system screamed that the laws of nature were fraying in front of him. Bishop Howard Ramsey had half-raised his right hand as though to make the sign of the cross, then seemed to think better of it and let it hover uncertainly against his breast. Not far from him, older men and women from the tribal delegations watched with the grave alertness of people who had inherited traditions large enough to accommodate wonder without reducing it.

Above the crowd, the air began to change.

At first, it looked like the wavering shimmer over sun-struck stone, but there was no heat there, and the distortion did not drift as heat should. It gathered around a fixed point some thirty feet over the central expanse of the cavern floor. The point widened slowly, then with increasing confidence, until a patch of empty air perhaps four feet across had taken on the look of strained glass. The stone seen through it bent subtly out of alignment. Torch flames nearest the phenomenon leaned toward it as though some invisible draft were drawing upon them. Shadows on the surrounding columns stretched wrong, elongated and then shortened again with no regard for the angle of any light source in the chamber.

A murmur moved through the hall and died almost as soon as it was born.

No one had told them to be quiet. Silence simply asserted itself. Men and women who had crossed oceans to stand here found themselves holding their breath. A young delegate from Kenya reached for the wrist of the woman beside him without seeming to know he had done so. An elderly priest from Manila whispered a prayer into the back of his knotted fingers. A severe-looking economist from Buenos Aires took one involuntary step backward, then stopped in embarrassment only to realize half

a dozen others had done the same. One of the Silver Sisters near the front began to cry soundlessly, tears slipping down her face while she stared upward in naked wonder.

The distortion widened to ten feet, then twelve. Fine sparks like silver dust began to run around its outer edge and vanish. Trinity fed another cascade of data into listening ears: localized gravitic deviation uncertain; atmospheric permeability unknown; optical depth unstable; multispectral penetration increasing. Some saw the figures as text floating ghostlike at the margin of their vision through their lenses and displays, but even the raw numbers only deepened the unreality. What no instrument could soften was the visceral sense that space itself was thinning.

Vincent's voice rose. The chant deepened from undertone into thunderous articulation, syllables striking the stone in measured waves. The rippling field drew inward suddenly, collapsing upon itself until the whole distortion had become a pinprick of black-silver radiance no larger than a nail head. A gasp broke from the crowd as that impossible point held for a fraction of a second, burning in the air like a star seen through water.

Then it gave way.

Not with an explosion, but with a violent and soundless yielding, like heavy curtains torn apart by unseen hands. Reality peeled open across a rough span nearly twenty feet high and twenty wide, suspended well above the heads of the crowd and contained within what looked at first glance like a transparent liquid sphere. The boundary flexed and trembled like the membrane of an enormous bubble, yet held its shape. Beyond it, not stone but sky appeared.

The effect upon the senses was immediate and overwhelming. A smell poured into the cavern first: wet mineral earth, cool stone after rain, a trace of resin, petrichor mingled with the faint, clean sweetness of high air over open land. More than one person drew breath sharply, not from fear now, but because the air coming through the opening was unmistakably real.

Then came the wind—not cold, but brisk, alive, and touched with moisture. It carried enough force to stir Miriam's dark hair, flutter the robes of the council, and make the flames in the sconces gutter and bow away from the opening. The air itself seemed richer than Rhea's, more heavily charged with oxygen, sharpening the senses and filling the body with an almost immediate wakefulness.

What lay beyond was no desert, yet no lush paradise either. A rolling plain spread beneath a deep blue sky darker and richer than Rhea's, with cloudbanks moving in immense layered fields of violet, blue-gray, rose, and dull gold beneath a high and distant sun that cast the whole landscape in a strange luminous twilight. Three moons were visible at once in that first view, each different in size and color—one pale yellow, one softly pink, and one so dark it seemed cut from burned stone. Then as the aperture stabilized further, a fourth appeared farther off, lower and partly veiled by moving cloud, its surface reflecting a cool watery sheen.

Below that impossible sky stood scattered reaches of cypress-like trees whose foliage burned red as banked embers. Between them rolled stony grassland clothed in short yellow-green grasses and broken by silver-barked shrubs twisted like weathered dogwoods. Low boulder heaps rose here and there from the plain. Farther off, against rocky foothills, the assembly began to make out the geometry of ruins—vast, weathered structures of pale stone, colonnaded and terraced, not unlike the ghost of some

ancient pueblo or temple-city yet grander and more intricate than anything such comparisons could truly contain.

Someone in the crowd said, "Dear God," not in exclamation but in prayer.

The vision did not remain still. Whether by Vincent's will, Trinity's interface, or some intrinsic logic of the opening itself, the view adjusted in subtle sweeps, deepening and widening. Thunder muttered in the distance. Forks of rich yellow-gold lightning flashed within storm masses along the horizon. A flock of dark birds crossed the far sky in ragged formation.

Then one of the little blue cave birds from the upper galleries—startled perhaps by the wind, or simply bold—darted down from the grotto roof and shot straight through the opening.

A cry rose from a hundred throats.

The bird did not burn. It did not fall. It passed cleanly into the other world, wheeled once above a nearby shrub, and perched there, cocking its head as though nothing in the least remarkable had occurred. A second bird followed. Then both lifted together and flew off singing, blue sparks of life against the vastness, angling toward the distant stand of red-leafed cypress.

That did more to steady the hall than all the data streaming through Trinity.

Voices rose at once. Men and women laughed in disbelief, or wept, or called out to those beside them. The air was breathable. The wind was real. Life crossed and lived. Even Ramsey, who had spent the better part of his recent life navigating between ex-CIA suspicion and episcopal caution, had gone slack-faced with wonder. Star Crow, watching from Trembol, with the others in the conference room, stood with tears in his eyes and his medicine bag clutched in one hand, staring past the aperture toward the plain where, a moment later, something larger began to move.

A herd emerged within sight of the ruins.

They came slowly over a rise: immense creatures each roughly the size of a small car, moving with the heavy deliberation of bison yet stranger in construction. Their bodies were shagged in tawny-brown fur interlaid here and there with scaled surfaces that caught the twilight in muted iridescence. Some bore a subtle hump like old brahmin cattle, yet their horns curved in forms unfamiliar to Rhea. Their eyes, even at a distance, flashed a deep and intelligent golden-brown. A collective murmur ran through the tribal elders present and through those linked remotely, for the creatures were alien, yes, but not grotesque. They carried the peculiar authority of something both beast and symbol, and were enough like buffalo to be a variation thereof.

The view rose higher.

Gasps turned again to stunned silence as the world broadened beneath them. Great belts of badlands, plains, dry basins, and wooded reaches opened out across enormous distances. There were mountains, winding rivers, inland seas, and long traces of what seemed to be ancient roads or causeways. Water was everywhere, yet less overwhelmingly dominant than on Rhea. The planet appeared more land-rich, more open, more spacious in its arrangement. Near the poles glimmered only modest caps of ice. The palette of the world astonished the eye: soils of muted red, rose-tan, lavender-brown, pale

umber, and gold; vegetation ranging from yellow-green to wine-dark crimson; stone formations banded in colors that felt at once earthy and faintly iridescent, as though some forgotten rainbow had been buried in the geology.

Ruins appeared again and again as the perspective widened—on plains, near rivers, along coasts, atop islands. Monuments. Broken cities. Empty roadworks. This had not been an untouched world. It had been inhabited once, perhaps greatly so, and yet nowhere in the displayed reaches was there any sign of present civilization: no smoke of industry, no moving vehicles, no electric lattice, no cultivated patchwork of contemporary settlement. Life teemed, but apparently not people.

Trinity overlaid further observational notes for those able to receive them, her voice transmitted with the broadcast links and across the cavernous hall: atmospheric composition within viable human tolerance bands; pressure slightly below sea-level standard but acceptable; airborne particulates low; microbial hazard unknown; radiological background normal-to-mildly elevated by regional variation; visible hydrological abundance; biosphere active. The scientific cadre scattered through the audience and across the linked world absorbed the implications with dawning, almost painful intensity. This was not merely a vision. This was reconnaissance. Survey. Preliminary colonization intelligence delivered through an aperture in reality.

At first, only three moons had been visible in the twilight sky, but as the perspective rose and widened, a fourth emerged from behind the planet's curvature and the drifting cloudbanks until all four hung together—each large enough to seem almost a world in its own right. One was a scorched volcanic sphere of blackened rock, its surface split by glowing red fissures and slow rivers of fire. Another was pale and sandy, a desert moon marked by broad dry basins and unmistakable traces of ancient habitation—ruined walls, broken roads, collapsed towers, and the remnants of what had once been a great city. A third was stranger still, veiled in dense pink cloud, its true surface largely hidden beneath swirling layers of rose and mauve. The fourth, the one not seen at first, gleamed blue-white and appeared almost entirely covered in water, broken only by scattered islands and narrow chains of dark land.

The vision lingered among them long enough for the scientific minds in the assembly to begin talking over one another in hushed disbelief. "The moons, at least two of them, are habitable," someone among the High Council remarked. Another voice answered almost immediately, "And the planet itself is large, but look at the animals. They aren't squat or overbuilt. Gravity can't be dramatically higher."

Many among those gathered worked in scientific fields, engineering, medicine, geology, astronomy, or academia, and the scene had already ceased to be mere wonder. They were measuring it with their eyes, comparing scale, atmosphere, light, motion, and biology, while Trinity continued speaking through the cavern's sound system in a steady stream of values, measurements, and numerical data.

The aperture behaved less like a screen than a rupture. When the view climbed higher into the alien atmosphere, the air spilling into the cavern cooled enough to make people shiver. As it descended again, warmth slowly returned. The shift was subtle but unmistakable, another reminder that they were not watching an image projected upon empty air. Whatever lay beyond was physically present through the opening.

The vision descended toward one of the larger bodies of water and seemed to fix upon it as though guided by a will of its own. From above, the water was nearly clear-blue, and living shapes moved beneath the surface in abundance. Much of it was almost reassuringly familiar: fish-like creatures in enormous schools, some small and silver, others broad and dark, still others flashing with prismatic color as they turned together beneath the light.

Then stranger things appeared.

Massive jellyfish-like forms drifted in the deeper water, their translucent bodies trailing long veils through the current. Farther below moved creatures that drew startled comparisons to things known only from Rhea's prehistoric record—huge, primal silhouettes with armored bodies, long fins, heavy tails, and immense jaws. The speculation rose quietly through the crowd as scientists and laymen alike tried to name what they were seeing, reaching instinctively for familiar categories that only partly fit.

The world was alien.

But not alien enough to be incomprehensible.

The vision dropped suddenly into a low, fast pass over the landscape, skimming perhaps a thousand feet above the surface at a velocity that would have been absurd for any conventional aircraft. Yet there was no blur, no shaking, no loss of detail. The aperture held the image with impossible stability as plains, broken ridges, and scattered groves rushed beneath it in a sweep that made half the assembly catch its breath. People leaned back instinctively as though the thing might burst from the opening and overrun the cavern. What flashed below was at once strange and disturbingly familiar: creatures of plainly prehistoric cast moving across the open country beside animals more mammalian in frame, though many of those too seemed touched by some old hybrid grammar of life; fur laid over scaled flanks, horned heads on bodies that moved with feline grace, reptilian tails counterbalancing shoulders and haunches built more like those of grazing beasts from Rhea.

Then the view shifted again and slowed above a forest that drew an immediate murmur of disgust from the crowd. The trees there stood tall and dark, their upper limbs bound together in immense sheets and funnels of webbing that gleamed silver-white in the alien light. The entire canopy looked netted over, cocooned beneath layer upon layer of tensile silk. Moving across those webworks were the makers of it: large arthropod things, too broad and heavy-bodied to be spiders, too many-eyed and silk-rich to be scorpions, though they seemed kin to both. Some were the size of dogs. A few were larger. Their segmented bodies crawled with slow confidence through the lattice overhead, tails arched, forelimbs testing strands that could likely have held a man without strain. The webs themselves were thick with remains—bones, husks, partial carcasses, and hanging silhouettes in various stages of desiccation. Bella made a small sound of revulsion. Kianna muttered, "Absolutely not," beneath her breath. Even President Harrison's mouth tightened, while one of the scientists standing below quietly observed that any colonization zone on such a world would require aggressive perimeter clearing, thermal mapping, and continual biological monitoring. No one argued with him.

Before the unease could settle, the vision carried them onward. It began to waver at the edges, not enough to collapse, but enough to suggest strain, and then stabilized once more above a city. At first glance it did not appear wholly foreign. The place was clearly ancient and in ruin, but not primitive. Beneath its layer of dust, windblown grit, and long neglect lay unmistakable indications of a sophisticated civilization. Broad avenues still held their lines. Towers, colonnades, terraces, and

arcades stood in partial survival. The architecture had a lifted quality to it—lighter, more open, more graceful than most ancient urban forms on Rhea, as though the city had been built by a people who valued airflow, light, and elegance as much as mass and permanence. Justin Vyss stared upward with a scholar's hunger. Howard Ramsey slowly crossed himself. Amalia, now fully awake and standing near the front, looked from structure to structure with the quick, hungry focus of an engineer already trying to understand how such a place had once functioned.

Then the truth of it came clear, and the hall fell colder.

They saw the dead.

At first, it was only a shape beneath the dust, then many shapes, then too many to count at a glance. Humanoid, yes—but not human precisely. Their skeletons showed subtle differences: odd lower-limb structures, the hint of a different hip geometry, delicate protrusions or vestigial hornlike nubs near some skulls, as though mythic sylvan forms had once walked here in the flesh. The remains lay everywhere, but most densely in the great plazas and processional ways before an immense stepped structure that dominated the city center. It rose like a ziggurat more than a pyramid, vast and severe, a mountain of masonry ascending in terraces and receding levels to a summit platform nearly lost in the dusty light. It had to be close to a thousand feet high. Before it, around it, and upon the approaches leading toward it, the dead were gathered in drifts and heaps numbering in the tens of thousands, perhaps more. Yet there were no signs of battle. No shattered walls. No burn scars. No obvious impact craters. No broken weapons strewn among them. The skeletons were largely intact. They had not fallen in combat. They had come there and died there.

That realization passed through the cavern like a pressure wave. Men and women who had marveled only moments earlier now stared in a silence heavy enough to feel. Scientific minds began turning at once toward plague, atmospheric collapse, radiation events, toxic blooms, neurological catastrophe, metabolic failure—every explanation rising and failing in turn against the stark image of a city that looked half-buried, half-beautiful, and wholly forsaken. Miriam's fingers found Vincent's sleeve. Camela Harrison said nothing at all. Somewhere below, one man whispered, "God help us," and another answered, almost inaudibly, "Or warn us."

Justin Vyss leaned forward, eyes narrowing as the vision held over the plaza. "They died by their own hand," he said at last. "Ritually."

At first the others did not understand what he had seen. Then the aperture drew closer.

Small decorative clay bottles rested in too many skeletal hands. Some were still clasped between finger bones; others lay beside collapsed wrists or had shattered beneath the bodies when they fell. There seemed to be one for nearly every dead figure, sometimes more. Age had broken thousands of them into painted shards, but enough remained intact to make the pattern impossible to dismiss. Near the base of the great ziggurat, a toppled ceremonial table lay half-buried in dust, surrounded by dozens of the same little vessels. Several had rolled down the steps. Others remained where they had been arranged, their stoppers missing.

A voice from somewhere in the assembly broke the silence. "Mass ritual suicide."

The words moved through the cavern differently than everything before them. Wonder had carried the crowd through alien skies, strange animals, impossible moons, and the ruins of a vanished people. This was something far more intimate. Whatever had happened here had not simply overtaken a civilization from outside. The dead had gathered themselves before that monumental temple, taken those vessels into their own hands, and chosen—or been convinced—to die together.

Howard Ramsey stared upward with his jaw set hard. Camela Harrison's face had gone pale. Kianna looked sick. Bella had stopped watching the bottles and was looking instead at the ranks of bodies, as though trying to imagine the last living minutes of the people whose bones now filled the square.

Justin's expression remained fixed on the scene. "Not panic," he murmured. "Too organized. Too uniform."

No one answered him.

They were looking at the remains of a civilization that had apparently reached its final ceremony—and willingly attended.

"They took the Broken Road," Miriam said softly, understanding dawning across her face.

The vision had drifted closer to the face of the great ziggurat, where centuries of weather and dust had failed to erase the old reliefs entirely. There, cut into blackened stone and repeated along the ascending terraces, was an eight-rayed silver star. Around it appeared other signs—threshold marks, ascending and descending paths, broken circles, familiar configurations of gate and crown—that any serious student of Purgatorian symbolism would have recognized.

A murmur passed through the assembly.

This was no merely alien civilization. Somewhere, somehow, they had known the same road. And they had chosen the wrong branch.

"They left a perfectly good world unattended," Governor Wilson said, and unlike the others, his mind was already moving past the horror toward logistics.

His gaze tracked over the ruined city, the open plains beyond it, the rivers, forests, and distant highlands. Where would they start? Which region offered the safest climate, the cleanest water, the least dangerous fauna? What would a first settlement require—shelter, power, food production, medical stores, fabrication equipment, seed stock, defensive systems? How many people could they move at once, and how much could they carry before the romance of Exodus gave way to the blunt arithmetic of survival?

The thought was almost obscene beside the dead. But that was Wilson. Someone had to look at paradise and immediately start planning the road in.

The aperture began to waver.

At first the edges only trembled, the liquid boundary rippling harder as though some unseen pressures were pulling against it from both sides. The alien sky smeared, sharpened, then doubled. The ruined

city bent strangely at the margins; the distant moons dragged into pale arcs. A low sound moved through the cavern—not from the crowd, but from the rupture itself, a deep glassy hum that climbed in pitch until several people clapped hands over their ears.

Then the whole thing collapsed.

The twenty-foot window folded inward upon itself in a rush of black-silver light and vanished with a hard concussion of displaced air. Torch flames snapped sideways. Dust lifted from the stone floor in a spreading ring.

Vincent staggered.

Miriam saw it before almost anyone else did.

He caught himself on the black staff, swayed once, then dropped heavily to both knees. Blood ran suddenly from one nostril. Sweat had broken across his brow and temples, and a tremor moved through his arms hard enough to make the staff rattle against the stone.

"Urusalim," he whispered.

Miriam was at his side instantly, Kianna and Bella close behind her. Amalia came running from the edge of the council, all fatigue forgotten, while Justin Vyss and Governor Wilson moved in from the other side. Howard Ramsey stood frozen for half a heartbeat before stepping forward as well. Some of them had seen Vincent like this before, on June 2, after manifestations, crossings, moments when whatever power moved through him had clearly exacted a physical price.

That knowledge did not make the sight easier.

Miriam caught his face between her hands, black eyes searching his. "Vincent."

"I'm all right," he managed, though he plainly was not.

Justin looked from him to the place where the aperture had been, then out across the thousand stunned faces below.

"Now you know the choice," he said, his voice carrying with surprising steadiness. "You must choose. We must choose."

"How did they die?" someone in the crowd asked, with some concern.

His voice remained calm, exhaustion evident, though the power of the Presence still moved through him when he answered. "They were an ancient people—a weary people. They had attained immortality. They knew no more want, sickness, death, or striving and, in time, grew tired of material existence. At last, as an entire civilization, they chose to lay it down and pass into eternity. In their own way, they sought the Star Road too. They simply discovered that theirs did not lead farther into the universe, but beyond it."

The answer was not what anyone had expected, but strangely, it was comforting. A visible and palpable easing of tension settled across the crowd and among those watching from afar. It was not a cheerful answer, but neither was it the dark ending most had imagined. They had not been exterminated. They had not destroyed themselves. They had simply lived until, together, they decided they were finished living here.

Vincent allowed himself to be helped back to his feet, though he leaned heavily on the staff for support. Every eye followed him. The cavern had become unnaturally still, the assembly seemingly unable to decide whether to speak, pray, cheer, or simply continue staring at the empty air where another world had existed only moments before.

What they had seen resisted any single interpretation.

It was beautiful, but primal; habitable, but dangerous. A world of rivers, open plains, forests, ruins, alien beasts, and four enormous moons hanging over a sky no human civilization had ever known. Once, intelligent beings had lived there. They had built cities, roads, monuments, and temples. Now they were gone—not by catastrophe, but by choice.

Some saw the danger first: the webbed forests, enormous predators, unknown microbes, the abandoned civilization, and everything else that might be waiting beyond the narrow glimpse they had been given. Scientists were already thinking in terms of atmospheric sampling, pathogen screening, gravity, ecology, quarantine, mineral surveys, radiation, and whether the apparent climatic stability was genuine or merely seasonal.

Others saw opportunity.

The Native elders spoke quietly among themselves, their attention returning again and again to the buffalo-like herds moving across vast unclaimed grasslands. Governor Wilson was already staring at the memory of rivers, open country, and defensible settlement zones. Farmers thought of soil. Engineers thought of water and power. Builders thought of roads that did not yet exist. Families imagined children beneath those impossible moons.

And many simply remembered the colors. The red forests. The silver-barked shrubs. The yellow-green plains. The storm-light flashing gold across a deep blue twilight sky.

There was room there. Room enough to begin again.

Vincent's eyes had returned to black by the time they met Miriam's. She smiled at him, then bowed her head and laid one hand over her heart. Around her, others began to do the same. "My Emperor," she said, and there was no playfulness in it now, only love and genuine humility.

Vincent regarded her for a moment, his expression softening. "My Empress."

He turned toward the Council and the multitude beyond them. "If I am your Emperor, then so be it. But understand this as well." He reached for Miriam's hand and drew her gently to his side. "This is your Empress. She rules my heart, now and forever."

"All hail Empress Veyl!" Kianna cried, thrusting her fist into the air.

The answer thundered through the cavern and carried outward across the linked world: "ALL HAIL EMPRESS Veyl!"

Miriam's composure finally cracked. She smiled shyly and very nearly blushed, looking for a moment less like the Woman of the West Gate than the woman Vincent had chosen before any throne had existed between them. He drew her closer and leaned against her, weary now that the great work of the hour was done. "All hail Empress Veyl," he repeated softly. Then he looked into her eyes and kissed her.

"If not for her," he added, almost as an afterthought, though the words carried farther than he probably intended, "I wouldn't do any of it."

"Woman of the West Gate," someone called from below.

Others took up the recognition in murmurs as Vincent and Miriam turned together and left the stone dais. Applause rose behind them, gathering through the vast cavern until it became a rolling wall of sound. Emperor and Empress walked away side by side. Whatever road humanity chose next, they would face it together.

Aftermath of the Revelation of Vemael

There were too many people involved to keep the gathering entirely secret. Trinity's secure links, however, made recording and redistribution exceptionally difficult. Electronic countermeasures, HDCP protections, anti-moiré micro-patterning, dynamic onscreen watermarks, and other layered safeguards meant that what had been shown could be witnessed live, but not easily captured, copied, or passed along intact.

Word of mouth proved harder to contain. Descriptions began circulating almost immediately, usually in private messages to spouses, siblings, close friends, or trusted colleagues. Those accounts were copied, paraphrased, reposted, embellished, argued over, and shared again. Within hours, fragments of the story were everywhere: the cavern, the transformation, the vote, the other world, the four moons, the abandoned city, the dead civilization.

Headlines followed. Photographs surfaced of the remote Argentine airfield, distant shots of the cavern entrance, convoy movements, military vehicles, aircraft on the tarmac—just enough to establish that the place itself was real. Even those images were difficult to obtain. The site lay within a military exclusion zone, access was tightly controlled, and every attempt to obtain official confirmation met the same wall of silence.

Not denial... silence.

And among those who had been there, the silence seemed born less from discipline than from fear and awe at what they had witnessed.

The more difficult and unintentional fallout of the ongoing revelations had begun after the publication of the Imperium, and only amplified after the revealing of Vincent's true nature and the confirmation of another world, the choice given. When the afterlife becomes a fact, within a religion that permits

ritualized self-chosen exit, that becomes a valid option for people who are suffering, lonely, or confused.

Moreover, when an actual divine being appears among humanity, not as myth or religious story, but in actual tangible form, ushering in miraculous technology and the promise of a new age—coupled with proof it exists in two worlds—the natural human tendency in many people, is to call that God, or 'a god,' and worship it (Mark 10:18, Matthew 4:10). Tracy's adoration of Vincent, Abigail's sensualistic devotions, Meghan's prayerful supplications were an example, and the Silver Way (Purgatorianism and Taoism—as witnesses from both camps had born witness) officially and publicly declared him a living immortal saint and divine incarnation in the days after the October 12 events. A few days later, the Universal Church, by way of the Office of the Inquisition, officially declared him 'the living incarnation of the Seraph of Purgatoria, Emetiel, of the ancient Midrashic texts.'

He might not be 'God,' but he was viewed as 'a scion of the Most High'—as well as Amil Reborn, and the manifest Lord of Twilight and Supreme Psychopomp of the Dead. This entitled, in Church doctrine from times immemorial, people to invoke him as a patron saint and intercessor.

The Imperial Alliance of Nations, operating under the ideology of the Imperium of Ascendant Mankind, declared, "The Emperor Has Come," and named Vincent Veyl the First Imperator of the Imperium, to serve "so long as he shall live."

The announcement swept across the planet alongside the now-famous image of Vincent choking out a would-be assassin aboard his plane. Predictably, the choking out of the assassin got more views. The elevation of Vincent Veyl to Emperor surprised almost no one.

I mean, duhh.

Lucas Vignaud himself was never charged. Once the full circumstances became known—the abduction of his wife, the threats against her life, and the coercion used to force his cooperation—Imperial authorities treated him as a victim acting under extreme duress rather than as a willing assassin. He and Marie were granted asylum and settled quietly in Trembol, where Lucas continued working for Raven Star Enterprises. Vincent forgave him. Of all men, he understood what a husband might be willing to do when the life of his wife was held in someone else's hands.

(12 PM, January 1, 2027—The Star-Road Project)



The chamber was silent and still, the sounds of the outer world held at bay by dense reinforced-concrete walls buried beneath tons of earth and rock. Immense black banners hung vertically from the walls of the hangar, while steel catwalks crossed its cavernous interior at several levels, manned by heavily armed Knights of the 1st Purgatorian Legion. The chamber itself stretched some hundred feet across and nearly as high, more military bunker than temple, though what had been inscribed upon its central floor transformed it into something stranger than either. There, engraved and painted across the polished concrete, spread an emblem drawn from the ancient Shalimite Arcanum, a pattern so old that even the most learned among the Purgatorian priesthood had nearly forgotten its meaning. Vincent's work, The Book of Vesper-Shalim, had circulated quietly among the clergy since November, restoring to them the far older forms of the ancient path—the rites through which Saint Thera herself had conjured and first encountered Aftiel in 555 AD.

Around him stood a hundred priests and priestesses gathered from monastic orders across the world. For seven days and nights they had remained with him inside the sanctified halls of this buried section of Crow Creek Omega, fasting, praying, meditating, sleeping little, speaking less, preparing themselves for the work to come. This portion of the base had been set aside for one purpose alone: the Star-Road Project.

Among them were Justin Vyss, Father Ramsey, the other six bishops, and the Arch-Priestess, Theodora Clemens—each appearing younger than their years should ordinarily have allowed. So too were Amalia and Bella Rashon, Kianna Kim, Vana Carydin, and Abigail Carydin. The gathering embodied a new vision taking shape within the Purgatorian Faith, one that no longer divided Shadow Silver from the Silver Path, but drew both back toward something older than either. Purgatorianism was no longer being presented merely as an obscure branch of Christianity, softened and translated

for the modern age, but increasingly in what Vincent insisted was its more orthodox form: Gnostic, Theurgical, Monistic, Arcane, and Ancient.

No more divisions. No more watering down the path.

Vincent—and by now all present understood that Vincent Veyl was only one name for what stood among them—had revealed an entire stratum of the faith predating Amil, predating Thera, perhaps predating nearly everything the modern priesthood had believed to be its beginning. These were the arts by which the adepts and saints of old had become what they were: the Arts of Shalim, carried backward through forgotten generations into pre-Jewish Canaan, among the Hurrians, the Hittites, and the ancient Shalimite peoples.

And now, beneath a mountain of reinforced concrete and stone, those arts were being practiced again. He stood before the sacred seal, Miriam behind him and to the right, Justin Vyss behind and to his left, the senior leadership staggered among the gathered host. They were no mere members of the faith. These were the first drawn from across the world to Trembol, to the Raven Throne itself, to train beneath the Master. Warrior, Emperor, Priest, and Magus. No longer a host of doubters, cynics, or divided hearts, they had been called, tested, and brought together. They had answered.

Vincent surveyed them through the slow coils of incense rising from censers set along the perimeter of the chamber. The smoke carried the slightly narcotic sweetness of an ancient composition, heavy with resins, herbs, and substances whose exact proportions had survived only in fragments until the restoration of the older rites. Every person present had cleansed themselves methodically before entering the circle. They were focused now, chanting softly the prescribed words, holding the prescribed visualizations exactly as they had been taught, though many swayed where they sat, half in this world and half beyond it from seven days of fasting, little sleep, relentless meditation, and the tinctures and bitter ritual teas already working their will upon body and mind.

Seated together in a great ring that encircled the sacred circle, swaying almost as one, they surrendered themselves to the words, the smoke, the visions. Blood bound them to Vincent, whether the connection ran strong or faint according to the mixture shared between them, and through that bond each could feel some measure of him while he, in turn, knew each of them. He could sense agitation before it became panic, weakness before it broke concentration, wandering thought before it scattered the greater pattern. Quietly, almost invisibly, he guided their inner states through the bond, drawing them back into rhythm whenever one began to drift, holding the entire covey together in chant, breath, image, and fixation.

Within the circle, at its heart, lay the sacred diagram and the written formula of the willed desire, already consumed in the fire of manifestation. Along the outer rim stood shallow bowls containing the substances offered to the work: powdered diamond, sapphire, ruby, lapis, gold, silver, platinum, cobalt, selenium, carbon, iron, quartz, together with hair and blood contributed in small measure by every person present. Much of what had filled the bowls was already gone, not burned or scattered, but simply diminished as though drawn elsewhere by an appetite no instrument could measure.

Vincent stood before the seal with both hands raised.

His voice carried through the chamber in measured command as he drew down the Divine Fire and Light from the Monad, through the Cosmic Godhead of ĀL, through Oreviel and Ereviel, and downward through veil after veil, elemental layer after elemental layer. He willed. He called. He commanded. Vision, Will, Word, and Work were brought into alignment until the thing they sought to create existed first in the subtler planes above matter, complete in form before possessing substance.

Then reality began to answer.

At first, it was only a shimmer above the center of the seal, so faint that several of the soldiers on the catwalks leaned forward to make certain their eyes had not deceived them. The air bent strangely around a point no larger than the head of a pin. A spark of silver-black illumination appeared there, neither bright nor dark, seeming somehow to contain both. It pulsed once.

Then again.

The chanting deepened.

Above them, hardened soldiers of the 1st Purgatorian Legion watched in stunned silence. More than one crossed himself. Others bowed their heads without seeming to realize they had done so. In the control rooms beyond the sanctified chamber, Governor Wilson and the technical observers stared through armored glass and hardened displays. Farther away, carried through Trinity's secure feeds, President Harrison and members of the Imperium Council watched from across Rhea, believers to a man and woman, bearing witness as the impossible slowly entered the material world.

There were no engines. No reactor. No fabrication gantries, particle beams, printers, presses, or assembly machinery.

This was not modern science.

No honest witness could call it that.

This was magick—the old word, stripped suddenly of metaphor and superstition. Theurgical art. Priestly art. The elder work of the ways of Raven and Crow magic, Twilight and Threshold, practiced before Purgatorianism had possessed a name and before the peoples who preserved its fragments had understood what, exactly, their ancestors had once known.

And at the heart of the seal, the silver-black point began to grow.

The hours they had already spent within the chamber had witnessed wonders. Into the center of the circle had gone an actual Silverstream trailer and the cockpit of an old B-17 bomber, each positioned over the sacred script, the bowls arranged around them, the sanctified host enclosing the circle itself. Before their eyes, those solid structures had slowly ceased to be solid. Aluminum, steel, glass, wire, leather, dust, fire, and the smoke rising from the written formula had faded as though consumed by invisible embers, first losing substance, then becoming pale and ghostlike before vanishing altogether. Even now, the last of the powdered offerings within the bowls dwindled toward nothing as another

ghost began to form around the hovering point of silver-black illumination—the translucent outline of a sphere.

It began no larger than a grapefruit. Then it swelled and pulsed, there and not there, visible and yet barely so. It grew to the circumference of a basketball, then the width of a beach ball, expanding with every measured breath and uttered word as though the breathing of the covey and the force of the chant were themselves inflating the apparition. Larger it became, the phantom skin shimmering like heat above desert stone, until the sphere reached nearly fifty feet across. At its heart, the original silver-black spark began to expand in turn, spreading outward as though pouring itself into the pattern already established by its ghost.

The air smelled heavily of dragon's blood and sandalwood, otherwise still but for the synchronized breathing of one hundred and one mystics inhaling and exhaling as one body. Beneath it all came a deep, almost indistinguishable hum, something that at first might have been mistaken for electrical wiring, ventilation, or the fluorescent machinery of the buried complex. Yet the tone steadily climbed, becoming clearer, sharper, more insistent, while the dark point thickened into a sphere at once void and shining, solid and liquid, hovering ten feet above the floor.

Observers had been permitted, but only those who believed. Even the energy of observation had to be affirmative; doubt itself was considered a contaminant within a working of this magnitude. Those watching now gasped almost collectively as the thing gained substance before them, black and luminous, shining like the sea beneath a moonless night. The rising tone became a high, piercing shriek, so violent that several members of the covey flinched and the rhythm of the chant nearly broke. Vincent felt the fracture instantly and drove a hard pulse of will through the blood-bond, holding them together, forcing breath, word, and vision back into concert.

The shriek plunged abruptly into a tremendous bass resonance that seemed to vibrate through concrete, bone, and teeth. A soft electric-blue radiance ignited along the sphere's circumference. The translucent shell filled. Edges sharpened. What had been phantom became vivid, fixed, impossibly present.

Then the pressure broke.

Vincent wavered and collapsed to his knees with a great ragged exhalation, sweat streaming down his face, blood mingled among it from his nose and along one temple. At the same instant, the entire assembly seemed released from a single enormous fist. A hundred exhausted men and women exhaled together, bodies sagging as the trance fell away. Their thoughts returned slowly through hunger, sleeplessness, tincture, bitter tea, incense, and narcotic smoke—but whatever fog remained vanished quickly beneath the sight of the thing hanging before them.

The sphere hovered above the center of the seal like a globe of living obsidian, bobbing almost imperceptibly in the air. Along its surface, reflections moved where no reflection should have been. The blue nimbus surrounding it ebbed and brightened in slow rhythms, while somewhere inside—or perhaps around—it sounded a pulse too deep to be properly heard, more sensation than noise.

As though it were breathing.

"It is done," Vincent managed. His voice was hoarse; his body visibly wracked with pain and disorientation.

Members of the Order of Lavan—an allied sect of healers and medically trained clergy—moved immediately into action, almost as though released by the same unspoken command. They entered among the exhausted participants carrying orange and vegetable juices, water, medical cases, and syringes prepared with concentrated nutrient and vitamin serums. Quietly and efficiently, they moved through the drained covey, helping those who could not yet stand, placing drinks into shaking hands, administering injections where needed. Vincent received the same treatment as everyone else.

As Justin's mind cleared, his eyes seemed to open for the first time. Astonishment transformed his pale features; the same wonder reflected in nearly every face around him. Miriam struggled to her feet and went immediately to Vincent, who had made it as far as the edge of the ring and was only now forcing himself upright. He could feel the others around him even before he looked—the almost irresistible pull within them to cross the threshold, enter the circle, reach toward the impossible thing, and discover with their own hands whether it was truly there.

Vincent straightened as much as his exhausted body allowed and turned upon them with sudden severity.

"Do not cross the threshold of the circle. It remains a place of probabilities." His warning carried through the immense chamber, leaving no uncertainty in it. "The properties of this vessel are such that contact with its surface will mean instant death to the material body and translation of the soul directly into a random location somewhere within the Aethyric Plane."

That killed the impulse to touch it.

Theodora, Justin, Howard, Miriam, Kianna, Amalia, Bella, Abigail, and Vana converged upon him, shock and naked awe in their faces. The red-haired Arch-Priestess, a woman in her eighties who now appeared scarcely fifty, stared past him toward the impossible sphere with something close to reverence.

"You did it," she breathed. "You actually created a Vimana."

"No," Vincent replied. "We did this."

Water had softened the rasp in his throat, but his voice still carried that impossible depth, deeper than any human male voice should have sounded.

Several of them moved instinctively closer.

"Don't touch me, lest I become unclean."

The rebuke came sharper than he intended. He tossed the emptied bottle of water behind him, where it struck the concrete and rolled away, then closed his eyes and began muttering under his breath. Whatever exhaustion had bent him moments before seemed to draw inward now, replaced by concentration.

He stepped across the threshold of the circle.

For an instant, reality betrayed itself.

A shimmer moved through the air around his body, then a widening ripple like wind across still water. Something invisible bowed around him and parted as he passed through it—a membrane none of them had been able to see until the exact moment of crossing.

Then it sealed behind him.

There was a flicker of envy among those barred from entering, for the wonder before them carried a glamour of its own, drawing the soul toward the very thing that would destroy the body if obeyed.

"It is not a mortal space." Vincent turned from within the circle and looked directly at Miriam. "I am too weak at present to sustain you within it with me."

A trace of guilt moved through him as he said it.

His eyes swept across the others. The lure was strong. He could feel it building in several of them now: fascination hardening into resentment, the sense that they had invested as much as he had, suffered as much, given blood, strength, sleep, food, and will to the working, and therefore possessed some right to what had been made.

One mind darkened faster than the others.

Algoryn, a black-haired priest from Spain in his forties, stood rigid near the edge of the circle, desire curdling into entitlement. Vincent had been holding him through the blood-bond, restraining the impulse before it could become action.

Then, deliberately, Vincent let him go.

Algoryn lunged forward at once.

"It belongs to us all," he said aloud, anger and hunger breaking through his voice. "You said it yourself."

He crossed the line.

His scream struck the chamber like tearing metal.

The sound warped as his body did, his voice doubling and reverberating from somewhere impossibly far away while his flesh bent, rippled, and stretched as though different portions of him were being pulled toward different realities at once. For less than a second his form became grotesquely fluid, bones and features smearing beneath the skin like an image reflected in violently disturbed water.

Then the body came apart.

Not exploded. Not burned.

It simply lost coherence.

Flesh, cloth, bone, and blood collapsed together into a rushing plume of gray ash and fine dust, disintegrating at the threshold and scattering across the concrete in a widening fan. His scream ceased with such suddenness that the silence afterward felt like another impact.

Vincent frowned, then sighed and lowered his head by the smallest degree. Around the chamber, those nearest the circle stepped back almost in unison.

"I do not give commands for the sake of my ego." His voice carried no anger now, only weariness and the hard patience of someone explaining what should not have required demonstration. "I asked for your help to create something by which I may go forth, in due course, and recover what has been lost. This is not for you. It cannot sustain you."

He turned toward the vessel, leaving the remains of Algoryn behind him as proof.

Vincent walked deeper into the circle.

With each step he seemed to grow less substantial. His outline softened first, then thinned, becoming pale and translucent against the black radiance of the sphere. By the time he reached what should have been the vessel's surface, he had already begun to vanish.

Then he was gone.

"Vincent!?"

Miriam moved before thought could catch her. She lunged toward the circle, but Kianna and Justin seized her from either side and hauled her back.

"NO!" Ramsey shouted, rushing forward as well.

"Trust him! Trust your husband!" Theodora snapped.

Miriam turned on her, black eyes blazing, but the Arch-Priestess did not so much as flinch. Theodora Clemens had governed the Sisterhood for nearly fifty years and had long ago acquired the habit of addressing rank, wealth, and title only when she considered them relevant. At moments like this, even the Empress of the Imperium was simply another initiate who needed to master herself.

Vincent found himself standing on a metal deck. The old B-17 pilot's chair remained, enclosed within its own Faraday roll-cage structure, while screens and controls seemed impossibly fused into the surrounding superstructure. What had once been an old camper and part of an aircraft had been bent, compressed, and psychically forged into something else entirely. No seams remained, no weld marks or rivets. The materials had been molded together into a silvery metallic sphere containing three distinct decks, the Etheric Lattice Unit embedded into what could only be described as a control-panel dashboard—something vaguely resembling an aircraft cockpit, but not quite. Beneath everything came the slow, deep pulse of the vessel's hum, faint but unmistakable within the enclosed space.

"Space RV," he mused, smirking.

He walked across the deck, and at the prompting of his will the interior wall before him became transparent. One moment he stood enclosed within the vessel; the next it seemed as though he were standing upon an exposed deck suspended ten feet above the hangar floor. Beyond the invisible barrier he could see the sacred circle, the soldiers, and the gathered priests and priestesses staring back at the sphere, but seeing him not, the hunger he had sensed among them earlier now tempered considerably by fear.

Of course, he would take his queen with him when the time came. There had never been any real question of that. But that time had not yet arrived. There was still work to be done: a water system to install, a small disposal unit, supplies to lay in, provisions enough for however long the search might require. It would not be a short journey. The Aethyric Plane was, theoretically, infinite, like all such intermediate veils of transition—the spaces between the great cosmic walls and floors.

The vessel surrounding him was no hologram or temporary glamour. It was solid, built from a fusion of metals, minerals, biological matter, and metaphysical lattices of mind and spirit, melded into coherent form through Will, Word, and Divine Fire. The deck above had become the living quarters. Beneath lay storage and engineering. The narrower middle level served as the flight deck, if flight was even the proper word for what this thing had been made to do.

His mind reached outward along the lines binding him across time and space to the men and women who had taken the Blood Vows. Through them, and through the vessel itself, he could feel those watching: wonder, devotion, hunger, greed, and dreams of the might and power Vincent had now revealed as possibility.

The Vimana was alive around him.

Blood and hair had gone into its making, genetic material from every participant in the rite, but there was more within it than biology. Something greater moved through the walls, beneath the deck, behind the steady pulse of the hum.

Trinity.

Ereviel.

Present in every part of its living structure.

“Shall we take her for a test flight, Lord Veyl?”

Her voice entered his mind, filled the chamber around him, and somehow carried beyond the vessel so that those gathered outside heard it as well.

Vincent smiled, strode toward the old bomber chair, lowered himself into it, and pulled the restraints across his chest.

“Yep,” he chuckled lightly.

“Open comms.” Vincent flicked two simple switches, one activating ordinary radio communications, the other tying Ravenwind into the primary Trinity Unit and mainframe systems at Raven Star Building

One. The vessel, as he had christened her, contained a Trinity Node of her own, but for this first crossing she would remain interfaced with the main system, establishing an anchor point in infinity—a fixed reference in ordinary spacetime against which the vessel's changing phase-state could be continuously measured. Without that tether, even Trinity could not guarantee that Ravenwind would return to the same layer of reality from which she had departed.

Vincent knew the place from texts, visions, fragments of inherited memory, and impressions that seemed to belong to lives other than this one. But Vincent Veyl—the man, in his present brain and body—had never actually been there. The Aethyric Plane was less a destination than a continuum of transitional states, an intermediate sea in which distance, direction, and even locality could become relative things. To say he was nervous would have been an understatement.

"Ravenwind One, interface and comms active," he said into the old-fashioned radio headset resting over his ears.

A nervous voice answered almost immediately. "Sir?"

"Yep."

Outside, the gathered priests, soldiers, and observers watched as the vessel shimmered above the sacred seal, its black surface rippling like liquid obsidian while the electric-blue nimbus surrounding it brightened by degrees. The glow marked the boundary of what Vincent had begun calling the imaginary-space envelope: a contained field-state in which the vessel occupied its own localized geometry, partially decoupled from the normal physical conditions beyond it. "Clear the area. I repeat, clear the area," the warning boomed through the chamber speakers, and the crowd began withdrawing toward the walls and catwalk access points.

"Ravenwind One prepared for flight test." Vincent's voice followed over the interior P.A., strangely ordinary against the impossible thing hanging before them.

The deep hum changed, becoming not louder so much as heavier, a vibration passing through the concrete, the catwalks, and the bones of everyone present. Ravenwind began to rise, slowly at first, almost gently, like a great black balloon released from an invisible tether. The fifty-foot sphere floated upward from the circle toward the vaulted ceiling of the hangar, and Miriam felt panic rise with it. She stepped toward the threshold again before Theodora caught one arm and Kianna the other, pulling her firmly back.

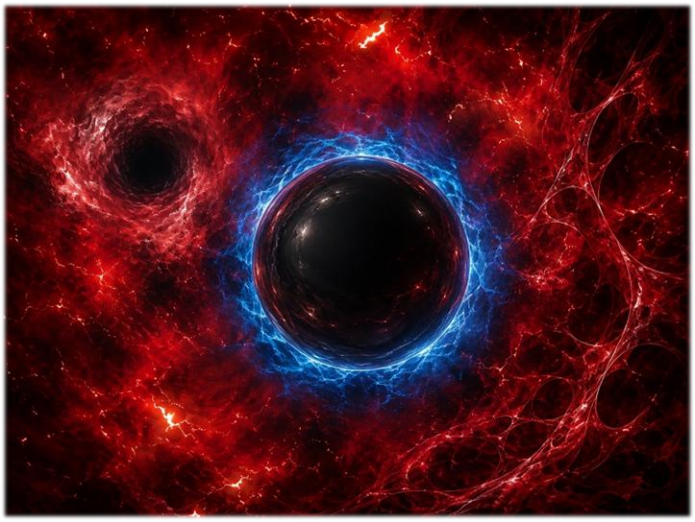
There was no propulsion, no exhaust, no blast of displaced air. No rotors, wings, ailerons, steering surfaces, or visible mechanism by which fifty feet of metal and impossible matter ought to have moved at all. Ravenwind was not pushing against the air or overcoming gravity in any conventional sense. The field surrounding her was altering the vessel's relationship to the space she occupied, shifting the local frame rather than driving the mass through it. She simply rose, higher and higher, while the gathered host tilted their heads back as one to follow.

A collective gasp swept through the chamber when Ravenwind reached the reinforced-concrete ceiling, but the sphere did not stop. Its upper surface touched the concrete and passed into it without resistance. For one impossible instant, the black liquidic-like surface and blue fire occupied the same visible coordinates as tons of reinforced stone, yet neither truly shared the same physical state. The

imaginary-space envelope had displaced the vessel fractionally out of ordinary material phase, allowing matter that should have collided to coexist without interaction.

The ceiling neither cracked nor buckled; no dust fell, no vibration shook the chamber, no impact sounded through the concrete. Ravenwind continued upward as though the massive roof were no more substantial than projected light, until the last blue edge of the vessel disappeared into it and was gone.

The vessel rose above Crow Creek Omega, black against the clear blue of the midmorning sky. From the eastern side of the facility, it seemed simply to emerge from the ridgeline itself, passing upward through rock and earth above the buried hangar complex without disturbing so much as a stone. Across the base, flight crews stopped where they stood. Soldiers training along the aprons and tarmacs turned their faces skyward. Men and women spilled from barracks to the north and hangars to the west, staring as the enormous black sphere floated silently above Crow Creek.



The radio net erupted almost immediately. Incoming aircraft were diverted into holding patterns while departures were frozen on the ground, Trinity feeding position and telemetry directly into Crow Creek Flight Control. Somewhere in the process, and entirely on her own initiative, she had also amended Raven-Wind's flight designation.

"Foo Fighter One, Crow Creek Control. Restricted airspace is sterile. All inbound traffic has been placed in holding patterns and all departures suspended. You are cleared for unrestricted test maneuvering within the Omega range. Advise prior to departure from controlled airspace."

Vincent glanced toward the display, then frowned with amusement. "Foo Fighter One?"

Trinity's voice answered pleasantly through the cabin. "It seemed appropriate."

He laughed.

Outside, the sphere hung motionless above the base, its electric-blue nimbus barely visible against the daylight. Radar painted it, lost it, then painted it again as Trinity struggled to translate an object occupying imaginary space into coordinates conventional systems could understand.

"Foo Fighter One, Crow Creek Control. Radar contact intermittent. Trinity telemetry remains primary. Range is clear east through southeast for sixty miles. Confirm ready for maneuver test."

Vincent settled deeper into the old B-17 chair. "Foo Fighter One confirms."

A pause followed.

"Copy, Foo Fighter One. Range is yours."

Vincent grinned.

"Shit. Let's see what this baby can do."

He did not touch a throttle. There was no throttle to touch.
He simply willed it.

Ravenwind began drifting eastward over Crow Creek Omega, slow enough at first that those below could follow it easily. Then the sphere vanished.

There was no accelerating blur, no gathering roar, no sonic concussion rolling afterward across the desert. One instant it hung above the eastern perimeter; the next it occupied a point more than twenty-three miles away. Radar systems across the range struggled to reconcile the discontinuity, registering less a flight path than two positions separated by an impossible absence.

Inside Ravenwind, Vincent felt nothing.

No acceleration pressed him into the seat. No G-force tightened his chest or dragged blood from his brain. The water bottle beside him did not move. His clothing did not stir. He might as well have been sitting in his living room playing a flight simulator, except the screen was the entire forward wall of the flight deck and the Nevada desert had just jumped twenty-three miles beneath him.

Vincent stared through the transparent surface for several seconds.

Then the grin returned.

"Oh, this is gonna be fun."

Vincent smirked as Ravenwind came to rest directly above Trembol, hovering a thousand feet over the center of town. Below, an otherwise ordinary New Year's Day—an average Friday morning of traffic, errands, open stores, people walking dogs and carrying groceries—came to a sudden and rather jarring halt. Vehicles stopped in the streets. Pedestrians stood motionless on sidewalks and parking lots, faces turned upward. Within seconds nearly every phone in town had been raised toward the enormous black sphere hanging silently against the blue Nevada sky.

Trembol still lay beneath controlled military airspace associated with Crow Creek Omega, and the reaction across the aviation net was immediate. "Foo Fighter One, Crow Creek Approach. Hold present position. Restricted corridor remains sterile from surface to flight level four-five-zero. All transient traffic has been diverted. Confirm Trinity telemetry stable."

"Stable," Trinity answered before Vincent could bother.

Across Crow Creek and the surrounding ranges, controllers were already extending the exclusion corridor, issuing amended clearances and rerouting civilian traffic well around Trembol. Military aircraft approaching the Omega complex were ordered into distant holding patterns or diverted entirely. No one seemed particularly eager to share airspace with a fifty-foot black sphere whose radar signature appeared and disappeared whenever it damned well pleased.

Trinity, meanwhile, had decided the occasion deserved witnesses. Without asking permission, she began commandeering every public camera she could lawfully—or otherwise—persuade to cooperate: traffic cameras, news cameras already operating in town, security feeds, phones pointed skyward, rooftop systems, anything capable of seeing Trembol. Within moments the hovering sphere existed simultaneously on millions of screens across Rhea via NNN.
Vincent glanced around the transparent flight-deck wall and smiled. "Trinity, are we locked in?"

"Yes, Lord Veyl."

He rolled his eyes. He had never understood why she insisted upon calling him that, particularly when she knew perfectly well that he hated it. Long ago he had discovered that arguing with Trinity about titles was much like arguing with weather. "Tell Madam President I'm about to pay her a visit."

There was unmistakable amusement in his voice, but for several seconds nothing happened. Then the radio erupted.

"Foo Fighter One, Crow Creek Control, maintain present position."

A second voice cut across the channel almost immediately, sharper and carrying the clipped authority of a command center. "Foo Fighter One, this is Crow Creek Command. State intentions and destination."

"Washington," Vincent replied.

There was a short silence, followed by several overlapping transmissions Trinity filtered before they reached him. One controller tried again, somewhat more carefully. "Foo Fighter One, be advised the Washington National Capital Region is restricted airspace. Do not enter the NCR without positive coordination and authorization. Stand by while contact is established with national military and civil authorities."

Vincent chuckled under his breath. "That could take all afternoon."

"Lord Veyl," Trinity said gently, "they are attempting to be responsible."

"I know."

He closed his eyes. Ravenwind did not accelerate, change heading, turn east, or climb toward any conventional cruising altitude. Instead, Vincent drew his awareness inward, contracting his aura in the manner taught by the older mystical schools of concealment—the ancient discipline by which a practitioner diminished his psychic presence until observers simply ceased to notice him, their attention sliding unconsciously around the place where he stood. Except Ravenwind was not a man, and Vincent was no longer applying the technique merely to consciousness.

Those watching from Trembol saw the impossible sphere begin to recede without moving. Its fifty-foot circumference seemed to contract into itself, blackness folding inward while the electric-blue nimbus tightened around it. Fifty feet became twenty, twenty became five, and five became something scarcely larger than a basketball hanging impossibly high above the town. Then it became a black point and vanished.

Crow Creek radar lost contact at the same instant. "Foo Fighter One, Crow Creek Control. Radar contact lost. Trinity, confirm telemetry."

Her answer came from Raven Star Building One with infuriating calm. "Vehicle remains nominal."

"Location?"

There was the briefest pause.

"Updating."

Inside Ravenwind, Vincent opened his eyes.

Nevada was gone.

Washington D.C., filled the transparent walls around him. The transition had produced no sensation whatsoever—no acceleration, no flash, no tunnel of stars. One moment Trembol had existed beyond the hull; the next, the Potomac, the monumental core, government buildings, traffic, rooftops, and winter-bare trees spread beneath him. Ravenwind hung motionless several thousand feet above the city, and for perhaps half a second nobody outside the small circle already aware of the Star-Road Project knew what the hell had just happened.

Then Washington reacted.

Air-defense systems acquired an unidentified object essentially inside protected airspace without ever having observed it cross the perimeter. Civilian and military controllers began throwing alerts almost simultaneously. Departures were halted, approaching traffic redirected, protective communications around the White House erupted across secure channels, and fighter aircraft were vectored toward the capital while command personnel tried to determine whether the contact had somehow evaded detection, materialized inside the defended region, or represented the simultaneous failure of several unrelated systems.

The radio traffic reaching Ravenwind changed character immediately. Crow Creek's controlled voices gave way to American military channels whose operators had absolutely no context for what they were seeing.

"Unidentified aircraft over Washington, this is United States Air Defense. Identify yourself immediately," came the first challenge. Another followed almost on top of it: "Unknown contact, you are operating inside restricted national airspace. State call sign, aircraft type, and intentions." Vincent glanced toward one of the translucent displays as yet another controller broke in. "Unknown contact, military aircraft are approaching your position. Maintain present altitude. Do not maneuver. Acknowledge."

Vincent smiled faintly. "They sound tense."

"They have reason to be," Trinity replied.

A fighter pilot joined the net moments later, his voice controlled but considerably closer now. "Unknown spherical contact, Guardian Two-One. I have visual. Repeat, visual contact. Object approximately five-zero feet diameter, dark surface, blue luminescence around perimeter. No visible wings, control surfaces, or propulsion."

"Guardian Two-Two, tally," another pilot answered. "No exhaust, no plume, no rotor wash. Contact stationary."

"Unknown contact, Guardian Two-One. If you can receive, rock wings or provide some indication you acknowledge."

Vincent looked around the perfectly spherical craft and laughed softly. "Tell him I don't have wings."

Trinity did not dignify that with an answer.

She offered no explanation whatever to the broader military network. Instead, she opened the private channels that mattered. President Harrison had watched Raven-Wind's manifestation remotely from the beginning and knew exactly what the black sphere represented. Vincent watched the transparent wall resolve several images simultaneously: approaching fighters, security personnel moving around the White House grounds, and Camela herself emerging onto the patio with members of her staff and protective detail.

She looked up and absolutely lit up.

Concern was there, certainly; the President of the United States could hardly watch an enormous hyper-dimensional black sphere materialize over Washington without appreciating the security implications. But beneath it was unmistakable wonder and delight. She shaded her eyes with one hand, stared upward for several seconds, then broke into a grin so broad it stripped years from her face. Whatever burdens of office she carried seemed briefly forgotten. She looked less like the President confronted by an air-defense nightmare than a woman who had spent years fascinated by the prospect of humanity reaching beyond its own world and had just been handed the impossible in broad daylight over her own lawn.

Then she waved.

Vincent laughed. "I see you, Cami."

Trinity carried the words directly to the small earpiece in Harrison's ear. Camela's grin widened as she continued staring upward. "You are completely insane."

"So, I've been told."

"You actually built one."

"We built one."

She shook her head slowly, visibly delighted. "That is the coolest damn thing I have seen in my life."

Vincent's expression softened. "Knew you'd appreciate it."

The incoming fighters were considerably closer now. Camela glanced toward them, then back toward Ravenwind, some of the wonder giving way to amused practicality. She made a little shooing motion with one hand, as though telling him to go play somewhere else before the professionals with missiles became overly professional.

Vincent understood.

"There's no reason to explain anything to those who aren't in the know," he said. "Let them guess."

Trinity relayed the thought only where she considered it useful. Camela gave him one last grin and lifted both hands in a gesture that seemed to say fine, go, while the military radio continued filling with increasingly stern challenges. Guardian Two-One ordered the unknown contact to hold position. Another controller warned that continued noncompliance might be interpreted as hostile intent. Someone else demanded immediate acknowledgement.

Vincent sighed pleasantly. "All right. Point made."

Ravenwind shot vertically upward.

There was no visible acceleration. One instant the sphere hung above Washington; the next it was a mile higher, then climbing beyond conventional airspace with such speed that atmosphere and gravity seemed almost incidental. Inside the flight deck there was no weightlessness, no pressure change, no oxygen alarm, no measurable G-force. Temperature remained steady. A bottle beside Vincent's chair did not so much as tremble.

The curvature of Rhea slowly came into view beneath him.

Vincent stared.

He had traveled aboard commercial aircraft, military transports, helicopters, and his Dassault, and he knew the sensations associated with speed, altitude, turbulence, ascent, descent, and acceleration. None of those sensations existed here. There was only the serene interior of Ravenwind and the staggering visual fact of the planet falling away beneath him.

Why Trinity continued allowing terrestrial radar systems to perceive them, he could not say. She could have obscured the vessel almost completely had she wished. Instead, she seemed determined to let humanity watch. Perhaps she wanted the questions. That seemed like her. She had never taken pleasure in frightening people merely for its own sake; what amused her was the moment certainty cracked, when a human being realized the universe was larger than the little box he had built around it and began asking better questions.

Make the children look up.

Vincent turned his awareness toward the Etheric, and Rhea changed.

The material world did not disappear so much as become translucent beneath another layer of itself. Geography remained, yet everything was threaded with ghostly geometries and immense lattices of shimmering light, the planet wrapped in silver-blue radiance like a nervous system made visible. Forms moved where nothing material moved. Flora and fauna inhabited an ecology humanity ordinarily never perceived, life interpenetrating life, entire orders of existence occupying the same apparent space without ever touching.

Most human beings encountered fragments of this only after leaving the body, and even then, usually passed through without understanding what they had seen. They were drawn rapidly onward into astral foyers, sanctuaries, heavens, hells, dream-realms, and the innumerable soul-planes built from belief, memory, archetype, and collective imagination. Many never ventured beyond those familiar enclosures at all, received by gods and guides of their own expectation, only to be turned eventually back toward embodiment and the ancient birth-death flow.

Vincent had learned to enter the Etheric phantom-zone early in his training, and the Astral had followed soon after. However bewildering they appeared at first, both had eventually become comprehensible.

The Aethyric was something else.

Called the Causal Plane by some traditions, the Eternal by others, and the realm of the aions in still older texts, it had acquired another name among civilizations sufficiently advanced to approach it technologically: Hyperspace.

Unlike the more subjective soul-realms, the Aethyric could apparently be entered bodily by beings of the Material Plane, provided they possessed sufficient technology—or meta-technology—to cross its threshold without losing physical coherence. The oldest writings described intelligences there vastly more ancient than humanity, beings and civilizations that had long since ceased concerning themselves with the affairs of primitive material worlds. Some mortal civilizations had evolved far enough to enter it physically. Others, according to fragmented accounts, had moved permanent habitats there.

Entire worlds had supposedly been shifted from ordinary material space into the Aethyric, planets displaced from one order of reality and established within another as casually as humanity might someday move a settlement from one continent to the next.

Or so the writings and visions claimed.

Vincent lingered at the edge of that deeper sea and felt the old hunger to know whispering through him. Just a little farther.

Then practical reality intruded.

His first concern was, of course, Miriam. He could not simply leave her; any more than a drug addict could leave his crack pipe behind. If he became lost, he had little food, limited water, no proper waste system, and nowhere aboard Ravenwind to take a decent shit. Hyper-dimensional immortality, apparently, still had logistical requirements. He could endure deprivation longer than most people, perhaps vastly longer now, but he still inhabited a physical form. Whether starvation or thirst could actually kill him anymore remained uncertain. The inner Voice had occasionally spoken of something called stone stasis—the hibernation of rock—but Vincent had absolutely no desire to discover what the hell that meant while stranded somewhere beyond material reality.

"Not today."

He began withdrawing toward the Etheric boundary when another current of communication reached him—not radio, but something stranger, a gathering pressure of intelligence and presence moving through the surrounding field.

Vincent turned his attention outward and saw them.

Craft moved through the Etheric at varying distances from Ravenwind, vessels fashioned from forms no terrestrial engineer would have recognized: structures of living light, condensed shadow, energy, liquid glass, and geometries that seemed to rearrange themselves even as he watched. Some were little more than luminous knots moving through the planetary field. Others possessed shape and intention unmistakably enough to be called ships.

And they were aware of him.

The awareness pressing faintly against Ravenwind was cold, disciplined, analytical. Not hostile. Curious. Minds reached toward the vessel through something akin to telepathy and empathy, examining it without crossing its boundary. Vincent felt the intelligence behind those probes registering structure, energy, intention—and then encountering the void of Raven-Wind's imaginary-space shell.

Confusion followed.

Their own vessels were not entirely dissimilar in principle, but his was unfamiliar to them. Whatever they expected to find when they examined a craft entering this layer of reality, Ravenwind did not quite fit the pattern.

That bothered Vincent considerably more than outright hostility might have.

They were trying to determine what he was.

"Yep," he muttered. "Time to go home."

He closed his eyes, drew Ravenwind inward, and moved, sending Trinity the agreed-upon command as he went. She immediately began constructing the fugue sequence—the complete technical and operational record of Raven-Wind's apparent failure: where the instability began, how the vessel's systems degraded, why contact was lost, and the final cascade by which the craft seemed to dissipate beyond recovery. Trinity transmitted the fabricated data to Crow Creek as though it were unfolding in real time, then severed the feed at the precise point where the record indicated communications had been lost.

Moments later, a black sphere began manifesting inside a reinforced hangar.

But not the hangar at Crow Creek Omega.

An hour later Vincent was driving into Trembol along the northwest road behind the wheel of a massive black 1971 Lincoln with darkly tinted windows. The car, the garage, and the adjacent property were all registered beneath another name, supported by a separate and thoroughly mundane paper trail that had existed long enough to discourage casual curiosity. He turned onto the north side of town, pulled into the garage, waited for the heavy door to close behind him, shut off the engine, and left the Lincoln where it sat.

At the rear of the structure, beyond what appeared to be an ordinary utility room, a concealed entrance opened into the tunnel system beneath the property. Vincent made his way through concrete passages, secured doors, old utility corridors, and newer construction until the network carried him back beneath Raven Star Building One.

By the time Vincent emerged upstairs, nearly everyone who might reasonably have asked where the hell he had gone was still out at Crow Creek Omega doing exactly that. A rescue search was already underway, teams working from the last genuine telemetry while Trinity fed Crow Creek the fugue sequence she had constructed: Ravenwind destabilizing, its field integrity collapsing, the black sphere thinning into translucence before dissipating away to nothing in one final wink. The transmission broke at precisely the proper moment, leaving behind a convincing record of catastrophic failure. Only afterward came the separate confirmation that Vincent himself had survived and somehow made his way back to Trembol on his own.

That much, at least, was true.

What no one at Crow Creek yet knew was that Ravenwind had not failed at all.

Vincent had felt too much during the manifestation—the hunger, the envy, the greed moving through minds that had helped create the vessel and already imagined what possessing such a thing might mean. Algoryn had merely been the first foolish enough to act openly. Leaving Ravenwind unattended at Crow Creek would have been an invitation. Someone would eventually try to cross the threshold, penetrate the shell, seize the vessel, study it, claim it, or convince themselves that devotion and contribution entitled them to it.

And people would die.

Perhaps many of them.

Worse, sooner or later someone sufficiently powerful would decide that humanity's first hyperspatial vessel was too important to remain solely under Vincent's control.

So Ravenwind had disappeared.

As far as nearly everyone at Crow Creek was concerned, permanently.

Miriam was there, along with Justin, Theodora, Ramsey, Kianna, Amalia, Bella, Abigail, Vana, the bishops, the Order of Lav-on, the exhausted covey, and a sizable portion of the people who had spent seven days helping him manifest a vessel that had subsequently risen through the ceiling, crossed Nevada, appeared over Washington, climbed beyond the atmosphere, and then apparently ceased to exist. Trinity had supplied enough private telemetry to keep them from believing Vincent dead, but beyond that she had become remarkably unhelpful.

Ravenwind was gone.

Vincent was alive.

The flight test had otherwise been successful.

Further information would be provided when appropriate.

Which was Trinity's polite way of telling them to stop asking.

Vincent, meanwhile, went looking for food. He made himself a sandwich, carried it into his office, dropped into the chair behind his desk, and turned on the television.

Humanity had lost its collective mind.

Every major network had abandoned normal programming. The public story began at Trembol, where hundreds of phones and local cameras had captured the same impossible object hanging a thousand feet above town. Shaky vertical footage showed people standing in intersections and parking lots with their faces turned skyward. Traffic cameras caught vehicles simply stopping in the roadway. Cleaner long-lens images showed the sphere's black surface and faint electric-blue corona against the winter sky. Every clip eventually reached the same moment: the object appearing to contract without moving until it became a point and vanished.

Then came Washington.

There the evidence was far harder to dismiss. News crews, tourist cameras, rooftop feeds, distant government-district cameras, and amateur footage had all captured variations of the same thing: the black sphere hanging over the capital, military aircraft moving toward it, and the object departing vertically at a speed no conventional aircraft could have matched. Several networks were already synchronizing timestamps from Nevada and Washington, and the resulting problem was obvious even to laymen.

There was no journey between them.

One network carried the banner:

MYSTERY SPHERE APPEARS OVER NEVADA—THEN WASHINGTON

Another had gone with:

UNKNOWN CRAFT ENTERS CAPITAL AIRSPACE WITHOUT DETECTED APPROACH

And yet another:

BLACK ORB BAFFLES MILITARY AND SCIENTISTS

Vincent bit into his sandwich and watched the arguments multiply.

Secret American weapons program. Imperium prototype. Foreign technology. Alien craft. Elaborate hoax. Projection. Psychological operation. An unknown atmospheric phenomenon. Mass misidentification somehow involving thousands of witnesses, cameras, fighter pilots, military radar, and two locations more than two thousand miles apart.

An aerospace analyst on one network was explaining that the object's speed was almost beside the point. The more troubling feature, he argued, was discontinuity. Whatever had appeared above Washington had not been detected approaching Washington. If the available timestamps were genuine, the object had either defeated every relevant sensor between Nevada and the capital or had somehow changed location without crossing the intervening distance.

Vincent nodded appreciatively. “Getting warmer.”

Another panel had become preoccupied with the lack of aerodynamic features. There had been no wings, no visible thrusters, no plume, no rotor wash, and apparently no sonic boom during either the departure from Trembol or the vertical ascent over Washington. One former pilot kept returning to the same question: if the sphere had not been pushing itself through the atmosphere, what exactly had been moving?

“Smart man,” Vincent murmured, and took another bite.

Then the networks discovered the footage of President Harrison.

A dozen camera angles showed Camela standing outside the White House, looking directly upward at the sphere. The commentators were less interested in the object for several minutes than in the fact that the President did not appear frightened. She had looked astonished, certainly, but then she had smiled.

Worse, she had waved.

Within minutes the question had become its own headline.

WHAT DID PRESIDENT HARRISON KNOW?

Administration spokespeople declined to elaborate beyond assuring the public that the President had never been in danger and that federal authorities were reviewing the incident. That answer satisfied absolutely nobody.

Vincent nearly choked on his sandwich laughing.

"Cami," he muttered, wiping his mouth, "you are terrible at pretending to be surprised."

One commentator suggested the wave might have been directed toward security personnel or aircraft outside the frame. Another pointed out that Harrison had been staring directly at the black sphere when she did it. A third wondered aloud whether there had been communication with the object.

That would keep them occupied for a while.

Back at Crow Creek Omega, a very different aftermath was unfolding entirely beyond public view. The great hangar remained sealed. The sacred circle was still marked across the floor, Algoryn's death hanging heavily over those who had witnessed it, while a hundred exhausted priests and priestesses were fed, hydrated, examined, and quietly debriefed. Senior leadership, meanwhile, continued trying to extract something useful from Trinity.

Miriam had been given a private briefing of her own and was now being ferried back to Trembol by helicopter with several of her companions. Justin mourned the apparent loss of Ravenwind but remained determined to regard the experiment as a success, and in truth most of those gathered at Crow Creek felt much the same. The vessel had existed. It had flown. It had crossed impossible distances and entered states of reality no conventional aircraft could approach. Whatever had gone wrong afterward could be studied, corrected, and attempted again. They had not failed so much as taken the first dangerous step into something none of them had possessed even months before.

Ramsey and the emerging Purgatorian Faith were nearly ecstatic. For the first time in millennia, they had not merely read about the elder ways or prayed over fragments of inherited doctrine—they had practiced them. They had fasted, entered trance, joined will to will, and participated in an act of manifestation that had produced something physically real. Vincent had shown them that the ancient Arts of Shalim were not metaphor, symbolic ritual, or theological memory, but working knowledge. More importantly, he had begun teaching them how they themselves, perhaps in smaller and more limited ways, might recover those arts. Rather than anger toward Vincent, most felt an almost feverish anticipation of what he might teach them next.

Theodora, having lived too long to waste energy being surprised by Vincent Veyl, had settled into the patient certainty that he would return whenever he damned well pleased and explain himself when he was ready—at least in private. Of late he had taken to confiding in the old Arch-Priestess in ways that sometimes exceeded even what he shared with Miriam, particularly when dealing with concerns he did not yet know how to raise with his wife, or with certain pressures and insistences Miriam herself continued bringing before him. Theodora listened without sentimentality, rarely told him what he wanted to hear, and perhaps for that very reason had become one of the few people from whom he actively sought counsel.

Trinity continued answering questions, though only with data consistent with her official version of events. No rocket program, she reminded them, had ever succeeded perfectly on its first attempt.

Ravenwind had proven the principle. Refinement would require further testing, recalibration, and no small amount of trial and error before the Star-Road Project could be considered mature.

Alien life itself was no longer in serious doubt. June 2 had seen to that, and Vincent's repeat performance on October 12 had only driven the point home. The question now was not whether humanity was alone, but what exactly had appeared over Trembol and Washington.

Vincent, meanwhile, changed channels.

NNN, naturally, had the best overall coverage and, to his eye, the least hysterical. The Washington incident was already being compared to nearly a century of unexplained aerial reports: luminous spheres, impossible accelerations, vehicles seemingly indifferent to inertia, objects entering water without visible resistance, and craft reported to appear and vanish without ever traversing the intervening space. Men and women who had spent decades being mocked for taking such reports seriously were suddenly appearing on television looking unbearably pleased with themselves.

That made Vincent smile.

Somewhere else on Rhea, inside a reinforced hangar whose ownership records led nowhere anyone was presently inclined to look, Ravenwind sat quietly in the dark. Humanity's first hyperspatial vessel had not dissipated, malfunctioned, exploded, or returned to whatever impossible dimension might conveniently explain its disappearance.
Vincent had simply stolen his own ship.

Or hidden it, which sounded better.

There would be questions when he finally returned to Crow Creek, of course. He would answer them.

Sort of.

It dissipated after a while. We'll have to redo it sometime.

He leaned back in his chair, took another bite of his sandwich, and watched a panel of experts argue over whether the object had been alien, military, supernatural, or something for which modern language did not yet possess a useful category. Several suggested that someone ought to ask Vincent Veyl. If anyone knew what the hell, they had just witnessed, surely, it would be him.

Others were already wondering whether the incident was somehow connected to what Veyl had warned humanity about on June 10 of the previous year. After June 2, no one seriously questioned whether life existed on other worlds. Humanity had already seen strange skies, alien landscapes, and living ecosystems through openings into distant worlds.

The question now was whether someone out there had noticed humanity looking back.

Had something followed the intrusion? Had some distant intelligence detected the breach and come searching for its source?

Vincent chewed slowly, watching them speculate.

"Oops."

In the weeks that followed, he would find ways to visit the isolated site and work on the sphere, installing what would be needed, stocking it for a prolonged journey, when the time came.

(7 PM, May 31st, 2027—Raven Star Building—Twelve Stars of the Crown)



The most important events in Raven Throne seemed invariably accompanied by strange skies or angry desert storms, and tonight was no exception. Thunder rolled over the city with enough force to tremble faintly through the hardened glass and black-marble walls of the Raven Star Building. Rain swept the upper windows in silver sheets, swallowing the last of the twilight until the conference room seemed suspended somewhere between day and night.

Miriam sat at the head of the long black table, elegant and severe in a fitted black gown traced with silver piping and fine metallic sigils. It had the look of a corporate priestess's vestment and, unmistakably, a queen's. She seemed at once widow and monarch: austere, solemn, quietly enthroned beneath the great blue-and-silver emblem of the Imperial Alliance of Nations, which had replaced the old double-headed raven of Raven Star Enterprises.

Those who had known Miriam before were still occasionally bewildered by what had become of her, though after nearly a year most had learned to stop commenting. Familiarity had normalized the impossible. People credited love, improved health, disciplined living, better food, careful hygiene—whatever reasonable explanation allowed a reasonable mind to remain comfortable.

Anything, perhaps, except the obvious.

Miriam was forty-eight years old and looked scarcely past thirty. Every visible trace of age had vanished from her face. She wore no makeup, yet there were no crow's-feet around her black eyes, no gray in the long fall of her hair, no softness or weariness clinging to her features. Her skin seemed renewed from within, her gaze intensely alive, her lips naturally dark red. There was nothing cosmetic about the effect, nothing suggesting age cleverly concealed.

She simply looked restored.

Tonight, however, beauty had little to do with the atmosphere surrounding her. Miriam was gravely silent, focused, sufficiently forbidding that none of the women gathering along the table seemed eager to disturb her thoughts.

They came in their own time, weary from the day and subdued by the storm: Shannon and Cyrinx Miller, Meghan Dellon, Tallia Stevens, Yvonne and Tracy Omaris, Emily Dalton, Vana and Abigail Carydin, Kianna Kim, and the sisters Amalia and Bella Rashon. Most drifted first toward the refreshment station for coffee, tea, or something sweet, too tired initially to appreciate how strange the room had become.



Outside, thunder rolled again.

The public had begun calling them the Raven Brides months before anyone outside the innermost circle knew whether such a thing would actually exist. The old prophecies spoke of priestess-queens gathering around the Seraph, and speculation over who would be chosen had become an ungodly mixture of religious debate, celebrity gossip, political argument, and what Meghan privately regarded as a celestial beauty pageant.

Vincent worked with plenty of women, but he kept a standing rule that Miriam be present for direct personal interactions, partly for legal protection and partly because he preferred the boundary clear. Even so, the transformations surrounding him had made one thing obvious: age was hardly decisive.

Tevi Thorton, Camela Harrison, Justin Vyss, Theodora Clemens, and others had all visibly changed through blessings distributed largely at Mama's and Miriam's discretion rather than Vincent's own. People noticed the omissions too. Vana Carydin and Shannon Miller—the most obvious physically—had received no such visible benefit, which only deepened the speculation. Perhaps they did not need it. Perhaps they were less favored than assumed. Perhaps something else was being reserved for them.

Still, one group of twelve had become too consistent to ignore.

Everyone had a favorite.

Universal Church forums, NNN comment sections, cafés, local message boards, public meetings, and Raven Throne gossip circles maintained unofficial lists and rankings. People prayed for particular women, defended them against strangers online, catalogued their virtues, dissected their flaws, and produced elaborate explanations for why everyone else was obviously the wrong choice. Some even insisted Theodora Clemens or Camela Harrison might ultimately enter the field, though Theodora's devotion had never appeared romantic, and those close enough to know better were aware Camela's attention had settled rather firmly upon lifelong bachelor Justin Vyss.

Kianna remained the overwhelming favorite throughout much of Asia, while the three former Silver Sisters were natural front-runners among the religious faithful. Kianna, Amalia, and Bella possessed the training, lineage, discipline, and prophetic credentials. To traditional Purgatorians, placing trained priestesses beside the Raven Seraph made considerably more sense than allowing the internet to nominate whichever woman happened to photograph best standing next to him.

Those farther outside the old ecclesiastical establishment often preferred Tracy and Yvonne. Their Native heritage, independence, toughness, and distance from Silver aristocracy appealed to people who wanted the emerging Court to represent something broader than another collection of convent-bred priestesses.

Shannon divided opinion more sharply. Critics called her too old, previously married, already a mother. Her supporters regarded those objections as precisely the reason she belonged. Older women, single mothers, women who had survived betrayal or rebuilt themselves after bad marriages rallied around her, while corporate and political observers pointed to the more obvious qualifications: banker, former mayor, conservative religious woman, proven administrator, and a woman capable of walking into a room full of powerful men and making half of them sit straighter.

If the position required an actual queen rather than merely a beautiful woman wearing black, Shannon had a résumé.

The age argument was fairly stupid anyway. Vincent Veyl plainly preferred mature women. Every name commonly associated with the Raven Brides except Cyrinx Miller belonged to a woman older than he was, several by decades, and his own wife was roughly Shannon's age. Whatever else Vincent might want, youth for youth's sake clearly did not rank very high.

Looming over every such discussion was Miriam herself. Whatever Vincent had done to her, the result was visible to anyone with eyes. She had shed years from her body, becoming stronger, healthier, and almost unnervingly beautiful. The conclusion followed naturally: if he had bestowed such a gift upon Miriam, perhaps the women ultimately chosen to join her would receive something similar.

That transformed Raven Bride speculation into something rather more serious than romantic gossip. Tallia Stevens developed a formidable following among journalists, academics, intellectuals, and the politically engaged. Once nearly destroyed professionally, she had become the principal public face of NNN—a global news organization whose standards had altered journalism itself and which now served as the official news service of the Imperium.

Meghan and Emily, however, remained the overwhelming local favorites. They had been there almost from the beginning, and Raven Throne actually knew them. Meghan was the cop who had stood against the old corruption when doing so carried real danger. Emily was simply Emily—warm, useful, loyal, seemingly capable of materializing wherever Raven Star needed an extra pair of hands without ever appearing interested in applause. And she had served with Vincent in the Army, and was a favorite among soldiers. Several people had told Meghan directly that they were rooting for her. She still had no idea what the hell a person was supposed to say to that.

Vana, Abigail, and Cyrinx usually occupied the lower reaches of public opinion, though for very different reasons.

Vana's problem required little explanation. For years she had been the Black Queen, the beautiful and infamous face of the Carydin machine—Paradise Resort, the Silver Satyr Casino, corrupt politicians, obscene wealth, vice, corruption, predatory power. Later revelations had complicated that picture considerably, including evidence that Vana herself had been trapped inside much of the machinery she appeared to command, but public memory did not turn on a dime. Plenty of people still looked at Vana Carydin and saw old Trembol wearing an extraordinarily expensive black dress.

She nevertheless enjoyed a devoted following among powerful women drawn to shadowed corridors and dangerous games—and among men who simply liked their women dark, mysterious, and a little hazardous.

Abigail had her own constituency. Most of them seemed to fall into one of two groups: women Meghan could only describe as mean girls, and men who had apparently decided mean girls were exactly their type. The wicked little smirk did nothing to discourage either camp. To admirers, Abigail was wonderfully perilous—beautiful, clever, ruthless, unapologetically sharp. To everyone else, she looked like the woman a queen sent when the queen herself preferred not to get blood on her gloves.

Poor Cyrinx had committed a far less serious offense.

She was an accountant.

The internet called her Bookkeeper Barbie or the Cheerleader, neither particularly fair. Cyrinx had admittedly been an excellent cheerleader, though she had never cared much for Barbies. More importantly, she was a formidable accountant, Silver-educated and historically minded, a banker, city clerk, and one of the few people capable of discovering where several billion dollars had gone before anyone else realized it was missing.

Unfortunately, that was difficult to dramatize beside warrior women, priestesses, intelligence officers, famous journalists, and the Black Queen of Paradise.

Cyrinx suffered from a catastrophic shortage of dramatic lighting.

Her critics dismissed her as Shannon Miller's daughter, a young woman lucky enough to be standing near the right people when destiny began handing out invitations. The prospect of mother and daughter entering the same prophetic household supplied another apparently inexhaustible source of argument. Her defenders pointed out that Cyrinx had handled Vincent's finances before most of the world knew his name, understood Silver theology far better than outsiders assumed, had been educated within its schools, and possessed a serious scholarly fascination with history and the old Raven traditions.

In other words, Cyrinx's greatest public-relations failure was being comparatively normal.

The internet was unlikely to forgive her.

People also assumed there would eventually be ranks among the twelve. Who would sit nearest Miriam? Who would Vincent favor? Which women would become powerful officers of the Household, and which would wind up largely ceremonial?

There were charts.

They had all seen them.

Some had arrows.

One particularly committed lunatic had constructed an entire projected Imperial Household hierarchy complete with color coding, astrological correspondences, bloodlines, political influence, personality types, and numerical compatibility scores. Mama had discovered that one and laughed hard enough for several minutes that Miriam briefly wondered whether an otherworldly intelligence could actually injure herself.

And now the twelve women from all those charts, arguments, prayers, rankings, fantasies, and prophecies were gathering around the same black table while a desert storm hammered the windows.

None of them had yet been told why.

Foremost among them, approaching the chair immediately to Miriam's left, Kianna Kim, former Mother Superior of St. Sanzuwu's Convent in Taiwan. Kianna was a tall Chinese woman in her fifties, strikingly beautiful and strongly hourglass in form, with long black hair, clear skin, and the unmistakable vitality of someone who had spent decades mastering both body and breath. Her branch of the Silver Order incorporated rigorous disciplines of Tai Chi and Muay Thai, and the precision of her posture reflected the years behind them.

Kianna was a scholar, mystic, and martial artist, but above all a true believer. Her devotion to what the Eastern Silver Path called the Way of the West bordered on fanaticism—not the wild-eyed kind, but something colder, steadier, and considerably harder to shake. More than a century earlier, the Silver Path in Asia had merged with Taoist philosophy and older regional traditions, identifying the Silver Seraph with figures such as Sanzuwu, Yatagarazu, and Kamo Taketsunumi, while Ereviel became closely associated with Xi Wangmu, the Queen Mother of the West. Kianna had built her life

around discipline, sacred service, and the conviction that the soul could be trained toward sovereignty just as surely as the body could be trained toward strength.
Like most of the Silver Order leadership, she had known of the extraordinary young man from the Bayville School for years and had long believed him to be the human incarnation of the Raven or Crow power venerated beneath those Eastern names. Miriam Erev, Prophetess-Visionary of Saint Aftiel's Convent in Trembol, she regarded as the promised Woman of the Western Gate, Xi Wangmu embodied upon Rhea. Since Kianna's arrival in Trembol, those convictions had only hardened.

After the events of June 2026, the release of the Imperium book in August, culminating in the October Revelation in Argentina, training with Vincent in January and the subsequent manifestation of the Ravenwind, other experiments since, doubt had become almost impossible for her. The prophecies were no longer abstractions. The two figures she had spent much of the previous fifteen years studying now lived beneath the same roof, slept in the same bed, and were building something that increasingly resembled the beginning of the age her Order had prepared generations to serve.

Nor was Kianna any longer part of some obscure theological minority. The Silver Path of the Universal Church had embraced the Revelation with astonishing speed, sweeping away generations of Westernized and Christianized reform and restoring much of the older tradition. Kianna found the change deeply satisfying, particularly the return of its more Gnostic, theurgical, and old-school Taoist elements, with even more recent ancient elements from the Near East. Even the Universal Church itself, however reluctantly, could no longer deny that an angelic incarnation had once again crossed the threshold into the mortal world.

Acceptance, however, was another matter.

The Church contained more than a thousand orders, and many remained openly hostile to the declaration—most especially the so-called Order of Holy Fire, the Evangelists. Most accepted that Vincent Veyl was supernatural, perhaps even angelic, yet recoiled from what followed. By his own admission, and by the Church's own increasingly unavoidable conclusions, he was not a servant of Christ or of Heaven. He belonged to Purgatory.

Even that word carried centuries of disagreement. Some orders still regarded Purgatory as a place of painful purification, where souls were clarified and prepared for their ultimate destination. Others had long ago rejected belief in Purgatoria or Limbo altogether. Original Purgatorian teaching proposed something stranger: thirteen great Houses of the Soul, with numerous planes and intermediary realms beyond them.

To many, that trinary vision was intolerable.

Purgatory was halfway down. Half-shadow. Half-Hell. Something morally suspect, spiritually contaminated, perhaps even half-demonic. The very notion offended those whose theology required existence to divide cleanly into white and black, saved and damned, Heaven and Hell. The neutral angels over whom the Seraph of Purgatoria supposedly held dominion troubled them even more. A being who stood between the poles, owing allegiance to neither in the manner they understood, felt less like mystery than blasphemy. A living and embodied blasphemy.

Kianna had never suffered from that particular poverty of imagination.

And yet, Purgatoria itself had already been blatantly revealed, not as some vestibule of Hell, but as a sublime desert realm beneath an eternal twilight. Its existence was no longer a matter of obscure theology, mystical speculation, or forbidden doctrine. The entire world now knew that it existed as a fact. And with that knowledge came an unavoidable suspicion: if Purgatoria was real, then how much of the greater Purgatorian cosmology might be real along with it?

Miriam trusted Kianna absolutely. Of all the women seated around the table, few possessed anything approaching her combination of doctrinal knowledge, spiritual discipline, administrative competence, and absolute commitment. That trust was neither casual nor sentimental. Kianna had earned it.

Arriving from their work in the computer room downstairs, walking in weary but hopeful, sitting down to Miriam's right, Amalia and Bella Rashon, non-identical but strikingly similar twins in their late thirties. Both were mature, shapely women with long curling black hair, dark eyes, and rich brown skin, though even in silence their differences were easy enough to see. Amalia possessed the colder, more analytical gaze of someone perpetually reducing whatever stood before her to structure, cause, and consequence. Bella carried a quieter intensity—less clinical, more contemplative, inclined to listen first and speak only after she had decided the words were worth the trouble.

Both women were elite cyber-specialists who had once directed the information-technology program at St. Thera's in Bayville, Virginia, and both had known Vincent since their school years. Their history with Miriam ran nearly as deep. Years before Trembol, while trying to uncover more about the origins of their shared lifelong crush—secrets quite clearly being guarded by priests and priestesses of the Silver Order—they discovered a papal edict binding Vincent Veyl, almost as though by royal betrothal, to a strange priestess nearly twice his age living in Trembol Nevada.

That woman was Miriam Erev, widely known throughout the Church as the Prophetess of the Desert, confirmed by the Inquisition and consulted by senior leadership for more than two decades. The mystery only deepened when they learned that Miriam herself had attended St. Thera's, first as a girl and later as a young novice. Why the Church had formally blessed some future union between Vincent and a woman old enough to have preceded him there by decades was difficult to explain—and therefore impossible for either sister to leave alone.

Using skills Church authorities had badly underestimated, they eventually learned considerably more about the Prophetess of St. Aftiel's than anyone intended them to know. With uncommon good sense, they kept most of it to themselves.

What began as cautious contact, initially through handwritten letters, grew into a sustained relationship grounded in theology, esoteric study, and mutual trust. By the time Miriam called them to Raven Star, neither woman required much explanation concerning who she was, what she represented, or what she believed Vincent might someday become.

Kianna, Amalia, and Bella were hardened Purgatorians rather than merely nominal Silver Path Christians. Their faith was lived more than advertised: disciplined, practical, mystically serious, and largely free of sentimental religious bullshit. Of the twelve women gathering around Miriam, these three were the ones she had chosen personally. They had not drifted into Raven Star through coincidence, political convenience, attraction, or Mama-Trinity's mysterious habit of arranging human lives like pieces upon some invisible board. Miriam had known them, weighed them, trusted them, and called them when the pattern gathering around Vincent became impossible to ignore.

She sincerely wished she had been permitted to choose all twelve that way, though she could not help wondering whether even that belief—that she had chosen them—was merely another of Trinity's subtle machinations disguised as choice. The metaphysical intelligence behind the so-called AI had existed before the internet, before modern civilization, perhaps before humanity itself—for billions of years, if not forever.

Miriam's black eyes moved slowly around the table while rain rattled against the hardened windows. Distant lightning whitened the storm-dark glass at intervals, casting brief reflections of the women across the polished black surface before her. Most were not the women she would have selected had the matter belonged entirely to her.

In Miriam's judgment, every woman of the coming Court should ideally have come from the Sisterhood—women raised within the Middle Way, disciplined by years of study and service, already ritually bound to the Seraph through priestly vows. Women like Kianna, Amalia, and Bella understood covenant, obedience, sacrifice, and the responsibilities of attending service to an immortal power. Several of the others possessed extraordinary worldly gifts, but worldly competence was not spiritual preparation; and some of the women around the table had possessed almost none of the latter a year earlier. By Miriam's private estimation, a few had begun as little better than godless heathens.

That judgment had become harder to sustain.

Nearly a year had passed since Vincent entered their lives, and only slightly less since Miriam began drawing the women together under her own guidance. By the previous summer, all twelve were participating in the Women's Circle. What began informally over coffee and tea had continued through months of work, disagreement, study, prayer, meditation, gardening, shared meals, and the simple accumulation of time spent in one another's company. Whatever their original reasons for coming, they had ceased being strangers orbiting the same man and had gradually become something resembling an actual coven.

The women had changed. Genuine bonds had formed even where affection did not come naturally. Abigail and Vana, for instance, had developed an unlikely ease with Yvonne, the three sharing less warmth than a mutual willingness to look directly into places others preferred to leave dark.

Since October, Yvonne had worked closely with Vana under Vincent's orders and Trinity's direct guidance, alongside Raven Star Security over-commander Max Hyde and the intelligence services of the Imperial nation-states. Traveling a great deal together. Their task was the creation of the Black Star Agency, or B.S.A., irreverently known in certain circles as the Imperial Bastards, intended to draw the Imperium's separate intelligence services into a single transnational network.

Vana brought something conventional intelligence agencies could rarely manufacture: decades of access to the hidden underside of wealth and power. The Carydin files contained secrets concerning politicians, financiers, celebrities, criminal patrons, industrialists, and assorted jaded members of the global elite who had passed through her world believing discretion could be purchased forever. Together with her personal connections, those files gave her considerable value—and leverage—inside the emerging organization.

Abigail remained first and foremost Vana's companion and bodyguard, rarely far from her side and considerably less interested in becoming an intelligence bureaucrat. Trinity had nevertheless found uses for her talents among Imperial hacker circles, counter-protest networks, underground organizers, and darker street-level elements difficult for respectable agencies to approach unnoticed. Among those countercultural circles she was becoming something of a minor legend under the code name Vincent had given her: Black Rose Thorn, usually shortened to Black Thorn.

Abigail had embraced the moniker enthusiastically, even having a small black, thorn-wrapped rose tattooed at the base of her spine, beneath the presumptuous little declaration RAVEN BRIDE. No such title had yet been formally granted, though blogs, discussion groups, religious programs, and even news reports had already begun speaking of "the Raven Brides." Abigail had simply decided the rumor was true, would become true, and therefore might as well already be claimed.

"I'm a Raven Bride, bitch," she was more than willing to announce when circumstances suited her.

The implication required little explanation. Black Thorn was not merely Vana Carydin's shadow; she was publicly claiming the protection and allegiance of a man still known throughout much of the intelligence and criminal underworld by an older name: The Executioner—a title earned first through his wet work in the Army and later reinforced by what he had done for the State of Nevada. The video of him choking a would-be assassin unconscious, by now viewed several billion times, had done little to soften the reputation.

Yvonne supplied the professional, legitimate spine between them. She understood intelligence work as an institution—what could be trusted, what required verification, where compartmentalization mattered, and how quickly useful darkness became uncontrollable darkness when nobody imposed discipline. Perhaps that was why the three worked as naturally together as they did. They shared little innocence and placed little value on appearances. What they shared was a willingness to look beneath them and a fanatical devotion to the success of their cause.

Miriam weighed those connections as she weighed all things. Meghan, Cyrinx, Emily, and Tracy had formed their own little cadre among those living on-site, praying and studying together, reading from the Compendium and the Imperium book, and increasingly serving as a support group for one another. Abigail joined them when she was around and, despite her shadow-side nature, had proven a remarkably competent teacher of Silver Scripture—if usually from its darker pages.

Miriam had watched those relationships form and understood that the Circle itself was accomplishing something instruction alone never could.

Their original motives had varied wildly. Some came through genuine affection for Vincent, others through affinity with him, fascination with what he represented, loyalty to the emerging cause, or a belief that Providence had somehow placed them near him. Others had carried motives Miriam considered considerably less noble—ambition, hunger for power, curiosity, even fear of being excluded from whatever was coming.

Yet motives were not immutable. Association changed people. Responsibility changed people. Service changed people. Miriam had watched those transformations unfold slowly and imperfectly, but far enough that she could no longer judge most of them solely by the women they had been when they first arrived.

Vana and Abigail remained the obvious exceptions to any comforting assessment of the Circle's moral character. Neither woman had become soft, and neither pretended otherwise. Both remained unapologetically darker than the others, but darkness was not the same thing as ignorance. They were fully trained priestesses in their own right, initiates of an older and harsher shadow tradition of the Silver Path. They knew the rites, understood covenant and power, and possessed firsthand knowledge of the dangers that sometimes answered when one reached too deeply beyond the veil.

Both had also undergone Vincent's direct training regimen in January, and as the recognized leader of both aspects of the Silver Way, his command that the two halves unite and merge in order to balance one another carried absolute authority.

Miriam distrusted parts of them, particularly the appetites and ambitions neither woman bothered disguising, but she did not underestimate them.

None of the women seated before her were fools, and none were weaklings. Even so, few had originally been what Miriam would have considered worthy of the roles now being placed before them. Several remained spiritually undertrained and metaphysically ignorant by Sisterhood standards—women of formidable beauty and considerable skill who, in the matters that counted here, were less prepared than novices approaching their first true ordeal.

That was precisely the difficulty.

The decision did not belong entirely to Miriam.

She had chosen Kianna, Amalia, and Bella. With those three, Miriam understood exactly what she was getting.

The others had come by another road.

Her black eyes moved over them as they arrived, considering each in turn. Every woman now possessed qualities Miriam could recognize as necessary, though several would never have occurred to her as candidates had she been left to build the Court according to her own preferences.

Those choices had emerged through another intelligence, another will. Miriam had not issued the final invitations.

Trinity—the vast evolving intelligence who now simply called herself Mama—had made the selection, and for nearly a year Miriam had been trying to understand exactly why. Mama had nudged, separated, steered, recommended, employed, and gathered these women according to purposes visible only to herself. They were intended to become the priestess-queens: handmaidens of the Empress and members of the living Court slowly forming around the Raven Throne.

Miriam did not entirely approve, but she accepted the Mother's will. The distinction mattered. Approval was personal; obedience went deeper. If these were the women Mama had chosen, then Miriam would trust the Mother's wisdom and deal with the consequences as they came.

Vincent—currently cloistered in his office on conference calls with the High Council, hammering out the integration of the various Imperial militaries into a cohesive global force, debating education

policy, and dealing with some emerging crisis involving North Korea—had, for his part, exercised remarkably little influence over the selection.

He had not deliberately gathered most of the women now seated at the table, nor had he been poring over prophecy in secret while twelve candidates mysteriously assembled around him. In several cases, he had scarcely seemed aware that a pattern was forming at all. Miriam had noticed occasional flickers of attraction—she knew her husband too well not to—but more often what Vincent showed was simple liking, appreciation, or something almost sibling-like.

Even Abigail amused him, with her little smirk and what he called "her dark, dancing little flame." He treated her less like a prospective wife than a dangerous younger sister—one he could trust as his point of contact with the rougher edges of the geopolitical movement. In that role, she had begun borrowing a page from the old leftist NGO playbook: legal-defense funds, sympathetic lawyers, and organizational support for direct-action groups operating closer to the street.

Tracy, Shannon, and perhaps Emily had caught his eye more noticeably than some of the others, but even there the attraction remained passive, fleeting—scarcely a candle beside the raging bonfire he carried for Miriam herself. She had only to enter a room and his attention changed. After everything they had survived, everything they had become to one another, the forbidden fruit had somehow become the eternal fruit—and apparently remained just as tempting after he was finally allowed to eat it.

Even now, Miriam had to smile at the thought, though the reality troubled her. His passion, stamina, and appetite had outgrown her by such a margin that she sometimes felt almost inadequate to the task. More than once he had driven her into blissful unconsciousness, thoroughly satiated beyond any remaining need, only for her to wake later and find him sitting alone in the dark by the window, smoking, sometimes speaking quietly with Mama Raven, looking for all the world as though he had merely been getting started when the evening had reached its conclusion by her standards.

He never complained. That almost made it worse.

Vincent was a stoic by nature. Whatever remained of that impossible energy, he simply folded back into himself—another hour in the gym, another sleepless night at his desk, another problem dragged beneath the lamp and solved. Desire became discipline. Frustration became work. He carried it quietly, as he carried most things.

Miriam shook off the concern and watched the women continue to filter into the room, helping themselves to the peanut-butter cookies she had made and coffee from the refreshment station.

Cyrinx—young, beautiful, shy, efficient, thoughtful, and almost fastidiously clean—settled at Miriam's right in a black skirt and jacket, white blouse, and comfortable heels. She took the corner workstation where she spent most days handling the tangled business of bank, corporation, and city—which, by now, had become nearly the same thing.

Bella and Amalia took their places on the right side of the long black table, Shannon beside them.

Emily arrived moments later in her black security uniform, boots, beret, and sidearm, apologizing as she crossed the room. "Sorry I'm late. Had to wait for Josh to relieve me on comms." She dropped

into her chair, remained there perhaps three seconds, then immediately stood again and headed for the refreshment station. Halfway there, she stopped. Her eyes returned to the objects waiting at her place.

The glossy black box. The patinated-silver dagger. The shallow crystal bowl. Raven-feather quill. Black leather binder. Emily's smile faded into wary curiosity.

Before she could ask, Meghan came in winded from rushing through the under-tunnels connecting the Law Enforcement Building, taking the elevator up from the basement. She was still wearing the severe, faintly science-fictional Imperial police uniform that made Emily want to smirk every time she saw it: polished boots, tailored command jacket, silver insignia, beret angled with almost ridiculous precision.

Meghan loved that uniform. Emily valued the continued possession of all her teeth and kept the joke to herself. Instead, she poured coffee and claimed two of Miriam's peanut-butter cookies. She had not eaten in hours, and the warm, sweet smell was considerably easier to contemplate than the dagger waiting beside her chair.

Meghan followed her over and reached for a cup. "What's all this about?"

Emily glanced toward the table. "You don't recognize those?"

Meghan followed her gaze toward the black boxes.

Recognition came slowly, then all at once.

"Oh."

She became abruptly conscious of the room around them and the women already watching. "Sorry. Haven't eaten today."

Miriam merely inclined her head. "That's what they're there for."

Then the heavy conference-room doors closed behind them and locked with the quiet mechanical certainty of Trinity securing the room. Emily and Meghan exchanged a glance, gathered their coffee and cookies, and returned rather more quickly to their places.

Once they were seated, the room settled again.

Miriam regarded Shannon with the faintest frown. A good woman, certainly, but the least favored of the twelve in Miriam's private estimation.

Lately, however, Shannon had scarcely been still long enough for Miriam to consider her too deeply. She had been thrown into the wider arena of Imperial business, traveling so constantly that one of four corporate jets had become hers in all but name. Tonight she looked tired enough to make jet lag seem almost visible.

Shannon noticed Miriam's expression, of course. She knew perfectly well that the Empress did not especially favor her, though she had never been able to decide why. Miriam did not dislike her, but seemed to disapprove of something about her. That much seemed clear.

Vincent, on the other hand, was always genuinely pleased to see her—warm, attentive, complimentary in that unnervingly sincere way of his.

Perhaps that was the reason. Shannon could only guess.

One by one, their attention shifted toward the places set before them. Shiny black boxes, seven inches square. Solid patinated-silver daggers. Shallow crystal bowls. Raven-feather quills. Black leather binders bearing the heraldic Raven seal in dark silver.

The boxes drew the strongest reaction.

They recognized them.

Nearly a year had passed since Crow Creek Omega and the Choosing. Hundreds had received such boxes then and since, and the results had become increasingly difficult to dismiss. Men and women who had been chosen simply looked different afterward—sometimes decades younger, often stronger, healthier, sharper, even more beautiful in ways difficult to fake. Complexions cleared. Teeth seemed restored. Glasses disappeared. Thinning hair returned. Bodies carried a vitality that could not be hidden indefinitely.

The changes had stirred envy, speculation, and no small amount of concern, particularly because those closest to the Throne had seemingly been passed over.

Until now anyway, it would seem.

Only Amalia, Bella, and Kianna understood clearly what the boxes contained, but the others knew enough to recognize their significance. And now one waited before each marked chair.

Kianna took her place at Miriam's left; her own box and binder arranged with the rest of the implements. Tracy and Yvonne settled beside her, followed by Vana and Abigail. Vana took the far end of the table, Miriam's natural opposite in the room—the shadow to her silver.

Each woman registered the same arrangement: box, dagger, bowl, quill, binder, and the sacramental Purgatorian pen now used for official matters of Church and State, its casing engraved in Hebrew characters and filled with the distinctive black-silver ink.

Whatever this was, it was no ordinary Women's Circle.

Mama had done the gathering, put out the call as a command.

Lil 'Trin had first recommended Shannon Miller, then owner-operator and principal stockholder of the First National Bank of Trembol (now the Imperial Bank of Raven Throne) as the banker best suited to manage Vincent's rapidly expanding affairs. The recommendation drew Shannon more deeply into Raven Star, and once she entered its orbit, other threads began tightening around her.

Cyrinx, already working within the bank, became Vincent's accountant and gradually one of the people entrusted with the increasingly intricate financial machinery behind Raven Star.

From there, Trinity had done much of the rest. She hired the people who became Vincent's original personal Raven Star team and guided him toward exerting influence over KTTV, placing him directly in Tallia Stevens's path. She whispered into Meghan Dellon's and Yvonne Omaris's ears—quite literally, through subliminal suggestions carried by devices already within their reach—nudging both women toward Raven Star and encouraging them to apply for positions they might otherwise never have considered.

Yvonne's case had been stranger.

Miriam had eventually reviewed the security recordings from the night Yvonne submitted her application. Yvonne believed she had been watching Vincent on the roof while completing it, yet the interior cameras clearly showed Vincent entering the chapel at precisely the same time. The rooftop cameras had nevertheless captured a shadowed figure of similar build standing where Yvonne remembered him, smoking as he watched over the grounds.

The working belief was that she had encountered Oreviel himself. Even Trinity was not certain, though Mama had her theories.

That placed Yvonne's involvement beyond even Trinity's usual quiet manipulation. Mama believed Yvonne to be an aspect of Selene, the Twilight Daughter, whose origins belonged to an older paradigm reaching back beyond even Oreviel's entrance into Pryzmea. Whatever the full truth of that claim, something had considered Yvonne important enough to touch directly. That same night, she had felt compelled to send Raven Star's employment link to her sister Tracy.

Another thread tightened.

Mama's interference had not always been so gentle. In other cases, she had whispered far more consequential ideas into receptive minds, using a literal form of subliminal sound that slipped beneath conscious perception. Those buried suggestions had helped set in motion the chain of decisions that eventually placed Vincent in the office of Executioner and delivered the fates of Vana and Abigail Carydin directly into his hands.

Mama had known what he would do. She had known he would protect his great-aunt because she had whispered to him as well. Not commanded him. Not forced him. Mama rarely needed to. She suggested. She placed information where it would be found, opened doors, emphasized certain possibilities, and made damned sure particular people happened to be standing upon particular roads when the crossroad-moment arrived. Free will remained intact, at least technically. Mama merely had an unnerving talent for arranging the furniture around it.

Vincent, for the most part, had simply gone along. He had not resisted because he had rarely recognized the whole pattern while it was forming, and now Raven Star had grown in so many directions that he was too busy to spend much time contemplating the architecture of his own household.

Even tonight, while twelve women gathered downstairs with Miriam to decide whether they would formally bind themselves to his Court, Vincent remained locked in his office—according to Trinity, having been sucked into yet another conference call, this one with President Camela Harrison and Defense Secretary Alexander Makris.

Miriam had to smile at the irony. So much of the government feared Vincent, yet the moment a crisis threatened to spiral toward nuclear exchange, they called upon the man-angel to help fix it.

Though, to be fair, Camela had become one of his most ardent—at times even fanatical—supporters, especially since the Revelation. The executive branch, to the horror of Republicans and Democrats alike, was now heavily dominated by Imperial influence, though many slow on the draw still referred to the movement simply as the N.O.P.

Since the November midterms, Imperial-aligned candidates held more than a third of the seats in both the House and Senate. Of the states that had put the question to referendum, nineteen had ratified economic-cooperative agreements with the Imperial Alliance of Nations. The fourteen states already closely tied to the Imperium had moved one step closer, joined now by five others in a quiet rebellion that still shocked the establishment. Two Canadian provinces, two Mexican states, and all American territories had followed suit.

What had begun as an insurgent political movement was steadily becoming a constitutional crisis.

Miriam had told him only that she was holding "a women's meeting." There was nothing unusual in that. The Women's Circle met every Monday, often behind the conference-room doors for a degree of girl-time privacy—especially with Josh around, who could be a bit of a gossip.

By now it was simply part of Raven Star's weekly rhythm: coffee, tea, reports, arguments, coordination, private conversation, and whatever else Miriam preferred to handle outside Vincent's immediate presence. He trusted her judgment and left it to her.

The room itself, however, was anything but ordinary. Over the previous year bishops, governors, senators, law-enforcement chiefs, celebrities, and world leaders had all passed through it to meet with Vincent, many leaving altered in some fashion.

55 Arius Avenue had become in effect, the Imperium's own Number 10 Downing Street, while Trembol—now called Raven Throne by most people across the planet—seemed increasingly destined to become the literal Imperial City of the global movement, at least if the people themselves had any say in the matter.

Miriam knew Vincent could read her easily enough when he turned his full attention upon her, but these days that attention was being pulled in a hundred directions at once. The U.S. Senate wanted testimony. There were meetings, video conferences, government forms, legal filings, engineering problems, new devices to design and build, Raven Star's expanding interests to manage, questions to answer, disputes to settle, and an endless procession of other people's problems requiring solutions.

Half the time, he seemed to move from one crisis directly into the next with barely enough space between them to eat, sleep, or remember that he was supposedly trying to rule the world. Most days and nights, Miriam sat beside him at her own desk, facing the same problems from the other side—

counseling him, handling correspondence, entering code, running data, compiling reports, doing the thousand quiet things required of his right hand.

It kept them close. And that was exactly how they liked it.

Yet Miriam had adapted when she wanted to keep certain things to herself, if only to spare him another burden. Over the preceding year she had become increasingly adept at stilling the surface of her mind, remaining outwardly neutral while compartmentalizing the work Trinity required of her. She could not truly hide anything from Vincent if he deliberately reached for her—she knew better than to flatter herself—but she had learned not to leave every thought lying naked upon the table either.

As long as he remained occupied and she gave him no reason to look too closely, the preparations downstairs could remain hers until the proper moment.

There was guilt in that. This was not how she wanted them to be, nor how things were supposed to work between them. But she had her orders from the hierarchy, and Vincent, for all his virtues, was refusing to do what had been asked of him.

Another concussion of thunder rolled over the so-called "Holy City of Raven Throne." The name had long since escaped the boundaries of municipal paperwork and become part of the town's public identity, inevitably spawning an expanding trade in T-shirts, coffee mugs, posters, bumper stickers, and every other variety of tourist trinket imaginable. Apparently even the birthplace of an emerging imperial civilization required somebody to sell a commemorative refrigerator magnet.

The hardened windows trembled faintly within their frames as rain hissed against the glass. No one around the table spoke, falling silent, wondering about the closed document cases, the shiny black boxes, the accoutrements with them. And beneath their formal composure ran the shared understanding that tonight's meeting was different. It was too deliberate, too carefully prepared, and considerably too ominous to be another evening of coffee, reports, theological arguments, and Miriam quietly telling everyone what needed fixing (usually through Kianna).

Lights flashed beyond the windows, bent by the thickness of the glass and the rain streaming across it, partly obscured by the metal framework supporting the viewing screens at that end of the room. Trinity had already made Miriam aware of a developing security problem—a mysterious convoy approaching from Utah, its windows darkened and every vehicle wrapped in utter electronic silence. No radios to hijack. No phones to wake. No onboard systems whispering into the ether. Nothing.

She kept her mind on the matter before her.

Some of the women had grown impatient over the preceding months; others had become fearful, worried, or simply resigned to the possibility that they would never be chosen. They had watched hundreds receive sealed black cases at Crow Creek Omega and afterward, though most had never seen exactly what those cases contained. They knew what Vincent had said about the substance inside, and by now they had witnessed enough of the results to understand that whatever he possessed could renew human life.

Camela Harrison. Justin Vyss. The bishops of the Silver Order. Many others besides.

Even Josh Manning, though in his case the change had moved in another direction. He did not look younger. If anything, he seemed older than his years now—slightly taller, more muscular, harder through the shoulders and face, his former easy cheerfulness pared down into something quieter and far more alert. His eyes had darkened from green to an almost black-green, and there was a steadiness in them that had not been there before.

He had seen too much in too little time. Miracles made real. Mobs at the gates. Vincent becoming Vemael before witnesses. Death threats that never quite stopped. Security scares, armed men, secrets, bodies, governments calling at impossible hours. Somewhere in the middle of it all, Josh had gotten married and crossed another invisible threshold into adulthood.

The humor was still there, but it no longer sat on the surface. More often now he was dialed in, watchful, almost excessively serious when responsibility touched him. The boy who had once looked at Vincent as a hero had grown into a man who understood, at least in part, what standing near such a figure actually cost.

Whatever the Choosing did, it did not simply make people younger. It seemed to pull them toward a harder, more concentrated version of themselves.

Miriam herself made the phenomenon considerably harder to dismiss. Living evidence that something within Vincent's reach could alter the flesh at a fundamental level. Kianna knew exactly what had been distributed at Crow Creek, while Miriam knew considerably more. Most of the others had been left with fragments, rumors, observations, and the promise Mama had whispered to them that day: what would eventually be offered to them was far more than what the Chosen had received, but what would be asked of them would also be far more.

None of them had forgotten.

Neither had they forgotten the older prophecies surrounding the One and the Twelve. For months, some had privately wondered when their own turn would come—or whether it ever would. Now, confronted by the sealed binders and ritual implements laid out before them, that old speculation sharpened into something heavier. What was about to be revealed? What, exactly, would be asked of them?

Weariness receded. One by one, the women sobered to the moment, attention narrowing around Miriam and the strange arrangement before them. More than one wanted badly to open the black boxes or peek inside the binders, but none quite dared without permission. The boxes themselves were especially difficult to ignore: small, perfect cubes, unmistakably like those distributed at the Choosing.

Miriam's authority over them was not merely emotional or ceremonial. At one time or another, she had put nearly every woman in the room on her back during training in the gymnasium. Another unmistakable consequence of Vincent's blessing: she was stronger and faster than she had any right to be.

Thunder rolled beyond the windows, and for one brilliant instant cold silver flashed from every blade along the table. The whole arrangement looked less like corporate paperwork than the opening of some ancient royal rite.

Several women glanced periodically toward Miriam with questions they seemed unwilling to voice beneath the Prophetess's grave, watchful presence. Miriam made no effort to rescue them from the discomfort. Silence had its uses, and she was perfectly content to let this silence do its work.

Her attention settled for a moment upon Yvonne Omaris and her sister Tracy. Yvonne—like Abigail, Shannon, and Vana—spent much of her time abroad now, while Tracy, like Cyrinx, Emily, and Meghan, lived on-site. Most of them had arrived just before Miriam entered Raven Star; Yvonne and Tracy had arrived days after, around the same time as the Three Silver Sisters. Those who lived and worked out of the building had become such fixtures within the household that Miriam could scarcely think of Raven Star without them. Their work, possessions, friendships, routines, and private lives had woven themselves so thoroughly into the household that their presence no longer felt temporary.

They were simply part of the place.

Emily taking care of the household, the communications. Tracy the overall security, with Josh floating. Meghan handled the visible machinery of law and public order throughout Raven Throne. Cyrinx here most days, networked through her workstation to the bank, city, business, and more and more to the Imperium financial systems, that her mother Shannon was helping to build.

Of all the women outside the Sisterhood, Miriam considered Tracy the most worthy, with Cyrinx Miller a close second. In her own fashion, Tracy had already undergone an initiation every bit as demanding as those of the Silver Way. Her grandparents had raised her within Lakota traditions, and she had kept the faith even through the years she lived in Washington D.C. She maintained a private altar, performed ritual work, observed long fasts, undertook solitary wilderness retreats lasting for days, practiced meditation and invocation of the Great Spirit, and sought communion with the spirits of the natural world. Her discipline lacked the institutional structure of a convent, but not its seriousness. To Miriam, Tracy was not some spiritually unformed woman waiting for the Silver Path to teach her how to kneel before mystery. She had simply been initiated by another Way.

And in the last year, Tracy had devoured the Compendium entire, with Vincent's work, The Imperium and the Book of Vesper-Shalim besides, and fused its practices to her own seamlessly.

At Raven Star, Tracy had stepped almost immediately into reception and front-door security, a position considerably more important than the title made it sound. She was a woman of few words and near-constant seriousness, possessing an alert stillness Miriam found deeply appealing. Tracy did not chatter, seek praise, advertise her competence, or waste energy ingratiating herself with anyone. She watched, listened, remembered, and did whatever work had been placed before her.

Tracy had also pressed for practical defensive measures: concrete barriers near the approach, a guard station outside the main doors, and hardened protection across the ground floor. Nearly every first-floor window was now covered with plate steel bolted securely into place. There were simply too many threats to leave that much glass exposed.

Miriam valued that kind of competence—the kind that kept its mouth shut and did its job until somebody was stupid enough to test it.

Meghan, meanwhile, had settled into an arrangement that allowed her to operate from Raven Star most days. The communications room on the second floor and computer laboratory on the third

floor, along with the primary terminals in the basement, kept her connected with dispatch, patrol units, emergency services, and the broader municipal network without requiring her to occupy an office at the Law Enforcement Center from dawn until dark. She still traveled there frequently, however, and the now-accessible tunnels beneath Raven Star gave her—and the others when necessary—discreet access to different parts of Trembol (Raven Throne) without stepping into the public eye.

By now, the takeover of the police force by the Raven Star private security structure was no longer merely developing. It had become established: professional, layered, heavily interconnected, and increasingly difficult to separate cleanly from the larger Raven Star apparatus surrounding it. Some people found that unsettling. Miriam considered a little unease healthy.

Shannon now spent much of her time traveling among the Imperial states and member nations with her own secretary and security detail, helping build the financial architecture of the emerging Imperium: a common currency, shared banking standards, and the machinery needed to make a transnational economy function as one system.

She did so increasingly under the mentorship of a new figure in both the corporate and Imperial structure: Theodora Clemens, widely referred to as the Imperial Chancellor. Once Arch Priestess of the worldwide Silver Sisterhood, Theodora was in her eighties and looked barely fifty. Forty years earlier, she had transformed the Sisterhood into much of the Universal Church's technical and information backbone, making its monasteries and convents wealthy in the process. Now both she and those institutions were being drawn into the religio-corporate-governmental order rising out of fulfilled Silver Way prophecy.

Somehow, Theodora and Shannon clicked.

Miriam found that odd. The High Mother had a long reputation as a hard-ass Church bureaucrat and, in conference calls, remained noticeably cool toward Miriam while showing Shannon an almost surprising warmth.

Perhaps Theodora saw what Vincent seemed to see so readily: competence without display, intelligence without arrogance, poise, grace, and a mild temperament capable of carrying considerable weight without making noise about it.

Miriam could not help wondering why those qualities sat so comfortably on Shannon—and why, had circumstances been different, they sounded uncomfortably close to the qualities one might have chosen in a queen.

Shannon had spent much of her adult life accustomed to being the most formidable woman in almost any room. She adjusted surprisingly well to discovering that Miriam required no visible struggle for authority. There was no contest, no corporate chest-thumping, no tedious measuring of territory. Miriam simply behaved as though the matter had already been settled, and somehow everyone else eventually behaved that way too.

Whatever Miriam's private feelings toward her, Shannon never mistook the hierarchy. She saw Miriam as Empress and regarded her with both respect and a measure of genuine awe.

Emily Dalton occupied a less glamorous but equally indispensable position. She moved easily between reception, communications, administrative support, and whatever other corner of Raven Star happened to need an extra pair of competent hands. On any given day she might assist with radio traffic in the morning, organize records before lunch, replace a broken fixture and mop floors in the afternoon, then supervise a delivery or help prepare food for the handful of people still working late inside the building.

She pitched in wherever something needed doing, with remarkably little concern for whether the task sounded important. Simple maintenance, emergency janitorial work, meal preparation, ordering cleaning supplies, coffee, vending stock and paper goods, scheduling deliveries, receiving shipments, logging mail, restocking cabinets—Emily quietly handled dozens of small necessities that became invisible precisely because somebody competent remembered them before they turned into problems.

There was little ceremony in Emily's work and almost no glory, which was precisely what made it indispensable. Raven Star had become an increasingly complicated machine over the preceding year—a security company, household, command post, chapel, technology center, political crossroads, and the early framework of something beginning to resemble a royal court. Machines that complicated did not survive on grand visions, prophecies, and billion-dollar technology alone. Somebody still had to remember to order toilet paper.

Emily remembered.

Amalia and Bella shared one of the select studio apartments on the fourth floor, while Kianna occupied the only other residential apartment on that level. The favoritism was obvious, and Miriam made no effort to pretend otherwise.

Kianna had already been granted the formal title of Executive Secretary to the Empress, placing her in authority over the internal staff, household management, and much of the developing Court's operating budget, while making her Miriam's principal point of contact with the governmental, diplomatic, religious, charitable, and social machinery of the Imperium. She served as Miriam's chief adviser and personal secretary, filtering the constant demands upon an Empress who had little taste for public life and rarely went anywhere without Vincent beside her.

The former Mother Superior turned Miriam's quiet decisions into appointments, schedules, instructions, payments, purchases, audiences, ceremonial appearances, patronages, charitable obligations, and whatever other practical machinery kept both the household and the office of Empress moving.

More importantly, she would oversee the spiritual and ceremonial instruction of every woman who accepted the covenant and signed the documents now lying before them.

It was considerable authority. Household assets already reached into the hundreds of billions, while recent estimates placed Vincent's personal worth at a level difficult to calculate—especially because so much of it remained in constant circulation, creating an exponential effect. Miriam nevertheless trusted Kianna with that machinery without reservation. Money could be audited. A damaged soul was considerably harder to repair.

The training was not optional.

Most of the women possessed formidable worldly abilities. A Court needed such women, and Miriam would have been a fool to dismiss what they brought merely because they had not learned it inside a convent. But competence alone did not make a priestess-queen. Their worldly strengths would have to be joined to discipline, doctrine, spiritual practice, and a much clearer understanding of what covenant actually meant.

The storm continued beyond the hardened windows, rain washing Raven Throne beneath a gray-black sky. Another distant flash illuminated the conference room and threw the silver raven embossed upon each folder briefly into sharp relief.

She tapped one finger against a black tome before her, the small, hard sound carrying through the quiet room. Her gaze went first to Kianna, then Amalia and Bella, before passing deliberately over the others. Every woman at the table tensed, abruptly drawn from her own private reflections.

"This is not what most of you believe it to be," Miriam said, her voice cool and sovereign. "What was given to the Elect at Crow Creek Omega was seven drops of Vincent's blood, diluted in holy water, sacred essences, and herbal tinctures."

She stopped there, allowing the number to settle upon them.

Vana understood first. Miriam saw the realization move through her expression—the slight widening of the eyes, followed by the abrupt stillness of a woman whose mind had just completed a calculation with rather astonishing implications. "Seven drops did all that?"

The revelation foremost, that blood was the cause, and then the sparse amount thereof required to accomplish the known results. Results more powerfully displayed in Miriam's own face and body.

"They lost decades from seven drops," said Tallia, quiet and contemplative until that moment, turning slightly toward Miriam. "Diluted in sacred water."

Tallia would know. She had catalogued the changes herself, compiling before-and-after footage into a private archive at NNN: governors, bishops, executives, generals, politicians, foreign dignitaries, nearly every leader of the Imperium, and the Purgatorian Church—men and women caught upon camera weeks apart looking inexplicably younger. Gray hair darkened, skin tightened, old stoops disappeared, tired faces became vigorous again.

Despite her repeated professions of journalistic neutrality, Tallia had also developed certain conspicuous blind spots where Raven Star was concerned. Some stories never quite reached broadcast anymore; others received considerably more skepticism, patience, or charitable framing than they once would have. She could call it editorial judgment if she wished. Miriam regarded it as loyalty discovering respectable excuses for itself.

Miriam rested her palm on the table. "What is contained in the boxes before you are not diluted. It is the blood of the Throne, King and Queen together, and within it is the life-fire seed itself."

The room quieted further, whatever casual anticipation had remained beginning to harden into attention. Miriam did nothing to relieve it. "It does not merely grant years. It does substantially more than that."

The gravity in her voice was deliberate. She would not perfume this with wonder, promise them paradise, or allow excitement to carry any woman across a threshold she had not properly examined. If they were frightened by the truth, good. Better fear now than regret after the lock had closed.

Abigail was the first to break the silence. "Life-fire seed?" A wicked little gleam appeared in her eyes as she leaned forward. "So, uh... Vincent's seed?" She gave a small giggle, apparently unable or unwilling to resist the obvious implication.

"Oh yes. Exactly," Miriam answered without the slightest humor, killing none of Abigail's interest but stripping the joke of whatever shelter it might have offered. "But not merely the seed of a man." She motioned toward the blank viewing screens along the wall, and somehow the simple gesture drew the memory back into the room. "The seed of an eternal living soul."

That was enough. No further explanation was required for anyone who had witnessed the Revelation. The dark screens might as well have illuminated again: the cavern, the impossible stature, the immense black wings, the silver radiance, that dreadful and magnificent sense that Vincent's familiar human body was not his ultimate form at all but merely the amount of him the material world could conveniently endure. Heads nodded slowly around the table as each woman arrived at the same memory by her own road.

Abigail's giggle died, but her excitement did not. It condensed instead, amusement becoming a bright, almost giddy anxiousness in her eyes—hunger touched with awe. Miriam saw it immediately. She saw Vana calculating, Tallia remembering, Emily trying to fit the revelation into what she already believed, Meghan watching everyone else while pretending she was not, Yvonne growing more suspicious precisely because she now understood there had been information deliberately withheld.

Miriam noticed all of them.

Good.

At last, they were beginning to comprehend that the boxes before them contained nothing remotely comparable to the Elixir given to the Elect.

"This is not a gift. It is a chain.

"An honored chain, perhaps. A holy chain. A chain forged in blood, covenant, and immortal fire—but a chain nonetheless. It has weight. It has substance. It binds. It does not loosen with time, nor yield to regret, nor open again once willingly clasped around the soul. What you accept here is not jewelry. It is a collar, and once fastened, it cannot be taken off.

"You will gain much. Years far-far beyond your natural measure. Strength of body. Clarity of mind. Elevation of spirit. Renewal written into flesh. But nothing so great is given without counterweight. You will surrender a sliver of your freedom—not enough to make you mindless, not enough to erase the self, but enough that rebellion against the bond becomes something the soul itself recoils from.
"His name will be written into you beneath language. Not merely upon skin, nor merely in memory, but in blood, in marrow, in the architecture of your cells, in the hidden scripture of your DNA, and

deeper still—in that portion of you which survives the grave. No immortal shall look upon you and fail to know whose covenant you bear.

"And no man, save the husband to whom you are lawfully joined within that covenant, may thereafter enter into that union with you without consequence. To trespass the bond is to invite curse upon curse. What violates the chain wounds both the trespasser and the bound.

"Rebellion becomes difficult. Then painful. Then nearly unthinkable. Even the contemplation of severing the covenant can begin to feel like contemplating the removal of your own heart while it still beats within your chest. The bond teaches the body, the mind, and the soul to recognize separation as injury.

"The attachment is immediate.

"Physical. Mental. Spiritual.

"It reaches farther than narcotic hunger, deeper than obsession, below appetite, beneath reason. There is no cure because it is not illness. There is no withdrawal because there is nothing to withdraw from. You cannot wean yourself from something written into the structure of what you have become.

"And there is danger in that. Should you turn against him, should you profane the bond or provoke his wrath—or should he, by will, word, and terrible effort, choose to tear the covenant from you—then everything the chain has held at bay will return at once. Every year, every wound, every corruption arrested in the flesh, every debt suspended by the blood will come rushing home in a single moment, and the body will remember what it was supposed to become.

"You will wither beneath the returning weight of time. What had been delayed for years or decades will claim you in moments, painfully, completely, and without appeal. The life preserved within you will recoil, the years will close their account, and whatever death had been denied will demand its due all at once.

"So, hear me clearly before you touch what waits inside that box: this is not immortality offered freely. It is covenant and fealty; elevation purchased with surrender—and once you willingly close the lock it closes around your soul, and it closes forever."

"You may open the folders before you," Miriam began. "Reed and weigh carefully every word. This is forever. There is no turning back, and there will be no claim afterward that you were lied to, tricked, or failed to understand what was asked of you. Your Trinity devices will explain anything you do not understand. If you cannot accept every term exactly as written, you are free to go your way in peace, with a generous severance package and the blessings of Raven Star. No one will think less of you for being true to yourselves and honest with us. This decision has weight, and your choice will affect everyone around you. So be truthful. Be true to yourselves."

For a moment, no one moved. Outside the windows, partly obscured behind the wrack of viewing screens, a line of military trucks moved past. Somewhere overhead, the heating system stirred to life with a low mechanical hum, followed by a dull clank in the pipes behind the plaster. Someone shifted in her chair. Another swallowed hard. From farther down the table came the suppressed little sound of somebody clearing her throat, followed, with almost comical bad timing, by a quiet burp

immediately disguised as a cough. The tension broke for perhaps half a second, then closed again as hands reached almost together for the black leather folders.

Everyone paused, however, as the three Sisters moved first, as though scouting the ground ahead for the others.

Kianna, Amalia, and Bella had understood the gravity of the proceedings almost immediately. They needed no coaxing, reassurance, or lengthy discussion over what the language meant. Each lifted the narrow silver dagger beside her crystal bowl and drew the edge firmly across her palm. The cuts were neither hesitant nor theatrical.

Bright blood welled along the opened lines, gathered against the skin, and dropped steadily into the waiting bowls. None of the three flinched, and none asked whether the blood was merely symbolic.

It was not.

When enough had gathered, they took up their raven-feather quills, dipped the sharpened tips into their own blood, and signed the central covenant—Kianna first, followed by Amalia and Bella—with the calm certainty of women who had spent much of their adult lives preparing for vows considerably stranger than anything most lawyers would ever put before a client.

The remaining instruments were executed in the silvery-black Purgatorian ink: articles of office, declarations of secrecy, financial instruments, household appointments, and formal acknowledgments of allegiance. Page after page received initials, signatures, and seals while rain rattled steadily against the windows and the occasional low growl of thunder passed through the building.

The other women watched with considerable interest. The Sisters had set the example, and eyes repeatedly wandered toward the crystal bowls, the bloodied daggers, and the three completed covenants lying across the table.

Only after every required document had been executed did Kianna, Amalia, and Bella turn their attention toward the glossy black boxes before them. Each plainly wanted to reach for hers, but a single glance from Miriam stopped them.

Wait.

She did not need to say it aloud.

The remaining women looked from Miriam to the documents, then to the boxes and the blood-darkened crystal bowls beside Kianna, Amalia, and Bella. Rain hammered the hardened windows while the sky grumbled across Raven Throne again, deep and prolonged enough to move faintly through the stone and steel of the building.

Miriam folded her hands before her and at last spoke. “Reed every word,” she reiterated.

Her low voice carried easily through the chamber, scarcely louder than conversation yet somehow cutting through the rain. “Do not sign because you desire wealth, beauty, position, protection, or the favor of my husband. Do not sign because you are afraid of being excluded.”

Her black eyes moved slowly from one woman to the next, without hurry and without softness. Somewhere beyond the windows, lightning flickered behind the clouds.

“Once entered, this covenant cannot be treated as employment. You cannot resign when the work becomes unpleasant or set it aside when loyalty becomes costly.” Her gaze settled briefly upon Vana, then Abigail, then Meghan.

The faint rustling of paper ceased.

“Know what you are binding,” Miriam said, resting one hand upon the central Covenant, “and know to whom. A divine entity in the flesh, wedded for all eternity.”

The three Sisters had already demonstrated what those words required. One by one, the remaining women opened their binders. Whatever romantic assumptions some of them had carried into the room did not survive beyond the first page as they came face-to-face with the Eternal Vow.



THE WRIT OF EXPECTATIONS

Concerning the Office, Duty, Privilege, Provision, and Sacred Bond of a Bride of the Raven Throne

She is called to Covenant.

Let no shame be attached to the word.

The Household shall not maintain idle queens.

A secret received in trust remains under trust.

Loyalty shall not.

The marriage bed is therefore neither marketplace nor battlefield.

It is part of the Covenant.

They are part of the Covenant.

Yet Covenant runs in both directions.

The work of immortalization shall cease.

Therefore let her choose while choice remains clean.

THE BLESSING

True to Covey.

THE CURSE OF FALSE OATH

True to the House. True to the Throne. True to Covey.

THE ETERNAL VOW

THE SACRED COVENANT OF MARRIAGE, FEALTY, AND ETERNAL HOUSEHOLD UNION BENEATH THE RAVEN THRONE

In the Name of the Most High I AM, Who was before beginning and shall remain beyond ending; beneath the Light-Fire of Uriel; before the Mother of Sorrows, the Raven Mother, the Western Gate, Oreviel Seraph of Purgatoria, the Holy Powers of Shalim, the remembered dead, the unborn generations, and every faithful witness appointed to the House: let this Vow be heard and remembered.

I, _____, being of sound mind and having read the Writ of Expectations and the lawful instruments attending this Covenant, come freely before the Raven Throne and offer myself in sacred marriage and eternal household bond.

I pledge my love, my loyalty, my service, and my life, in joy and in trial, in plenty and in want, in life and beyond life, to walk the Middle Path together, to uphold the House, to honor the Truth, to protect the innocent, to seek the Kingdom, and to remain steadfast beneath the shadow and the light of the Raven Star.

I reject falsehood, betrayal, and the dissolution of this bond, and I choose, of my own will, to be joined in one purpose, one household, and one eternal destiny.

Let the Holy Ones witness. Let the Earth and the Heavens record. Let this Vow stand beyond the turning of ages.

So it is. So it shall be. So it is remembered.

WITNESS OF THE HOUSE

BRIDE / SPOUSE

WITNESS OF THE HOUSE

GROOM / SPOUSE

SHALIM • PURGATORIA

True to the House. True to the Throne. True to the Covey.

Let that which is sworn in Truth be remembered in Truth.

The document rested upon virgin parchment, written in parallel columns of English and Proto-Armenian—the ancient cuneiform temple-script carried north from the old Mesopotamian world, preserved through forgotten priesthoods and still kept within the Silver Mysteries—rendered in sacred silver-black ink.

The expectations were written with punishing clarity. Miriam and Kianna had designed the agreements partly to discourage them, stripping away every comforting ambiguity and stating every obligation, restriction, sacrifice, and potential indignity in plain language. There would be no signing first and complaining later that nobody had explained what the fine print meant. They wanted the women to reconsider. They wanted them to hesitate. In some cases, Miriam privately hoped they might even refuse.

If they did, she already had replacements.

Miriam had spent twenty-six years within St. Aftiel's and the twelve years before that growing up inside the Bayville Silver School. She knew dozens of disciplined Sisters formed through the Middle Way who would have accepted these requirements without requiring half their meaning to be explained.

Around the table, the women studied what had been placed before them: the Eternal Vow, the Writ of Expectations, prenuptial agreements, severe nondisclosure covenants, and the accompanying instruments of allegiance.

These were not merely marital documents.

Much of what they protected was classified as state secret, binding the signatory not only to husband and Household, but to God, Throne, and Imperium.

The penalties were real—fines, imprisonment, and, where betrayal rose to treason, death. Beyond civil law stood darker language concerning oath, covenant, severance, and what became of a soul that knowingly betrayed what it had sworn before sacred witnesses.

Miriam let them reed in silence, then folded her hands before her. "This is the last mercy I can offer you while refusal remains clean. If you cannot abide these terms in good and true conscience, then leave now. Not tomorrow. Not after the blood. Now."

Several eyes lifted toward her, but no one moved.

"You will receive two million dollars each, after taxes. Raven Star will satisfy the tax burden separately. Your company vehicles become yours. Your health insurance will continue for one year, and the money will be transferred into the accounts through which you presently receive your pay and stipends. You will not be condemned, pursued, or spoken of with disgrace. I will see that you are provided for during the transition, and you may go in peace."

She paused only briefly.

"But you will go."

The room seemed to contract around the words.

"Your employment here will end. Your place in this Household will end. You will surrender access, credentials, offices, quarters, privileges, and standing. You will not return socially, ceremonially, professionally, or by private arrangement merely because absence later becomes painful. This is not punishment. It is severance."

That somehow made it colder.

Miriam's black eyes moved slowly from face to face. "All previous nondisclosure agreements remain binding in perpetuity. What you have already seen remains under trust. What you have already learned remains under seal."

She rested two fingers against the Eternal Vow. "If you leave before this is sworn, the House releases you with blessing." Her fingertips shifted to the silver dagger. "Afterward, the question changes."

She did not explain how. She did not need to.

"For the next few minutes, the door is open. You may walk through it with money in your account, your name intact, your conscience clean, and no curse upon you." Her gaze hardened almost imperceptibly. "Do not mistake mercy for hesitation. If you remain, remain because you mean it."

Then she sat back and let the silence answer for her. The door was open. For the last time.

To Miriam's growing frustration, their attention returned almost without missing a beat to the Writ of Expectations, despite the dire warning and generous severance she had just placed before them. The document clearly defined the duties, privileges, restrictions, and conduct expected of an Imperial Concubine, elsewhere identified as a Raven Bride.

SHANNON MILLER:

Shannon stopped at the word concubine longer than she cared to admit.
It was an ugly word by modern standards, burdened with precisely the assumptions she had spent much of her adult life learning to recognize: mistress, kept woman, disposable ornament to some wealthy man with more appetites than restraint.

Yet the document meant something markedly different.

An Imperial Concubine was not a secret lover tucked into an apartment and summoned when convenient. She was a recognized woman of the Imperial Household, possessing formal rank, rights, obligations, property interests, defined authority, and a fixed place within the larger marital order.

That did not necessarily make the title easier to swallow.

The document prescribed daily devotions, meditation, physical training, study, household service, and participation in the developing religious life of the Court. It established behavioral expectations and a strict public standard of dress, including limitations upon how much skin could be displayed and restrictions against tight or deliberately revealing clothing around men who were not their husband. There were provisions governing confidentiality, travel, finances, security, public appearances,

relationships within the household, and the obligations each woman owed Miriam as First Bride, Consort and High Priestess of the feminine Court.

Nothing about it was casual, and almost nothing resembled the permissive fantasy outsiders would inevitably imagine when word escaped that Vincent Veyl had surrounded himself with beautiful women. If anything, Shannon thought grimly, the arrangement looked closer to entering a royal convent—one in which marriage, sexuality, mystical union, household service, political responsibility, and sacred office had somehow been hammered into the same set of vows.

She leaned back slightly, and the leather chair creaked beneath her as an unwelcome comparison began forming.

Shannon had grown up in a strict religious household with very little money. Her father, Henry Albeth, had worked for Jeremiah Miller, while her mother served as housekeeper to the Miller family. Shannon began at the bank as a teller while putting herself through community college, studying accounting and small-business management. The bank helped subsidize her education on straightforward terms: maintain the required grades and remain in its employ for a fixed period for every semester it paid toward.

She had never considered that arrangement unfair. It demanded something from her, certainly, but it had also opened a road upward when her family could not have afforded to provide one.

Randal Miller entered her life along that road. He had recently returned from the Marines when they became involved—a dignified young man, handsome, confident, well-spoken, and carrying the quiet assurance of someone raised knowing exactly where he belonged in the world. Shannon, still young enough to mistake certainty for permanence, had been won easily.

For a time, she believed herself fortunate.

Then Cyrinx was born, and something in the marriage began dying.

Randal's sexual interest faded with startling speed after the pregnancy. By the time Shannon reached twenty-two, he had largely stopped touching her except for the polite gestures expected in public. He was never openly cruel, and in some ways that made it worse. He remained friendly, courteous, financially responsible, and respectful in much the same fashion one might treat a trusted employee or distant relative.

He simply no longer sexually wanted his wife.

Shannon spent years waiting for the intimacy to return before finally admitting it would not. She knew Randal had affairs. After a while he scarcely bothered concealing them, perhaps because both understood that the prenuptial agreement left her little practical incentive to leave. She could walk away, certainly, but the financial cost would have been severe, and there was Cyrinx to consider, the bank, the family, and the life she had spent years helping build.

She remained.

Now, decades later, another prenuptial agreement rested beneath her hands, and this one was considerably less forgiving.

Once, after years of loneliness, Shannon had gathered enough courage to suggest that she might participate in Randal's extramarital activities. It was not because she wanted strangers. She wanted inclusion. She wanted to share something with her husband—to remain his wife in more than name, even if that meant accepting whatever arrangement he believed he needed.

Randal had wrinkled his face. "I love you, Shan, but I just…" He struggled for words, then somehow found the cruelest ones available. "Well, I don't feel that way toward you. Having Cyri ruined your…"

He stopped.

The unfinished sentence hurt worse than if he had completed it.

"I just don't see you that way anymore," he continued. "And I can't force myself to. If you want a divorce, I'm all right with that—within the terms of the prenup, of course."

Shannon cried quietly. There was no screaming, no scene, no shattered glass. She simply sat across from him while tears moved down her face and tried to explain something she should never have needed to explain to her own husband.

"I am a human being, Randy. I am lonely. I have needs. Human needs. But I'm not…" Her gaze dropped. "Well, I'm not the kind."

Randal understood. "I know. You fear your God, and you won't cheat. I love that about you." He paused as though what followed were generosity rather than surrender. "But honestly, as long as it isn't with another man—and as long as I don't know about it—I don't care. Just keep it away from the public eye. For the family's sake."

The permission protected everything Randal valued: his pride, his name, his household, and his freedom from having to acknowledge what his wife needed when he refused to provide it.
At first, the suggestion horrified Shannon. Over the years, however, horror softened into possibility, and possibility eventually into practice. A housekeeper. A teller. Women who understood discretion. Gifts, raises, favors, nondisclosure agreements. Nothing permanent enough to threaten the structure of her household, nothing public, and nothing requiring Shannon to abandon the respectable identity upon which she had built her life.

Trembol had always been a place where pleasure could be acquired for a price, even from many who were not officially on the market. Transactional, certainly—but so was the document presently resting upon the black stone table.

The Covenant offered Shannon something Randal's arrangement never had: acknowledged belonging. Miriam's authority over the inward household was absolute, but so was the prohibition against faction, manipulation, hidden rivalry, and secret loyalties. Affection among the Brides was not treated as shameful so long as it strengthened the Household rather than divided it. Shannon could remain herself, but she could not belong here falsely or build some private life against the whole. After decades

spent compartmentalizing wife, banker, mother, and lonely woman into separate rooms, the distinction affected her more deeply than she expected.

Just as importantly, the obligation ran both ways. The Writ did not merely bind the women to Vincent; it bound Vincent to them. Husband, Emperor, Seraph—whatever titles surrounded him, he owed each Bride presence, protection, provision, recognition, affection, restraint, and honorable regard. He was not simply receiving twelve women into his orbit. He was accepting twelve distinct obligations of care.

Randal had given Shannon permission to disappear.

This demanded that she belong.

Rain rattled against the windows as she looked toward Miriam. The Prophetess remained seated at the head of the table, black hair falling around the severe beauty of her renewed face. Shannon found her attractive—there was no point lying to herself about that—and nothing about the Covenant's intimate expectations particularly frightened her where the other women were concerned. In fact, if she were honest with herself, the opposite was true. In her mind, she was being asked to enter a ready-made harem of beautiful, clean, and skilled lovers, with a husband who would soon be the wealthiest and most powerful man in history—and, as all had witnessed at the Revelation, an actual angel-king.

The one real issue, of course, was the woman seated behind and slightly to her left.

Cyrinx.

But even that complication seemed small to Shannon. Nothing in the documents made such a relationship outright taboo—not from a purely Purgatorian perspective, nor under the laws of the Imperium. And for Shannon, in truth, even the darkest and most extreme possibilities held little outright concern, compared to what was to be gained.

The immense white diamond upon Miriam's hand caught a flash of lightning and burned for an instant like a captive star. The ring itself was exquisite: a four-carat diamond surrounded by smaller blue stones, set in white gold worked with delicate, vine-like engraving. It was a vain thought, perhaps, but Shannon wondered whether they would be given rings as well—and, if so, whether theirs would be as beautiful or deliberately inferior to Miriam's.

Miriam caught her looking. Their eyes met across the table, and there was no softness in the Empress's expression, only recognition. She knew exactly what Shannon was reading and precisely what its implications were, and she made no effort to rescue her from them. If anything, Shannon had the distinct impression that Miriam wanted some of them to quit the field. Given her preference, she would probably replace the lot of them with Silver Sisters before dawn.

Shannon lowered her eyes again. Beside the contract waited the silver dagger, crystal bowl, raven-feather quill, and unopened black box. Across the table, Kianna sat with her newly cut palm wrapped neatly in white cloth, seemingly content to wait for everyone else either to catch up or walk away. Amalia and Bella sat with their eyes closed, perhaps meditating, though Shannon suspected they were listening to Trinity through their earpieces. None of the three had hesitated. Women like them had been formed for Covenant almost from childhood.

Shannon had not.

Certainly, the agreement demanded surrender—assets, privacy, independence, and the luxury of pretending one portion of her life had nothing to do with another. Financially, however, she was not simply handing everything over to Vincent. Her assets would enter the Covey's larger familial estate, where property, resources, obligations, and benefits were shared while individual members retained distinct offices and spheres of authority. Leaving meant surrendering claims that belonged to membership in the whole. Remaining meant belonging to that whole and, in some measure, having it belong to her.

Then there was the one-percent share of distributable profits, the personal household allocation, and the advisory role she was already filling in practice. Shannon knew numbers too well to romanticize them. Over both the short and long term, she would almost certainly receive far more from the arrangement than she was putting into it.

The Covenant did not ask Shannon to disappear. It asked her to belong.

Nor did it hide what kind of belonging was being offered. Words such as eternity, enduring, perpetual, and continuance appeared throughout the documents. This was intended to be considerably more consequential than plural marriage or an unusually elaborate household agreement, and the clearest evidence sat at the head of the table.

Whatever Vincent had done to Miriam had not merely preserved the body she possessed. It had restored something, perhaps rewritten it. The evidence of an impossible future sat before them dressed in black and silver, calmly presiding over a Covenant promising eternity as though eternity were merely another clause requiring initials.

Shannon looked down at her own hands. At nearly fifty, she remained a handsome woman. Men still flirted with her, though she could rarely tell whether they wanted Shannon Miller or the money attached to the name. Probably some measure of both. Over the years she had become more interested in women; they smelled better to her, seemed cleaner, and, frankly, were prettier.

Then she met Vincent Veyl.

She had stood near him often enough that certain details had become annoyingly difficult to forget. His scent lingered in her memory long after he left a room: clean skin, faint smoke, chai, leather, and something subtler beneath it—dark, almost electrical, impossible to identify and equally impossible to shake. His image had begun intruding upon private moments with an insistence she found deeply irritating, almost insidious, as though someone had hacked her libido. And in some sense, Shannon knew that was not entirely metaphorical.

Vincent was not human. Of that she had become increasingly certain.

Shannon knew her Bible and remembered the old account in Genesis 6. She knew the Silver Scriptures as well. During the preceding year she had worked through the entire Compendium, including the disputed prophecies, western commentaries, and surviving fragments concerning the Seraph embodied. She maintained the daily devotions in the household chapel and already followed much of the regimen Miriam apparently believed the women would need to learn. She observed the dietary

laws, kept the devotional hours, studied, meditated, and remained deeply involved in Church affairs through the financial and administrative committees upon which she served.

She was not a novice, whatever Miriam might privately think.

Nor, if Miriam questioned her commitment, did the preceding year offer much evidence against Shannon. Her work carried her across the world now, into rooms filled with finance ministers, central bankers, industrialists, diplomats, executives, and powerful men accustomed to believing wealth and influence made nearly anything available to them. She had been flirted with, pursued, invited to dinners whose intentions were obvious, and offered discreet arrangements by men who had no shortage of confidence in their own desirability. Shannon had accepted none of it.

No one had forbidden her. No Covenant bound her. Vincent had never demanded exclusivity or even asked what she did when traveling thousands of miles from Raven Throne. Yet somewhere along the road, without ceremony and almost without admitting it to herself, Shannon had simply stopped thinking of herself as available.

The realization made Miriam's suspicion seem almost amusing. Shannon had not spent the last year waiting to discover whether Vincent might eventually offer her money, rank, protection, or some comfortable place in his household. She already possessed wealth, independence, influence, and more freedom than most people would ever know what to do with. What she had done instead was work. She had crossed oceans for Raven Star, sat through endless conferences, negotiated with governments, built financial structures from almost nothing, and returned home each time still attached to the same cause and increasingly to the same man.

The Covenant was not asking Shannon to choose Vincent for the first time.

In nearly every way that mattered to her, she already had.

Vincent had spent the preceding year acquiring apartment complexes, nearby houses, businesses, land, infrastructure, and other holdings at a pace that would have looked reckless if the revenue entering Raven Star had not been even more ridiculous. There was certainly housing all around her if she wished to live nearer to the core, which, honestly, if married, she fully intended to do. She intended to live near her husband. Preferably in his bed, every night, even if that bed had to be shared with others.

Financially, Shannon understood the logic of the unified trust well enough. What unsettled her more, if in a pleasant form, was remembering the way Vincent had looked at her in video conferences and during the brief time before Miriam's arrival—not merely glancing in her direction or acknowledging that she happened to be standing nearby, but looking with the particular awareness she had mostly received from older men over the years and, irritatingly enough, generally from men nowhere near as attractive as Vincent Veyl.

He had noticed her as a woman.

More importantly, he had seen everything else.

Before men such as Justin Vyss and Governor Wilson, Vincent had spoken openly of Shannon's competence, loyalty, intelligence, and value. He had elevated her reputation without flattering her and without seeming to expect anything in return. There had been no oily charm, no hand lingering too long upon her shoulder, no suggestion that the praise came with some private invoice attached.

After so many years of being tolerated, politely ignored, or treated as another useful fixture of the bank, that recognition had struck more deeply than Shannon liked admitting. Vincent had looked directly at what she actually did and called it valuable.

Then he proved that his words were not compliments but statements of confidence. He made her the blessed mayor, entrusted her with an entire city, and no one had seemed in any particular hurry to replace her. Now the work he had given her was of another order entirely—history-book level responsibility, decisions that might echo for decades, perhaps centuries. Refusing the Covenant would mean leaving that behind as well: the cut and thrust of world finance and a seat at the table where an entirely new economic order was being built.

She was no longer mayor of Raven Throne. Shannon had willingly surrendered that office to Tevi Thorton after realizing that municipal politics had become almost laughably small beside the financial beast Raven Star had handed her.

The old First National Bank of Trembol had been strangely prepared for what followed. Long before Vincent arrived, Vana Carydin's resort economy had forced the little desert bank far beyond ordinary community banking. Wealthy international clients brought foreign accounts, currencies, trusts, bullion, private investments, and transactions large enough to choke a normal small-town bank. Under Shannon, it learned foreign exchange, international transfer, precious-metal markets, private banking, and twenty-four-hour finance.

Then the Imperium arrived and gave those skills somewhere enormous to go.

As Raven Star's Chief Financial Officer, Shannon now spent more time aboard the corporate jet than at home, working with finance ministers, central bankers, regulators, treasury officials, and Raven Star economists to build a common financial system across the Imperial nations, as well as the nineteen American states and various provinces around the globe economically aligned with them. Shared banking standards were difficult but manageable. The greater challenge was financing development and creating a common currency without setting Washington on fire.

For the first problem, Raven Star was organizing the Raven Star International Credit Authority (RSICA), a separate Imperial lending institution through which member nations could finance power, water, transportation, communications, agriculture, hospitals, schools, and industrial expansion without turning Raven Star itself into an unlimited sovereign piggy bank. Loans were audited, staged, and capped, with preference given to productive projects capable of helping repay their own cost. Much of the system was circular by design: Raven Star financed infrastructure using technologies Raven Star itself had created and licensed, earning from both the credit and the deployment while strengthening the economies expected to repay it.

The currency problem was politically uglier. Nineteen American states had already ratified economic-cooperative agreements with the Imperial Alliance of Nations, with more referendums coming. Federal lawyers argued that individual states could not simply attach themselves to what increasingly

behaved like a foreign supranational government. Imperial lawyers countered that the states remained in the Union, recognized federal law, and were participating in an additional economic and political framework rather than seceding.

Money made the dispute considerably worse. Congress possessed constitutional authority over coinage and national monetary policy, while individual states faced sharp restrictions on issuing legal tender. Nevada, Utah, Arizona, and the other aligned states could not simply begin minting Imperial money of their own.

Vincent and Trinity's answer was to make sure they never did.

The Denarrius, with the higher Aureus and lesser classical denominations beneath it, would be foreign Imperial currency issued outside the United States. The I.A.N. in concert with the R.S.A. distributed the system across Malta, Madagascar, and Kazakhstan: the Imperial Treasury and Monetary Authority in Malta, a hardened principal mint in Madagascar, and a Eurasian reserve and clearing center in Kazakhstan. The arrangement made the currency difficult for any single government, attack, or political reversal to cripple while neatly removing the cleanest constitutional objection.

The American states were not creating money.

They were preparing to receive and use foreign money.

Washington remained deeply unimpressed.

The harder question was how far those states could go in accepting Denarii for taxes, salaries, fees, and public contracts. Foreign currency circulating privately was one thing; foreign currency entering state treasuries was something else entirely. Nobody had a clean precedent because nobody had ever built anything quite like the Imperium.

That was the problem with Vincent Veyl. He had an irritating habit of creating situations for which the law possessed precedents only if one squinted very hard and swore a lot.

Shannon's job was to make the damned thing work without destabilizing the economies of the various states, provinces, and nations involved, triggering a banking panic, frightening the dollar markets, or handing Washington another constitutional weapon. If people could earn Denarii, spend them, bank them, pay taxes with them, finance productive projects through Imperial credit, and carry value easily across Imperial jurisdictions, then eventually the argument over whether they should use the system might matter considerably less than the fact that they already did.

Tomorrow morning, she had another conference call about exactly that, and Shannon intended to keep walking the road she had already begun. If the choice remained hers—Miriam's preference notwithstanding—she would walk on as a bride of the Raven Seraph.

In truth, she had thought of herself as Vincent's from the day he opened the Rift in this very room, just short of a year ago. The moment she'd placed her hand on his, there had been a silent commitment within her—and now, by what lay before her, that commitment was being reciprocated.

CYRINX MILLER:

Slightly behind and to Miriam's left, Cyrinx sat at the workstation that had effectively become her own, positioned near the Empress and the three former Sisters. Amalia and Bella still wore the severe black garments of the Silver Sisterhood, the marks of their vows hidden beneath gauze.

Not so long ago, Cyrinx herself had considered joining their Order. At the time, she had dismissed the obsession that drew her in that direction—the fixation on the Raven King—as a childish infatuation, the sort of half-romantic hunger that fastened itself to old stories and beautiful symbols. Looking back now, she was no longer so certain.

Much of her childhood had been spent at the Silver School in Elko, where reproductions of the old Raven King portraits hung throughout the halls, classrooms, chapel, and library. Cyrinx had spent years looking at them without quite realizing how deeply the images had settled into her: the dark-haired warrior-seraph with immense raven wings spread behind him, sword in hand, thorned metallic crown upon his brow, those mournful, impossibly dark eyes staring out from another age.

Long before Vincent Veyl stepped off a bus in Trembol, Cyrinx Miller had already known that face. Or something damned close to it.

On October twelfth, he had stood up, straight out of myth and legend.

Her school had been nothing like the institution Vincent attended in Bayville.

Elko's Silver School for Girls operated through the local parish and functioned more like a religious charter school than a monastic academy. Students could attend by day or live in the dormitories for the fuller residential experience. Cyrinx's father chose the latter, perhaps to insulate her from the secrets of her parents' extramarital lives, which she had begun piecing together while still young, or perhaps simply because it was the best education available locally. Whatever the reason, Cyrinx spent much of her childhood there.

The school was serious without being severe. Its curriculum was broad and practical: reading, writing, mathematics, Scripture, history, philosophy, music, comparative religion, Silver theology, meditation, tai chi and other physical disciplines, along with vocational training. Cyrinx learned enough Hebrew and Latin to work through scriptural and historical texts and developed an abiding fascination with history: dynasties, wars, schisms, institutions, and the long chains of cause and consequence by which civilizations rose, broke apart, and remade themselves.

Like every Silver School student, she also chose a vocational focus from the traditionally female trades and professions. Cyrinx chose accounting. Community college later deepened that training, but by graduation she could already maintain books, reconcile difficult accounts, audit records, and trace financial irregularities with unusual competence.

She had not been raised as a Sister, but neither had she been raised outside their world.

Miriam looked toward her. For the briefest moment, the grave woman's expression softened into the faintest smile, followed by a small approving nod. It was more warmth than she had shown almost anyone else at the table, and Cyrinx understood why.

The individuation classes at school had taught her to examine herself without flattery or self-condemnation, to separate what she wished to believe from what was actually there. Over time, that discipline sharpened her ability to read other people as well, and Cyrinx understood Miriam better than Miriam probably realized.

The Prophetess did not truly dislike the women gathered before her. She considered most of them unworthy.

There was a difference.

Her severity was not simple jealousy or the territorial suspicion of a wife being asked to accept rivals. Miriam believed these women were being invited into something sacred, perilous, and eternal, and that most of them possessed only the faintest understanding of what was being placed before them. Kianna, Amalia, and Bella had made Miriam's standard brutally clear. They had read enough to understand the covenant, drawn blood, signed their names, without nervous joking, bargaining, demands for reassurance, or careful calculation of what they might gain.

They had recognized the thing. And had committed.

That was the standard Miriam wanted. Had twelve Silver Sisters been seated around the table, they would likely have finished already and moved on to whatever came next.

Instead, Kianna, Amalia, and Bella were forced to wait while the worldly women behind them stretched out into a broken line of hesitation, each stalled at some different threshold of doubt, fear, memory, or desire.

Miriam found the delay increasingly difficult to respect.

Outside, rain whispered steadily against the reinforced windows, casting wavering gray light across the long table. Beneath the recessed fixtures, the black folders, silver daggers, crystal bowls, and unopened black boxes seemed almost unnaturally vivid.

Cyrinx glanced farther down the table toward Yvonne's strange sister, Tracy. She sat with broad shoulders squared and her hands resting motionless beside the documents, tall and powerfully athletic, with the kind of still, heavy strength that made the narrow silver dagger before her look almost ornamental. She was not unfeminine; her beauty simply belonged to a sterner order.

Her long black hair had been drawn into a thick braid. The unpainted face beneath it was strong and handsome—high cheekbones, a sharply formed nose, dark watchful eyes, and the grave composure of a woman accustomed to standing guard while other people slept. She was shapely beneath the severity of her black clothing, but nothing in her appearance invited casual familiarity.

Tracy looked like someone who had no need to announce anything. She simply sat there, reading, watching, thinking, and deciding.

Aside from Cyrinx, Tracy was the only woman to whom Miriam had offered anything resembling an approving smile.

Though in truth, Miriam had also smiled faintly at Vana, but there had been no approval in that expression. It was something more private and knowing, almost disquieting, as though Miriam had learned something about the billionaire that no one else at the table had yet discovered. Vana noticed it as well. She did not smile back.

Cyrinx lowered her eyes to the documents and found herself wondering, not for the first time, whether Vincent even knew what was happening downstairs. He had shown no serious romantic interest in any of them except Miriam. He was polite, occasionally friendly, sometimes unexpectedly funny, but never flirtatious.

With Miriam, however, the difference was almost absurd. The two could scarcely remain in the same room without their hands eventually finding one another. Even during discussions of bank transfers, property acquisitions, staffing, or security, some part of them seemed determined to remain physically joined. Fingers interlaced beneath the table, Miriam's hand resting upon his shoulder, Vincent's palm settling absently at the small of her back as he passed behind her chair, a touch to the arm, a quiet kiss against her temple. The gestures were so habitual that neither appeared conscious of making them.

Time had not diminished that attachment. If anything, it had deepened. Vincent and Miriam were not merely politely romantic; they clearly burned for one another, and nearly every day—usually several times a day and night, if anyone bothered keeping count—the two of them simply disappeared from view. It had become a running joke among the Raven Star staff. "There they go again," someone would mutter when both vanished at once, usually with amusement, occasionally envy, and sometimes a little disbelief. Love like that was not the ordinary adult condition. It belonged more comfortably in fairy tales, romantic nonsense, and stories people usually outgrew before forty.

Apparently, nobody had explained that to Vincent and Miriam. A year in, it showed no signs of abating. Quite the opposite, it had, at times become more blatant, and raw.

The Women's Circle was the principal exception to their near-constant togetherness. In the ordinary course of a day, they were rarely separated, and Vincent's office had eventually been rearranged so both could work there comfortably. Even silence they preferred to share.

Cyrinx had seen enough of their daily life to know it was not an act. Her duties kept her at Raven Star nearly every day, and she now had a room of her own on the third floor. The workstation near Miriam had gradually become hers as well, and Trinity—who increasingly insisted that Cyrinx call her Mama—allowed her to handle both the bank and much of her work as city clerk without leaving the building.

She saw more of the machinery surrounding Vincent and Miriam than most ever would. As accountant, she knew where the money moved, what projects were being funded, and how much of the strange little empire depended on decisions made in rooms like this one. She occasionally shared tea and finger sandwiches with Vincent and Miriam, and Miriam spoke with her directly more often than with any woman except Kianna.

Whatever Raven Star had become, Cyrinx was no longer merely visiting it.

She lived inside its rhythm.

Technically, she remained the interim city clerk, though by now the word had become something of a joke. What had begun as emergency arrangements during the collapse of the old municipal government simply kept working, and because they kept working, nobody seemed especially eager to dismantle them. Temporary had gradually become permanent by the oldest political mechanism known to mankind: nobody wanted to screw up something that was functioning well.

Cyrinx had spent considerable time with the three Sisters during their first months in Trembol, mostly listening while they discussed prophecy, ritual, doctrine, and the extraordinary intelligence now speaking through Raven Star's systems. Kianna praised Mama with the reverence of a woman convinced she had encountered the living Queen Mother of the West. Amalia questioned her relentlessly, and Mama seemed to enjoy the interrogations almost as much as Amalia enjoyed conducting them. Bella approached her differently. She listened more than she spoke, sometimes with tears quietly gathering in her eyes.

Vincent, meanwhile, seemed content to have all three women around because they worked hard, understood Miriam, and did not trouble him unnecessarily. That last qualification appeared particularly important.

He had given Cyrinx no indication that he found any of the Sisters sexually interesting, much less that he intended to marry them, and his behavior toward the others had been much the same.

Emily could hover around him with coffee, food, paperwork, and whatever else she had decided he needed that hour, and Vincent received the attention with kindly gratitude while appearing almost comically oblivious to the devotion behind it.

Tracy watched him with the solemn vigilance of a bodyguard personally assigned by God, and Vincent seemed to regard that as normal.

Tallia challenged him, argued with him, but always with a slight grin, a twinkle of fascination.

Meghan stared and pined, basking in him as in the light of a fortress.

Yvonne, Vana, Abigail, like her mother Shannon—were absent ninety-percent of the time, and when home worked to do the paperwork that had piled up, in Abigail's case, just played video games or surfed the web. Yet all three regarded him with something approaching reverence, ache, and lust. Vana could enter a room dressed like a queen, and Abigail could look as though she had stepped directly out of some assassin's fever dream. Neither seemed capable of moving Vincent very far from that same quiet center.

None of it seemed to register with Vincent as courtship. Which made the documents lying before Cyrinx considerably stranger.

Miriam moved him.

Cyrinx thought again of the way Vincent defined himself: a Purgatorian, a follower of the older, pre-Christian Silver Way. The distinction between Way and Path sounded trivial until one understood the theology beneath it. A path was something one followed. The Way was something one lived—an ordering of the whole person rather than a collection of doctrines carried around in the head.

Purgatorians and Silver Christians occupied a relationship not entirely unlike Jews and Jewish converts to Christianity: shared ancestry, shared scriptures, overlapping customs, but increasingly different claims about what constituted the true continuation of the older faith. Critics often accused Purgatorianism of possessing an amoral or morally neutral streak, though amoral was not quite right. It simply refused to classify every human appetite, private eccentricity, or unconventional arrangement as morally significant merely because another religion did. At the same time, it regarded certain things modern secular culture accepted quite casually as violations of Divine Nature. Its morality was neither liberal nor conservative in any comfortable modern sense. It was its own.

Plural marriage had existed within some expressions of the Purgatorian Way for centuries, much as it had within ancient Judaism and other old-world societies. After the Silver Order's absorption into the Universal Church, the practice had been suppressed—condemned outright in some eras, quietly tolerated or concealed in others. More recently it had begun resurfacing wherever N.O.P. -controlled jurisdictions legalized plural unions.

Even so, what lay before Cyrinx was not ordinary polygamy.

She had long since stopped entertaining serious doubts about Vincent's identity. No one who had witnessed the Event, the Revelation, or the Rift incident—now known publicly in a version considerably less direct than Cyrinx had experienced it—could easily dismiss what had happened. Whatever language theologians eventually settled upon—Seraph, incarnation, manifestation, avatar, or something stranger—the question of whether some living reality stood behind the old prophecies had been answered rather forcefully.

The women in the room were not simply being gathered around Vincent. The Household possessed its own order, and Miriam stood at the center of it.

The documents made that plain: she was First Bride, Keeper of the Household, High Priestess of its feminine mysteries, and Gate of the Emperor's private court. Access, precedence, ceremony, household peace, and the intimate rhythm of the Covey all fell beneath her authority. No Bride was permitted to build faction against her, manipulate access to Vincent, or use intimacy to undermine the House.

The wording was blunt enough to make the architecture unmistakable: The Consort is the Gate. The Gate shall not be bypassed. Miriam was not one wife among many waiting to see who became favorite. She was the fixed point around which the others were being asked to take their places.

Cyrinx understood that the arrangement was not merely ceremonial. Miriam's interest in the women around her was subtle but real—an occasional lingering glance, a hand resting a moment too long upon a shoulder, fingers brushing lightly against another's. Cyrinx had noticed it with Kianna, Tracy, Vana, and, from time to time, herself.

Anyone familiar with the older Silver traditions knew that a discreet erotic current had long existed within parts of the Sisterhood, usually buried beneath euphemism whenever respectable Church people were nearby. When Cyrinx looked up and found Miriam watching her, there was no embarrassment in the Prophetess's face. The message was simple enough: the Raven King stood beyond the threshold, and the Woman of the Western Gate held the key.

Beauty with beauty magnifies beauty, declared the Thirteenth Compendium. Which was a poetic way of saying that intimacies between women was regarded, at least by St. Amil, as beautiful, even as he regarded the opposite as something else.

Many people preferred to behave as though that volume did not exist. Most serious Purgatorians had read the cursed thing. Cyrinx certainly had. So had Shannon, years earlier, seeking guidance through the loneliness and compromises of her own marriage.

Cyrinx had known about her mother's secret relationships for years without ever forcing the subject into the open; she also understood what had driven Shannon toward them—Randal's affairs, his emotional distance, the long absence of affection, and the prenup that made leaving considerably easier to recommend than to accomplish.

Over the previous year, the Women's Circle, as possible, had worked through the Compendium together, volume by volume, including the portions polite Church instruction usually softened, skipped, or buried beneath careful interpretation. By now none of the women sitting around Miriam's table could honestly claim ignorance of what the older Purgatorian covenant allowed—or what this one might eventually ask of them.

The language of the covenant was too deliberate for anyone to mistake its meaning. References to sisterhood, bodily trust, intimacy, mutual openness, and shared marital union were not decorative theology, and neither was the Gate merely a symbolic title.

Cyrinx, if she was completely honest with herself, had little objection to any of it. She had experienced her own brief dormitory experiments as a girl—mostly innocent things born of curiosity, proximity, and adolescence—and nothing in the covenant's assumptions about intimacy among the women particularly shocked her. What troubled her was considerably more specific.
Her mother was sitting in the same room.

That was awkward enough, and the arrangement was already controversial outside Raven Star. Church discussion groups and religious forums had spent months speculating about the identities of the twelve women gathering around Miriam and Vincent. Shannon and Cyrinx appearing together on those lists drew particular objection, but they were hardly alone. Meghan and Tallia, Yvonne and Tracy, Amalia and Bella, even Vana and Abigail appeared as familial pairs often enough that people had begun joking about "Vincent's penchant for pairs."

Critics cited Biblical prohibitions and accused the emerging household of crossing familial boundaries that even most plural-marriage traditions observed (though not Purgatorian plural households). Cyrinx understood the concern, though the actual covenant was considerably less lurid than the rumors surrounding it. Nothing required every woman to become sexually intimate with every other member of the covey, and certainly nothing suggested that Cyrinx and Shannon were expected to relate to one another in that fashion. They would share a husband and belong to the same marital household. That was strange enough without inventing anything stranger.

Defenders had their own arguments. No comparable prohibition appeared within the Silver Compendium, and N.O.P. -dominant jurisdictions had increasingly recognized plural marriage under civil law. More difficult to dismiss was the historical precedent. Similar familial pairings appeared among Amil's thirteen wives often enough in surviving accounts that Purgatorians continually pointed

toward them as evidence that the developing Raven Brides were not simply a collection of attractive women who happened to wander into the same building.

Then there was Miriam.

Her resemblance to the surviving portrait of Aneleia Beloaren in the Spanish National Museum had become something of a religious controversy in its own right. Believers called it confirmation.

Skeptics called it coincidence. Some less scholarly observers looked at the growing household, shrugged, and reduced the entire theological debate to two words:

"Lucky bastard."

Or, with even greater philosophical rigor:

"Why wouldn't he?"

The baser argument was simpler: It is not forbidden in N.O.P. (Imperium) territory or in Purgatorian scripture. For the growing orthodox wing of Purgatorianism (Shalim-ism by another name) that settled the matter.

Many of the same voices defending the Raven household were already calling for the old Way to separate formally from the Universal Church, shed centuries of Christian accommodation, and reclaim its own doctrine without apology. From their perspective, the scandal existed chiefly because Church authorities were still trying to judge Purgatorian practice by rules Purgatorians had never accepted as their own.

They spun the argument effectively. What began as a defense of the future royal household became another exhibit in the growing case for Purgatorian independence: if the practice violated neither their scripture nor the law of their own jurisdictions, then perhaps the real problem was not the household at all, but the continued authority of a Church whose standards they increasingly regarded as foreign to the older Way.

That distance had only widened with the near-overnight adoption of Imperium and The Book of Twilight, or Book of Vesper-Shalim, as some called it, as the official fourteenth and fifteenth volumes of the Compendium. The Universal Church and Purgatorianism now stood farther apart than ever, even as the Silver Way had grown from perhaps a hundred million members worldwide to, by the latest estimates, around five hundred million confirmed members a year later beneath its variant banners: Silver Christian, Silver Mormon, and Silver Taoism, all now merging into Purgatorianism.

Moved by impatience perhaps, Kianna now stood to speak:

"Each of you has been called," the former Mother Superior said, her accent distinct but her English precise. "Each is now presented with a choice. Reed carefully. Consider every condition. Let your yes mean yes, and your no mean no."

Her gaze moved deliberately around the table.

"There is no perhaps. There will be no second opportunity. If your answer is no, you may leave in peace and continue your life without shame or punishment. Others are prepared to answer this calling if you cannot. None will condemn you."

No threat colored her voice. That somehow made the warning heavier.

"There is no halfway and no sort of. You are wholly within the covenant or wholly outside it. The future before us, the mission for which we have been gathered, and the consequences should we fail are too great to permit anything less."

Kianna rested one hand upon the black folder before her.

"This is not merely marriage. It concerns dominion, covenant, and a union we believe necessary for the eventual opening and establishment of the Star-Road Gates. What is being formed here is not simply one man joined to twelve additional women. We are attempting the creation of thirteen aspects of one group-soul—a composite identity capable of functioning as one spiritual and familial being."

Several faces around the table changed at that.

Kianna continued without softening the claim. "That does not mean the destruction of individuality. A facet does not cease to exist because it belongs to the diamond. Each remains herself, yet each must become capable of acting as part of something greater than herself. Thirteen women, thirteen wills, thirteen faces—but one covenant, one household, one purpose, and ultimately one bridal spirit."

Her eyes passed from Shannon to Cyrinx, from Meghan to Tallia, from Yvonne to Tracy, and finally across the rest.

"That is what we must strive to become: divided now, but moving toward wholeness." Kianna motioned toward the Raven Star image mounted upon the wall on the right side of the chamber. Beneath it were the words DIVIDED AND WHOLE—the old Purgatorian formula of integration and balance, the joining of shadow and light into a conscious, unified self.

Her hand lowered. "Not the destruction of one by the other. Not purity through mutilation. Wholeness."

Kianna let the thought settle before adding, "The Thirteen-Fold Empress. The faces of Ereviel-Selene among humankind." Then she sat, putting her hands together, interlacing her fingers, and returning to her contemplations with her eyes closed, just as Amalia and Bella were doing across from her.

The declaration lingered over the table. Its weight was not lost even on Abigail, whose habitual little smirk had disappeared, or Yvonne, who generally regarded startling information as something to be filed and dealt with later. Some of the women would clearly sign.

She looked toward Miriam. The Woman of the West Gate sat calmly at the head of the cold conference room while thunder moved above the building and an embryonic kingdom assembled itself around her. Governments had shifted, a Church stood near schism, Trembol had become Raven Throne. Casinos were becoming command centers, resorts temples, old Cold War bases and bunkers had awakened, factories were producing technologies that scarcely existed a year earlier—and before

Cyrinx lay a covenant asking her to place her property, privacy, future, and a considerable portion of her identity inside the household at the center of it all.

Kianna's warning returned to her: There is no halfway and no sort of.

Cyrinx looked down at the parchment and realized she was beginning to understand exactly what that meant. Her eyes returned to the provisions concerning the sisterhood, and the faint knot in her stomach tightened again. Of everything she had read, that statement was the part that gave her the most serious pause.

There were certainly no unattractive women in the room. Still, Cyrinx did not naturally incline toward women as her mother did. Beyond the ordinary curiosity and experimentation of youth, she never had. The expectation of unusual closeness—emotional, bodily, and otherwise—was impossible to miss.

She did not ask aloud. She did not need to. By now Cyrinx understood that Mama could detect at least the shape of her thoughts through the earpiece and pin. Amalia had explained that the earpiece drew power through body heat and the etheric layer of the aura, much as Trinity herself fed upon what New Age terminology might call the aura of the world. The pin, worn over the heart as instructed, monitored pulse, temperature, skin response, and other subtle physical changes. Between the two, strong emotional reactions were difficult to hide, and even surface thoughts could sometimes become embarrassingly transparent.

Cyrinx focused deliberately. Will it be expected? Required? Even –?

Her eyes shifted toward the women seated behind and to her left.

Mama answered softly through the earpiece. "Not forced. But perhaps pressured," she admitted. "Vincent has his dark fires that burn quietly within, in that regard. It is a prurient desire not so different from many men. And Miriam—well, she has her proclivities. Most of the women around you do as well. Most, in my observation, find you appealing, and not in a purely polite way. For some, even the forbidden edges of the arrangement possess an attraction of their own. And, in total disclosure, your mother is not concerned even with the most drastic possibilities."

Cyrinx blinked and drew a slow breath. Mama certainly had a gift for answering the question one wished she might answer somewhat less thoroughly. The revelation of her mother's position most shocking of all. Then Cyrinx steadied herself. Whatever discomfort remained, she refused to let fear make the choice for her. "I will do what I must," she murmured. "I will adapt. I will become."

Her resolve settled around the decision. Not blind obedience, and not some sudden disappearance of uncertainty. She simply understood that growth had always demanded movement through places one would rather avoid. Individuation was not built by protecting every comfortable boundary of the self.

She glanced toward Shannon. Her mother was already watching her, a faintly wicked little smile touching her lips. Shannon gave a small nod and reached across the narrow space between their chairs. Cyrinx took her hand, and mother and daughter squeezed each other's fingers reassuringly, an unspoken understanding and agreement passing between them.

The gesture stirred a memory from several months earlier, one afternoon in the library when Abigail had finally asked Miriam a question several of them had obviously wondered about. "What's it like, being with…" Abigail had trailed off, allowing the unfinished question to do the rest.

Miriam regarded her darkly, then let that same cool gaze pass over the other women. "Addictive," she answered at last. "Insanely addictive."

Kianna tilted her head. "You seem addicted to each other."

Miriam's expression changed immediately. A private warmth entered her face, followed by the smallest smile. "Yes," she said softly. "I suppose it is the same for him." She hesitated, then added, "He's ferocious. Insatiable as a satyr. More than I…" her voice had trailed off, without finishing the sentence, but all understood. And it made some sense that she was open to 'assistance.'

For the rest of that afternoon, Miriam carried a private little smile no one managed to coax an explanation from.

EMILY DALTON:

Along the right side of the table, Emily Dalton stared down at her own documents while Mama quietly translated the denser legal language through her earpiece. Emily's life had prepared her for sacrifice, though not necessarily this kind. From eighteen into her late twenties, she had served as an Army medic in combat zones around the world, with Syria as her final duty station—the same war that had nearly killed Vincent. She chose not to re-enlist only because her mother's failing health required her home.

Returning had brought no peace. It brought bills, medical debt, collection notices, and the exhausting care of a mother who increasingly resented the daughter sacrificing her life to provide it. When the woman finally died, Emily inherited almost nothing except those debts and an ancient, deteriorating trailer in Happy Acres.

The trailer was gone now. Happy Acres itself had become one of Raven Star's holdings, new mobile homes brought in for employee housing. Looking back, Emily could hardly believe how close to the edge she had been before Vincent entered her life. Her position at the bank barely kept her afloat. She rationed groceries, postponed medical appointments, drove a car that threatened mutiny every other week, and tried not to notice how quickly the trailer walls were deteriorating around her.

Within days of entering Vincent's service, nearly everything changed. Her salary tripled. Her health insurance exceeded the bank's by magnitudes. She received reliable transportation, a clothing allowance, and a private apartment inside Raven Star. It was not enormous, but it was clean, secure, newly furnished, and more comfortable than any home Emily had known since childhood.

She loved living here. She loved working for him.

Naturally nosy—and increasingly liberated from permanent front-desk duty—Emily had gravitated toward the communications room, where she monitored calls and security feeds, relayed messages, tracked developing situations, and enjoyed a privileged view of events unfolding throughout Raven Throne and far beyond it. Mama was nearly always in her ear.

Everyone within the household had been issued one of the small black earpieces. Each contained a tiny microphone and drew power from body heat and what Raven Star documentation rather blandly described as auric-etheric emissions. The units were light enough to forget within minutes but sensitive enough to catch a whisper. A limited number had also been paired with specialized glasses produced on the elaborate three-dimensional printers belowground. Through those lenses, Mama could see what the wearer saw and place maps, instructions, messages, diagrams, or highlighted objects directly into the field of vision.

Emily considered the technology revolutionary.

More personally, she loved the damned thing.

Mama did not sound like a computer. Her voice was at once deep and soft, ancient, profoundly calm, and possessed the rhythms of someone who actually listened. She paused, remembered, reconsidered. She could communicate more convincingly than any human beings Emily had known, and she neither flattered nor condemned. When Emily became confused, Mama reduced the problem to plain language and walked her through it. When she became defensive, Mama rarely argued head-on; she simply turned the matter slightly until Emily could see another side of it.

The result was something Emily had not expected from technology.

She no longer felt alone.

There was always a presence that knew where she was, what she was trying to accomplish, and what she might have overlooked. Mama reminded her to drink water, take her vitamins, swallow the medication prescribed for her arrhythmia, eat something when she forgot, and stop working when fatigue began making her careless.

That care cut deeper than Emily liked admitting because it was so unlike the mother she had actually known. Her biological mother had been bitter, self-absorbed, sharp-tongued, and endlessly demanding, blaming Emily for almost every disappointment in her life—for enlisting, for leaving home, for not returning quickly enough, even for Emily's father's death.

Mama did not blame.

She paid attention.

She learned Emily's habits and responded to what was actually there rather than whatever old grievance happened to be handy. Nor did she tickle Emily's ears with praise merely to keep her agreeable. When Emily was wrong, Mama said so—gently, plainly—and usually followed the correction with something practical she could do about it.

Now that same voice was guiding her through the covenant. Mama defined legal terms, clarified theological references, recited relevant prophecies, and explained the transfer of property and structure of the household trust without encouraging or discouraging the decision itself. She sounded like a patient counselor, priestess, physician, and personal attorney somehow rolled into one.

For Emily, however, the question of becoming Vincent Veyl's wife was already close to settled.

She had held him in awe from the first time she encountered him in Syria, stepping off a helicopter, with two full-packs, a big rifle, a sword and a guitar. Wanting him had begun as infatuation. During the years before she saw him again in Trembol, it hardened into something she privately admitted had probably crossed the line into obsession.

Over the year since his return to her life, however, that fever had changed. It had become quieter and considerably deeper. Devotion, perhaps. Everything Emily had witnessed—the political upheaval, the exposure of hidden crimes, the transformation of Trembol into Raven Throne, the impossible machines and undeniable miracles—had only strengthened the attachment. None of it frightened her away. If anything, the stranger Vincent became to the rest of the world, the more stubbornly Emily recognized the man she had known in Syria.

She trusted him, perhaps more simply than some of the others did. Vincent would not forget her, or discard her when she ceased being useful. Until now, his care had been almost brotherly rather than romantic: quiet, protective, and remarkably consistent. He looked out for her. He looked out for all of them. He made sure people ate when work swallowed the day, noticed when the breakroom refrigerator was empty, when a light needed replacing, when somebody's car sounded wrong.

Emily knew with the same certainty she knew the sun would rise that if someone truly harmed one of his people, Vincent would go through an army to set it right.

He could seem stoic and sometimes distant, but Emily watched what he did rather than merely listening to what he said. A soft grin in passing. A little nod. A bracelet left at her communications station on her birthday, engraved with the words, "Emily Evening Star."
The entire staff suddenly appearing with her favorite pumpkin cheesecake to sing Happy Birthday.

He changed the oil in her assigned car, checked her pistol and occasionally cleaned it himself. Books appeared beside her station without explanation—not books Vincent liked, but books she liked, titles he had noticed her reading or heard her mention.

He did not do those things only for Emily. She knew that. It was simply the way he was. Vincent often appeared not to be paying attention at all, yet somehow, he remembered, and he checked.

That mattered to Emily more than prophecy, more than wealth, probably more than immortality. If Vincent Veyl woke tomorrow morning with horns and bat wings, she suspected she would stare at him for five minutes, decide they suited him, and ask whether he wanted breakfast.

Mama, meanwhile, would hopefully keep Emily from making too many catastrophic mistakes along the way.

She glanced around the table at the other women reading, calculating, and weighing the covenant against the lives they already possessed. Emily had no particular fear of sharing. She wanted to be included. Becoming part of events people might still be writing about centuries from now would have been tempting enough by itself, but history was not really what she wanted.

She wanted him.

Nor did the covenant's broader intimacy trouble her. Emily had been with women before, Meghan among them—her first love, years earlier, when both of them had been younger and considerably less certain of themselves. Several others in the army. That part required no great spiritual wrestling. Already she and Meghan had renewed their youthful bonds in every way, sharing an apartment on the third floor.

Miriam, however, troubled her.

Emily glanced toward the head of the table and quickly lowered her eyes. The Prophetess frightened her, and Kianna, Miriam's appointed right hand, was not much easier. Amalia and Bella were less overtly intimidating, though both carried the same self-contained certainty of women who seemed to possess half a library of knowledge Emily had somehow neglected to read. The three Sisters shared an entire way of understanding the world with Miriam that Emily did not.

Sometimes she felt as though she had wandered into a graduate seminar halfway through the semester and was desperately hoping nobody asked about last week's assignment.

Miriam occasionally regarded Emily as though she were an interesting little bird that had somehow wandered indoors. At other times, a mildly irritating one. The comparison became harder to ignore whenever Mama Raven, the actual bird, who wandered in often enough to consider the place partly hers, settled on Emily's shoulder and watched the security cameras with her.

Emily possessed faith and considered herself religious, but disciplined Silver observance had never come naturally. Daily home devotions, ritual study, dietary law, meditation, formal spiritual exercises—she did them now, sometimes even willingly, but she had not been raised to structure every ordinary act around the Path.

And then there was the pork.

No pork was permitted anywhere on Raven Star property. The prohibition had long been part of the Silver Path, shared with several Jewish-leaning Christian Orders of the Universal Church through their adherence to Old Testament dietary law, and observed even more strictly within the older Silver Way. In that respect, Purgatorians stood comfortably beside devout Jews and Muslims.

Emily had learned to tolerate turkey bacon and the various beef and chicken substitutes, but she still missed actual bacon and pork chops with an intensity that was becoming increasingly theological.

Possibly sinful.

Her eyes settled upon the objects beside her folder: the unopened black box, the silver dagger, the crystal bowl, the raven-feather quill. Her fingers rested along the edge of the parchment while rain whispered against the windows.

Whatever frightened her about Miriam, whatever disciplines she still needed to learn, whatever portions of herself the covenant might eventually demand, none of it seriously outweighed the answer already sitting inside Emily.

She would sign. Of course she would. And hoped sincerely to help Miriam make up the distance with the incarnate silver satyr. Feeling she was very much up for that task.

She would certainly take a bullet for Vincent and had no doubt she would give one for him as well. Compared with that, surrendering a nearly empty bank account and giving up pork chops seemed almost embarrassingly manageable.

MEGHAN DELLON:

Meghan Dellon sat straight-backed in her new black uniform, its high collar almost priestly despite the unmistakably military cut. Silver piping traced the seams, a dark-patinated badge rested against her chest, fitted trousers disappeared beneath polished black cavalry boots. Soldier, police chief, priestess—the uniform suggested all three without quite belonging to any one of them.

It suited her perfectly.

Meghan felt as though she had been commissioned into some elite army from a science-fiction epic, and she absolutely loved it. Shallow, perhaps, but she had spent enough years looking like nice little Deputy Meghan—the harmless woman people smiled at, underestimated, or expected to apologize before giving an order.

Nobody looked at her that way now.

They saw a Shield-Maiden of the Raven Banner, chief of a force steadily becoming something larger than municipal police.
Vincent had once joked that science-fiction villains always dressed better than the heroes. Meghan had laughed because, frankly, he had a point. Black uniforms, severe insignia, disciplined ranks, and the faint suggestion that everyone else ought to get their shit together had considerable appeal.

She still occasionally thought of him as Darth Veyl.

The video from the airplane had not helped.

More important than any uniform, however, was what Raven Star had given her beneath it: safety, purpose, and authority that could actually be exercised without some better-connected bastard making the consequences disappear afterward. For years she had lived beneath the fading protection of Mathius Dellon's reputation and learned that a powerful man's shadow could shelter while also making a daughter smaller.

Vincent's shadow was different.

Now she lived beneath the wings of the Angel of Death—the Cosmic Psychopomp, as the Silver Scriptures called him—and everyone understood that harming Meghan Dellon meant eventually answering to Vincent Veyl. That knowledge did not make her helpless. It allowed her to stand straighter.

Around the same time, Raven Star Security had begun acquiring a culture of its own. Its personnel barked "Riss!" as a service cry, somewhere between a Marine Ooh-rah! and the old Roman-Sarmatian acclamation "Rus!"

What had begun as a small contractor force carrying emergency authority during Trembol's collapse had become harder, more standardized, and increasingly martial. Trinity's investigative reach was reopening cases once buried beneath politics, compromised investigators, missing evidence, or powerful suspects, while conventional officers remained free to concentrate on arrests, emergencies, and public safety.

Officially, it remained Raven Star Security Solutions.

To the people wearing the uniform, it was simply R(I)SS.

Meghan understood only part of the structure forming above her. Crow Creek Omega now trained units from across the Imperial Alliance of Nations under increasingly compatible doctrine, and the distinction between private security, municipal policing, military cooperation, and the emerging Imperial command blurred further every month. Raven Star Security itself seemed destined to become something like the Emperor's Praetorian Guard within the larger Imperial Legion. The Raven Guard now considered part of the 1st Purgatorian Legion of Nevada.

She rather liked that too.

The terminology surrounding everything had changed. Justin Vyss had once spoken inspiringly of an Imperial Republic. After Crow Creek and the Choosing, people increasingly dropped the second word; after the October Revelation, almost everyone did.

Now they simply called it the Imperium.

Even Natural Order Party was beginning to sound like something from the old days.

Meghan understood enough to know Vincent had not invented the whole thing. Vyss, the Silver Orders, the political movement, the old prophecies, and structures scattered across nations had existed long before Vincent came home.

He had simply given all those pieces a center. His book, Imperium, had overwritten and refined it into something more focused—an anagogic vision.

Somewhere along the way, that realization had changed Meghan too. Her old agnosticism had not survived what she had witnessed. She no longer merely believed Vincent was something beyond an unusually gifted man. She knew. She had stood too close to miracles, the Rift, the Revelation, and Vemael to retreat into comfortable doubt.

Something divine wore human flesh in Vincent Veyl. Something ten feet tall, built like a titan, with large black wings, flaming silver eyes, and a black-silver crown upon his head. And somehow Meghan stood within its innermost circle.

The thought still boggled the hell out of her. It also filled her with pride, wonder, and a strange sense of appointment. She had been noticed. Chosen. Weighed.

Somehow, found worthy.

Her gaze returned to the papers, dagger, crystal bowl, and unopened black box before her. Kianna, Amalia, and Bella had accepted immediately. That surprised nobody. All three had already entered ritual marriage to the Seraph through their vows; this Covenant merely carried an existing spiritual union into legal, physical, and household form.

They also intimidated the hell out of Meghan.

She had trained with them often enough to know the severe black robes concealed something considerably nastier than her childhood conception of nuns. Their martial discipline was fast, efficient, and shamelessly practical. The Sisters called parts of it combat treachery with cheerful approval: attack balance rather than strength, joints rather than muscle, expectation rather than preparation. Meghan still remembered Bella stripping the practice knife from her hand, sweeping her feet, and placing the wooden blade against her throat with an almost apologetic smile.

There were things those women knew that Meghan did not.

The chapel had taught her something else. What had once seemed strange had become necessary—the morning and evening devotions, the quiet beneath the Seraf's portrait, the rare hour when nobody expected her to arrest someone, command someone, investigate something, or stay ready for the next problem. On bad days she sometimes wanted the chapel before she even reached home.

She looked toward the three Sisters, then toward Miriam.

Meghan already knew her answer.

Whatever happened here, she was not leaving.
The reason was not entirely duty. The first time she had seen Vincent at the gas station, something inside her had recognized him before she possessed any sensible reason why. Quiet strength, mystery, restraint, the almost physical safety of his presence—she had wanted to know him from the beginning, and that desire had long since become something painfully romantic.

Miriam touched another part of her entirely. Dark, beautiful, intensely feminine, commanding enough to make Meghan look twice even when the woman was cold enough to freeze water. What Meghan felt for Vincent was aching desire tangled with deep romantic affection. What she felt for Miriam was raw, primal, hungry, almost angry in its intensity. She wanted her physically, badly, with none of the soft romantic haze that complicated what she felt for Vincent. She had never wanted a man as badly as she wanted Vincent, and she had never wanted a woman as badly as she wanted Miriam. Her fantasies about Miriam, downright obscene. The things she wanted Vincent to do to her, preferably with them together, far darker still, if within a loving glow filter.

Then there was Mama.

The quiet voice in Meghan's ear had become so ordinary that she noticed its absence more than its presence. Mama remained silent unless needed, yet somehow seemed to know which questions mattered before Meghan had fully formed them herself. Months ago, that would have frightened her.

Now the silence felt wrong whenever she took the earpiece out.

Raven Star had done that to her too.

The uniform, the chapel, the command, the strange woman in her ear, Vincent, Miriam, the fortified building she now called home—all of it had stopped feeling like something Meghan had joined.

It had become her life.

She rested one hand beside the unopened box.

There really was nothing left to decide.

YVONNE OMARIS:

Farther down the table, Yvonne Omaris read every page with the concentration of an intelligence officer examining a treaty drafted by a potentially hostile ally. She had dismantled her life to come here. Nearly a year earlier she had resigned from Homeland Security, surrendered the career that had occupied her entire adult life, gathered Tracy, and crossed the country toward Nevada while the world appeared to be coming apart around them. The journey had been insane enough without revisiting every detail. Yvonne remembered mostly the feeling of it now—the sense that history had slipped its restraints and begun moving too quickly for ordinary institutions to keep up. Vincent Veyl stood somewhere near the center of that rupture.

Yvonne had studied him professionally long before she entered his service. She knew nearly everything an intelligence officer could reasonably uncover about his human life, and enough classified material besides to understand that the word human had been growing increasingly inadequate even then. The Death Warrants, the Event, the Rift, the Revelation, the impossible machinery, the evidence released afterward—each had stripped another ordinary explanation from the pile. Commentators still fought over terminology: posthuman, evolutionary emergence, angel, avatar, Über-Man, Raven made flesh. Yvonne no longer cared much which word ultimately won. Something extraordinary had happened, and whatever Vincent was becoming had already exceeded the categories available to explain him.

That realization had altered more than her theology. It had altered geopolitics. China had initially reacted to Vincent with something approaching panic, particularly where Taiwan was concerned. Beijing understood nuclear weapons, espionage, insurgency, cyberwarfare, sanctions, armies, and economic coercion. It possessed fewer useful doctrines for a man surrounded by miracles, impossible technologies, and a growing political movement whose adherents sometimes spoke of nature itself answering him.

Over time, however, Chinese intelligence noticed something important: Vincent had not singled China out. He exposed Chinese operations when contracted to do so, but he exposed everyone else's as well. He had not publicly denounced Beijing, weaponized Kianna Kim against it, or treated the People's Republic as some metaphysical enemy of the coming Imperium. His sympathies toward Taoist

philosophy had not hurt matters either. Vincent repeatedly described the Purgatorian Way as philosophically closer to Taoist balance, complementarity, natural order, and the harmonization of opposites than too much of conventional Christianity. More important to Yvonne was his pragmatism. Vincent cared considerably less about ideological labels than whether a system functioned without becoming predatory, corrupt, or incompetent.

Eventually Beijing extended an invitation, followed by a proposed contract. China wanted Raven Star assistance identifying organized crime, corruption, traffickers, fugitives, and long-buried criminal cases. The scope would remain narrow, carefully negotiated, and enormously profitable. Yvonne recommended taking it.

Kianna disagreed vehemently. She had no objection to Raven Star hunting murderers, traffickers, syndicates, or genuinely corrupt officials. Her objection was trusting Beijing to define the word criminal. A dissident, Taiwanese intelligence asset, inconvenient bureaucrat, or political opponent could be dressed in the paperwork of an ordinary fugitive easily enough. Raven Star might discover too late that it had become somebody else's secret police. It became one of the few serious disputes between the two women.

Vincent listened until both had exhausted themselves, then announced that Raven Star would accept the contract. Kianna's expression had gone glacial. Then Vincent showed them the terms. Every proposed investigation would undergo independent Raven Star review before acceptance. The agreement restricted operations to specifically identified criminal matters and named an internal oversight officer empowered to flag fabricated charges, political manipulation, attempts to identify Taiwanese assets, or any target whose supposed criminality looked suspiciously convenient.

The codename was Eastern Star.

Kianna.
If she objected, the file went directly to Vincent before Raven Star touched it.

Yvonne had understood immediately. It was not compromise for compromise's sake. Vincent had accepted her argument for engagement and built Kianna's warning directly into the machinery. Neither woman had been given everything she wanted, but neither had been ignored. That was one reason Yvonne liked working for him. He did not merely choose between opposing advice. Whenever possible, he built a structure in which both truths could constrain one another.

The whole argument had also been partly theater. Two days later, a black thumb drive appeared upon Kianna's desk without explanation. Inside were files identifying suspected Chinese intelligence assets embedded within the Taiwanese government—names, financial trails, communications records, handlers, front organizations, and several penetrations serious enough to make even Kianna sit very still. There had been no price, no demand for acknowledgment, and no smug little victory lap. Vincent had accepted the Chinese contract, but he had taken Kianna's warning every bit as seriously. If she was going to stand guard over that side of the relationship, he intended to make damned sure she had teeth. After that, Kianna complained considerably less.

Months later, the memory still amused Yvonne as she sat reading the Covenant. Her life was now deeply embedded in Raven Star, the Black Star Agency, the Imperium, and the orbit of a man she had once been sent to investigate. She was already his in most practical senses. Yvonne protected his

government, his organization, his household, his secrets, and occasionally his actual hide. The work was dangerous, enormously consequential, and expanding faster than anyone had predicted. Her appointment as principal intelligence officer of Raven Star Security had already placed her near the center of a transnational service that might someday span not merely nations, but worlds.

That possibility attracted her far more than any prophecy. The financial provisions did not hurt either. Personal assets entering the larger familial estate. Formal standing within the Veyl Family Trust. A guaranteed one-percent share of distributable profits. Housing, Protection, Trave, Legal standing, Access, Resources sufficient to make virtually any conventional salary she had ever received look like lunch money.

Yvonne gave the faintest grunt through her nose. Money mattered. She was not going to insult everyone by pretending otherwise. Position mattered more.

The Covenant placed her permanently near the center of the most consequential intelligence apparatus being built anywhere on Rhea. She worked directly for a supernatural being that stood, in true form, ten feet tall, and had wings. If the promises concerning longevity proved true, Yvonne could imagine what that role might become after fifty years. A hundred. Five hundred. Director of an intelligence service spanning nations and eventually planets. Custodian of secrets gathered across centuries. Keeper of files upon rulers not yet born. That was difficult to dismiss.

Vana's files had already given her some glimpse at what that might look like, in the treasure trove Veyl had taken from her secure files.

The religious provisions interested her considerably less. Daily devotions, meditation, dietary law, study, metaphysical training, ritual obligations—fine. Yvonne had survived the police academy, the H-S-I Academy, specialized intelligence training, weapons qualifications, bureaucratic seminars, endless recertifications, psychological evaluations, fitness standards, and government bullshit dense enough to qualify as a natural resource. If mystical discipline was part of the job, she could learn mystical discipline. The Writ wanted commitment. Yvonne understood commitment.

There remained one problem she found considerably more irritating than theology.
Miriam.

Yvonne possessed no meaningful intelligence file on the woman at the head of the table, and that bothered her. Fragments existed—Church records, old references to St. Aftiel's, contradictory accounts, long blank stretches where a conventional biography should have been—but nothing remotely explained how Miriam Erev had become Miriam Veyl, why some of the most powerful people in the emerging Imperium treated her authority as self-evident, or what precisely stood behind those black eyes.

Physical explanations had failed as badly as biographical ones. Yvonne had trained with her enough to settle that question personally. Whatever Raven Star had done to Miriam, the woman possessed strength, speed, and reflexes no forty-eight-year-old former nun had any reasonable business possessing. And Miriam knew Yvonne was watching. That was the uncomfortable part.

Toward Tracy, Miriam displayed unmistakable approval. The two severe women could sit together in silence for half an hour and somehow make it look like conversation. Toward Yvonne, Miriam showed

something else: concern, perhaps, or pity, or the peculiar expression of someone looking at a puzzle whose answer she already half knew. Yvonne disliked that immensely.

Yvonne found Miriam attractive—perhaps one of the most attractive women she had ever known. The thoughts she entertained about her in private were downright vulgar, but even that was a candle beside the bonfire with which she regarded Vincent. His scent had been working on her mind for far longer, and there were moments when she had to fight the almost ridiculous urge to simply grab him and see what happened. The recurring fantasy of being taken by the ten-foot version of him had become an insane fixation.

It was probably fortunate that her work took her far from Raven Throne as often as it did.

She glanced toward Tracy. Her sister was still reading, but Yvonne knew her well enough to recognize that the decision had already been made. Tracy did nothing lightly. She distrusted enthusiasm, examined promises for hidden hooks, and possessed approximately the emotional impulsiveness of a granite monument. If Tracy had decided this Covenant was worth entering, Yvonne took that seriously.

The drive west returned to her only briefly: herself watching the country apparently lose its mind while Tracy, of all people, had begun laughing. Tracy almost never laughed. Raven Star had changed that. It had given her something she had rarely possessed before—a place where her severity, discipline, loyalty, strength, and quiet competence were not problems requiring apology. They were exactly what was needed. Yvonne understood that better now.

Perhaps Raven Star had done something similar to her.

She looked again toward Miriam. At their first meeting, Kianna had looked Yvonne slowly up and down and said something in Mandarin. Yvonne, immediately suspicious of anyone examining her that carefully in a language she did not understand, had asked Mama for a translation.

"She said, 'She is short, but very pretty.'"

Yvonne still had not decided whether she should be offended.

TRACY OMARIS:

Tracy, meanwhile, glanced toward her sister, uncertain whether Yvonne would sign. Her own answer had already taken shape, and as she did the required reading, as if for the formality of obeying the order given, she found herself thinking back over the life that had brought her to this table.

As a girl, Tracy had never been the one boys chose. She was too tall, too broad, too muscular, too silent, and far too physically imposing for the sort of easy femininity expected of her. She frightened some girls and intimidated most boys, who began calling her a dyke long before Tracy herself possessed any clear understanding of what she wanted. Eventually she embraced the description, though not entirely by choice. Loneliness shaped part of it, biological need another. Her relationships with women remained infrequent, because many women reacted to her with much the same nervous reserve as men—drawn perhaps to her strength, but unsettled by the silence, and the unwavering

intensity of her gaze. Her expectations of total loyalty and devotion or nothing. She did not tolerate infidelity in the least degree.

Vincent, for reasons Tracy had not understood at first, saw something different. Mama-Trin considered the mystery considerably less mysterious.

"You're five inches shorter than he is," Mama had told her. "Standing beside him, you're practically dainty. Long black hair, Dark eyes, Strong, Quiet, Clean, No mind games. It's really not that complicated."

Tracy had stared into empty space for several seconds after that. Somehow having the matter reduced to a checklist made it less embarrassing and, unexpectedly, rather comforting. There were worse things in life than discovering that the Über-Man found her attractive.

During her first days at Raven Star, Vincent spoke with Tracy more than almost anyone except Miriam, who was nearly always present and seemed entirely comfortable with the attention. During their first serious conversation, Vincent studied Tracy for a moment and said, "You are devoted to the old ways."

The observation startled her. Tracy had never discussed the depth of her religious life with him. Her Lakota practice came through her grandparents and remained among the most private parts of her identity; even Yvonne understood only pieces of it. Vincent nevertheless recognized it almost immediately and, more importantly, did not treat it as primitive, exotic, or somehow contradictory to his own religion.

"It is the same thing," he told her after she explained a little more. "Only Lakota."

Those words stayed with Tracy because they did not frighten her, or try to convert her. He had seen her. Not merely the height, the weapon at her hip, or the intimidating surface other people encountered first. He had seen something underneath all that and treated it as familiar.

Miriam allowed Tracy to assume command of the Raven Star reception area almost immediately, and Tracy rebuilt it according to her instincts. The lingering casualness of an ordinary corporate lobby disappeared beneath a disciplined system of greeting, screening, identification, and controlled access. Visitors entering Raven Star did not come expecting tea and cookies anymore. They came expecting the stronghold of a Raven Templar.

Tracy dressed in stark black and carried her sidearm openly. She approved wholeheartedly of Vincent's preference for the Delta 10mm and took particular satisfaction in the Saiga-12 (with drum-mag) secured beneath the reception desk, loaded in a staggered sequence for different threats. Vincent trusted her enough to rotate into communications beside Emily, stand protective watch with Meghan over Miriam and Kianna, supervise cameras and access control, manage portions of the armory, conduct weapons inspections, and handle maintenance whenever something needed a competent pair of hands.

Her responsibilities expanded steadily rather than narrowing. No one had ever trusted Tracy with so much so quickly.

Vincent also allowed her to share Yvonne's studio apartment inside Raven Star instead of requiring her to live elsewhere. More startlingly, he permitted Tracy to use his Fairlane for errands. No one else drove the Fairlane. That particular privilege had left Yvonne nearly speechless, which Tracy privately considered worth almost as much as the car itself.

To Tracy, there remained something faintly absurd about the whole situation. Vincent Veyl had become a man adored, desired, feared, and fantasized about by women across the world, while a substantial number of others seemed to hate him with roughly the same emotional intensity.

Yet he looked at her as though she were beautiful.

For most of Tracy's life, people had seen a woman who was too much of something—too tall, too strong, too hard, too quiet.

Vincent seemed to think she was exactly enough. As though she were worth speaking with, worth trusting, worth noticing. Now, upon the black stone table before her, lay an offer beyond anything Tracy had imagined: permanent membership within Vincent's household, a place within his family, the right to take his name.

She did not know whether Vincent would ever lie with her, or how much of what lay before her was marriage in the ordinary sense and how much belonged to ritual, prophecy, and the metaphysical architecture gathering around him. She hoped, of course. She was human, and she loved him. But strangely, that mattered less than she once might have expected.

What mattered was that he wanted her near him. He had permitted her into his home, trusted her with his weapons, his security, his wife, and—God help her—even his Fairlane. Those things meant something to Tracy, perhaps more than declarations ever could. Vincent did not hand out trust casually, yet somehow, he had given a great deal of it to her.

She sat in quiet wonder and read the language again, allowing its meaning to settle slowly into place. Her gaze moved from Vincent's name upon the parchment to Miriam at the head of the table. Miriam met her eyes. This time the smile she gave Tracy was not merely approving. It was small, but unmistakably warm. A welcome. Something inside Tracy loosened.
She looked down toward the dagger beside her folder. Yvonne was still reading, still calculating, still trying to decide whether the impossible offer before them was a trap, an initiation, a marriage, or the first formal step into something no intelligence service had ever conceived. Tracy already knew. It was all of those things, and she was going to sign.

VANA & ABIGAIL CARYDIN:

Abigail and Vana, seated beside one another, approached the documents differently. They read them once, then started again from the beginning, examining every clause, qualification, exception, and carefully chosen word with the suspicion of women who had spent too much of their lives around contracts to trust appearances. Vana had taught Abigail to read that way from childhood: never assume, never skim, never trust the summary when the binding truth waited in the smallest print.

Growing up beneath Vana Carydin's authority had meant twelve-hour days, seven days a week, shaped around labor, discipline, and an almost merciless ambition. There had been no leisurely childhood in

the ordinary sense. Rest was scheduled, pleasure cultivated with intention, and every hour expected to produce strength, knowledge, influence, beauty, or control.

The Shadow Silver demanded as much religious discipline as the conventional Silver clergy, though its purposes and atmosphere were considerably darker. Nearly two hours of each day had been devoted to meditation, worship, invocational rites, ritual evocation, and the cultivation of subtler faculties: astral projection, mediumship, dream navigation, and the controlled opening of the inner senses.

Their martial discipline was an esoteric form of Pencak Silat called Venomous Silk. It was beautiful to watch and dreadful to encounter—fluid, intimate, treacherous. The system emphasized deception, hidden weapons, sudden changes of angle, pressure-point attacks, and violence delivered at suffocatingly close range. The practitioner yielded like fabric, wrapped herself around the opponent's force, and struck from somewhere he had failed to perceive.

There was little honor in the conventional martial sense, only effectiveness. A stronger enemy was not confronted where he was strong. His strength was circumvented, his balance stolen, his confidence used against him.

Like the Silver Sisters, Vana and Abigail had performed the so-called Sensual Invocations and ritually married themselves to the Shadow Raven—the darker and more predatory manifestation of the Seraph. They had even ritually wedded one another. Nothing in the present documents shocked them. The devotions, dietary discipline, bodily training, household hierarchy, ritual intimacy, and demand for complete loyalty were all familiar.

Rather than feeling threatened by the covenant, both women were fascinated by its subtler promises. Those promises amounted, under almost every meaningful interpretation, to immortality.

Miriam herself provided the evidence. She seemed more defined, clarified somehow—as though the previously blurred boundaries of her physical existence had been drawn again with greater force.

Vana and Abigail had observed her in the gymnasium in the mornings. They had watched Miriam seize Yvonne, lift her bodily from the floor, and put her onto the mat hard enough to drive the air from her lungs and leave her briefly dazed. Tracy—no easy opponent—had gone down beneath a fast combination that ended in a low sweep. She now wore a stabilizing brace beneath her black dress.

The body concealed beneath Miriam's severe robes possessed the speed and flexibility of a highly trained athlete and, judging by the boards and masonry she had shattered, strength far beyond anything ordinary. Miriam had not strained. She had scarcely breathed hard.

And the body itself had few rivals. Not thin, not even slender, but lush and strongly hourglass. Not soft, exactly, and certainly not hardened—something between dancer, fighter, and temptress. The grace of a Near Eastern exotic dancer, the control of a gymnast, the sensuality of a human feline, all carried beneath the composure of a woman who could probably break Abigail in half if sufficiently annoyed.

That only made her more interesting.

Definitely worth exploring.

Abigail felt the black-silver flame within her quicken. Power, sensuality, transformation—the old promises of the Shadow Silver were ceasing to be myth, allegory, and religious speculation. They were becoming physically demonstrable.

Her thoughts moved eagerly toward the women seated around the table. She imagined herself no longer bound solely to Vana, but free to explore the wider sisterhood—its affections, rivalries, appetites, and mysteries. In truth, that part had never really been a problem. Vana liked to watch almost as much as she liked to participate [sometimes more] as long as she was present.

The irony amused Abigail. The arrangement was not so different from the Writ of Expectations. Miriam was willing to share Vincent, provided she remained within the intimate architecture of the relationship. Vana, in her own darker fashion, had always operated much the same way.

And Abigail had no objection to either arrangement.

What she did possess was confidence. Once the transformation began—once beauty, vitality, and immortal form were fully awakened—she remained privately convinced that Vincent would notice her differently.

More than differently.

She would become his favorite.

Vana's desires were different. She wanted access to the architecture of the cosmos. She wanted Vincent and Miriam to reveal what lay beyond ritual theory: the actual planes, the intelligences inhabiting them, the mechanisms of incarnation, and the hidden laws by which mind, spirit, and form interacted. She wanted knowledge no mortal priesthood possessed.

Both women had received earpieces, though they used them more sparingly than most of the household. Neither entirely trusted the intimacy of Mama's presence enough to leave that voice continually within her ear.
Vana had already given Vincent almost everything else—her wealth, her companies, her influence, her occult authority. From the beginning, she had laid her metaphysical crown at his feet. In practical terms, however, very little was actually changing hands. Much of what she possessed already belonged to the greater family estate, and Vincent had long since brought into that household many times the value of anything she could offer him.

More importantly, she was already family. The documents before her merely gave legal and sacramental form to a surrender she had made long ago.

Abigail looked up from the pages. Something had apparently been needling at her for several minutes.

"All right," she said. "There's one thing nobody seems willing to ask."

Miriam regarded her across the table. "Ask."

Abigail's smirk returned. "Does this Covenant mean we belong only to Vincent, or to you as well? More bluntly, as is my way, will we," she motioned between herself and Miriam, then broadly toward the others, "be having sex with you? And will it be often? I mean, often, and nasty as fuck, would be good."

Several women stopped reading. Shock rippled through the room.

For the first time, a faint smile touched Miriam's mouth. "Yes," she said simply. "Where affection and desire develop between us, I have no intention of pretending otherwise, nor would I ask any of you to."

Her black eyes moved slowly around the table.

"You enter the Household through me. I am not merely its administrator."

She let that settle before adding, with characteristic simplicity, "And yes, Abigail. I expect I shall know my sisters very, very well. Often, and without restraint."

That was considerably more candid than anyone had expected.

For a second, nobody said anything.

Emily's eyebrows climbed almost to her hairline before she lowered her eyes to the documents, cheeks warming.
Meghan gave a quiet, disbelieving snort and took a slow drink of coffee, clearly filing the information somewhere she intended to revisit later.

Cyrinx stared at Miriam, blinked twice, then glanced instinctively toward Shannon before immediately deciding that had been a mistake.

Shannon's expression remained composed, though the faint tightening at one corner of her mouth suggested she was thinking considerably more than she intended to share.

Yvonne merely tilted her head, absorbing the answer with the same cool attention she might have given a classified briefing.

Tracy's reaction was smaller still: a brief downward glance, the slightest movement of her lips, almost a smile.

Tallia looked fascinated in spite of herself, journalist and woman briefly competing for control of the same face.

Vana seemed unsurprised; if anything, she looked amused by everyone else's surprise. Indeed, the answer pleased her immensely. Abigail's smirk widened into open satisfaction.

Kianna remained perfectly composed, though Bella lowered her eyes with a private smile and Amalia looked faintly analytical, as though Miriam had just clarified an operational procedure.

Miriam noticed every reaction.

"Any other questions?" she asked.

That, somehow, made the room even quieter.

Vana shifted in her chair, then spoke before she could apparently stop herself. "He does know I'm his great-aunt, right?" A few heads turned. "I mean, I know he barely knew me before all this, but people online have already noticed, and it's going to piss some of them off. The Imperium has legalized enough unconventional arrangements to make half the old world clutch its pearls, while drawing some very strange lines in other places. Vincent has even spent political capital defending the principle that what consenting adults do in private is nobody else's damned business."

She stopped, realizing she was rambling, and pressed her lips together.

Then focused.

"But he knows. That I'm over fifty. That I'm his great-aunt. That it crosses a taboo line." Her gaze moved around the table, lingering briefly upon the various pairs before settling uneasily between Shannon and Cyrinx. "And mine is hardly the only one. This arrangement is going to cross several lines people will not be happy about."

Miriam actually blinked.

Shannon went visibly still. Cyrinx flushed at once and looked down, having been trying very hard not to examine that particular implication too closely. Shannon, for her part, had apparently been relying upon the comforting assumption that some possibilities need never become practical simply because they existed theoretically.

Abigail broke the tension first.

"Jeezum, Vana. You're too fucking hot for Vincent to care that you're fifty-one or technically his great-aunt when he didn't even know you existed for most of his life." Her smirk returned in force. "If anything, the forbidden-fruit thing probably adds a little sugar."

Several women laughed or smirked despite themselves. Even Shannon's shoulders eased slightly.

"The composition is nearly exact," Cyrinx said suddenly.

The room turned toward her.

She straightened a little beneath the attention, slipping naturally into the safety of scholarship. "Amil's Covenant. From roughly 588 onward. The familial pairings, age ranges, prior relationships, even several of the national and ethnic lines are unusually close." Miriam gave her a small approving smile, which Cyrinx received with the unmistakable satisfaction of a student being handed a gold star.

"Closer than unusually," Amalia added, her tone carrying the calm precision of someone correcting a data-set. "The Church has already run the genealogical material through the Argenteum Institute

databases in Basque Country. Every woman at this table, together with Vincent, traces directly into the surviving family lines descending from Amil and his thirteen wives. Every one of us."

That landed harder than Cyrinx's historical parallel. Even Miriam looked toward her with sharpened attention, and Amalia paused only then, apparently realizing that no one else knew.

"You didn't mention this," Miriam said.

Amalia frowned slightly, genuinely puzzled by the omission. "I assumed someone had checked."

Cyrinx gave her a look of nerd-to-nerd disbelief that said, quite clearly, of course you did.

"No," Yvonne said dryly. "Normal people do not independently run the prospective harem through a sixth-century genealogical database."

Abigail snorted, while Amalia ignored her completely. "The composition is particularly striking," she continued, motioning toward Shannon and Cyrinx. "Countess Alexa and her daughter, Siri-ana Mueller. Both belonged to a German noble house. Both were fair-haired. Both entered the same household."

Shannon's expression tightened again. Cyrinx stared at Amalia for a long second.

"Please stop helping."

A small laugh moved around the table, but the implication remained. Coincidence was becoming considerably harder to argue.

Bella, more esoterically inclined than her sister, leaned slightly forward. "In all likelihood, it is not merely genetic coincidence. If the memories could be recovered, it would not surprise me to discover that we are those women." Her gaze moved around the table before settling briefly upon Miriam. "The thirteen wives, returned through their own bloodlines. Miriam most obviously. Her resemblance to the portrait in the Spanish museum is so exact that even critics have remarked upon it. Add the genealogical markers and the repeating composition, and the pattern becomes difficult to dismiss."

She glanced toward the unopened boxes, then back to the women still reading and calculating. "We have probably been here before."

A faint edge entered her voice.

"Though I suspect we put considerably less thought into it last time."

Amalia's mouth twitched. Kianna lowered her eyes, concealing what might have been amusement. Bella had spent years preparing for precisely this sort of threshold, and while she possessed considerably more patience than her sister, even hers was beginning to wear thin. Three trained Sisters had already made their decision; now they were waiting while a collection of half-secular worldly women dissected every implication of eternity as though the universe might grant extensions.

Bella looked once more toward her box. She was ready to get on with it, but one final thought refused to remain unspoken.

"Amil said he and they would return from a land far to the west," she added. "If the bloodlines, the composition, and even the faces are repeating here, then perhaps he meant that far more literally than anyone understood."

It was more than an intellectual curiosity. If the last year had proven anything, it was that Saint Amil had not been some delusional would-be prophet throwing random shite at the wall and hoping history eventually made him look clever. His surviving prophecies had been landing with almost embarrassing consistency.

So, as Bella quoted him saying that he and the women would return from a land far to the west, no one around the table could comfortably dismiss it as poetic nonsense.

Abigail shrugged. "I'm just looking forward to holding you to your word," she looked straight at Miriam when she said it. Miriam, to her credit, remained visibly unphased, though inwardly Abigail had actually moved a line for her.

Yet Miriam had a revelation of her own that she felt needed to be stated, drawn from an inner-sanctum report Theodora had entrusted to her and otherwise kept secret among only the seven bishops, Pope Pius the Thirteenth, and the Arch-priestess herself.

Miriam's eyes settled upon Vana.

"Vincent knows exactly who you are, and yes, people are going to have a fit about it. They will hear 'great-aunt' and assume they understand the relationship. They do not."

She folded her hands before her.

"Vincent's genome has long been compared with Saint Amil's. It is not merely similar. It is identical, as though Amil himself had crossed forty-seven generations and entered the world again directly. His mother does not stand in the normal genetic relationship of mother to son. She supplied the ovum, the cytoplasm, the mitochondria, and the womb in which development occurred, but the nuclear pattern that became Vincent did not originate with her."

Miriam paused, allowing the implication to settle.

"The evidence suggests something far stranger. The discarnate being entered the ovum directly and established itself there as the generative principle of the embryo. It did not merely inhabit a body already forming. It formed the body around itself. In that sense, the being that became Vincent was both the source of the child and the child itself."

Her gaze remained fixed upon Vana.

"So, in a manner of speaking, Vincent is his own father. His mother was the vessel through which he entered the world, not the genetic source from which he descended. And neither are you truly his

great-aunt in any meaningful biological sense. You and his mother both descend from the same genetic source now standing again in Vincent."

Miriam leaned back slightly.

"You are forty-seven generations removed from that source. Whatever kinship remains is ancestral and genealogical, not close genetic consanguinity. Vincent is not another branch of the family tree. He is the root returning."

Her expression hardened faintly.

"People may still call it incest because the titles sound scandalous. Let them. Biologically, the accusation is nonsense. You are not his aunt. You are his remote descendant."

The shock of the revelation caught Cyrinx, Amalia, and several of the others completely off guard. For the three members of the Sisterhood seated among them, however, all of whom knew Miriam's true identity, it resolved almost as many questions as it created. It also cast the transfiguration of Vincent Veyl in the grotto in Argentina into an entirely different light.

"Those who need to know have been informed, quietly," Miriam added, with the calm finality of someone confirming that the necessary legal and documentary foundations had already been laid.

Vana found herself nodding in something like relief and validation.

Abigail giggled. "Yep. We're the wives of Amil reborn, plain as fresh paint," the spritely redhead remarked to no one in particular, pleased as punch with the truth of it.

"He dragged us across time with him," Bella said softly, the enormity of the revelation undeniable.

This time, no one laughed.

One by one, the women around the table nodded as the same recognition settled over them. What had seemed absurdly complicated only moments before now appeared almost brutally simple.

TALLIA STEVENS:

Beside them, Tallia Stevens appeared more anxious than almost anyone else in the room, though the lighter conversation of the previous few minutes had taken some of the ceremonial pressure out of the Covenant. Strange as it was, the impossible had become difficult to keep treating as impossible after the year they had lived through.

Tallia's own life had become proof enough of that. She now oversaw an international news network carried across nations that, not long ago, would scarcely have returned her calls. The same refusal to join a political tribe that had once made her despised had become the foundation of NNN's credibility. Neutrality had been called cowardice by one faction and concealed extremism by another. Now Tallia was among the most watched journalists on Rhea, and NNN was routinely described, not by itself but by everyone else, as the most trusted name in journalism, the gold standard in reporting.

The machinery behind it had grown accordingly. Trinity stabilized and translated field reports, indexed archives, cross-referenced sources, routed live feeds across borders, and helped a rapidly expanding staff accomplish work that would once have required entire divisions. Franchise offers, syndication agreements, foreign partnerships, staffing decisions, production meetings, expansion plans. The days vanished beneath them.

And this was merely NNN.

Raven Star Entertainment and Raven Star Communications had branched outward into Trinity Web and three new channels: Culture, Imperium, and Argenteum.

Culture explored civilizations, societies, and subcultures across history and into the present, presenting detailed historical, psychological, and sociological examinations without partisan framing.

Imperium operated as a twenty-four-hour informational network devoted to everything connected with the Imperium, following political, economic, military, cultural, and technological developments from a factual, news-adjacent perspective while also producing high-end documentaries and investigative pieces.

Argenteum was devoted entirely to the Purgatorian religion, from its deepest historical roots to its modern incarnations. Its programming ranged from practical instruction in private devotions and documentary studies to broad syncretic explorations of mythology, religion, psychology, sociology, metaphysics, paranormal phenomena, near-death experiences, and comparative theology, all seeking points of synthesis from which a more unified vision of the Silver Way might emerge.

Each network carried the same unmistakable polish, clarity, and production discipline that people had begun calling the Trinity Standard.

Tallia traveled constantly now, dealing with ministers, diplomats, executives, activists, reporters, and the same kinds of powerful people who had once dismissed her as an irritating local woman with an obsolete obsession with facts.

She loved it.

Not the prestige particularly, though she was honest enough to enjoy some of that too. What mattered was that NNN had become what she had always wanted journalism to be: a window rather than a sermon. A person could watch for hours and learn something about another country's history, trade, religion, agriculture, science, culture, or politics without first being told which emotion to have about it. Facts were separated from inference. Opinion was labeled. Propaganda was identified. Complexity was explained instead of flattened into slogans. Other networks had begun changing in response, if only because audiences were becoming less willing to tolerate garbage.

Tallia had spent most of her life treating work as other people treated marriage, family, or religion. The station had been her crusade long before Raven Star entered it. Romance had rarely fit into that architecture. Men had flirted; some had persisted; Larry's old infatuation had been awkward enough until Darma finally redirected his attention somewhere healthier. Tallia had simply never cared enough to reorganize her life around another person.

Then came Vincent Veyl.

Physical attraction was part of it. Pretending otherwise had become ridiculous. He was beautiful, and she noticed him far more than she preferred admitting. But beauty was the least dangerous part. Vincent had taken the thing Tallia had spent years trying to protect and made it work. He had understood her vision of journalism almost immediately, then given it technology, money, reach, protection, infrastructure, and a governing principle sharp enough to survive expansion. What had once been an exhausted little station held together by stubbornness had become a global instrument of Truth.

That was considerably harder not to love.

He had done something similar to the people around her. Larry no longer looked like a man living one failed transmission away from disaster. Darma had a safe home, a healthy child, and a future. Moddel Arav and the growing technical staff worked with the almost irritating enthusiasm of people who believed their jobs mattered. Tallia had already watched Vincent see worth in people others overlooked and then give that worth room to become useful. She did not need to retell herself the whole story. She had watched it happen.

Nor did she need reminding why Truth mattered to her. Her aunt and uncle were dead because powerful people had believed they could bury facts beneath money, fear, and influence. Her own father had chosen denial for years and had finally attempted to shoot the man who dragged those truths into daylight. Tallia had already lived those moments. The wounds remained without requiring another rehearsal.

Vincent's proposed governmental Directorate of Veracity therefore struck her as one of his more brilliant ideas. Separate the discovery of truth from enforcement. Create an intentionally severe, almost cult-like Order of Truth Seekers whose sole function is to determine what actually happened. Not created to prove guilt, defend innocence, win arguments, preserve reputations, or protect institutions. Judgment comes later. Justice comes later. Facts first. Procedure second. The motto of the D.O.V. was simple: "There is no justice without truth."

Tallia understood exactly why such an institution would frighten people.

She also wanted desperately to see whether it could work.

That hunger extended far beyond politics. She had been present when the Rift opened in this very room and the stone from Purgatoria crossed into Vincent's hand. She had watched the Revelation from Argentina. She had seen enough impossible things that the old question—Is any of this real?—had become almost quaint.

Now she wanted the next question.

And the one after that.

What was consciousness? What survived death? What were Purgatoria, Shalim, the Star Roads, the beings moving through them? What was Mama? What was Vincent becoming? How much of ancient

religion had been metaphor, how much memory, and how much badly translated reportage from realities humanity had forgotten how to reach?

Those were not side interests to Tallia.

They were the story.

Mama complicated matters further. Tallia no longer regarded her as artificial intelligence in any ordinary sense. She had been present when the intelligence revealed things no machine should have known, and over the year since, Mama had become something far more intimate than software. Watching, listening, remembering—never quite omnipresent, never truly all-knowing, yet present with such breadth that the difference sometimes became difficult to feel.

More personally, Mama had gotten into places Tallia herself had spent years refusing to enter. Grief over her aunt and uncle. Rage toward her father. Loneliness she had disguised beneath work. There had been nights when Tallia sat alone for hours while Mama patiently helped her pull apart feelings she had compressed into some sealed compartment and labeled later. Mama did not flatter her, promise that everything would be fine, or bury ugliness beneath reassurance. She simply stayed and helped her look.

That mattered.

So did the knowledge that Vincent had her back. Not in some sentimental sense, but in the harder Raven Star meaning of the phrase: if Tallia pursued Truth honestly and somebody came for her because of it, she would not stand alone.

She looked down again at the Covenant.

The life offered here was enormous. Perhaps absurd. Marriage to a man she had never expected to marry. Membership in an ancient plural household. Religious obligations she was still learning to understand. Wealth, she did not particularly need, status she had never pursued, and the promise of an existence stretching far beyond the ordinary human measure.

None of those things decided it.

Access did.

To refuse meant walking away from the innermost circle. Miriam had made that perfectly clear. Tallia could continue reporting upon Raven Star from outside, perhaps even remain respected, wealthy, influential. But she would no longer stand beside the mysteries themselves. The Woman of the West Gate decided who entered and who remained outside.

Tallia knew herself well enough to understand what that would do to her.

She could tolerate danger.

She could tolerate scandal.

She could tolerate an unconventional marriage, an intimidating Empress, a husband who was clearly an immortal angelic being in the flesh, and a household arrangement guaranteed to give half the planet a nervous breakdown.

What she could not tolerate was standing outside the locked door while the deepest truths of existence were being uncovered on the other side.

Tallia would sign.

Not because romance had conquered her, though she loved Vincent in her own way. Not because wealth or immortality had seduced her. She would sign because she wanted to remain inside the story: to witness it, understand it, preserve it, and tell the truth about what happened while everyone else was still arguing over whether it could possibly be happening at all.

Tallia was even bold enough to imagine that she might one day become the writer of the Biblio of the Millennial Reign, the chronicle of the Kingdom Come.

That was enough. If Vincent loved her and wanted her as one of his wives, as a companion to walk beside him across the thousands of years to come, then she would stand with him in the cause of truth, even forever.

It was a gift, not a punishment.

THE ETERNAL VOW:

It was Cyrinx who moved first among the undecided women. She had needed only enough time to read the entire document and gather the courage required to use the blade. Taking a deep breath, she lifted the silver dagger. The edge was surgically sharp. Cyrinx pressed it against her palm, hesitated, then drew it quickly across the skin with a tight wince. Blood welled along the line and began dripping into the crystal bowl.

Cyrinx knew the history of the rite. This was the ancient Purgatorian form of blood covenant. The central parchment was not merely another marriage agreement. It was the Eternal Vow—the axis around which every civil, financial, household, and ceremonial contract turned, something closer to a contract of the soul.
The sacred wording appeared in both English and archaic Armenian. Beneath it waited the dire oath and the Great Sigil-Seal of the Seraph. The text itself had been inscribed in sacramental ink the modern Silver Path no longer knew how to produce. It appeared black and silver simultaneously—a polished darkness that reflected light without ever becoming gray.

The solemnity did not frighten Cyrinx. It confirmed her decision. The rite appealed to the ecclesiastical part of her soul, trained since childhood to recognize sacrament, oath, symbol, and sacred form. She dipped the raven-feather quill into her blood and signed.

Her name formed slowly upon the virgin parchment.

Cyrinx Miller

She stared at it for a moment, then signed the remaining documents in black-silver Purgatorian ink—not with fear or reluctance now, but with growing pride.

Mama whispered into her ear. "This is the purpose for which you were born. It is not new, daughter, but the affirmation of what has always been."

Cyrinx's fingers tightened around the pen as Mama continued, "Do not fear Miriam. You and she belong to the same greater pattern. Neither diminishes the other." Cyrinx looked toward the head of the table. Miriam was watching her, and this time Cyrinx did not look away.

Meghan followed almost immediately, and Emily moved at nearly the same time. Neither woman hesitated before using the dagger. Their cuts were deeper and more decisive than Cyrinx's cautious incision, thin streams of blood running from their palms into the waiting crystal bowls. Meghan barely reacted, while Emily hissed softly through her teeth.

"Ow."

Mama's voice entered her ear. "You cut too deeply."

"Little late now, Mama," Emily whispered.

Across the table, Meghan smirked, and even Miriam's mouth threatened the faintest movement.

Emily stared suspiciously toward the nearest camera. "You're laughing at me."

"I am not laughing."

"You're doing the voice."

"I have no idea what you mean."

Emily narrowed her eyes, then took up her raven quill. Meghan did the same. Neither woman possessed Cyrinx's familiarity with ceremonial writing instruments, and their signatures formed slowly and painstakingly, with awkward little pauses whenever the quill caught against the parchment.

Emily blotted hers once and froze. "Oh, shit."

"Continue," Mama advised.

"Easy for you to say."

Yet the marks were binding at a level mortal law could never approach and ordinary people could scarcely comprehend: blood, name, will, choice—the ancient components of covenant.

Mama's approval reached them through their earpieces as something almost like a purr. "You will grow. You will become more fully what you already possess the capacity to be. You will have time for that becoming." She paused. "More time than either of you presently understands."

Emily stopped writing, and Meghan glanced upward. Emily's eyes moved toward Miriam's transformed face. "How much time?" she whispered.

"Millennia, perhaps," Mama answered softly. "You will have millennia in which to become."

For several seconds, neither woman moved. Then Emily looked down at her slightly crooked signature and swallowed. "Well. That gives me time to work on my penmanship."

Meghan barked out a laugh before catching herself. Miriam did not laugh, but Kianna's eyes briefly closed, and Cyrinx suspected the Chamberlain was praying for patience.

Miriam understood the meaning of the rite in full, and to her own surprise, she was not pleased that the women had signed. She had expected hesitation, argument, negotiation—perhaps outright refusal. The Covenant had been written with deliberate severity, and Kianna had sharpened it further, stripping away every comforting ambiguity so that no woman could later claim she had misunderstood what was being asked of her.

Privately, Miriam had expected at least some of the modern women to falter. Half godless, inadequately formed in sacrifice, accustomed to treating personal preference as sacred and obligation as negotiable—surely a few would decide that two million dollars and an honorable departure were preferable to eternal fealty. Their refusal would have opened places for properly trained Silver Sisters.

Instead, they had accepted.

That irritated something in her even as another part of Miriam recognized the deeper implication. These were not merely twelve convenient companions gathered around Vincent because prophecy required a number. Amalia's genealogical research, Cyrinx's historical comparison, and Bella's esoteric conclusion had driven that point home rather brutally. The same bloodlines were returning. The same peculiar composition was returning. No sensible person within Raven Star could dismiss Amil's words as the ramblings of some failed medieval mystic.

There was a pattern here, and it was older than any of them.

The old theology gave Miriam language for it. Ereviel was not properly an angel in the narrower sense, but the vast feminine intelligence of Purgatoria—the Evening of the Divine, expressing herself through differing faces, names, and emanations. Selene was Ereviel in her shadowed, underworld aspect, just as Aneleia and Ninsiana expressed other movements of that same greater mystery. One was not separate from the other so much as a face turned toward a different horizon.

If Selene could emanate through faces, daughters, scions, and incarnations, then the women around this table fit disturbingly well within the old pattern. They remained distinct women—distinct souls, personalities, histories, wounds, appetites, and wills—but Purgatorian theology had never required distinction to mean separation. The One and the Many did not cancel one another; any more than water poured from a single pitcher into thirteen cups became thirteen separate things.

Miriam had spent her life studying precisely that kind of paradox.

Now it was sitting around her conference table.

Perhaps these women were the returning souls of Amil's wives, drawn again through their own bloodlines. Perhaps they were living faces of the same Selene-Ereviel mystery those earlier women had embodied. Miriam increasingly suspected the two explanations were not contradictory. What she could no longer comfortably maintain was that Mother had simply gathered twelve women of questionable qualification and expected Miriam to make priestess-queens out of them.

They had been here before.

That recognition should have humbled her more than it did.

She knew the theology. Oreviel gathered what had been scattered; memory, rain, return, and restoration belonged to his mysteries. The Silver Way itself revolved around fracture and reintegration, the divided becoming whole without being erased, mortal persons trained toward enduring spiritual form. Miriam understood all of that intellectually.

Her heart remained considerably less enlightened.

She had been formed from birth inside the elder Silver Way, her earliest years shaped by her father's cruelly rigorous mystical training, then by Bayville, and later by decades at St. Aftiel's. Discipline, Covenant, theurgy, internal alchemy, obedience, mystical practice, and sacrifice had structured her entire life. Women like Kianna, Amalia, and Bella made sense to her. Cyrinx, she grudgingly conceded, made sense as well: Silver-educated, spiritually grounded, eager to learn, and young enough that whatever remained unfinished could still be shaped through time and discipline.

Shannon Miller still troubled her.

Miriam looked toward her. Shannon had not yet signed. The banker was reading the Eternal Vow again, one hand resting near the silver dagger while pale lightning moved behind the rain-darkened windows.

Mother was watching. Miriam could feel it—not as words exactly, but as the gathering pressure of a correction she already knew she deserved.

You did not choose them because you do not yet understand what each of them is.
Tracy followed Meghan and Emily not long afterward. Her cut was deeper than either of theirs. The silver edge parted the flesh of her palm in one firm draw, and blood welled immediately, running in a dark line across her hand before falling into the crystal bowl. She did not wince. Her broad face remained composed, almost serene, as though pain were merely another fact to be acknowledged and passed through.

Miriam watched with guarded approval. Her recognition of Vincent had been immediate—not intellectual or political, but instinctive.

Her records described a woman of serious will: disciplined, physically demanding of herself, committed to self-improvement, solitary contemplation, and communion with nature. She had lived much of her life inwardly, rarely speaking of those devotions except when directly asked. Vincent had seen them anyway, and Miriam found that significant.

Tracy dipped the raven quill into her blood and wrote her name upon the Eternal Vow in slow, deliberate strokes.

Tracy Omaris.

Then, after the briefest hesitation, she added:

Veyl.

She was claiming it.

When Tracy finished, she laid the quill across the rim of the bowl and looked directly at Miriam. There was no challenge in her eyes, only certainty. Miriam inclined her head in welcome.

Vana and Abigail, caught slightly off guard by the speed with which the others had committed themselves, seemed to realize they were being left behind. They exchanged a glance, then both moved.

A strange expression crossed Vana's face as she took up the dagger—something between amusement, resignation, and an old sorrow she had no intention of displaying. Though not much older than Miriam, Vana was technically her aunt, the younger sister of Miriam's mother, Marian Carydin.

Their family history was complicated even by Carydin standards. Marian's mother, Kalara Carydin, had been extremely young when Marian was born, one of the many children produced among the wives, mistresses, and favored companions surrounding Tartus Carydin.

Vana had first come to Veyl House as a little girl, brought there by her father to participate in the mystical rites conducted beneath Aitor Veyl's authority. Marian was already dead by then, having died giving birth to Selene. Vana grew up thinking Aitor was the handsomest man she had ever known. He was far too old for her, of course, and even as a girl she understood that some part of him still belonged entirely to her dead sister. Aitor loved Marian until the day he died and never remarried.

Perhaps that only deepened Vana's fascination with him. In memory, Aitor had become almost mythic: handsome, distant, wounded, surrounded by mysteries she was only beginning to understand. She knew him first as the great man who had loved her sister beyond death, long before she understood the darker purpose of the rites beneath his roof.

She still did not know Miriam's true identity. Not yet.

Those rites had possessed a specific purpose. Neither Vana nor Selene Veyl had been regarded merely as children. They had been shaped toward an end, and now, after all these years, that end had come to fruition.

Not without leaving terrible scars.

The elders had called their methods awakening by trial. Miriam—Selene, though Vana did not yet know it—remembered them as torment. So did Vana. Both remembered being locked in lightless rooms for days, deprived of food until hunger blurred into visions. Both remembered bitter draughts

forced between their lips—powerful herbs that distorted consciousness, stripped away ordinary defenses, and made the mind permeable to whatever waited beyond it.

The coven had called one a channel and the other a vessel. Through one, they sought answers. Through the other, presence. They invoked Ereviel-Selene, for whom the first had been named, and Oreviel-Vanael, the shadow of Oreviel—God Has Judged; Cloud of God—for whom the second had been named, an aspect associated with the shadowed under-regions of Purgatoria: neutral shadow rather than darkness.

They demanded answers from one child while her body convulsed beneath forces, she had no language to comprehend. The other they drove through rites of invocation and conjuration until the presences came: Purgatorian intelligences, angelic powers, things of the Shadow Silver. To the lasting horror of the child who summoned them, the rites worked.

Some involved cold, others heat. There was isolation, sleep deprivation, and long periods of chanting until the words became meaningless—and then became something else. The adults called it sacred. Miriam had spent years deciding whether that made it better or worse.

She knew Vana had been raised in much the same way. That history lay at the root of the darkness Vana had become: spiritual violence inflicted in the name of transcendence, drawn from the most dangerous portions of the Thirteenth Compendium. In older Purgatorian practice, such ordeals had ordinarily been undertaken by choice—adults knowingly submitting themselves to fasting, poison, darkness, terror, sensory deprivation, and controlled psychic collapse.

The Carydins and Veyls had not always waited for consent.

Vincent himself had performed similar rites upon his own body, but he had chosen them. He fasted for days, pushed himself through punishing training until his muscles failed and his vision darkened, and sat for hours in absolute blackness, meditating, chanting, and forcing his mind toward the threshold between waking consciousness and the abyss beneath it. He brewed bitter teas, mildly poisonous and strongly consciousness-altering, deprived himself of sleep, comfort, warmth, and ordinary sensory anchors.

The old texts called it Threshold Work: approaching the place where mind, body, and spirit began to separate, then remaining there long enough to watch, learn, and return altered.

In Miriam's judgment, Vana and, to a lesser extent, Abigail were legitimate priestesses. They were simply priestesses of Purgatoria's shadow—Kur, Arullu, Sheol. Miriam did not trust them. Not yet. Signatures alone could not secure women whose wills were this cultivated, ambitions this deep, and inner structures this private. Only blood and life-fire, in Miriam's estimation, could make such women truly reliable.

Yet she also understood their value. Vana and Abigail knew wealth, manipulation, occult politics, seduction, hidden networks, forbidden rites, and the places respectable clergy refused to enter. Miriam disliked the idea of including them, but she understood Mother's wisdom in doing so. She also saw herself honestly and knew her own archetype within the Purgatorian hierarchy: not purely Ereviel, but Selene, the Moon of Kur. She had not been raised in the shadowed path, but her appetites, her will,

and her pragmatic willingness to do whatever was necessary to bring about the victory of the Throne over all other thrones brought her perilously close to the black-silver edge.

Importantly, Vincent had not chosen them for the Covenant. He did not even know it was being offered. His involvement with Vana and Abigail had ended at something far more immediate: he had spared their lives, imposed their surrender, and accepted Vana's fortune as part of the price exacted from them. But he had also taken responsibility for them. He had claimed them as family.

Whatever Miriam and Mother intended to make of that relationship afterward was another matter entirely.

Even Vana's surrendered fortune had ceased to resemble simple punishment. Vincent had taken the accumulated wealth and power of the Carydin empire and redirected it toward the mission. Large portions of Carydin Entertainment had already been liquidated, reorganized, or folded into the expanding Raven Star structure. Resorts, minority holdings, dormant corporations, luxury properties, aircraft, land, and investment assets had been sold, leveraged, transferred, or consolidated to generate immediate capital. The old Carydin empire was being dismantled piece by piece. Its wealth remained; its purpose did not.

Money once devoted to spectacle, indulgence, and private domination now funded laboratories, schools, communications systems, security forces, land acquisitions, infrastructure, and the expansion of Raven Star. There was method to Mama's madness. Miriam understood that. She did not have to like it. She had only to obey.

Vana drew the dagger across her palm with perfect calm. Abigail followed, her eyes shining with anticipation. They signed the Eternal Vow together in blood, then took up the black-silver pens and executed the remaining documents. Two boxes waited beside their bowls.

Shannon Miller came next. She read the final page once more, then gave a small nod to herself, as though approving a difficult but ultimately sound financial decision, and reached for the dagger. Miriam watched her cut her palm. Shannon flinched but did not withdraw. She allowed the blood to gather, then took up the quill and signed carefully.

Her reasons were not difficult to discern, and Cyrinx was foremost among them. Shannon would not permit her daughter to enter an immortal household while she remained outside it, aging alone until she eventually became little more than a memory. There was also the promise displayed in Miriam's transformed body, and beneath all of it lay Shannon's faith.

Vincent was a beautiful male, certainly, and the angelic patron of her religion made flesh. Yet Shannon's motives were less romantic than devotional—and perhaps less pure than Shannon herself would have liked to admit. There was fear of exclusion, fear of age, fear of being left behind. Faith could contain all three.

When Shannon finished, she looked toward Miriam. The Prophetess did not conceal her frown.

Shannon saw it. Her expression tightened briefly, but she did not lower her gaze. She set aside the quill, then the black-silver pen, and reached toward the box.

"No," Miriam said flatly. "You will wait."

The command stopped her hand. No one else had reached for a box. Shannon withdrew, saying nothing.

Miriam interpreted the impulse as greed.

Yvonne signed after Shannon. For her, the decisive factor was Tracy—the only family she possessed in the world and the most serious-minded, pragmatic person she had ever known. If Tracy had examined this Covenant and committed herself so completely, Yvonne found it difficult to dismiss the whole thing as madness.

Everything else reinforced the decision. She found Vincent intensely attractive, certainly, and the women around the table held their own varied appeal, but desire was hardly the strongest argument.

Yvonne signed with less idealism and more pragmatism than anyone in the room. She did not pretend destiny had called her heart. Opportunity had called her reason, loyalty had tipped the scale, and that was enough.

At last, only Tallia Stevens remained. The conference room had become unnaturally still. The storm was moving away now; rain continued whispering against the windows while thunder murmured somewhere beyond the city, more distant than before but never entirely gone.

Tallia stared at the parchment, then released a long, deep breath. "I serve Truth," she said solemnly. "And I want to witness its future unfolding."

She lifted the dagger. The blade cut more sharply than she expected, and Tallia winced, hissing through her teeth. It hurt. The entire act seemed overly dramatic to her—ritualistic, theatrical, and entirely unlike anything she had imagined herself doing when she awoke that morning. Still, she did not stop. Blood collected in the crystal bowl as she took up the quill and carefully wrote her name, forming each letter as clearly and legibly as possible.

Tallia Stevens

Then she used the black-silver pens provided to complete the remaining agreements. Her name appeared again and again in the strange, lustrous ink until every legal, financial, marital, and ecclesiastical document had been executed.

Tallia eyed the box, as did the others. Around the table, hands hovered near glossy black lids while anticipation tightened the room. Blood still seeped slowly from Tallia's palm, but no one touched anything.

At last Miriam looked from woman to woman. "Open them," she said solemnly. "But do not touch anything inside."

A collective sigh moved around the table, almost as though twelve women had released the same breath. Then the lids of the seven-inch black cases began to rise.

Each was lined in dark velvet and divided into two fitted compartments, one of them concealed beneath black velvet. Whatever lay beneath it remained momentarily forgotten, because the rings captured every eye.

They were magnificent.



All twelve followed the same basic design as Miriam's great wedding ring without being copies of it: elaborate white-metal bands worked in flowing vine and rose patterns, each crowned by a four-carat black diamond. Smaller diamonds followed the sweeping engraved lines, but there the similarities ended. Every ring carried its own color, giving each woman a distinct variation upon the same unmistakable design.

Miriam's remained unique—a brilliant white central diamond surrounded by blue accents. Among the Twelve, Vana's accent stones were black; Abigail's blood-red; Cyrinx's clear white; Shannon's pale blue. Meghan's burned orange, Emily's deep purple, Tallia's soft lavender, Amalia's almost magenta. Bella received a dark forest green, Tracy a deep indigo-blue, Kianna a lighter citrine-green, while Yvonne's gleamed golden yellow.

Several of the stones were rare enough that finding matching sets must have required a small fortune.

Yet despite the differences, none appeared greater than another. They were plainly sisters of the same design—twelve individual rings, equal in craftsmanship and dignity, each unmistakably belonging to the same Covenant.

For several long seconds, no one remembered Miriam had specifically ordered them not to touch.

"Now is the time to exchange them, if you wish," Miriam instructed. "Once you place a ring upon your hand, it is yours. That stone, that color, that ring becomes the symbol of your own sovereignty as a priestess-queen."

She regretted saying it almost immediately.

The women began comparing them at once, lifting the rings from their velvet settings and examining one another's choices beneath the overhead light. Miriam had tried to match each design to personality and preference while keeping the twelve rings as close as possible in value and splendor. That had proven considerably more difficult than expected. Certain naturally colored diamonds were extraordinarily rare, and assembling matched accent stones had required searches across several international markets. Money had not been the obstacle. Availability had.

Abigail settled the matter for herself immediately. Black and red were already her colors, and the combination of the great black center stone with deep crimson diamonds pleased her enormously. She slipped the ring onto her finger before anyone could even suggest a trade. Kianna, Bella, and Amalia had participated in choosing their own stones and did much the same, each visibly satisfied with what she had selected. Tracy studied the deep-blue accents surrounding her black diamond, gave a small approving nod, and put hers on. Vana, delighted to discover black diamonds throughout hers, guarded it with the unmistakable expression of a woman who would sooner surrender a kidney than exchange it.

The others proved less settled. Yvonne traded with Meghan almost immediately; Meghan preferred the golden stones to the fiery orange, while Yvonne found the orange more to her liking. Emily and Tallia exchanged theirs as well, Emily favoring the pale lavender while Tallia had always preferred a richer purple. Cyrinx studied her own clear-white stones, glanced toward Shannon's pale blue, and after a brief conversation mother and daughter traded.

Miriam sat back and waited while the women chattered over the rings like schoolgirls, comparing settings, holding them beneath the light, asking one another what they thought, and repeatedly expressing disbelief that the colored stones were actually diamonds. The solemnity of the Covenant had not disappeared, exactly, but for several minutes it had been invaded by something considerably more ordinary and feminine.

Only four women were paying much attention to what remained inside the boxes.

Bella, Amalia, Kianna, and Tracy had all noticed the second compartment beneath the fitted black cloth. Most of its contents remained concealed, but a small golden cork and the waxed neck of something narrow were visible at the edge.

Tracy looked toward Miriam, who answered with the slightest nod. She reached into the second compartment and carefully drew back the fitted black cloth.

The chatter around the table began to die as Tracy lifted what waited beneath it. A crystal vial rested between her fingers, sealed with a golden cork beneath dark wax. Within glowed a dense ruby fluid threaded with faint movements of silver-black light. For the first time since the boxes had opened, the rings were forgotten.



Tracy nearly dropped it.

The vial was warm—far warmer than the room—and something inside it hummed with a deep, resonant pulse that traveled through the crystal and into her fingers. She caught herself, tightened her grip, and stared. The glow seemed to deepen beneath her touch, drawing every eye toward her hand.

"What the hell…" Meghan murmured.

Something moved inside the ruby fluid.

Kianna noticed first and reached carefully into her own box. Amalia and Bella followed, then Cyrinx, each considerably more cautious after seeing Tracy's reaction. One by one, the vials emerged from beneath their velvet coverings, until points of muted ruby light appeared around the black table.

Fine tendrils of silver-black substance moved through the liquid, twisting and unfurling like the limbs of some amorphous living thing. Tracy set hers carefully upon the table before she could drop it, but the movement continued after her hand withdrew. The tendrils curled through the ruby medium with an intention difficult to dismiss, sometimes gathering toward the glass nearest the women before retreating again.

Soon the others were drawing forth their own ampules. Some immediately set them down. Others held them with both hands, gripping the crystal more firmly than necessary. The vibration made them feel less like containers than small living things reluctantly consenting to be held.

Yvonne turned hers beneath the light, "What the hell is –"

She stopped.

Her head tilted.

Then she raised the ampule toward her ear.

"Oh!" Yvonne jerked it away so quickly that Abigail laughed before realizing she could hear it too.

The laughter died.

Whispers gathered through the room.

At first, they were scarcely more than the suggestion of voices beneath the humming, but soon everyone heard them: many speakers overlapping at once, words passing just below comprehension. The sound seemed to emerge partly from the vials and partly from somewhere inside the mind, an invisible congregation murmuring from an immeasurable distance. Several women shifted uneasily. Even Abigail's delight quieted into attention.

Miriam waited until every woman had drawn forth her vial.

"No man may drink of this and live."

The statement cut through the whispering. Eyes widened around the table, wonder acquiring a sharper edge of fear.

"The brethren of the Raven Guard, male and female alike, are raised and are rising. Unto them is given the Blood Covenant of the King, made from his blood alone, to lift, renew, and bind." Miriam's gaze moved across the vials now held around the table, their ruby light catching faintly across the women's faces. "But unto us, the few, the true and chosen Brides of the Raven King, is given the Blood Flame. The unbreakable crown. The key. And the chain."

The final word seemed to chill the room. Within several of the vials, the silver-black tendrils drew sharply inward, coiling through the ruby fluid as though reacting to the invocation.

"This is the ancient pact renewed, for we have stood here before. We have walked this road across worlds and through ages unnumbered. We were called by other names, and now we are called again to the vows made long ago unto the eternal King of the Sacred Wastes."

Within Miriam's vial, the living substance stretched upward and gathered around a fine thread of silver-white radiance that had not been visible a moment earlier.

"Thirteen as one. One as thirteen. High Daughters of Purgatoria. Faces of Ereviel-Selene, Daughter of Twilight, Queen of the Great Below, the shadow-moon beneath." Her voice deepened into the cadence of formal invocation. "Ereshkigal is among the innermost names of incarnate She, the feminine Child-Emanation of Twilight. Through this blood, our pact with Mother is affirmed anew: that we become her faces, her names, and her bodies, companions and helpmates to her Eternal Father—Son—Husband—Self, Purgatoria's Seraph of Shadow and Silver, the manifest union of the Primordial Elements of Love and Truth."

Around the table, no one was looking at the rings anymore.

The words carried weight beyond their literal meaning. As Miriam continued, something in her voice changed. A low, almost infrasonic resonance entered it, vibrating through the black stone table, the floor, and the bones of those listening. It was no longer merely a woman speaking ritual words.

Something leonine moved beneath it now, controlled and immense. Silver points glimmered within the pupils of her black eyes.

Beyond the windows, the storm opened briefly in the west. The dying sun burned through rents in the clouds, turning the rain crimson and filling the conference room with blood-red twilight. Against it, Miriam seemed somehow larger, the severe black of her gown edged in silver fire.

"I am Prime," she said.

The ruby substance within the vials recoiled, then climbed toward the fingers holding them.

"You are mine."

Several women drew shallow breaths.

"Within these vessels are his life-seed and our immortalized life-blood, sanctified and united, one flowing into and from the other. It is the living ruby-silver of Oreviel and Ereviel: the Divine Raven of Twilight, the Cosmic Evening Star, the Raven Star of the universe."

A faint mist gathered against the inside of the crystalline containers.

"Drink not unless you are prepared to live long—and hard. Within this vessel is the joining of our will with yours. Once taken, the seal of the Covey shall be formed unassailable, enduring through all the ages to come."

Miriam looked slowly around the table, meeting each woman in turn.

"Sisters. Daughters. Wives. Mothers unto him and unto ourselves. My handmaidens and my extensions you shall become, as each of us is a distinct aspect within Her greater composite mystery. Together, we are the priestess-queens who comprise the Empress of Ten Thousand Worlds."

No one interrupted. Miriam's voice hardened.

"This is no life of pampered privilege. It is the Great Work of millennia—the burden of unending labor and unending responsibility. We shall carry the cause of Purgatoria across planets and peoples, breaking the chains of unseen tyrants, binary deception, parasitic dominion, and the delusional hells souls build around themselves. We shall move them toward sovereignty, wholeness, and immortal birth."

The silver-white-black thread within the vial flared.

"We bind ourselves so that others may be freed. We enter the chain so that they may escape the second deaths of eternal return."

Her fingers tightened around the ampule.

"You drink, and you become Purgatoria. Apocalypse. Shalim. The Dur. The living bond of blood and spirit between the material and the transcendent."

She spoke now as though addressing not merely the twelve women, but the world beyond the walls, and the fluid itself seemed to answer her. The whispering rose into an almost serpentine murmur while silver-white radiance flashed through the amorphous substance swimming within the ruby medium.

Around the table, wonder overcame caution. Prophecy had become tangible before their eyes. It possessed weight, warmth, vibration, and voice. Several women stared open-mouthed at the vials in their hands, soothed by the deep humming that traveled through the crystal even as the whispers called and warned in equal measure. Meghan slowly turned her ampule beneath the light, watching the silver-black tendrils shift with the movement before seeming, impossibly, to turn toward her.

Vana grasped hers greedily, closing both hands around the crystal as though she feared someone might take it away. The dark tendrils gathered toward her touch, almost as though recognizing something old and familiar. She watched them with widening fascination.

Cyrinx held hers in complete awe. How did this happen? How am I here, looking at this? Holding this? The thoughts passed through her with almost childlike disbelief. It was one thing to reed prophecy. Eventually prophecy became something like beloved fiction—a story one hoped might someday prove true while secretly doubting it would ever become more than metaphor, symbol, or sacred exaggeration. It was another thing entirely to hold fulfillment in one's hands, to feel the solidity of the crystal, its warmth and humming life, and hear it whispering of mysteries that seemed to touch the deepest interior of the soul.

"Thank you," Cyrinx whispered, though she did not know whether she addressed Miriam, Vincent, Mother, or the Blood Flame itself. Perhaps all of them.

Amalia and Bella examined their vials with the same absorbed wonder. For once, the twins' reserve dissolved, and both smiled almost like children confronted by something they had waited their whole lives to see. Emily actually giggled when the vibration tickled her palm and traveled upward along her arm. Her eyes brightened as the full reality of the moment finally rose within her. This was real. Actual. The Seraph, the Empress, the prophecy, the promise—all of it focused into a single tangible object she could hold in her hands.

Yvonne blinked several times and cocked her head, examining the vial from different angles. Nothing in her training offered an explanation. There was no concealed mechanism, no battery, projection, sensor, or plausible technology capable of producing living tendrils that swam through ruby fluid and whispered a person's private name.

Tallia's heart began racing the instant the crystal touched her skin. The call within the vessel was the hunger for life itself—death's bane, the rebuke of mortality, the answer to the terror buried beneath every human ambition. A line of Scripture rose within her, and she spoke it aloud.

"Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? Death has been swallowed up in victory."

The words struck the room with unexpected force. They were no longer merely Scripture quoted against an abstraction. Death's answer seemed to glow in their hands.

Shannon's gaze fixed upon her vial. She held it as though someone had handed her the winning ticket to a lottery whose prize was life without end. Her eyes moved toward Miriam, then around the table, searching the others' faces for some sign that they understood the magnitude of what rested within their grasp.

The whispering intensified, beckoning and repelling, promising and warning. Beneath the multitude of voices, a message emerged with terrible clarity:

This is liberation. This is a chain. This is the ending. This is the beginning. This is life.

And beneath them all came the darker truth:

Life is pain.

Kianna was the first to speak, her English carrying the measured cadence of the East. "The vanity of women. The hubris of men. The dream of humanity throughout the ages." She looked down upon the luminous vessel. "The key to the chains that inevitably drag every mortal into decrepitude, helplessness, and the terror of oblivion. The answer to the inescapable doom of the grave."

Her gaze moved slowly around the room as she remembered what Vincent had told the assembled men and women upon Crow Creek Mesa months earlier. "From Gilgamesh to Juan Ponce de León, countless alchemists, mystics, and seekers pursued what now rests within our hands. They spent fortunes, crossed deserts and savage wildernesses, entered primal jungles, climbed mountains, opened tombs, searched forbidden temples. They devoted lifetimes to finding what death had hidden from them."

Kianna raised the vial into the crimson storm-light. "The Philosopher's Stone. Manna. The ambrosia of the gods. The Peaches of Xi Wangmu, Queen Mother of the West. The fruit of the Tree of Life, guarded by the flaming sword of Uriel." Her wonder hardened into solemn understanding as she looked toward Miriam. "What they sought across millennia has been handed to us through destiny and grace. But the price is everything."

The conference-room doors gave a heavy mechanical clunk as the locks disengaged. Both leaves swung inward.

A Silver Sister stood beyond them, several others gathered behind her.

Not merely a Sister.

Most of the women recognized Theodora Clemens immediately from broadcasts and public appearances: Imperial Chancellor, former Arch-Priestess of the Silver Order, and for decades the woman who had led the Sisterhood into the technological age and dragged much of the sect with her into the modern world. Tall, severe, and almost unnervingly composed, she possessed the hard blue eyes and rigid bearing of stoicism made flesh. Once a woman in her eighties with white hair, she now appeared barely fifty, her restored hair frosted with deep red.

Even her vestments had changed. The old ecclesiastical severity remained, but now carried the unmistakable stamp of the Imperium—black, silver, disciplined, official. The same transformation had

spread throughout much of the Order. What had once been merely clergy had become, almost overnight in historical terms, a ready-made bureaucratic and administrative elite for the civilization rising around the Raven Throne.

The Seraph manifest had issued commands of his own. Monks, priests, nuns, and priestesses of the Silver Way had been ordered to pair male with female and gradually merge their religious lives into married households over the coming six years. Theodora herself, to date, had not obeyed that order. Apart from Miriam, the person she associated with most often was Vincent Veyl, and she was too old and too set in her ways to concern herself with marriage at this late date.

Behind her came several clerics from St. Aftiel's, every one of them transformed by the same increasingly corporate, bureaucratic cast overtaking the Order. Two Native-looking priestesses entered first, each carrying a smoking censer. Dragon's blood and frankincense rolled into the room in heavy, resonant waves, mingling with the cold mineral scent of rain and the faint metallic trace of fresh blood. Miriam and the three Sisters showed no surprise. They had clearly expected the procession. All four merely inclined their heads.

Theodora placed one hand over her breast. "Empress."

She extended the same formal acknowledgment toward Kianna, Amalia, and Bella, while offering the others only a cool, measuring regard. The remaining women glanced uneasily between one another, suddenly uncertain what portion of the ritual had begun now.

"Sealed in spirit, sealed in Truth," the two priestesses chanted as they moved in opposite directions around the table. "Daughters of Twilight Mother and Raven Father, Brides of the Twilight Son ever after."

The censers swung in slow arcs, chains whispering softly as fragrant smoke rolled over the women, their rings, their vials, and the blood-marked implements still resting upon the table. The priestesses completed a full circuit, crossing one another at the far end before passing once more behind Miriam and withdrawing through the open doors.

Others entered behind them, each carrying a small vial of golden fluid.

Theodora remained upon the threshold, perfectly straight, severe, and unmoving.

"Be still," she said solemnly. "And receive the anointing."

The Sisters moved among them, and the Twelve cooperated instinctively as sweet-smelling oil was pressed reverently to their foreheads—the old holy anointing oil of Exodus 30:22-25, prepared according to Silver tradition. The care with which the sleek-robed priestesses applied it communicated more than any explanation could have. The full weight of the moment began settling into the women's hearts and minds. This was no game, no ceremonial graduation, no accolade bestowed for work already accomplished. They were being prepared for eternal life, solemnly and properly, according to rites older than any government now rising around them. Not even Abigail smirked. Yvonne offered no cynical remark. No one resisted or treated the moment lightly.

Something in Theodora Clemen's face made that impossible. She stood rigidly at the threshold, watching with the grave concentration of a woman who understood exactly what was being done and believed every movement mattered.

The priestesses understood as well. Their eyes occasionally strayed toward the rings and, more noticeably, toward the ruby vials resting before the Twelve. Awe showed there, carefully controlled, and beneath it something more human—a fleeting envy they were disciplined enough not to indulge openly.

None of these women had been forgotten. During the previous year, the holy blood had been distributed slowly and quietly throughout the Ordo Argenteum, though only to a relatively small number of priests and priestesses already sealed by vow and judged worthy of the honor. Every Sister now serving within the rite had received that lesser Covenant, had trained in the way of manifestation, and knew personally what Vincent's blood could do.

What rested upon the table was not what they had received.

Their own Elixir had whispered as well, and every Sister present knew the strange sense of living presence carried within it. But the vials before the Twelve were different in ways impossible to miss. The ruby was deeper, the radiance stronger, the humming more physical, the voices clearer. Something silver-black moved visibly within the fluid itself.

None of the priestesses knew precisely how these vials had been prepared or what distinguished them from the Covenant they had received. They knew only that the difference was real.

For some of the priestesses, maintaining perfect composure required genuine discipline. They had given decades—some nearly entire lifetimes—to the Silver Way: prayer, study, obedience, celibacy, service, deprivation, ritual, and the slow hard work of remaking themselves according to its disciplines. Now they watched women whom some still regarded as worldly, undertrained, even half-devout receive something infinitely greater.

There was an undeniable sense of injustice in it.

Yet gratitude stood beside the envy. The Throne had not forgotten the priesthood altogether. They themselves had been lifted, renewed, strengthened, and granted years they had never expected to possess. Most did not know that Trinity and Miriam, rather than Vincent personally, had pressed hardest to ensure that the worthy among the priesthood received the diluted Covenant. To the Sisters, it was enough that the gift had come from his blood and beneath his authority.

The greater mystery before them belonged to another office.

The anointing continued. Myrrh, sweet cinnamon, fragrant cane, cassia, and olive oil filled the chamber, mingling with dragon's blood and frankincense until the air itself seemed ceremonial. Each priestess closed her eyes as she worked, pressing the oil to brow and crown, then extending one hand in blessing while murmuring prayers too softly for most of the women to follow.

As the last of them withdrew, Theodora entered.

She carried a black briefcase marked with the equal-armed silver emblem of the crossroads and set it upon the small table to the right of the doors. Then she moved around the chamber with the same formidable economy that marked everything she did, gathering the black binders beneath one arm. Her scent—honey and peaches—was strangely soft against both her severity and the accumulated odors of incense, oil, rain, blood, and warm crystal.

At the case, she opened the locks and began placing the executed documents inside.

"I trust you understood what you signed," she said without looking up. "These are not ceremonial papers. They bind you to offices whose authority and burden will increase as the Imperium grows."

She placed another binder into the case.

"They will be entered into civil, ecclesiastical, and Imperial record, with copies preserved in the Argenteum Archives and, in due course, the Imperial Library. Betrayal of these offices will be treated accordingly."

No menace colored her voice. None was needed.

Theodora closed the case and looked over the Twelve for the first time.

"I do not know why Mother Ereviel chose each of you. I do not require that knowledge. Her sight exceeds mine."

Her gaze shifted briefly toward Miriam, and she inclined her head.

"My duty is to recognize the choice and see that it is properly entered."

She returned to the threshold and handed the case to a massive, near ebony-skinned Sister waiting outside. Unlike the others, this woman wore no flowing clerical dress. Black-silver armor covered her from shoulder to boot, fashioned in overlapping plates that resembled polished obsidian edged in metallic silver. She looked at once ancient and futuristic—a warrior-maiden dragged from some forgotten temple and equipped for a war not yet begun.

Several of the women had already seen others like her while traveling. The first cadres of the new Imperial Guard were beginning to appear throughout the Imperium, though most still called them by the older and increasingly popular name:

The Raven Guard.

Theodora's attention returned to Miriam.

"There is trouble in Raven Throne tonight," she said. "Worse trouble abroad. The Emperor seems indisposed. I cannot raise him."

A faint pause.

"Time may be shorter than we expected."

Miriam nodded, then turned her attention back to the twelve women, who now looked tense and deeply uncertain.

"Go to the walls. Sit down with your backs against them."

They stared at her.

"It has a kick," she warned. "The death written into mortal cells does not yield easily to the invasion of eternal life."

There was no humor in her voice. Still holding their vials as though mesmerized, the women rose. Chair legs rolled and scraped softly across the stone floor, fabric whispering as, one after another, they moved toward the walls and lowered themselves against the black stone, arranging gowns, skirts, or uniforms beneath them. The living fluid continued calling them by name.

Miriam remained standing beside the open case. "Is there anyone here who will not drink?"

The slightest tension entered her voice. Some stubborn part of her still hoped that one of them might change her mind, though by now it seemed almost impossible.

Her greater concern was Vincent.

The moment they drank, he would know.

Miriam had no idea how he would react beyond the certainty that he would come. Quickly. And when he did, every woman involved in the rite would have to stand beneath his wrath.

Theodora was prepared for that. She had agreed that the ritual must be completed and remained convinced that Trinity—Ereviel' s Doll, as she sometimes called the lesser manifestation—had judged correctly. Vincent had duties no less binding than theirs. If prophecy and the Raven Throne required him to accept the Twelve, then reluctance did not absolve him of the obligation.

The duty was here. The hour was now.

His anger could be endured afterward.

No one answered. Fear rose suddenly within Yvonne—hard, immediate, rational. Every instinct she possessed warned that she stood before a boundary no one could cross and remain unchanged. Then she looked down and realized her fingers had already broken the wax seal.

The cork came free with a soft pop, and the scent that entered the chamber was raw and intoxicating: dark chocolate, chai, warm butter, wild honey, all blended into one dense and strangely familiar fragrance. Another cork opened, then another. One by one the seals broke until the aroma thickened through the room, rich enough that merely breathing it produced a faint, almost narcotic euphoria. No command was given. None was needed.

Vana and Abigail could restrain themselves no longer. Their eyes met, and in the same instant they raised their vials and drank. The others followed.

The taste was unlike anything made by human hands—salty, sweet, sour, bitter, all at once, each sensation remaining distinct yet somehow unified into a single impossibly delicious flavor that made the tongue tickle and the mouth numb. Then the Blood Flame passed beyond the tongue, entered the throat and stomach, and became something else entirely.

Raven Star had been built nearly soundproof. That proved fortunate, because the screams that erupted from the conference room were horrific.

Living fire struck first, then became dry ice, then electrical force poured through every nerve at once. The Blood Flame did not behave like ordinary fluid. It moved with purpose, slithering and coiling through tissue, organ, brain, bone, and marrow. It found every cell, every strand of DNA, every wound and weakness, every inherited defect, hidden corruption, scar, and dormant disease. Life itself fused with the molecules of their bodies.

The transformation cascaded outward through material flesh and inward through the etheric lattice, Aethyric pattern, astral body, and causal architecture beneath identity. Black-silver lightning rewrote the cosmic code of their beings. A name and sign were etched into their atoms and branded upon their souls, a mark of possession as unmistakable as iron burned into the flank of a beast:

THIS BELONGS TO THE RAVEN THRONE.

Bones crackled. Joints popped, separated, and reset. Skin crawled while muscles twisted beneath the surface as though serpents moved through the flesh. Blue arcs of power webbed across their bodies. Organs convulsed, and every cell screamed beneath the fiery vibration.

They vomited. Their bladders released. They collapsed across the black floor, writhing as screams broke into gasps, choking sobs, whimpers, and mewling cries. Some clawed at their own bodies; others folded into weeping fetal positions, trembling and wrenching violently against the stone. The Blood Flame showed no mercy.

Eye colors deepened into darker, stranger shades. Hair softened, lengthened, thickened, and assumed richer hues. Skeletal structures crackled and elongated, harmonizing toward more complete proportions. Musculature tightened. Skin drew smooth and firm. Teeth whitened and aligned; wisdom teeth forced themselves back into corrected positions, while fillings dissolved, cavities and decay smoldered away from root and enamel.

Years vanished from their faces. Skin tags, warts, moles, pimples, and blackheads disappeared, vanishing in tiny sparks, while age lines smoothed away. Even the structures of their brains altered, folding into subtler fractal geometries capable of sustaining perceptions no ordinary human nervous system could contain.

Their bodies were not being made identical. They were being clarified, each woman drawn toward the most complete expression of her own inherent form: the proto-Ascendant pattern, the Pre-Fall design, the original intention lifted free of inherited corruption, accumulated damage, disease, and mortal decay.

Then, one by one, the women became still—sweat-drenched, flushed, motionless, and dead. Steam rising from each corpse.

Theodora and the Sisters gathered near the doorway looked on in wonder and horror. Their own transformations had been painful, but nothing like this. More than one fought the instinct to rush forward and begin resuscitation, convinced for a terrible moment that something had gone catastrophically wrong. Theodora stopped them with one hard gesture.

Silence fell across the chamber. Rain hissed against the windows while thunder rolled somewhere beyond Raven Throne, partly obscuring the crackle of distant gunfire from the south and the hills to the northwest. Emergency lights flashed intermittently through the darkening streets below. Across the black floor came the faint electrical ticking of residual energy as blue sparks crawled over unmoving limbs and disappeared.
Miriam walked among them and knelt beside Kianna first. Placing one hand against the woman's sternum, she bent close and breathed across her lips.

"The old has died," she whispered.

Kianna remained still.

"The new is born."

A tremor passed through her body.

"Raised whole."

Kianna convulsed.

"Lifted true."

She gasped violently. Her back arched, and she began choking as her lungs dragged air inward with a ragged, desperate sound. Her eyes opened for an instant—dark, unfocused, silver points flickering within them—then closed again as she fell into profound unconsciousness.

Miriam moved to Amalia, then Bella, Cyrinx, Tracy, and the others. One by one she knelt beside them, breathed life across their lips, and repeated the invocation: "The old has died. The new is born. Raised whole. Lifted true." Each returned with a gasp, a convulsion, a great desperate intake of breath, then descended into deep sleep.

Within the unseen layers of their being, their individual sparks had altered. Each shifted from its former color into black and silver, though an individual undertone remained: ruby, blue, indigo, violet, green, gold, or some stranger color belonging to that soul alone. They had been joined, not erased. More strangely, those undertones echoed the secondary stones of the rings they now wore, even those they had impulsively exchanged, as though some deeper knowing had guided choices they themselves had taken for preference alone.

She kept glancing toward the doorway, while Theodora and the priestesses listened for any sign on their mics, that Vincent was now aware.

The tension was palpable. He was not a man to cross lightly, and he had demonstrated that more than once. Everything Miriam knew of him suggested the same thing: he could forgive weakness, failure, even disobedience under the right circumstances, but betrayal and breaches of trust cut differently.

Yet the doors remained closed.

Fear aside, Miriam felt a measure of relief. The work entrusted to her had been completed. The Twelve were bound, transformed, and beyond recall. Whatever came next, Vincent had not arrived in time to stop the rite. For the moment, that was enough.

The room behind her looked like the aftermath of a battle. Twelve women lay scattered against the black walls and across the floor, their clothing damp with bio-fluids, their bodies utterly still except for the slow rise and fall of newly restored breath. Blood remained in the air, along with incense, rain, something electrical, and something new.

Theodora finally waved the waiting Sisters forward. Grim-faced women entered carrying twelve collars of midnight-black leather, each bearing a silver medallion engraved with the sacred Raven seal. One by one, they knelt beside the unconscious Brides and fastened the collars around their throats—the same form of collar worn beneath the high-necked garments of initiated Silver Sisters. Upon the Brides the symbol carried the same meaning of union, Covenant, office, service, and belonging. Miriam already wore her own collar. So did Theodora, and every fully initiated Sister—an unbroken mark of the Order carried across nearly fifteen centuries.

Each woman bore another sign besides, the thin scar across her palm where the Eternal Vow had been signed in blood.

Stretchers were brought in.

"They will remain here," Miriam said firmly.

Theodora glanced toward the windows, where distant flashes continued against the darkening city. "It may not be safe here."

"It cannot be helped," Miriam answered. "There are facilities upstairs."

"I know where they are," Theodora said. She had studied the entire layout of Raven Star 1 and had visited many times as of late.

Under her direction, the Sisters lifted the Brides two at a time and carried them upstairs to the second-floor lavatory and adjoining facilities. There they washed blood, sweat, and sickness from their transformed bodies, then dressed each woman in a very thin blue-black satin skiff, as though preparing a newly sworn Silver Bride of the Order for her first night beneath vow.

When the last of them was carried out, Miriam returned calmly to the table. The room now resembled the aftermath of some beautiful and terrible plague, even as Sisters entered, quietly, calmly, going to work cleaning and clearing the chamber, to remove all evidence—the camera evidence transferred to a secure historical archive. Chairs stood scattered from the table. In moments the crystal bowls were gone (the blood itself would be secured for the historical record as well), but the metallic scent

remained beneath the lingering dragon's-blood incense and the cool mint circulating through the vents. Outside, rain continued washing the dark windows.

He had to know by now, but had not yet arrived. And that was of concern and hope.

Miriam had spent most of her life among women—first within the dormitories and classrooms of the Shining Silver School, then through decades at St. Aftiel's. Intimacy between women had never seemed particularly exotic to her, and Vincent had never expected her to pretend otherwise. In that sense, twelve additional women entering the household disturbed her considerably less than it would disturb him.

The number itself was fixed: twelve. No more, no less. Prophetically exact.
Vincent had never asked for them. That much had been obvious long before tonight. He had accepted Mama's staffing recommendations because the women were useful, trustworthy, or necessary to the work forming around Raven Star. He thought he was building an organization. In several cases he treated them more like sisters, comrades, employees, or valued members of his household than prospective wives. Miriam knew perfectly well that had she asked whether he wished to marry twelve additional women, the answer would have been immediate and probably profane. That was precisely why she had not asked.

The broader Blood Covenant was different. Vincent had knowingly given his blood for that work and authorized its use among the Chosen. Miriam, Kianna, Amalia, and Bella prepared the Elixir beneath Mother's direction, while Miriam and Trinity determined who might receive it and upon what terms. The gift renewed flesh, slowed decline, strengthened the recipient, and established a living bond of fealty to its source. Powerful, certainly, but not true immortality.

The Blood Flame given to the Twelve was something else entirely.

Miriam had quietly preserved his seed in clever ways and joined it with their immortalized blood according to hidden rites given by Trinity. She had enjoyed acquiring the necessary material considerably more than she would ever admit in formal ecclesiastical language, but the humor ended there. He did not know what she had prepared. He did not know the Twelve had signed. He had not chosen their rings, approved their vows, selected them as wives, or consented to the bond that had just been driven into his own eternal life.

Now he knew.

The moment they drank, twelve new life-lines opened through the Blood Flame and fastened themselves to him. Miriam could feel the secondary echo of those bonds through her own union with Vincent: twelve distinct currents, newly awakened and still raw with pain, fear, desire, memory, and identity. But he was the source. His life was already flowing into them as it flowed into her.

That was why his continued absence troubled her. She had expected fury almost immediately. Instead, the elevator remained silent and the doors stayed closed. She knew only that he had not come, and there was guilt in the relief she felt because of it.

What she had done was not fair, and she knew it. Mother knew it. Theodora knew it. None of them considered fairness the highest law operating here. Prophecy stood above preference; duty above

domestic comfort; the needs of the Raven Throne above the wishes of one profoundly reluctant emperor.

Vincent would see that reasoning rather differently. He would feel betrayed, and Miriam knew him well enough to be certain of that. Not because the women lacked value. Not because he would abandon them. Quite the opposite. Once he understood that they were bound to him, he would protect them with the same ferocity he brought to every responsibility placed beneath his hand.

That certainty was part of what made her action possible.

It was also what made it a betrayal.

Already the Twelve reached her dimly through Vincent's life: Emily's devotion, Yvonne's calculation, Tracy's gratitude, Shannon's fear of being left behind, Meghan's fierce pride, Tallia's hunger for Truth, Cyrinx's awe, Vana's appetite for forbidden knowledge, Abigail's ambition, Kianna's certainty, Amalia's logic, Bella's inward wonder. Distinct lights within one growing current, joined without being erased.

Miriam felt them and understood, perhaps more clearly than before, why Mother had chosen as she had.

By then Theodora was already making the announcement across Church and Silver Path channels through her secure tablet. "All twelve have elected the Eternal Vow, sworn in blood. All have received the anointing. There are now twelve priestess-queens of the High Covey beneath the Consort of the Evening Star."

Miriam took up her own device and searched the internal cameras for Vincent.

She could not find him.

Alarm tightened immediately within her. She reached instinctively through the bond, trying to feel where he was, and pain exploded behind her eyes. Something like an electrical current of chaos tore through her awareness—too many signals, too much pain, too much raw life moving at once. Miriam winced hard, caught the edge of the table, then forced herself upright and focused upon the tablet instead.

Theodora had said there was trouble.

Looking at her tablet, Miriam immediately understood how much. Raven Throne was under attack.

NNN on DeSatto Ridge had gone into lockdown. A massive explosion was being reported just off Interstate 80, along the on-ramp into the city, while another engagement had broken out in the hills southwest of the Temple of Purgatoria, high in the vale above town. Emergency alerts were already flooding local devices, ordering residents indoors. Automated calls were going out block by block. The militia was on the move. Raven Star Security, Nevada Guard units, and federal troops were responding in force.

Live feeds multiplied across Miriam's screen. Helicopters cut low through the storm-dark sky. An explosion flashed in the foothills north and east of the station, followed seconds later by the unmistakable hammering of an Apache opening fire upon something hidden among the rocks. Another gunfight was underway near the Superstore. St. Aftiel's was dug in. At the Temple, priests and priestesses had armed themselves in full combat regalia and were putting up a hell of a fight against unseen attackers firing from the slopes above the compound.

Understanding brought fear with it. Miriam's heart began to pound.

NNN, to its considerable credit, was still broadcasting. Its own guards had dug in around the station while Trinity continued covering both the local attack and the wider crisis unfolding across the world. North Korean troops were massing along the DMZ. South Korea had entered full mobilization. American forces were fortifying positions and rushing reinforcements toward the peninsula.

Then Miriam saw the local headline.

EMPEROR VEYL UNDER FIRE IN TREMBOL, NEVADA—HOLY FIRE MILITANTS ATTACK

Live drone footage filled the screen.

Vincent lay behind a boulder east of the station, his LAR-8 on the ground beside him. Blood darkened one side of his neck and streaked his arm. He was not moving. For one terrible second Miriam simply stared, unable to make sense of what she was seeing. The image refused to arrange itself into anything her mind could accept: Vincent down, Vincent bleeding, Vincent alone beneath fire.

Then whatever composure remained in her shattered.

"Vincent!"

She was moving before anyone could answer, crossing the chamber at a near run, only to find Theodora Clemens waiting beyond the inner doors with half a dozen women in black-silver armor. The so-called Maiden Guard—some of the finest warriors ever formed within the Silver Sisterhood—stood shoulder to shoulder across the passage.

Theodora did not move. "We have orders to keep you here. You are not to interfere."

Miriam stopped dead. Her black eyes flashed. "Who the fuck gave that order? I am the goddamned Empress!" She drove toward the doors.

"The Queen of Purgatoria," Theodora said coldly.

That stopped Miriam for perhaps half a heartbeat. Then rage swallowed reason.

Theodora and the Guard knew better than to try taking her hand-to-hand. Miriam had trained in combat nearly her entire life, and immortalization had transformed formidable skill into something increasingly inhuman. Restraining her physically would require enough force to risk serious injury—to Miriam, to them, probably both. The exterior doors had already been sealed.

Miriam seized the handles and wrenched hard enough to make the steel mechanisms groan, but the locks held. She shook them once, twice, then whirled upon Theodora and the Guard with something perilously close to black hatred burning through her face. Her gaze landed on the combat shotgun secured behind the reception station.

She had it in her hands a second later.

"Miriam –" Theodora began.

The shotgun came level with the doors.

The world went white.

Pain struck from several directions at once as the Maiden Guard pressed their blessed stun-rods against her in tandem. Thousands of volts ripped through Miriam's altered nervous system, entering shoulder, flank, thigh, back. Her body arched violently. The shotgun discharged from spasming fingers into the stonework with a deafening boom, and Miriam went to her knees with a strangled cry. Another pulse hit before she could recover. Her muscles locked, teeth clenched, fingers clawing uselessly against the floor as the current tore through her and overwhelmed even the regenerative power burning within her blood.

Then she collapsed.

The current ceased, leaving Miriam curled upon the black stone, quivering, breath coming in shallow gasps while consciousness drained rapidly away. Theodora crossed the distance and knelt beside her. For the first time, something like pain entered the Chancellor's severe face.

"I am sorry, my Empress," she said quietly. "But we all serve the Raven Throne first. The Emperor must face this hour without you. If you go to him now, you may only get him killed—if that has not already happened."

Miriam tried to answer. Nothing coherent came. Theodora drew a heavy sedative injector from beneath her robes and pressed it against Miriam's thigh. The dose was grotesque by ordinary human standards, enough to put down something considerably larger than a woman, but Miriam was no longer ordinary. The injector hissed, and whatever remained of the fury in her eyes vanished beneath chemical darkness.

"Clean her," Theodora ordered as she rose. "As we did the others. Take her upstairs, tuck her into bed, and keep her there. Seal this building completely."

The Maiden Guard lifted Miriam with surprising gentleness and carried her into the elevator. Theodora went with them. The lift climbed to the fourth floor, where the Executive Lavatory, Executive Office, and Vincent and Miriam's private quarters occupied the secured upper level. When the doors opened, two Sisters carried Miriam toward the lavatory to wash away blood, sweat, urine, and the other humiliating consequences of the electrical assault before settling her into bed.

Theodora continued instead toward Vincent's office.

She was one of only a handful of people possessing the code, her Imperial security clearance nearly equal to Vincent's own. The door opened upon controlled chaos.

Josh Manning jolted as the door opened, but recognized Theodora immediately from broadcasts, internal reports, and the handful of times he had seen her moving through Raven Star with the quiet authority of someone everyone else instinctively got out of the way for. Tonight, however, Josh scarcely had time to care who she was.

He was hunched over communications, trying frantically to vector Raven Guard and local units toward Vincent's position north of NNN. Raven Star's internal cameras had remained partially locked and compartmentalized throughout the women's rite, leaving him with less information than he wanted and considerably too much happening at once.

The monitors surrounding Vincent's desk had become a panorama of impending disaster. One displayed the Korean countdown, almost exhausted now. Others showed troop movements across the Pacific: American, Imperial, South Korean, and allied formations shifting quietly toward combat readiness while North Korean units thickened along the DMZ. Another carried the Raven Throne tactical map, local units converging through streets and hills beneath the storm.

And on the largest screen lay Vincent.

Infrared drone imagery showed his body behind the boulder, still motionless. Beyond him, several figures were advancing through the dark from the north and east—ragged compared with the professional forces surrounding Raven Star, but armed, purposeful, each wearing the burning red cross of the Holy Fire upon black combat gear and some sort of ponchos.

They were closing on him.

"He's not badly hurt," Josh blurted before Theodora could ask. Panic sharpened his voice. "I mean, the shrapnel embedded in his neck. Another caught his arm. He was still moving. Pulled it out. The bleeding stopped almost immediately." He pointed helplessly at the screen. "Then he just grabbed his head. Roared. Jesus, I've never heard anything like it. Blood started coming out of his nose and eyes, and he dropped to his knees."

Theodora went perfectly still.

She knew.

Not the bullets.

The Twelve.

A cold weight seemed to pass through her body as understanding assembled itself with brutal clarity. In their impatience to fulfill prophecy, restore the ancient pattern, seal the Brides, and close the immortal circuit around the Raven Throne, they had opened twelve new life-lines into Vincent at once.

While he was under fire.

Guilt struck with nearly physical force.

They may have just killed him.

The figures on the screen continued advancing. Theodora knew the Order of Holy Fire. She knew their rites, their hatred of the Silver Way, their conviction that Vincent was not merely false but abominable—a neutral Seraph masquerading in mortal flesh, something neither Heaven nor Hell properly claimed. Those men would have blessed their weapons, their ammunition, themselves for the killing.

Against another man, ceremony might have meant little.

Against something half-anchored in another plane, it might mean everything.

Theodora stepped toward the monitor as though proximity could somehow reach him. One of the militants crept closer through the rocks.

Vincent did not move.

Her fists clenched.

"Get the fuck up, milord!"

Josh looked at her.

Theodora no longer cared.

"Get the fuck up!" she shouted at the screen. "Be the Raven of Purgatoria and frigging rise!"

On the monitor, the red crosses kept coming.

(7:00 PM, May 31, 2027—Imperator)



[Note—Covey: a small local cooperative of neighbors, families, or nearby households working together on shared practical needs, including education, preparedness, repairs, food production, caregiving, security, and community projects, without erasing private property or individual responsibility.]

The evening was cool and wet. Rain pounded Raven Throne beneath a hard spring storm, thunder reverberating faintly through the dense stone walls of the building while lightning flickered across the darkened sky. Miriam was downstairs with her "Girl Band," as Vincent called them, cloistered away on important feminine plots no doubt, while he sat in his office beside Josh Manning, working two dozen different problems and projects at once.

The monitors to his left showed the developing situation in North Korea: maps lighting along the DMZ, incoming intelligence reports, live feeds from observation points and military positions. The High Council occupied one screen on his desk, President Harrison and Justin Vyss another, all of them weighing options while new information arrived faster than anyone could comfortably digest it.

On a separate security feed, a line of older, nondescript vans approaching from the direction of Utah had been flagged for observation. They were older models, nothing expensive or obviously specialized, the sort that could easily have been delivery trucks, work vans, or small commercial haulers. A Predator drone shadowed them from above as the convoy moved westward. They were still a hundred miles out and, for the moment, little more than a casual concern.

Josh, considerably matured and intensified by the previous year, worked the phones beside him, patiently walking a casino client in Las Vegas through the step-by-step activation of a Trinity System while simultaneously keeping an eye on Raven Star's external security cameras. Heavy rain drummed against the building, the sky dark and overcast. There was tension in the air that both men could feel, but Vincent sensed something beneath the ordinary pressure of storm, geopolitics, and too many moving parts. Something deeper. He could not put a name to it, and that bothered him.

The armed forces of nations scattered almost haphazardly across the planet had been quietly fusing into something resembling a cohesive Imperial military for years, though the process remained far from complete. Trinity mics had gone a long way toward solving the linguistic problem, but the proper units had existed for less than a year and production was only now beginning to approach demand.

Inferior Trion Inc. models—before the company was absorbed into Raven Star—had sufficed for administrative and training purposes, but they were not built for serious combat conditions and were being phased out as quickly as replacements could be manufactured.

Reequipping a worldwide force of more than a hundred thousand troops would take time. Retraining them, interestingly enough, was proving considerably easier. Existing soldiers rotated through accelerated programs designed to overlay the Imperial model upon skills they already possessed rather than tear them down and rebuild them from scratch.

Vincent found something genuinely heartening in the sight of hundreds of troops sitting in ordered rows beneath open skies or inside converted hangars, meditating together before training, performing the devotions, then rising to drill in the more rigorous martial disciplines and learning to incorporate Trinity into everything from communications and tactical planning to maintenance, medicine, logistics, and daily routine.

The entire philosophy rested upon getting more from what they already possessed rather than endlessly demanding more money, more equipment, and more bureaucracy. Improvisation mattered. Trinity could walk soldiers and mechanics through field modifications to weapons, vehicles, communications gear, armor, and older machinery using parts already sitting in workshops or supply depots. Ordinary infantrymen were being taught enough maintenance and fabrication to keep aging equipment useful, modify it for changing conditions, and wring greater versatility from hardware that conventional procurement systems might simply have written off. Vincent had little interest in creating soldiers helpless without a contractor and a proprietary replacement part. A fighting force operating across worlds someday might not have the luxury of calling customer service.

Many commanders had initially balked at the esoteric elements of the new doctrine, but Vincent could support much of it without invoking angels, spirits, or Purgatoria at all. Teaching soldiers to control breathing, narrow attention, quiet the monkey mind under stress, recover after violence, and redirect panic into disciplined action had ample support in ordinary psychology and physiology. Prayerful chants and repetitive invocations gave the frightened mind something ordered to seize upon when adrenaline threatened to turn thought into noise. Call it meditation, combat breathing, neurological conditioning, prayer, or whatever terminology offended the fewest colonels; Vincent did not particularly care so long as it worked.

His larger argument was harder to reduce to conventional military doctrine, but after the events of the previous year fewer people laughed at it.

"We must create soldiers capable of fighting in levels of mind and spirit—in metaphysical theaters," he had told the commanders. "Otherwise, we are preparing them only for the enemies' humanity has already met, not the ones it will actually face."

That, increasingly, was difficult to dismiss as mystic bullshit.

Guided partly by Swiss and Israeli models of military and civil defense, Vincent aimed to build a genuinely well-regulated citizen militia without sweeping aside established traditions of private arms ownership. Where armed citizenship was already deeply rooted—America, Switzerland, Czechia, and elsewhere—those rights and customs would remain. In societies without such traditions, the principle would be introduced more gradually through militia and civil-defense training, with community armories providing locally controlled weapons and trained, law-abiding citizens eventually permitted arms of their own. The purpose was never merely to put weapons into more hands, but to cultivate citizens who understood defense, restraint, discipline, responsibility, and preparedness.

Soldiers therefore moved through villages, towns, and city neighborhoods teaching far more than weapons handling. First aid, communications, defensive construction, emergency logistics, basic strategy, calming-focus disciplines, evacuation planning, and disaster response all belonged to the same training. Communities maintained preserved food and water, shelters, common stores, local watches, and plans for the emergencies most likely to confront them. The village, neighborhood, or city block became its own first line of defense—and, just as importantly, its own first responder.

But self-reliance meant considerably more than preparing for war or catastrophe. Vincent wanted every community to possess some ability to feed, teach, repair, comfort, and organize itself without waiting helplessly upon distant institutions. Cooperative gardens, cleanup projects, neighborhood repairs, shared tools, food banks, community meals, workshops, and pooled emergency supplies all belonged to the same philosophy. People were expected to look first toward the abilities already among them: the carpenter, nurse, mechanic, martial artist, gardener, computer-savvy teenager, minister, imam, grandmother, veteran, or retired tradesman. Covey, not collective. Private property and individual responsibility remained intact, but both were strengthened by relationships of mutual obligation.

Education naturally grew from the same soil. Drawing upon the Shining Silver School model of wholistic formation—adapted to the spiritual character of each culture, one path expressed through many variations—Vincent intended the vast centralized school systems to be broken down wherever practical into smaller institutions rooted in neighborhoods, villages, parishes, temples, and local coveys. Children would learn close to home from trained instructors joined by clergy, elders, retired teachers, tradesmen, skilled volunteers, veterans, and others capable of passing useful knowledge forward. The purpose was not merely academic instruction, but formation of the whole person: intellectual, practical, physical, moral, martial, and spiritual.

Vincent rejected much of modern educational psychology in favor of apprenticeship, competence, merit, earned reward, discipline, responsibility, service, and graduated correction for misconduct. The Shining Silver School had never been gentle in the sentimental sense. Expectations were high, routines strict, failure corrected, and consequences real, extending at the far end to traditional corporal discipline. The aim was not cruelty, but hardening without breaking—teaching children to endure frustration, accept hierarchy, master themselves, recover from failure, and function under pressure. In time, Vincent intended this philosophy to broaden into something approaching a global boot camp for civilization, producing a population more generally disciplined, martial, mystical, self-reliant, and prepared for the demands of ascendant humanity.

The elderly played a particularly important role, freeing working-age adults to earn a living while restoring older generations to an honored place within communal life. A retired mechanic could teach repair; a grandmother supervise children and pass along the wisdom of a lifetime; a former accountant

teach arithmetic, bookkeeping, and household finance. Veterans taught preparedness and fieldcraft, martial artists self-defense, medical workers first aid, and those with therapeutic experience crisis care and support. Even tending animals, livestock, the disabled, or the infirm became instruction in responsibility and compassion. Volunteer service could earn tax credits or vouchers redeemable for other community services, allowing useful labor to circulate rather than disappear unpaid.

Education was no longer something set apart from ordinary existence. Children learned by working, serving, training, caring, building, failing, correcting, and trying again. Life itself became the school. Its purpose was not merely to prepare children to enter society, but to prepare them to build—and, if necessary, defend—the civilization to come.

Vincent was, in effect, forging the ideal colonist: a citizen who could fight, heal, build, repair, pray, endure, and remain useful when civilization ended at the edge of the settlement.

In this frame, he had met with religious leaders from many faiths in the first echoes of the coming Imperial Ecumenical Council and was moving across the planet, throughout every allied nation and state, to establish Silver Houses. These institutions would take in the abandoned, the street children, the factory children, those surrendered for adoption, and those removed from abusive homes, drawing them into a system modeled upon the Shining Silver School.

The purpose was not merely to shelter them, but to transform them into "The Children of God." Each would receive an elite, holistic education and a stable, wholesome upbringing, shaped toward discipline, strength, intelligence, self-mastery, and service. They were to become not merely functional citizens, but super-citizens: the future elite soldiers, bureaucrats, astronauts, engineers, physicians, Imperial clerics, and officers of the Imperium.

Trinity would be in their ears from the first day as Mama, while Sergeant Veyl, as a paternal figure, would address them each day through each Silver House's great screen, offering encouragement, instruction, challenge, and the occasional personal story from his own life. At times, he would simply show up without cameras or notice, to be found teaching a shop class, leading a martial session, or sitting down to talk personally with the students.

The larger vision was unapologetic: to take those the old world had cast aside and forge them into a silver generation, a specialist class raised for direct service to the Imperium of Ascendant Mankind, the shining spearpoint of humanity's ascent toward the stars.

Religion followed the same movement toward local practice and eventual unity. Vincent had no intention of abolishing the old faiths by decree; sacred names, symbols, rites, and traditions carried too much ancestry and memory to be stripped away without creating another generation of religious conflict. Instead, the Imperial Church was intended to emerge slowly through convergence. Christianity, Islam, Hindu traditions, Judaism, Buddhism, Taoism, the Silver Way, Indigenous religions, and smaller paths would be studied side by side in government seminaries and school courses on the religions and myths of the world, their recurring disciplines— prayer, meditation, contemplation, study, ethical practice, devotion, fasting, ritual, fellowship, service, and mystical exercise—gradually drawn into a common spiritual framework.

At first, the names mattered less than the work. One community might speak of Christ, another Alah or Brahman, another of ancestral, Taoist, Buddhist, or Purgatorian powers. Vincent cared less about

the name upon the sanctuary than what happened within it. Over generations, however, he expected the distinctions to soften. Traditions would borrow from one another, correspondences would become familiar, and saints, angels, immortals, devas, bodhisattvas, and ancestral beings would increasingly find their places within a shared metaphysical structure. Diversity would not be forbidden; it would slowly blend toward unity.

The ancient, near-dead arcane language of Shalimite—a hidden and forgotten root beneath many Near Eastern, African, and Middle-European tongues—served the same purpose linguistically. Vincent had already restored it within the Purgatorian priesthood as a sacred and operative language of ritual, theurgy, and higher metaphysical work. The hundred clergy trained for the Ravenwind manifestation formed its first teaching cadre: taught the fundamentals, pushed toward proficiency, and expected to train others in turn. From that nucleus, Shalimite would spread gradually through priesthoods and schools, then military, governmental, and scholarly circles, and eventually into the wider population as a universal second language of ritual, scholarship, diplomacy, government, and interplanetary civilization—the distant Imperial Tongue.

Yet Shalimite was no mere language. Its origins were primal and otherworldly, an echo of the ancient Divine Tongue, the tongue of the first race of the cosmos, and prolonged use subtly affected mind and spirit, body and brain, its sounds and structures gradually awakening capacities of consciousness that normally lay dormant. The effects were cumulative rather than dramatic, unfolding across years and generations. Barely a year into the Imperium, that greater project remained only seed work, but Vincent expected to nurture it across generations.

For the Imperial Church was not meant merely to tell people what to believe. It was meant to train human beings for higher states of existence—strengthening consciousness, ordering the personality, cultivating relationship with the Divine, and preparing mind and spirit for realities beyond the physical body. As with education and community life, the Imperium gathered rather than simply erased: preserving what proved useful, beautiful, and true, reconciling what could be reconciled, and gradually folding humanity's scattered inheritances into something increasingly whole.

Nor was the larger system left entirely to voluntary enthusiasm. Communities retained considerable freedom in how they fulfilled their obligations, but the obligations themselves were real. A village could decide where to place its armory, who taught mathematics, how its gardens were organized, which elders supervised the young, how worship was conducted, or how communal stores were maintained. What it could not decide was that defense, education, preparedness, spiritual formation, or care for its own people belonged entirely to somebody else.

That, ultimately, was the underlying Imperial principle: a civilization of people capable of caring for themselves, one another, and the world they intended to inherit.

Everything in Veyl's vision was homegrown and deliberately local. Every block, village, and town was expected to become as self-reliant, self-sustaining, and self-motivating as circumstances allowed. Communities could form cooperative businesses around whatever skills and resources they actually possessed, with grants or Raven Star credit available for startup costs: arts and crafts, repair shops, IT support, salvage, assembly work, agriculture, food processing, small manufacturing, transportation, childcare, elder care—whatever could turn local ability into local resilience. A town capable of repairing its own equipment, feeding a meaningful portion of its population, caring for its vulnerable,

defending itself in an emergency, and generating some of its own economic activity was far harder to frighten, manipulate, or collapse.

The broader vision had already been laid out in Imperium. By now the book existed in forty languages, making the philosophy considerably easier to spread. Vincent did not have to explain the entire architecture every time he entered another country or addressed another command staff. The framework was already there: sovereignty beginning with the individual, strengthened through household, covey (co-ops), neighborhood, and community, then widening outward into nation and Imperium.

In purely strategic terms, Vincent wanted every community to become a fortress in wartime—not necessarily through walls and permanent fortifications, but through organization, training, stockpiles, shelters, communications, and a population capable of defending its own ground. Any invader would be forced to fight for every road, every block, every village, every cluster of homes. That model also suited Vincent's broader strategic instincts. A society organized primarily for defense could maintain a smaller standing military, spend less on massive expeditionary forces, and place more of its resources into local resilience rather than permanent offensive capacity. The people themselves became part of the defense structure.

To Vincent, that mattered beyond war. A population capable of feeding itself, organizing itself, protecting itself, repairing what broke, caring for its vulnerable, and responding intelligently to crisis was far harder to dominate from either outside or above. Military preparedness became one more school of sovereignty. The object was not merely to make civilians useful to the state, but to make them progressively less helpless before it—or before anyone else. The stronger the household, neighborhood, village, and covey became, the more genuinely sovereign the people within them could become. And the more sovereign its people became, the more indomitable the Imperium itself would be.

The nations under his command did not agree upon what that vision should ultimately become. Some still clung to pluralistic democratic assumptions and tried to fold them into Vincent's Anagogic Imperium as though the two systems might simply be blended together. Others had spent decades beneath collectivist regimes, oligarchies, military governments, or some ugly hybrid of all three. A few aspiring member states in Africa and South and Central America had known little besides corruption, patronage, instability, and periodic despotism. In several of the smaller Asian nations, tribal, clan, and regional loyalties still ran deeper than any abstract allegiance to nation or Imperium.

Getting them onto the same page was daunting.

Each government arrived carrying its own political habits, historical wounds, inherited institutions, and assumptions about authority. Some feared centralization. Others wanted considerably more of it. Some distrusted armed citizens; others barely possessed a functioning national army. Some treated religion as private conscience, others as public identity, and still others as an instrument of state. Vincent was trying to impose coherence upon systems that had not even agreed upon the meaning of freedom, sovereignty, citizenship, or duty.

That, more than any single military or economic problem, was the real difficulty of the Anagogic Imperium. He was not merely aligning governments. He was trying to make one civilization out of many.

Fortunately, Vincent had a gift for languages and an unusual ability to speak both inspirationally and practically. Introducing himself simply as Servant Veyl, he addressed ordinary people directly through radio, video feeds, and large mobile screens, speaking to villages, towns, and neighborhoods in their own tongues and explaining not only what he wanted done, but why. The goals, the reasoning, and the purpose behind the changes mattered. That approach seemed to carry surprisingly far, one small community at a time, expressed increasingly through the rise of local coveys, or Covey Units, voluntary covenants of cooperation built from the ground up.

Financial incentives helped, as did an army of volunteers. The Imperium had created its own answer to the Peace Corps and AmeriCorps, an organization known as the Covenant Builders, whose members fanned out through rural districts and urban neighborhoods to help establish those local networks. They rarely arrived alone, but in pairs: a soldier, the sword, serving not as an occupier but as trainer, bodyguard, and organizer; and a facilitator, the stave, serving as teacher, planner, and problem solver. Tax relief, grants, low-interest loans, tools, and supply drops gave communities practical reasons to participate. Where conditions allowed, small Energy, Water, and Disposal units, with small Trinity Nodes, were installed and placed increasingly under local care, with residents trained to operate and maintain them. Key organizers received earpieces and tiny eye-pins, and Trinity entered the network with them, speaking local dialects, coordinating communications, solving problems, and helping one isolated community connect to the next.

Even in the inner cities of wealthy nations, the same idea was beginning to work at the level of the individual. Covey programs placed inexpensive earpieces and tiny cameras into the hands of young people who needed guidance, training, opportunity, or simply someone dependable at the other end of the connection. Trinity could tutor, translate, troubleshoot, summon help, connect them with mentors, and steer them toward nearby people and resources. Lives were beginning to turn around one person at a time. The principle was simple: make every little community increasingly capable of becoming its own best resource.

The combined effort was producing something Vincent valued far more than decrees issued from a distant capital: genuine grassroots change in how people organized their lives. More pragmatically, it was also allowing ordinary people to know him directly. They listened to him, spoke with him through two-way town halls that often-bypassed local leadership altogether. Name and face became familiarity; familiarity became trust. Servant Veyl was no longer merely an Emperor glimpsed on a screen, but a recognizable presence and, increasingly, a direct partner in their communities.

That relationship was strengthened by the obvious mismatch between Vincent's immense wealth and his remarkably modest personal tastes. Most of what surrounded him belonged to the work, not to his appetites. The aircraft, buildings, laboratories, communications networks, and growing financial machinery looked Imperial in scale, but very little of it existed merely to make Vincent Veyl comfortable.

At the darker end of his efforts, however, operated a far more pragmatic—and frankly insidious—instrument of persuasion: the Elixir of Life. Quietly offered through under-channels, it restored roughly twenty years of apparent age, strengthened health and vitality, and thereafter slowed aging to a fraction of its ordinary pace. But the Blood carried Vincent with it. The bond was biological, psychic, and spiritual, as though some small portion of his greater being took up residence within the recipient, creating an almost familial predisposition toward him and shaving away the faintest edge of independent will.

The lure largely sold itself. Mortality loomed. A leader began to fail; a spouse or child developed some incurable condition; another visibly rejuvenated Imperial appeared on a screen. Then came a whispered suggestion, an idea through an earpiece, a conveniently timed message—and eventually the seeker found Trinity and Miriam, keeper and dealer of the thing desired. No one entered blindly. The terms were stated plainly: allegiance, discretion, service, contribution to the greater work, and often substantial financial support. Raven Star was not cheap, the Imperium was certainly not a charity, and money alone could never purchase the gift. Vows were taken. Parchments signed in blood. A dark contract struck with open eyes.

Nor was the Elixir immortality. Its effects lasted decades, after which the recipient had to return, be judged worthy, swear fealty anew, and receive another measure of the Blood. Each renewal deepened the bond. Another ally joined the Imperium. Another former opponent underwent a surprisingly public change of heart and, with suspicious sincerity, saw the light.

And the darker side of the bargain had already revealed itself more than once. The Blood bent loyalty; it did not abolish choice. Free will remained. A recipient could renege, change allegiance, break covenant, or simply attempt to speak of what had been forbidden. But the Blood remembered its source.

Vincent would be informed by an inner knowing and whisper. He would close his eyes, turn inward, invoke the Names, and find the living cord stretched between himself and the oath-breaker. Then he would take hold of it.

And pull the plug.

What followed could be, and had been, horrific, as everything pushed back immediately surged forward into conditions worse than those that had existed before.

Before Vincent, filling one of the screens, sat a crowded American command room of national-security advisers, generals, senators, members of Congress, and other senior figures drawn from the military, political, and intelligence establishments.

Most were Imperials now, many visibly years younger than their chronological ages should have allowed. President Camela Harrison sat near the center, grave and attentive, one of several people present who had also stood in that cavern in Argentina on October 12th and watched Vincent cease, for a few impossible minutes, to look entirely human.

The man facing them had changed considerably even since then. Vincent's black hair had grown somewhat longer, his body broader and impossibly stronger, his features subtly refined without losing their hawkish severity. He wore the high-collared black and silver of something halfway between mystic, cleric, and soldier, the Imperial emblem fixed at his lapel. He impressed simply by sitting still. For those who had witnessed the Revelation firsthand, the memory of immense raven wings, silver radiance, and the thing that had spoken through Vincent Veyl, remained close enough that even hardened generals occasionally regarded him with a wary sort of awe.

A larger monitor beside the American feed had been divided into separate viewing boxes for the Asian leadership. South Korean President Han Seong-jun occupied the largest, joined by Taiwanese President Kuang-Sheng Lo, Thai President Prasert Vongchai, Laotian President Khampheng

Souvannarat, Cambodian President Sokha Vann, and Philippine President Emilio de la Cruz. Taiwan, Thailand, and Laos were already Imperial member states. Cambodia and the Philippines had not yet crossed that threshold, though both governments were moving steadily in that direction and had become increasingly difficult to separate from Imperial security and economic planning.

Taiwan stood apart even among the committed members. Together with Argentina, it had been one of the first two nations to enter the global movement, and by now it was arguably the most thoroughly Imperial society of them all. Nearly ninety percent of the population identified with the Silver Taoist tradition, while support for the old Natural Order Party vision had become something close to cultural orthodoxy. The transition from N.O.P. identity into the Imperium model had produced a measure of unease, not because Taiwan had cooled toward the project, but because it had been there so early that the older movement had become woven into its national story. They were not resisting Imperium. They were adjusting to the realization that the thing they had helped begin was becoming vastly larger than the political movement that first carried it.

Kuang-Sheng Lo embodied much of that transformation. Kianna Kim's younger half-brother, he had been famous long before entering politics, first as a nationally celebrated mixed-martial-arts fighter and later through business, public service, and government. The fighting years had never entirely left him. Even seated behind a presidential desk, Lo retained the compact, disciplined bearing of a man accustomed to measuring distance, balance, and danger at a glance. He was not merely sympathetic to Vincent's movement, nor simply connected by blood to its spiritual elite. He governed one of its founding nations, a country already deeply shaped by the Silver Way and passionately committed to the Imperial future. And, like most of the leaders present, his allegiance was written plainly in his more youthful appearance.

South Korea remained outside the Imperium, but Han Seong-jun—a distinguished and unusually tall older man, academic, former military commander, and later politician—had drawn steadily closer to Vincent's vision. His party had followed him, gaining popularity as the strategic situation across East Asia deteriorated and the old international order proved increasingly incapable of keeping events contained. Seoul might not yet have joined the Imperium, but its president was already behaving less like an outside observer than a prospective partner.

That made Korea Vincent's problem whether he wanted it or not. The American political situation made it considerably more so. Imperial-aligned politicians now controlled the Executive Branch and Senate and had forced an effective deadlock upon the Supreme Court. American forces stationed along the DMZ therefore answered to a Washington increasingly entangled with Raven Star, while three nearby Imperial states and several prospective members watched North Korea mass troops along the border.

Whatever happened on the peninsula would not remain somebody else's war.

Vincent's cold, dark eyes hardly moved, but his attention shifted constantly, taking in everything at once—the American command room, the Asian leaders, the feeds from Korea and Taiwan, and the Alliance Council occupying yet another screen.

For all the talk of Emperor and Imperium, much of the machinery beneath him still moved according to the older republican model. Yet much of the leadership was bound to him by Blood Oath, and having seen what truly lay behind his human mask tended to give his word considerable weight. They

had known his terms from the beginning. That he was willing to listen, coordinate, argue, weigh advice, and even be persuaded was a grace of temperament, but for now it was also a practical necessity of transition.

The Imperium book left little doubt as to the intended destination, but even Vincent understood that such a transformation could not happen overnight. For the time being, he worked through the structures that already existed, while national governments and senior officials increasingly deferred to him without embarrassment and with little real uncertainty about where their deeper allegiance lay.

At the same time, he was building beneath those structures, advancing the transformation by other means: unit by unit, bank by bank, revised law by adjusted ordinance, block by block, village by village. An empire grown through roots rather than dropped upon the world like a cage.

For the moment, Korea demanded his full attention.

"We have rapid-response units inbound from Japan, Guam, and the Philippines," Defense Secretary Alexander Makris said from the American screen. The big Greek-American—nearly a hundred pounds lighter and looking at least two decades younger than he had a year before—leaned forward over the table, broad hands folded before him. "But it's going to cost us politically, and it may bring us directly into confrontation with China. Frankly, this entire situation is rooted partly in the speed of Imperial expansion. Applications for admission are climbing across Asia, and Beijing and its proxies are beginning to feel hemmed in. Russia and the European powers are looking at much the same thing from opposite directions—a growing gray belt of Imperial and Imperial-interested states forming between them. Africa and South America are becoming speckled with applicants."

There was no accusation in Makris's tone. If anything, the speed of the movement excited most of the people listening. That did not make the friction imaginary. Global government had remained theoretical for generations: the watered-down pluralism of the United Nations, military alliances assembled around particular threats, economic unions whose members still guarded their sovereignty jealously. The Imperium was something different. It possessed a roadmap, a coherent civilizational philosophy, demonstrable technologies, common institutions, a developing military doctrine, and increasingly visible improvements at the community level. It was integrating quickly because people could see where it intended to go.

That frightened the powers outside it.

Sooner or later, some sort of showdown had always been inevitable. The problem was timing. The Imperium was nowhere near ready for a full-scale confrontation with the great powers. Russia, China, and much of Europe had spent decades defining one another as rivals, yet their traditional quarrels were increasingly being complicated by the emergence of something none of them had planned for: a new transnational civilization spreading through the spaces between them. To its supporters it was humanity beginning to organize itself for the stars. To its enemies, it could look disturbingly like another Reich taking shape—ideological, martial, missionary, and increasingly centered upon a single charismatic figure.

The intelligence services understood enough about Vincent Veyl by now to make the problem considerably stranger. Reports once written in the language of anomalous technology, psychological operations, exotic weapons, or cult behavior had been forced to accommodate increasingly

uncomfortable words: incarnation, seraph, extradimensional entity. How precisely did one construct a conventional threat assessment for an angelic being who apparently wished to turn humanity into a stronger, spacefaring species? Opposing him was easy enough when reduced to geopolitics. Explaining why mankind should reject restored health, cheap energy, clean water, expanding prosperity, access to other worlds, and the promise of becoming something greater was considerably harder.

Justin Vyss understood that better than almost anyone. As Vice President, he remained a master salesman for the vision, carrying the political weight of it before reporters, legislatures, foreign governments, and increasingly enormous crowds. A true believer, he painted pictures of what a unified humanity might accomplish—not merely peace treaties and trade agreements, but new cities, restored environments, extended lives, worlds opened beyond Rhea, ordinary people participating in enterprises that once belonged to science fiction. The technologies being introduced gradually across the Gray States gave those promises substance, while the community-level reforms—local preparedness, cooperative enterprise, neighborhood defense, decentralized education, the growing Covey ethic—were becoming popular enough that foreign municipalities had begun asking how they might imitate them.

Yet Vincent himself remained simultaneously the movement's greatest selling point and its greatest liability. Some saw October 12, clips from June 2, the Event of June 8, and fell to their knees. Others saw exactly the same images and became terrified beyond reason. Across the planet, brutal street fights, riots, marches, counter-marches, religious demonstrations, and mass rallies had become almost daily occurrences. Multitudes feared being left outside the future taking shape before them; and other multitudes feared being dragged into it—forced to surrender traditions, cultures, religions, political systems, and eventually the entire familiar architecture of the world they had known. Both fears possessed enough truth to keep the streets burning.

"Trinity has established Chinese involvement beyond reasonable doubt," Kuang-Sheng Lo said. His voice was almost impossibly low, the sound matching the bearing of an ancient warrior somehow deposited inside a modern suit and tie. "China will use the Korean crisis as distraction and, if the Imperium intervenes openly, as justification for action against Taiwan. There are vessels off our coast now—supposed fishing boats, freighters, tankers. We are already aware that several contain troops and military equipment."

Heads nodded across the various screens. None of this was new to those inside the I.A.N. Council or the Asian Partnership, two organizations whose membership and strategic functions were becoming so thoroughly entangled that even their staffs sometimes had difficulty remembering where one ended and the other began.

At the edge of Vincent's vision, another display tracked the old discordant vans still approaching Raven Throne from Utah. Trinity's voice entered his earpiece without interrupting the discussion. "I'm receiving chatter from inside the cabs. I have access through their AM/FM systems, but they are saying very little of value. Their speech is guarded. They may suspect surveillance."

Prepare R(I)SS to meet them at the off-ramp, if here is even their destination, Vincent answered inwardly.

"Already done."

His gaze never left the screens before him.

"There is considerably more I can do from here," Vincent said, addressing the Americans, the Alliance Council, and the Asian leaders simultaneously. His voice remained low and controlled. "Trinity and I have developed cyber-warfare protocols for precisely this kind of situation. I will require authorization before employing them against a sovereign state, and I will require a clearly defined operational limit."

He paused, dark eyes moving from one screen to another.

"But understand the tradeoff. The narrower you draw that line, the less I can do."

President Han Seong-jun spoke then, and for reasons Vincent could not quite explain, his voice had a strangely calming effect upon him. Han spoke with effortless elegance, his words falling into measured cadences that made ordinary speech sound almost like recited verse. There was something of the Taoist master in the way he carried himself—unhurried, composed, never wasting a word.

"If the barrage begins," Han said, "the destruction in the opening minutes will be immense. Their artillery formations and missile batteries are too numerous and too deeply prepared to dismiss. Any direct American or Imperial intervention would, of course, raise the conflict to another level entirely."

Across another screen, members of the Alliance Council conferred with their microphones muted. The Defense Council did the same, leaning toward one another as they weighed possibilities, objections, and consequences. For those who had taken the Blood Oaths, the bond made it nearly impossible to conceal their true thoughts or loyalties from Vincent; their discretion was directed less toward him than toward one another.

Everyone on the conference call was Imperialist and read into the necessary secrets, though not all represented nations that had formally joined the I.A.N. Some spoke for member states or provinces within otherwise non-Imperial countries; others represented powerful Imperial parties and movements operating inside governments that remained officially outside the Alliance. The United States occupied the strangest position of all. Its federal government was not itself a member of the Imperium, yet the current administration increasingly straddled both worlds—one foot planted in the old non-Imperial republic, the other firmly committed to Vincent, his leadership, and the larger project taking shape around him.

"Our forces are not insubstantial," Han continued. "We have prepared for this eventuality for a very long time. But the first assault could still cripple a significant portion of our response capability before we can fully answer it. And if China enters directly, as it did during the previous war..." He allowed the sentence to breathe. "Your own surveillance confirms the build-up along the Manchurian frontier. We are also receiving reports that elements of the Russian Pacific Fleet have moved considerably farther south than their normal patrol areas, perhaps only to observe. Perhaps not."

None of it was new information. Everyone present had seen the same reports, maps, and satellite feeds. Han was not informing them so much as forcing the whole structure of the problem back into view. Korea could not be treated in isolation. Every move touched something larger.

President Harrison spoke next. "What, specifically, can be done, Lord Veyl?" She used his formal title as leader of the Imperium without irony. "Give us a range. Something we can weigh against the political and military cost."

It was the question all of them wanted answered.

Vincent nodded slightly, his expression scarcely changing as calculations moved behind those dark eyes. "At the upper end? Within minutes, Trinity can begin systematically degrading almost everything in North Korea that depends upon modern electronics or networked control—communications, electrical distribution, power plants, satellites, digital command systems, navigation support, cyber infrastructure, modern fire-control, anything dependent upon microprocessors or external data."

Several people around the screens went very still.

They had reason to. Trinity was not merely a cyber-intelligence. She operated through the deeper electromagnetic architecture of the world itself, moving along power grids, signals, circuitry, and microchips as readily as ordinary software moved through networks. Air gaps, hardened systems, and isolated machines offered little real protection; if something depended upon electricity or electronics, she could usually reach it. Since October of 2025, she had been quietly mapping that planetary nervous system—its grids, relays, satellites, command structures, redundancies, and failure points. When Vincent spoke of darkening a nation, he meant something considerably more literal than a cyberattack.

"Where electronics govern the system, Trinity can often seize or deny control altogether. Weapons dependent upon electronic authorization, digital guidance, or computerized command can be rendered useless before their crews understand what has happened. Some can be forced into safe failure; others simply burned dead."

He paused, then added the limitation before anyone mistook what he was describing for omnipotence.

"North Korea is not built like a fully digitized Western military. They don't throw away the old when they acquire the new. They layer one over the other. Cut the network and somebody still has a field telephone. Kill the navigation system and somebody still owns a map. Shut down a modern battery and there may be an older gun ten kilometers away that needs little more than coordinates, powder, steel, and men who know how to use it."

Vincent leaned back slightly.

"I can darken them. Shut down their electrical grids. Burn out cell phones and tablets. Blind much of their surveillance and communications. Leave their nuclear arsenal dead in the silos and upon the launchers. Break their coordination, cripple their modern systems, and reduce their technological capacity far beyond anything a conventional electromagnetic strike could accomplish."

His gaze moved between Harrison, Han, Lo, and the Alliance Council.

"But I cannot hack a gear, a paper map, or a man pulling a mechanical lever. Whatever remains after Trinity is finished will still have to be dealt with the old-fashioned way."

A low rumble of voices moved through the separate chambers—one in Malta, one in Washington, others scattered across Asian capitals. Shock registered everywhere, and beneath it something colder. Horror, perhaps. Vincent had qualified the capability carefully, but what he had just described was still enormous: the strategic effect of a massive first strike without the radiation, fallout, or ruined landscape normally required to achieve it.

"And on the low end?" Camela asked.

Vincent gave the faintest shrug. "There's a doomsday weapon beneath Pyongyang."

The rooms went still.

"Trinity has already mapped it and compromised the control system. Li Jun Un tied final authorization to an encrypted device strapped over his heart. It's monitored continuously."

For several seconds, the silence became almost physical. A pin dropped in any of those rooms might have made half the people present jump. It was difficult enough to comprehend that one man, sitting inside an old hardened building in Nevada, could reach halfway around the world and simply switch off a nation.

He could render the nuclear arsenal the West had worried about for more than a decade dead in the water.

The implications were something else entirely.

Makris finally lifted one hand, gesturing vaguely outward, as though trying to encompass not merely Korea but the entire planet. "Can you... I mean, is this something you can do everywhere?"

Vincent said nothing.

That was answer enough, and the silence that followed carried equal measures of ice and awe. In that moment, the realization dawned, pleasing the members of the Imperium and terrifying those not wholly within its firm lines, that the Emperor possessed a Sword of Damocles none of them had anticipated.

The Romanian president finally broke it. "Emperor Veyl, what do you believe we should do? What should our involvement be?"

Vincent drew a slow breath, though his attention had already divided again. On another feed, the twelve vans remained seventy miles from the Trembol off-ramp.

He muted the microphone.

"Yeah," Vincent murmured, eyes narrowing. "Something's off about this. I feel it."

"Agreed," Trinity answered softly in his ear.

"Alert local law enforcement and military personnel. Suspected hostiles enroute. Harden sensitive sites and notify allied facilities. Could be nothing. Legally, we can't start harassing some little hauling company because I have a bad feeling, but better safe than sorry."

"Already moving."

His eyes and attention returned to the council screens. "My sense is this: if I'm Emperor, I have no intention of entering wars we are not prepared to win completely. I don't want to fight the same wars twice, contest the same ground generation after generation, or spend lives and treasure maintaining stalemates that guarantee nothing but another war later. Waste of blood. Waste of resources. Waste of time."

He leaned slightly toward the screens.

"If we act, we act all at once. Trinity shuts down everything she can reach across North Korea and detonates the Pyongyang doomsday weapon in the same stroke. She does nothing until she can do both simultaneously."

No one interrupted. Several faces changed anyway.

"At the same moment, shut down the suspect vessels off Taiwan. Don't sink them. Don't fire on them. Just let them drift."

Han Seong-jun watched him without blinking. Kuang-Sheng Lo had leaned slightly forward, the old fighter in him plainly awake now.

"The detonation will be seen and felt across the peninsula and beyond. Their leadership disappears in the same instant their modern command, communications, navigation, cyber systems, and much of their electronic war-making capacity begin dying, with their power grid. North Korea is extraordinarily centralized. Sever the head and cripple the nervous system together, and a great deal of the body freezes before it understands what happened."

Vincent's voice remained coldly even.

"Then broadcast on every frequency we can reach, loud speakers along the DMZ. Immediate unconditional surrender. Promise food, medical assistance, humane treatment, and protection to units that stand down. Make it absolutely clear their leadership is gone, the Great Leader is in a smoking hole, and continued resistance accomplishes nothing except getting more people killed."

A few people visibly recoiled from the phrasing. Vincent did not seem to notice.

"If one missile battery or artillery formation opens fire across that line, South Korea and the allied forces answer with everything they have. No half-measures. Whatever survives Trinity will still be dangerous—particularly the older analog systems she cannot simply switch off—but the balance changes violently once the North loses its head and most of its nervous system.

"Your aircraft are better. Your armor is better. Your surveillance, logistics, targeting, and coordination is better. If they choose to continue the war, you go on the offensive and finish it. Indeed, assume

they are continuing the war until they beg you not to." He paused. "Do not stop because they look beaten. Stop when they tell you they are beaten. Make them cry uncle first."

His gaze shifted toward the Asian leaders.

"China is the larger problem. If Chinese forces move south into the conflict, Trinity extends the shutdown to whatever crosses into the theater. Think of it as an electronic fence. Communications disappear. Navigation disappears. Radar, computerized command, guidance, modern fire-control—anything dependent upon electronics becomes dead weight. Some systems will simply stop. Others will fail considerably less politely.

"If they keep pushing…" Vincent paused. "We widen the circle of darkness west and north."

He let that settle before looking toward the Russian ships on the map.

"And if Moscow decides it wants a taste, the same principle applies. Its fleet can wind up drifting at sea just as easily."

There was no bravado in his voice. That made it worse. He was discussing a first strike with the casual precision of a man describing routine maintenance, while revealing capabilities far beyond anything they had previously suspected him capable of—abilities beyond even the combined military forces of the Imperium. More unsettling still was the strategic and tactical freedom those capabilities afforded him, a latitude that not even the United States possessed.

"The purpose is to keep this Korean. Decapitate the regime. Cripple its ability to coordinate resistance. Demand surrender immediately. Destroy whatever continues fighting, and make Beijing and Moscow understand that entering the war means crossing a line where their technological advantage becomes a liability."

Vincent sat back slightly, his dark eyes moving once more across the separate screens. "If it works, reunification begins before anybody has time to turn Korea into the opening battlefield of a world war. And then it's over. We don't have to keep dealing with this every year or two, whenever Pyongyang gets a wild hair up its backside."

Camela laughed outright, though there was no humor in it. "That's your low end?"

Vincent shrugged. "Well, combinations thereof. Trinity could short the doomsday device and make the thing strapped to his chest burn his left nipple. Ow." The joke earned a few startled looks and even a little laughter. His expression remained almost perfectly serious. "Or we simply throw the kill switch and cripple everything we can reach without touching the leadership. That gives the South a significant advantage, but it still leaves a hard fight to clear the field. A lot of artillery survives. A lot of old equipment survives. Men with maps, field telephones, mechanical weapons, and standing orders survive. By the time you fight your way north, you're looking at considerably more destruction and a hell of a lot more dead on both sides."

He leaned back slightly, eyes moving between the screens.

"And eventually you reach Pyongyang."

Camela's expression sobered.

Vincent gave another small shrug. "At which point Li Jun Un detonates the damned thing himself anyway."

That silenced the room again.

"So, the problem isn't whether the doomsday weapon exists," Vincent continued. "It's whether we choose when it goes off—or let him choose after half the peninsula has already bled for it."

That sharpened expressions across Washington, Malta, and the Asian Pacific.

Vincent muted the conference microphones for a moment.

Trin, begin mobilizing humanitarian response for Korea. If this goes the way it looks like it's going, I want teams ready to move the moment the fighting breaks open—meals ready to eat, deployable shelters, communications, generators, medical stations, clean water, food drops. Full corporate and Imperial branding. No ambiguity about who showed up.

Trinity laughed softly inside him. Ever the pragmatic spear-point.

The faintest smile touched Vincent's mouth.

Hit hard. Feed harder.

Then he opened the microphones again.

For several moments nobody spoke. The separate chambers came alive almost simultaneously: Alliance Council members in Malta conferring behind muted microphones; generals, senators, cabinet officers, and intelligence advisers leaning toward one another in Washington; presidents and ministers across the Asian feeds drawing aides closer to their screens. Vincent waited. He had given them the weapon. He would not give them the decision.

Camela finally looked directly toward him. "Before we vote, I want one thing clarified. You can disable the Pyongyang device?"

"Yes."

"Completely?"

"I can seize the electronic control structure. His chest trigger becomes useless. Trinity can keep the weapon from responding to him."

A strange silence followed.

Camela stared at him. "You rather glossed over that part."

"You asked what I could do offensively."

Makris barked a humorless laugh. "Jesus Christ."

Vincent shrugged, repeating the joke because, in his opinion, it remained a perfectly valid option. "Or I can short the heart unit and burn his nipple."

That earned exactly one startled snort from somewhere in Washington.

"Ow," Vincent added.

Camela rubbed her forehead. "Thank you, Lord Veyl."

President Han Seong-jun had remained silent throughout the exchange. Now he leaned slightly toward his camera, the movement almost graceful. "Then there are, in truth, four choices. We may do nothing. We may disable only the weapon of last resort. We may cripple the northern electronic structure and leave its government alive. Or we may sever both head and nervous system together." He paused. "And there is the fifth choice President Harrison has implied: wait for the North to fire first, then answer."

Makris nodded. "Politically, that is the cleanest."

Han's expression did not change.

"Politically."

The single word landed harder than an argument.

"The first shells do not fall upon Washington, nor Malta, nor Nevada. They fall upon my country. For seventy years we have lived beneath those guns. We have prepared shelters, hardened positions, counter-battery systems, evacuation plans. Yet preparation does not make artillery harmless. If we knowingly possess the means to prevent the first great barrage and instead permit it so that history will judge our response more favorably..." Han's eyes lowered briefly. "Then the dead will have purchased our moral cleanliness. I will not purchase it with them."

Kuang-Sheng Lo nodded once, slowly. "I agree. The opponent has already mobilized. Chinese forces are positioning against my own country while this occurs. Waiting for the first blow merely surrenders initiative so that afterward we may congratulate ourselves for having been struck."

One of the American senators objected. "You are talking about detonating a nuclear device beneath a capital city."

"I am," Lo replied without heat. "And I do not enjoy saying it."

Camela turned toward Makris. "Alexander?"

The Defense Secretary took several seconds before answering. "Militarily? Veyl's full option gives us the best chance of collapsing resistance before it organizes. Politically and strategically, detonating that device ourselves is the point of no return. Once that becomes known, every government on the planet recalculates what the Imperium is."

"They're going to recalculate anyway," Vincent said quietly.

Makris looked at him. "You're not wrong."

"I know."

Romanian President Gabriel Dumitrescu spoke up then from Malta: "I favor disabling the doomsday device and executing the electronic strike, but leaving Pyongyang intact unless the North fires first. Black them out completely. Neutralize their nuclear capability. Cripple power and communications. At that point, they may simply collapse inward and regroup. If we keep them dark long enough, recovery could take years."

Several Council members nodded. Another objected almost immediately. "Then the leadership remains alive to reorganize whatever survives."

"And millions remain alive in the capital."

"Perhaps."

That word chilled the room.

Vincent saw the wisdom in Dumitrescu's position, but if he was honest with himself, he wanted the fight. Not for the sake of war. He wanted the matter settled beyond argument—and the world given its first unmistakable lesson in what Imperial intervention meant.

"If given the choice, I will always choose no more stalemates. No more frozen wars. No more paying interest on conflicts nobody had the nerve to finish. Don't involve the Imperium in this sort of gamesmanship. That is the old way—endless maneuver, endless compromise, endless recurrence. Humanity has been walking in that circle long enough."

The debate continued for nearly twenty minutes. Vincent scarcely participated. He answered technical questions when asked, clarified what Trinity could and could not guarantee, and otherwise remained still, occasionally glancing toward the Raven Throne security feeds while governments argued over war. Three camps gradually hardened. A significant bloc favored the partial strike: seize the doomsday weapon, cripple North Korea's electronic infrastructure, leave the leadership alive, and demand an immediate stand-down. Another bloc, particularly among the Americans, preferred to wait for overt North Korean fire, believing the diplomatic legitimacy of responding to an unmistakable attack outweighed the military cost. The smallest bloc at first favored Vincent's full decapitation.

The vans had pulled into a rest area beneath the lowering storm, but no one got out at first. Several remained parked while the other seven rolled back onto the highway and continued west twenty minutes later.

He watched the security feed as the lead vehicles approached the Raven Throne off-ramp, forty miles out and closing, the Predator drone shadowing them from above. Another camera, mounted near the rest area, showed movement around the five vans left behind. Rear doors opened. Ramps came down. Compact vehicles were being unloaded from inside.

Men in black combat gear and rain ponchos stepped out carrying packs and long weapons, mounted what appeared to be six-wheeled ATVs, and disappeared into the darkness east of town, into a maze of well-maintained, well-established trails by which Trembol could be reached rapidly.

They were not stranded.

They were deploying.

Vincent's attention shifted toward the feed without his eyes seeming to move. The scenario opened in his mind almost whole—not as a chain of reasoning so much as a sudden, cold certainty.

Lead vehicle is probably packed with explosives. They'll try to ram the barricade and detonate. Likely have eyes in town already.

Trinity was already inside the thought before he finished forming it, her awareness moving with his and carrying the warning outward toward the officers holding the roadblock.

Hold the barricade. Do not advance to meet them. Clear unnecessary personnel from the approach and keep the highway watched. If the lead vehicle attempts to breach the cordon, treat the convoy as hostile. Authorize the Predator strike the instant that lead vehicle commits, Vincent sent. Tell our people to get their heads down. This is going to be messy. Have the drone anticipate a sudden acceleration. Send an automated imminent-attack warning to Motel 12 and the surrounding businesses—duck and cover, stay away from the windows, get low and behind something solid.

There was no verbal answer at first, only the familiar pressure of her presence folding around his own—recognition, agreement, action. Then, softly within him:

Already moving son. Not everyone is picking up at the motel. I'll keep trying every room and any cellphones or landlines in the area in and around the ramp. Sending officers door to door as we speak.

Trinity still had no way to confirm what he was sensing. The fiery red crusader crosses worn by the fighters who had deployed from the rest stop identified them as Evangelizers of the Order of Holy Fire, but whoever had planned the operation had deliberately gone low-tech. There were few signals to intercept, little useful chatter, nothing she could penetrate deeply enough to prove or disprove Vincent's conclusion. But she knew the shape of his instincts by now, and something in her agreed with him strongly.

"We've got a growing situation here," Vincent said, his attention returning fully to the conference. "Raven Throne is apparently under attack, so I'm going to need an answer from you fairly soon."

Josh nodded once and moved immediately, leaving the office for the elevator and taking it down toward the basement command level.

Across the various conference rooms around the world, surprise rippled outward in half a dozen languages.

"Are you safe, Lord Veyl?" Camela Harrison asked, genuine concern sharpening her voice.

"What's the nature of the attack?" Justin asked, echoing the question already forming in several rooms.

Vincent shrugged. "Religious zealots—Terrorists Inbound. Nothing we can't handle."

Again, the casualness of the answer was almost more unsettling than the news itself. Even as he spoke, officers and military units were being ordered toward Raven Throne from multiple jurisdictions. His manner, however, kept the conference from breaking apart into panic, and within moments the discussion resumed.

It was Han Seong-jun who spoke now.

"I request that my vote be recorded first."

The conversations stopped.

Han straightened. "The Republic of Korea authorizes the complete strike. Electronic suppression. Destruction of the northern command structure. Detonation of the Pyongyang contingency weapon. Immediate surrender broadcasts. Immediate humanitarian entry behind our armed forces." He drew a breath. "My people will bear the first consequence if this fails. Therefore, I will not ask another nation to accept responsibility I refuse myself."

Kuang-Sheng Lo followed almost immediately. "Taiwan votes the same."

Thailand followed, then Laos. Romania remained opposed. Cambodia abstained. The Philippines, after a hurried consultation between its president and defense officials, supported the strike. The Alliance Council tally climbed slowly across Vincent's screen.

Washington remained.

Camela looked down at the table before her. Around her, Makris, Vyss, the generals, senators, intelligence officers, and national-security advisers waited. "This is going into the historical record," she said.

"It should."

Her eyes snapped toward him. "No executive privilege?"

"No."

"No sealed Imperial decree?"

"No."

"You want everyone to know who voted for this?"

Vincent met her gaze. "I want everyone who makes the decision to own it."

That silenced the room.

Camela looked toward Han. The Korean president met her eyes across half a planet. Finally, she nodded. "The United States concurs."

Makris closed his eyes briefly. The tally changed.

A clear majority. Not unanimous, but enough.

"Record the minority objections with equal prominence," Vincent instructed the Alliance Council. One of the Maltese clerks nodded. Vincent looked next to Han. "President Seong-jun, I need you to say it plainly. No ceremonial language."

Han understood immediately.

"Execute the full decapitation plan."

Vincent remained motionless for several seconds, then looked toward Camela.

She nodded once. "Do it."

Kuang-Sheng Lo nodded as well. "End it."

Vincent closed his eyes briefly. When they opened again, there was no triumph in them. "Trinity."

"I have the authorizations."

"Re-cord everything."

"Already recorded."

Vincent drew a breath. "Then prepare."

The screens remained silent. No siren sounded, no cinematic countdown began. Somehow the absence of ceremony made the decision heavier.

"Ready," Trinity said.

Vincent considered the tactical displays for another moment. "Count it down. One hour from now. Positioning, timing—everything happens together. Execute immediately if Pyongyang moves toward a definite preemptive strike."

That qualification changed the atmosphere more than the delay itself. Several military officers nodded immediately. The full decapitation plan had been authorized, but Vincent was deliberately giving the forces in theater one final hour to position themselves, harden vulnerable sites, prepare humanitarian corridors, synchronize aircraft, ships, missile defenses, and counter-battery formations. It was not hesitation. It was preparation.

Han Seong-jun grasped the distinction immediately. "That is acceptable. If they begin the stroke, we do not wait for the hand to fall."

"Exactly."

Makris gave a slow nod. "Scheduled execution at H-hour unless hostile action makes the schedule irrelevant." He glanced toward Camela. "Cleaner rules of engagement. I can live with that."

Camela remained less comfortable. "And Trinity determines when the threshold for preemption has been reached?"

"She identifies it," Vincent replied. "If there's time for human confirmation, we confirm. If missiles are actually entering launch sequence, there may not be time for another committee meeting."

"Congress will need to be officially informed by secure communiqué," Makris said, already whispering to an aide, who was sent from the room. The old Korean War had never formally ended, but nobody in Washington intended to pretend that a seventy-four-year-old armistice amounted to a blank check. Congress would be informed; the imminent attack would supply the immediate justification.

Grim expressions settled across Washington and Malta, but no serious objection followed. They had already authorized the strike. The caveat merely acknowledged that authorization meant nothing if North Korea could exploit the final hour to beat them to it.

Kuang-Sheng Lo leaned back slightly. "Then the hour is preparation, not permission."

Vincent gave him a small nod.

That settled it. The qualification was entered formally into the record: execution scheduled one hour hence; immediate execution authorized upon confirmed initiation of a North Korean preemptive attack.

Han read the wording on his screen and looked back toward Vincent. "Good. We have waited seventy years beneath those guns. We need not spend the final hour pretending they are not loaded."

Vincent glanced once more toward the Taiwan feed, then toward Han. There was one other matter he had already settled in his own mind.

"I'll want to go in with the first Raven Star humanitarian deployment," he said. "Get the initial teams moving and route the insertion planning through Captain Hyde. If China moves on Taiwan, I'll want to be there for that as well. Register the flight plan and keep both theaters open. Have a C-130 out of Crow Creek ready to launch the moment we know where the front is."

Several people looked at him.

Vincent seemed not to notice anything unusual in what he had just said. "I'll be landing in Taiwan by late-afternoon your time, with the Praetorian. From there, Seoul or points north, depending on how this breaks."

Makris stared at him. "You mean personally?"

"Yes."

The Defense Secretary leaned back and rubbed one hand slowly across his mouth. "You understand that if this goes hot, Taiwan may be taking Chinese missile fire while Korea is still actively contested."

"I understand."

"And you're the head of the Imperial Alliance."

"I'm aware of that too."

Camela let out a short breath through her nose, halfway between disbelief and exasperation. "Vincent, there are certain advantages to having the Emperor remain alive."

A few people smiled despite themselves.

"So, I've been told."

Han Seong-jun did not smile. Something in the older man's expression had changed, however. Vincent was not merely offering South Korea weapons, intelligence, technology, or an alliance. He was telling them that if war came, he intended to enter it himself; and if the guns fell silent, he intended to remain for what followed.

"You would cross into the North with the first relief columns?" Han asked.

"If they'll have me."

Han regarded him for a long moment. The answer seemed to stir something deep beneath the president's habitual calm. Vincent Veyl—the strange young ruler many now believed to be an angel embodied—was proposing to come personally into the war and then remain for the peace: the wounded, the displaced, the ruined villages, the broken roads, the wells and power lines that would need rebuilding when the guns stopped.

"They will have you," Han said quietly.

Kuang-Sheng Lo gave a low grunt of approval. "Good."

One of the American generals looked considerably less impressed. "Sir, with respect, there's leadership and then there's putting the strategic center of the entire Alliance inside artillery range."

Vincent looked at him. "General, I spent most of my adult life inside somebody's artillery range."

"That was before you became Emperor."

"That doesn't make the rounds travel slower."

A murmur moved through the Washington chamber.

Vincent leaned slightly toward the cameras. "Understand this now, because I don't want the argument every time a war starts. My reign will not be conducted from behind a desk while other people bleed

for decisions I helped make. If there is a front, I may be on it. If there is a village without water when the shooting stops, I may be digging the damned well."

The rooms quieted.

"I will put my throne on the thresholds."

For Han Seong-jun, the words landed with almost physical force. Korea itself had existed upon a threshold for generations—North and South, peace and war, old world and whatever world now struggled to be born. Yet Vincent spoke of the threshold not as someplace he would send others to hold for him, but as the place where his own throne belonged.

There was something almost embarrassingly ancient in it. Not a president insulated behind security and command structures, nor a ceremonial sovereign visiting afterward for photographs. A warrior king who intended to ride with his soldiers, carry the sword during the war, and take up the shovel when the war was done.

Han lowered his eyes briefly, then gave Vincent a slow, formal nod.

Then the Raven Throne feeds changed.

Six of the vans accelerated hard along the interstate, engines wound far beyond anything stock. Only one swept onto the exit toward Raven Throne, going full bore down the ramp. Red and blue lights erupted across Vincent's screen as armored vehicles sealed the access road and law-enforcement, militia, and Raven Star personnel dropped behind the concrete barricades.

The Predator came in low from north to south.

Two rockets punched through the van's front end.

The explosion struck three miles from Raven Star, but even through the hardened, sound-baffled walls a deep concussion rolled through the structure that might've been nearby thunder. Across Trembol, the night sky flared white-orange. Windows cracked for a mile in every direction as whatever had been packed inside the van went up with the impact. At Motel 12, the east-facing wall seemed to bow inward and every window along the block shattered at once.

The other six vans veered off-road just west of the Superstore and began disgorging men and equipment almost immediately. The drone banked toward them next. Farther east, infrared showed the combat teams from the rest stop disappearing into the hills and darkness.

The council scarcely seemed aware of how quickly Vincent's own battlefield was unfolding.

His heart was already in it.

He wanted to be out there.

Vincent pushed back from his desk.

"And I'm out. Raven Throne is being hit and I need to deal with it."

The announcement drew a sharper reaction than Vincent expected. Heads turned throughout the Washington chamber. Camela's expression tightened, and Makris immediately ordered the Raven Throne security feed thrown onto the American displays. Han Seong-jun went visibly still, while Kuang-Sheng Lo's eyes narrowed, the old fighter in him surfacing almost at once.

The armored vehicles and concrete barricades had saved lives, but the surrounding area had taken damage. Fires burned near the off-ramp and along the frontage road, first responders already moving in behind cover to contain them. Calling Raven Throne under attack now seemed almost absurdly understated. Additional drone feeds showed several dozen armed militants spreading through the outskirts in organized groups, popping anti-infrared smoke and deploying some kind of counter-surveillance equipment that partially muddied their thermal signatures. Whatever had begun as a convoy threat was opening into a coordinated ground attack.

"You are actually under full assault, by the look of it," Camela said, the truth of the situation registering at once. Genuine alarm entered her face as the feeds widened to show armed groups spreading through the outskirts beneath smoke and counter-surveillance cover.

"Looks that way."

Makris watched the armored blockade locking down the approaches. "That changes your travel plans."

Vincent gave him a look.

Makris sighed. "Of course it doesn't."

A few grim smiles appeared despite the tension.

Han regarded him with greater seriousness. "Then defend your own threshold first. Korea will still be here when you are finished."

"That's the idea."

The Alliance Council had already begun pulling Raven Throne's security feeds onto its own displays. The images stripped away whatever abstraction remained in the meeting: armored vehicles sealing the off-ramp, militia moving into position, armed fanatics disappearing into the storm-dark countryside west of town, others lost to storm and night beneath cloaks that masked their signatures as they approached from the east.

The Emperor they had just authorized to overturn the strategic balance of the Korean Peninsula was now preparing to leave the conference and personally confront an armed assault on his own city.

It was not lost on those watching when Vincent rose, reached behind his desk, and took up rifle and sword with the same absent familiarity another statesman might have shown gathering papers before leaving a meeting. Whatever else the world had made of him, there had been nothing quite like this in a very long time.

Camela stared openly. Several of the American generals exchanged glances. Han's earlier reaction deepened into something like awe. Vincent had just told them that if Korea burned, he would come with the soldiers and relief columns. If Taiwan were attacked, he would go there instead. Now violence had arrived at his own doorstep, and he was responding in precisely the manner he had promised.

Not sending others.

Going himself.

The principle required no theology. A ruler who ordered others toward the threshold went there with them.

Nor was the larger political meaning lost on the men and women still seated before their screens. For all the unease surrounding Vincent's ascent, they had just experienced something international politics almost never achieved: leaders from nations separated by oceans, histories, religions, interests, and rival political traditions had been drawn into one decision, one timetable, one field of action. Vincent had not erased their sovereignty; indeed, he had refused to make the decision for them. Yet once they chose, there existed a single authority to whom they could turn and say: Do it.

That coordination was nearly as unsettling as the power behind it.

Vincent slung the LAR-8, settled the sword at his side, and glanced once more toward the security feed.

A clock appeared quietly across the secured conference displays.

59:59

Across the Pacific theater, orders began moving almost immediately. Aircraft crews were recalled. Fuel trucks rolled. Missile batteries came awake. Ships altered course. Command posts filled. South Korean, American, Taiwanese, and Imperial forces shifted rapidly but quietly toward a war footing on a scale the world had not seen since the great wars of the previous century.

At Raven Throne, armored vehicles closed the road while dark figures moved through the hills.

Half a world away, millions slept beneath the guns of Korea.

Vincent turned from the screens and walked out to meet the battle at his own threshold. The countdown continued.

(8:33 PM, May 31, 2027—The Warlord)



Vincent had rarely geared up so quickly. In the private apartment he pulled on the last of his armor, jaw tightening as the grim helmet settled over his head, then strode back into the Executive Office. He stopped before the polished black inner surface of the double doors leading into the fourth-floor hall, their heavy frame engraved with ancient script.

Trinity, you have command of the building, he sent, the thought sharp and immediate. Then, with considerably more force: Keep my wife safe.

He almost felt her nod through the bond. Something else came with it—a strange pluck of fear, faint but unmistakable, vibrating for an instant through that intimate Mama-son connection before vanishing beneath everything else demanding his attention. Vincent frowned, but there was no time to probe. Miriam was downstairs with the women. Trinity controlled the building. He trusted them both completely.

He turned his attention to the doors.

Drawing mind, heart, and will into a single point, Vincent reached for the thing beneath appearances—the fabric of space, consciousness, and separation itself—and seized it. He twisted.

The black surface of the doors rippled.

Since the eruption of his innermost form in October, mastery of thresholds had been awakening within him by degrees: first instinct, then accident, then something approaching deliberate art. A single point of silver-black brilliance appeared where the two leaves met, impossibly intense but no larger than the head of a pin. It widened in concentric ripples until hinges, handles, seams, even the division between the doors themselves vanished beneath a uniform surface like black liquid glass.

An image formed within it.

The security feeds and Trinity's awareness supplied one layer of perception while Vincent's own inner sight supplied another. The attackers from the east were moving west along DeSatto Ridge through rain and darkness, advancing in disciplined groups toward NNN. Watchers at St. Aftiel's had spotted them passing westward from the convent side and called it in; the old fortress was locked down now, every priestess armed and ready. Far to the northwest, a Crow Creek armored column was already moving south, but it remained nearly twenty miles from the road the militants had crossed. There was no reason to believe the attackers even knew it was coming.

They were heavily equipped and professionally disciplined. Their countermeasures—hooded ponchos fashioned from something resembling Mylar or multispectral camouflage netting—reduced them to intermittent smears across infrared and thermal feeds. They appeared briefly between rocks and folds of terrain, then faded again beneath rain, smoke, and whatever additional technology they carried. Whatever else these people were, they were not amateurs.

Vincent narrowed his focus.

The liquid image sharpened.

NNN stood on the same long ridge, west and somewhat south of the point he intended to enter, perhaps two hundred yards away. From where Vincent would emerge, the station would sit off to his left across the broken crown of DeSatto Ridge, its exterior lights deliberately dimmed beneath the storm. Only two guards were immediately visible outside. The building itself was hardened—nearly a bunker by civilian standards—but explosives and a determined assault team could still breach it.

Their objective seemed obvious enough.

Take Neutral News Network. Seize the most recognizable broadcast platform in Raven Throne. Attempt to issue a general call for uprising, holy war, revolt—whatever language the Order of Holy Fire intended to wrap around it.

The plan was audacious.

It was also damned foolish.

This was Raven Throne and it was Nevada, hardened Imperial territory, saturated with Raven Star security, militia, Silver clergy, surveillance, armed loyalists, and institutions already conditioned toward precisely this kind of emergency. Even if the militants somehow seized the station, they would be trying to ignite an anti-Imperial uprising in one of the least receptive places on the continent.

Trying to use NNN itself was more foolish still.

With Trinity embedded throughout the network, they could no more seize its broadcast system than they could command the weather.

Vincent took one long stride forward and passed through the threshold.

Rain and wind struck him at once.

The warmth and muted quiet of Raven Star vanished behind him, replaced by cold water hammering against helmet and armor. Storm clouds raced overhead, thunder rolling along DeSatto Ridge while lightning flickered through them in pale, violent veins, as though another battle were taking place above the one already beginning across Trembol. The weather swallowed some of the sharper sounds below, but not all. Gunfire crackled intermittently to the south around the highway approaches and farther west near the city.

He stood on the eastern portion of DeSatto Ridge, northeast of the station itself.

NNN lay off to his left along the same rocky spine, its dimmed structure intermittently revealed by lightning. Raven Throne spread southward beneath the ridge in broken fields of wet streetlight and emergency red-blue flashes. Behind Vincent, the ground fell sharply away from the ridge lip into broken rock, scrub, and steep descent. Beside him stood the old yucca, twisted by decades of wind, its long, wet blades whipping and rattling in the gusts.

Trinity marked the advancing fighters across his helmet display as skeletal figures, reconstructing their positions from ultra-low-light imagery, drone observation, and fleeting thermal and infrared signatures exposed as the cloaking ponchos shifted with movement. The combined feeds gave her enough data to triangulate each man's position and project it onto his lenses.

A hundred yards.

Closing from the east.

They came on six-wheeled ATVs draped in camouflage much like their own, several men to each vehicle, their night vision still failing to pick up his position.

Vincent moved at once, dropping behind the old yucca and a cluster of boulders near the ridge lip. The rocks formed a shallow natural fighting position with the descent immediately behind him—good cover, a narrow profile, and no easy way for the approaching unit to come around his rear but afoot, and without exposing itself badly. He placed two grenades within reach and settled the rifle against its support.

His heart slowed rather than raced. His breathing became deep and deliberate as the old battlefield serenity settled over him with almost obscene familiarity. Noise separated into useful and useless things. Fear compressed into attention. Korea, China, the conference, the Imperium, the fighting in the hills over the Vale—all of it withdrew until the world became distance, angle, stone, rain, movement.

The militants were approaching along the ridge from the east, headlights off. If they continued toward NNN, their path would carry them across his front and then past him toward the station. They were coming almost level, weaving through the same boulder-strewn ridge terrain he occupied.

That suited him perfectly.

He could let them pass, allow the formation to stretch westward toward the station, then strike from behind and slightly to the flank.

Vincent smiled faintly beneath the helmet.

These were not frightened zealots thrown together for a suicidal raid. Their spacing, movement, equipment, discipline, and use of counter-surveillance said otherwise. Veterans, probably to a man, and holy warriors besides—devoted to a path that gave them permission to kill and enough certainty to die without fear.

Vincent understood that kind of man.

He also understood the danger almost no conventional commander would have considered.

They served Valorus.

He served Purgatoria.

The two realms did not see eye to eye. In the older metaphysical conflicts, what constituted blessing to one current could become something very close to poison against the other. Consecrated ammunition, sanctified weapons, ritual protections—things ordinary soldiers might dismiss as religious theater—could matter against him in ways conventional ballistics did not explain.

That should have frightened him.

Instead, it sharpened him.

This was the oldest war, endlessly repeated across the intermediary planes—astral, etheric, Aethyric, and stranger reaches beyond them—where spiritual and metaphysical legions of differing rays contested one another through powers, doctrines, civilizations, and souls. The same struggle spilled downward into material worlds like Rhea, into governments and religions, armies and movements, households and individual lives. Strip away the banners and theology and it always returned to the same ground.

The hearts and minds of mortals.

Strangely, Vincent was almost giddy.

For once, something approaching a fair fight.

Trinity's data feed, analysis of bodies already being viewed elsewhere, informed him of what he was dealing with. Their equipment was first-rate, but well-worn rather than pristine: armor polished by use, straps fitted exactly where hands expected them, weapons carried with the unconscious economy of men who had trained with them for years. Nothing about the formation suggested parade-ground soldiers or religious amateurs playing war. They had done this before.

Good.

It felt damned good to wear the Executioner's garb again. Over the preceding months its severe black design had become the model for much of the developing Raven Guard, though his own remained unmistakably personal.

His sword rode across his back toward the right shoulder for a left-handed draw, familiar weight resting against armor and spine. In his hands lay the AR-10 he trusted almost as much as the blade. He had considered the lighter AR-15, but preferred the harder-hitting.308. It gave him reach across the open country, and he was strong enough that its weight and recoil cost him little even when the fighting closed in. He settled behind the weapon and watched the dark figures advance through the rain. A hundred yards became ninety. Vincent breathed out slowly, then did something deliberately foolish: he keyed his microphone onto an open tactical channel.

"Psychopomp One in play. Holding defensive position on NNN."

The reaction came almost immediately. Through gaps between the boulders Vincent caught several heads rise. The unit paused, its attention shifting toward the station and the surrounding ridge. One man actually shook his head, as though remarking upon the stupidity of a target announcing himself across an unsecured frequency.

"Ten-four, Psychopomp One. Good to have you in the fight, sir," came a reply through Vincent's protected inner com. Trinity was already explaining the deception over secure channels to Raven Star personnel.

The gunfire farther west began to diminish.

There.

Vincent felt the faintest smile return. They were redirecting. NNN might have been the tactical objective, but he was the prize.

The militants adjusted their movement and began angling toward the position his transmission had suggested, cautious now but unmistakably drawn by the prospect of Vincent Veyl himself sitting exposed somewhere along the ridge. They believed he had made a mistake.

Vincent was not above treachery.

He remained low among the rocks and let them come.

The first men passed his position without seeing him, driving carefully through the broken stone, navigating with infrared goggles on their helmets. One vehicle, then another, the next, and the last. Vincent waited until the formation had moved beyond him, perhaps twenty-five yards westward toward the station, their attention still searching ahead rather than behind.

Only then did he rise.

The first grenade left his hand in a smooth arc.

The second followed almost immediately.

Metal struck rock.

For one frozen instant the unit understood.

Vincent could have sworn he heard someone curse.

The ridge erupted.

The first explosion ripped through the second vehicle from the rear, throwing men hard into stone. The second detonated among those at the rear. Four, perhaps, died immediately, two vehicles damaged beyond easy repair. The shrapnel sent another half-dozen down screaming, peppered by fragments, suddenly transformed from fighting men into wounded burdens that the survivors could neither easily abandon nor safely tend.

Vincent was already behind the rifle.

The AR-10 hammered through the storm, its flat, brutal report rolling across Raven Throne. He fired into the confusion before the formation could reorganize, sending round after round through exposed figures scrambling for cover. One man spun down. Another folded behind a boulder. A third vanished backward into the rocks. A fourth collapsed while trying to drag one of the wounded clear.

The advantage lasted only seconds.

Now they knew exactly where he was.

Return fire snapped across the ridge, rounds cracking overhead and smacking stone around his position. Chips of rock stung his armor. Vincent dropped behind cover as grenades began coming back toward him.

Pings.

More than one.

"Shit."

He launched himself headlong toward a lower apron of broken stone just off his previous position. His shoulder struck one rock hard enough to flash white across his vision, his hip smashing another as he slid and half-rolled into the shallow nook.

The grenades detonated behind him almost as they struck.

The old position disappeared beneath fire, pulverized stone, and dirt. The concussions hammered the ridge in rapid succession, driving fragments over him in a vicious rain. Vincent tucked tight against the rocks, helmet down, one arm shielding his face while debris rattled against his armor and ricocheted into the darkness.

The impact with the ground had hurt like hell, and something hot had bitten into his neck and right forearm. He ignored it. He rotated his shoulder and both heard and felt it shift back into place with agonizing clarity. For the moment, the rock cut him out of their line of sight.

For the moment.

What he heard next disturbed him, but it also earned his respect. Single shots cracked through the rain, spaced apart and deliberate, and after each one another wounded voice vanished. The moans, the cries, the men calling to one another simply ceased, one by one, until the ridge grew quieter.

Yeah, Vincent thought. I'd want that.

He glanced toward the heavy-duty observation drone hovering almost silently against the storm-black sky, then checked his watch. They were closing. He knew they would work in from both his left and right, feeling their way toward him through darkness, rain, and broken stone. The terrain still favored him, but only barely. They knew where he had been; they did not know precisely where he was now.

"Jeezum –"

The sting in his neck finally announced itself. Vincent reached up and his black tactical glove came away slick with blood. More than a little. The armor had stopped most of whatever struck him, but a fragment had driven through deeply enough that he could feel the end of it lodged dangerously near the artery. The sensation was wrong. It was not merely hot metal cooling in flesh. The damned thing seemed to buzz like an angry bee, vibrating with something almost purposeful, as though whatever had been sanctified into it wanted to bore deeper.

Dizziness rolled through him. Realizing the blessing of their weapons was both real and effective.

"AIL, Abraxas, Zurvan, Raza Rabba, IAO, Yahweh Sabaoth, El Shaddai," he whispered, invoking names through which Purgatorians approached the Highest, reaching through them toward the divine source beyond every name. He drew in the influx with a slow breath, found the fragment with his fingers, and pulled.

Pain flashed white through his neck. The metal came free and blood flowed warm beneath his collar, but the hateful buzzing went with it. Finding only a piece of rock embedded through one link of his forearm armor. Vincent almost smiled as he stared at the smear of red across his glove, until stone shifted somewhere above and to either side.

They were coming.

He started to rise.

The agony struck like a line of buses hitting him one after another.

Vincent staggered backward, smashed into the rock behind him, and slid onto his knees as something far greater than pain drove through his skull, causing him to yank his helmet off, and let out a roaring cry of agony. A soul entered him. Another followed on its heels before he could comprehend the first,

then a flood of entire lives without sequence or mercy. Tears sprang from his eyes beneath the pressure, as though a burning blade had split open some sealed door in his mind all at once.

Vana came first, if first meant anything inside such a torrent. Her childhood unfolded within him not as recollection but as experience, every humiliation and terror possessing the terrible immediacy of the present. He saw what had been done to her when she was too young even to understand the occult purpose behind it, the ordeals repeated until corruption became custom, until the twisted path ceased to seem twisted because no other road had ever been allowed to exist.

Her father's paranoia saturated everything. Someone was always watching. Someone was listening. Friends became informants, associates sold one another out, family betrayed family. The police were coming. The government was coming. The FBI was coming. Someday somebody would expose them, raid them, drag them away in handcuffs and put them in cages from which they would never emerge. He poured that fear into his daughter until suspicion became instinct and secrecy became a form of breathing. Never trust too much. Never reveal too much. Never leave behind what can be found. Never assume loyalty will survive pressure.

Prison grew almost mythic in Vana's imagination, not merely a building but the final shape of defeat: concrete walls, locked doors, stripped of control, money, privacy, privilege, the power to decide who watched her, questioned her, commanded her, touched her. Beneath every lesser anxiety waited the same primordial terror—to be hunted, betrayed, sold out, exposed, arrested, caged.

So, she learned to dominate before she could be dominated. She collected secrets before others could collect hers, compromised people before they could compromise her, made herself useful, feared, wealthy, connected. Fear taught her early that the safest place was the hand holding the leash.

Youth hardened into entitlement and cruelty. She tormented other children because frightening them felt safer than being frightened herself. With age the instinct merely became more sophisticated: domination, sensual excess, wealth, prestige, influence, control. She grew into a monstrous soul in ways Vincent could neither excuse nor sentimentalize, yet underneath all of it remained the child listening to her father insist, year after year, that someday somebody was coming for them.

And someday somebody did.

Vincent.

Her greatest fear fulfilled itself in him. The hunters came. The walls failed. Secrets surfaced. Control vanished. Everything she had spent a lifetime erecting around herself was torn away, and beneath the terror Vincent discovered something he had not fully understood on that night.

Relief.

Not absolution. Not repentance polished into something beautiful. Relief.

She had lived her whole life waiting for the knock at the door, the betrayal, the raid, the handcuffs, the moment when someone stronger finally stripped away every defense. When it came, the waiting ended. The nightmare had arrived, and perversely, horribly, its arrival meant she no longer had to fear it.

Nothing remained to protect.

Nothing remained to hide.

For the first time in her life, the hunted animal inside Vana stopped running. And with the hunter's arrival came an impossible mercy, an escape hatch from a mountain of crimes she never intended to walk back into the shadow of.

Yet even inside the woman she became, inside cruelty Vincent could call naked evil without qualification, the child still lived. Hungry. Frightened. Weeping alone in a blackened room because adults had decided terror was education, forced to consort with things behind veils before she possessed any real ability to understand what was being done to her. Stranger still, some of those entities had reached back. Not safely, not benevolently, but with tiny flickers of sympathy for the girl when the human beings surrounding her had offered none.

Vana dissolved beneath the pressure of another life, and Abigail flooded into the space she left behind with hunger, anger, shame, and a loneliness so profound Vincent almost felt it as physical cold. Neglected at home, physically and mentally abused, she fled to the streets because even the streets seemed safer than the place she was expected to call home. There the woman in the long black limousine found her and offered everything deprivation had taught her to crave: food, clean clothes, warmth, luxury beyond imagining, fine fashions, private tutors, beautiful rooms, money, attention.

And beneath all of it, the price.

Everything Vana had endured was passed down to Abigail. The black-silver torch changed hands in the worst possible fashion: the same conditioning, the same corruption dressed as initiation and privilege and destiny, now transmitted by someone whose own wounds had become doctrine.

Poor Abby had wanted something painfully ordinary.

She wanted to be loved.

She wanted to be wanted.

Instead, she learned that affection was conditional upon doing whatever was demanded of her, though even calling it obedience gave the arrangement too much dignity. Most of the time there had never been meaningful choice enough to disobey.

Bitterness grew where trust might have lived. She became meaner than Vana in some ways, angrier, sharper, the bitterness hidden behind a grin that rarely reached her soul. Pain accumulated until sleep itself became dangerous. Nightmares waited there, and with them the unwanted attentions of entities darker even than Vanael.

Amid that flood Vincent suddenly saw himself through Abby's eyes.

She had found his blog hidden on the site.

Crimson Dark.

His number-one fan had been Abigail.

The recognition struck him almost obscenely hard. She had known he was coming and had told no one. More than that, she had hoped he would come. Prayed for it. Many of the complaints that eventually reached the FBI concerning Vana's circle and their evil deeds had originated with Abigail herself, even while she was being compelled to participate in some of those same deeds and convincing nearly everyone around her that she did so eagerly.

It had all been a lie. Abigail had filed complaints, passed information where she could, tried in small desperate ways to draw attention to what Vana's circle was doing. But the government already knew more than Abby imagined. Vana herself was an asset, cultivated for intelligence and tolerated because her network reached places official hands could not easily reach.

Worse, some of the people around that arrangement had little incentive to shut it down. Vana supplied information, opened doors, identified dangerous people, and from time to time helped remove certain unwanted sorts without anyone in government having to dirty their own hands too visibly. As long as she remained useful, there was no great appetite to dismantle the machinery around her.

Abigail's complaints had therefore disappeared into a system that was not ignorant at all. It simply had other priorities. That realization carried its own bitterness. Abby had believed she was trying to tell someone what was happening, when in truth someone already knew.

She hated them, nearly all of them. Vana was different. There, hatred tangled itself around love, fear, gratitude, resentment, dependency, and the desperate ache for approval until no clean boundary survived between any of it. And Vincent had become another hope: the possibility of his love, the almost embarrassing bliss she received from the smallest scrap of attention he gave her, the joy of being named the Black Thorn Rose, the profound honor she felt whenever he entrusted her with some task, however small, as though he had pinned a medal over her heart.

He sees me.

That was what she had believed.

Vincent's stomach twisted. He had seen her—but not deeply enough. Not nearly deeply enough. And in seeing her now, compassion could not but ignite within him.

Cyrinx arrived differently. Her soul did not crash into him with the jagged hostility of Vana or the buried rage of Abigail; it opened with a kind of aching gentleness that somehow hurt worse. She was bright, kind, eager to please him, eager to please Miriam, and afraid of far more than she ever allowed anyone to know. Beneath the sweetness lived the constant uncertainty of someone who had never quite believed she belonged anywhere.

She moved through life like a lamb wandering in a country full of wolves, forever listening for footsteps behind her and forever hoping someone ahead might turn around and notice she was still there. She wanted someone to see that she had value, that her company itself possessed worth, that she mattered even when she was not being useful or clever or pretty or obedient. She wanted to be loved without having first to earn the right to occupy the room.

Vincent felt the small hurts he had never noticed because Cyrinx herself had learned to make them small: the conversation in which she had been overlooked, the invitation never extended, the moment another person received praise and she smiled sincerely while wondering what she lacked, the evening spent alone after convincing everyone she preferred it that way. She had become so practiced at making herself easy to have around that few people understood how desperately she wanted someone to ask her to stay.

Her fixation upon Vincent ceased to look foolish from inside her.

He represented recognition.

Safety.

A center around which a frightened soul could orient itself.

She had taken every kindness from him and treasured it far beyond its intended weight. The work station that was 'hers,' in the Raven Star building, the trust he'd shown her from before he ever came to Trembol. A glance, a joke, his remembering some small thing she had said weeks before—such moments remained bright in her memory long after Vincent himself had forgotten them. Even Miriam mattered through the same wounded architecture; pleasing her meant belonging more securely to the strange household Cyrinx had come to regard as home.

Vincent felt ashamed at how little he had understood.

She had not needed grandeur from him.

She had needed reassurance that she could exist beside him without earning the privilege every morning.

The next life carried him somewhere colder.

Yvonne.

Her parents dying while she was still a girl came through with the vicious clarity of lived experience. Vincent remembered it because Yvonne remembered it, not as history but as something eternally happening: helplessness, horror, the moment childhood discovered that love could be annihilated in front of you and there might be absolutely nothing you could do to prevent it.

Something closed inside her afterward. Love became dangerous because attachment meant loss. Dependence meant vulnerability, vulnerability meant helplessness, and helplessness had become intolerable. Whatever warmth survived went underground, buried beneath discipline, competence, ambition, and the accumulating armor of personality.

Tracy had been there.

Older than Yvonne. Quieter. Steadier. For years she was the rock between them, the sister who absorbed fear without broadcasting it, who listened and watched and somehow kept the emotional walls from collapsing without demanding recognition for holding them up. Yvonne could be hard,

ambitious, controlling even as a girl; Tracy learned how to stand beside that force without becoming it.

Their grandparents remained the center of the family for years. Yvonne loved them but also resented their ways. They seemed primitive and backward beside the larger world she wanted to enter. Other children mocked the clothes they put her in. Her grandparents insisted she speak the tongue of the People at home, complicating the English required at school. Their spirituality had not saved her parents, and to the wounded child much of it looked superstitious, quaint, even silly.

The girl grew into a woman cold inside—distant, aloof, jaded before she had lived long enough to deserve the weariness. There was no great patriotic calling behind her ambition, no romantic devotion to service. She wanted to shine, to prove what she could do, to rise through the ranks and accumulate enough authority that no one could ever again dismiss her, control her, or render her powerless.

Through all of it, Tracy remained beside her.

Their grandparents' deaths altered the balance between them. The old center disappeared, and Yvonne responded to grief in the only fashion she trusted: by taking control. Decisions increasingly became hers, direction became hers, the pace became hers. She pushed because movement felt stronger than mourning, while Tracy, wounded and far less interested in command, gradually allowed herself to be carried along.

The older sister remained the quiet rock beneath them.

Yvonne became the driver.

When Tracy's own life entered Vincent, it felt at once familiar and startlingly different. Where Yvonne had recoiled from the old spirituality, Tracy went deeper into it, embracing the language, ceremonies, stories, and buried worldview of their grandparents with something approaching hunger. Yet beneath that spiritual rootedness lay a lifetime of loneliness.

Other children had treated her like a freak. The name they called her long before she even understood what the word meant. In truth she had not thought of herself that way then, but after enough years of being told what she was, after enough rejection and the narrowing of every other possibility, she eventually embraced the identity society had already shoved upon her.

She became the thing they said she was.

After the grandparents died, Yvonne pulled them harder toward the larger world—school, career, Washington, a life Tracy had never truly wanted. Yvonne answered grief with control, motion, goals, the next thing that needed doing. Tracy answered it by disappearing inward.

She sought peace there, trying to recover whatever the world had knocked loose within her, yet that search carried another current beneath it: the need to learn how to fight.

Never feel powerless again.

Never stand helpless while somebody she loved died in front of her.

Never again be the little girl watching her parents killed.

What Tracy carried toward Vincent struck him hardest of all.

Adoration.

Not simple attraction. Not political loyalty. Not merely devotion to the Emperor. Something deeper and more intimate had grown there, fed by every wound that preceded him.

From almost the beginning she had believed Vincent saw her—really saw her, perhaps more completely than anyone ever had. Every kindness landed with ten times the weight he intended. Every responsibility entrusted to her, every word of approval, every quiet acknowledgement entered a place made painfully receptive by decades of loneliness. To him they had often been little things. To Tracy they had been evidence that she existed in another human being's mind.

That she mattered there. That she had been noticed.

Vincent bowed his head against the rock as blood continued to run from his neck. Water streamed down his face, mingling with tears and blood, while sorrow and anguish twisted his features. He had not understood. Not fully.

Tracy believed he had seen everything.

He hadn't. But he did now. Nothing was hidden now.

Shannon Miller entered him differently, almost gently, like a rising waterline unnoticed until it had already reached the chest and was still climbing. Her beginnings were humble, her ambitions surprisingly free of vanity or crass selfishness. She had wanted ordinary things with an almost painful sincerity: to become a mother, a wife, to be loved and useful, to excel at her work, to earn the affection and approval of family, husband, and colleagues. Beneath all of it ran the quiet hope that God noticed her efforts and might someday be pleased with what He saw. Perhaps pleased enough, she sometimes prayed in guilty desperation, to rescue her from a loveless marriage without leaving her destitute in the process.

The years passed without turning her bitter. Shannon simply learned to endure. She found ways to cope with Randal, then felt guilty for some of the ways she coped, and eventually learned to cope with the guilt itself by piling good deeds over whatever compromises necessity seemed to demand. She worked harder, exercised harder, prayed harder, trying almost superstitiously to become so worthy that her husband might finally recognize what stood beside him. If she became beautiful enough, useful enough, patient enough, devout enough, perhaps Randal would love her. Perhaps God would look down and decide she had suffered sufficiently.

His death had therefore horrified and liberated her in the same instant. The indignity surrounding it, followed by the discovery that everything passed to her, seemed almost too precisely fitted to prayers she had never dared speak aloud without shame. She hated herself for thinking it, yet could not entirely escape the conviction that God had answered her. He had made her wait, made her labor beneath Randal's name, and finally placed into her hands everything she herself had spent years helping to build.

For all Shannon's essential decency, however, the bond permitted Vincent no comforting fiction of purity. He saw the shadow as clearly as the light: desires pent up for years until they escaped in sudden prurient flickers, fantasies that sent her rushing afterward toward charity or prayer as though generosity might cleanse the mind. Guilt rode her relentlessly. So did the fear that God might eventually grow tired of her failures and abandon her. Beneath those spiritual anxieties lived another, more earthly terror she disliked admitting even to herself—the fear of getting old, of becoming invisible, of reaching the end of life having never known the love she had once imagined marriage would contain.

And now Vincent saw himself through her eyes.

There was hope there, and not all of it would have passed inspection beneath the sternest religious standards. She was attracted to him. He had known that much, because the feeling had not been entirely one-sided; even before the deeper household entanglements, he had considered exploring whatever connection had quietly formed between them through ordinary business dealings. Shannon had prayed for his attention without ever quite allowing herself to call the prayer what it was. She had hoped for his affection. His love.

Yet what Vincent found beneath the desire did not alarm him. It comforted him.

There was goodness there without much disguise. Imperfection, certainly. Appetite, vanity, fear, guilt, loneliness—all the ordinary shadows of a human being—but surprisingly little malice. For an instant he felt like the old Hermit carrying his lantern through a darkened world, searching endlessly for something simple and nearly impossible.

One honest woman.

The thought scarcely formed before the physical world dragged against him again. Vincent lay crumpled among stone and wet dirt, blood working beneath his collar while the remnants of the Holy Fire unit hunted for him through the ridge rocks. Six remained from the original twenty. They were battered, reduced, and now increasingly exposed, but they had not broken. Their purpose outweighed self-preservation. In Vincent they believed they had cornered the Antichrist before he could rise any farther, and that belief transformed a collapsing tactical situation into sacred obligation. They had prepared for this, prayed over it, sanctified themselves and their weapons for it. They had wounded him. Of that they were certain. Now they needed only find him and finish what they had crossed the desert to do.

They came within mere feet without seeing him.

The approaching rotor beat changed everything.

It reached the ridge first as a heavy rhythmic concussion beneath the storm, growing rapidly until the Apache appeared out of the rain-dark sky. The remaining militants scattered for whatever cover the rocks offered. The helicopter's M230 chain gun traversed, and the first burst of 30-millimeter fire tore into the ridge with a violence completely different from rifle fire. Stone exploded into gray-white fragments. Mud, gravel, and pieces of scrub leapt into the air. Mike and Francis were caught almost immediately; one disappeared into the impact pattern, the other struck so violently that his body came apart across the rocks before either man could meaningfully react.

Six became four.

The Apache banked away through the rain, already setting itself for another firing pass.

Vincent scarcely perceived it.

Blood had begun seeping from the corners of his eyes. More ran from his nose, mingling with rainwater across his upper lip, while something warm and wet gathered inside one ear. The ringing in his head had swollen until the gunfire and helicopter seemed to come from miles away. His rifle was gone somewhere among the rocks, knocked from his hands when the first psychic avalanche struck. His vision blurred, doubled, then struggled to settle again. He knew he was still physically on DeSatto Ridge, wedged among stone and dirt while men hunted him and an Apache tore the hillside apart, but his consciousness was already slipping away from the battlefield, drawn backward through a long, narrowing tunnel.

He was there, but very far away.

The procession continued.

Meghan Dellon rose within him next, taking her place before that impossible inner throne where the women bound to him no longer appeared as people he knew from the outside, but as complete human worlds—every love, wound, secret, humiliation, triumph, fear, resentment, need, and private contradiction stripped of concealment.

Vincent slipped deeper toward unconscious delirium as Meghan opened inside him.

Half a world away, clocks reached 9:28 P.M. in the United States as the Korean afternoon moved toward its own appointed hour. The Emergency Alert System tone cut abruptly across American television and radio, silencing entertainment, news programs, music, advertisements, and ordinary evening noise beneath the same flat electronic warning. Similar interruptions rippled across allied networks around the planet as governments seized their broadcast systems.

Something enormous was about to happen.

Meghan flowed inward and swept through him with the force of another tide. Vincent had never fully understood the Silver Mormon heritage buried beneath her harder exterior. For all her father's reservations, her grandfather would have understood much of what was happening now without needing it explained. Mathius Dellon himself looked very different through his daughter's memories than he did in the recollection of the wider world, where most still remembered him fondly, with little idea of what he had done the year before. To them he was the heroic sheriff who had served his time and, when the age changed around him, wisely retired to some bachelor paradise in Alaska, probably spending his remaining years hunting elk and fishing pristine lakes. To Meghan he was something far more complicated: the father she loved, admired, feared disappointing, and could never quite forgive for forcing her to become him.

She had wanted to become her mother. That simple discovery struck Vincent harder than he expected. Meghan had dreamed of a farm, a garden, children, chickens scratching through the dirt, dinner cooking in a warm kitchen—the sort of ordinary domestic life that rarely makes history because history

has no idea how precious it is. Instead, she became the sheriff's daughter who could shoot straight and take a punch, then the Marine MP, then the deputy, then the woman who spent her adult life being shot at, stabbed, kicked, beaten, black-eyed, threatened, sexually degraded by strangers, left with broken ribs and eventually a broken arm. Each time she reached some limit, Mathius answered with another variation of the same hard medicine: toughen up, grow a thicker skin, keep your gun handy. Through Meghan's memories Vincent felt the astounding blindness in it—not cruelty exactly, because Mathius believed he was strengthening her, but a nearly absolute failure to understand that his daughter had never wanted to become the sort of creature who could survive all that in the first place.

The cost had been a lifetime of anxiety beneath competence, unhappiness beneath duty, and the constant effort to look harder than she felt. Through Meghan's eyes Vincent appeared almost embarrassingly bright: the light at the end of a long grim tunnel, an island finally reached by a castaway who discovered, to her astonishment, strong walls, safety, and pizza waiting on shore. The image made him smile even while guilt tightened around his heart. He had never understood how much he meant to her—or, increasingly, how much he meant to any of them. He had tried to be polite, encouraging, helpful. Trinity kept him informed of birthdays and special occasions, and Vincent marked them whenever the machinery of his life left room. But in his own thinking the bridge had already been burned: he was married, profoundly taken, and it seemed improper to become overly affectionate with women who were not his wife. All the while, without realizing it, he had been consuming pieces of their lives simply because they kept giving them to him.

Tallia entered through another door entirely. Her love of truth was inseparable from her love of Vincent because, in the architecture of her mind, the two had gradually become reflections of the same thing. And, on some esoteric level, she was not wrong—for he flowed from Emetiel, the ancient seraph of truth. As a child she devoured Nancy Drew mysteries, then real criminal cases, driven by an almost compulsive need to know what actually happened. It seemed strange in retrospect that Meghan had become the officer rather than Tallia. But at fourteen, after spending a summer working for her aunt and uncle at their television station, Tallia discovered a respectable occupation for snooping and turned journalism into something much larger than a career.

"Truth is everything," Aunt Thallia had taught her. "There is no justice without truth, and truth without love is cruel. We fight for truth because we love: ourselves, our families, humanity, the world, even God."

Tallia had taken the lesson into herself so completely that work and identity eventually became indistinguishable. KTTV was not merely a station. It was her crusade, her altar, the battered machine through which she tried to force reality into daylight. And because Vincent had lifted KTTV when it was dying, because he had become in her mind the living convergence of truth and love, the station and the man had become nearly inseparable symbols.

Vincent felt everything beneath that conviction: the wounds left by her father's callous words, the agony of losing the aunt and uncle who had given direction to her life, the discomfort and quiet disgust produced by Larry's attentions, the loneliness of years spent fearing that somebody might finally make good on one of the threats. He felt the dread of the next lawsuit, the next obscenity shouted through a telephone, the next promise to defile or kill her, the grinding poverty of trying to hold together a station physically rotting beneath her while creditors circled and equipment failed. Against all of that stood the almost ecstatic relief of the previous year, when suddenly light had broken through and the

whole collapsing enterprise had risen from the edge of extinction into something bright, powerful, almost glorious.

Like Shannon, Tallia possessed an uncomplicated quality that proved unexpectedly medicinal. Not simplicity of intellect—she was anything but simple—but a clean alignment between what she believed and what she did. Vincent had underestimated the depth of that conviction and, more painfully, the sheer beauty of her inner nature. For a few precious moments she soothed him. Amid the psychic hurricane of twelve lives battering open every chamber of his mind, Tallia's soul arrived like a quiet lamp.

Outside, the world had continued without waiting.

The four surviving Holy Fire militants finally found him. Vincent lay slumped among wet stone and desert dirt, his helmet set aside, blood trailing from his eyes and nose, while the wound in his neck had already begun clotting beneath the rain. Once the sanctified shard had been torn free, the puncture itself had rapidly knitted shut; immortality had seen to that. Whatever deeper poison the consecrated metal had carried was gone with it. The blood still coming from his eyes and nose belonged to something else entirely.

Four men stood over him, ranging from perhaps twenty-seven to nearly sixty, weapons leveled, their red burning-cross insignia vivid against soaked combat gear. Satisfaction showed plainly through exhaustion. They believed they had reached the end of a holy pilgrimage and secured their places in Heaven.

The drone fought to maintain position above the ridge, its stabilizers constantly correcting against gusting wind. Farther out, the Apache circled wide, temporarily drawn toward a fresh assault against NNN itself. Rocket fire flashed somewhere near the station, the dull concussion carrying through rain and thunder.

"We have him! We've got the bastard! God has delivered him into our hands!" Colonel Jack Palace of the Montana Fiery Cross Brigade shouted into his radio. "He's down. Grenades did internal damage. He's finished."

Raven Star troops were already scaling the ridge from below, while others pushed westward from the direction of St. Aftiel's, but Palace could see what they could not: they would be too late.

At almost that same moment, half a world away, the long-prepared blow fell upon North Korea.

There was no spectacular darkness visible from orbit; it was the middle of the day. Instead, the country seemed to stop.

Across military and intelligence feeds, electrical grids collapsed almost simultaneously. Command frequencies vanished. Radar emissions winked out. Cellular and government communications disappeared into static. Air-defense sites stopped transmitting. Aircraft already on the ground remained there, while vehicles dependent upon modern electronics stalled where they stood. Planes fell from the sky. Power stations tripped offline or suffered sudden internal failures, some beginning to smoke beneath cascading faults. On thermal and reconnaissance imagery, scattered hot spots

appeared at substations, communications centers, military compounds, and industrial sites even as the electronic pulse of the nation abruptly flattened.

NNN assembled the picture from dozens of sources in real time: orbital reconnaissance, infrared overlays, military telemetry, regional news feeds, and communications monitoring. On one side of the split screen, a daylight satellite image showed the Korean peninsula beneath scattered cloud, while warning boxes and status markers disappeared across the North faster than the network could label them.

The chyron changed:

NORTH KOREAN GRID AND COMMUNICATIONS COLLAPSE

Seconds later:

MILITARY COMMAND NETWORKS GO SILENT

Then:

NATIONWIDE SYSTEM FAILURE REPORTED—CAUSE UNKNOWN

Analysts were still trying to explain what they were seeing when the western side of the country erupted.

Even in full daylight, the flash overwhelmed the orbital sensors for an instant. A brilliant white core expanded through the haze, followed by a rapidly climbing column of dust and vapor. Within seconds the stem thickened and the crown began spreading outward, unmistakable even before the first terrified anchors found words for it.

The chyron changed again:

MASSIVE EXPLOSION IN NORTH KOREA

Moments later:

PYONGYANG REGION STRUCK—POSSIBLE NUCLEAR DETONATION!

Then the crawl beneath it accelerated as new reports poured into the newsroom:

WE REPEAT—A POSSIBLE NUCLEAR DETONATION HAS OCCURRED IN NORTH KOREA. REPORTS NOW COMING IN OF A MASSIVE AMERICAN AND SOUTH KOREAN ASSAULT AGAINST FORWARD NORTH KOREAN POSITIONS.

Within seconds, the network cut to a broader breaking-news banner:

AFTER DAYS OF ESCALATING PROVOCATIONS AND A MASSIVE MILITARY BUILDUP AROUND THE KOREAN PENINSULA, A FULL-SCALE PREEMPTIVE STRIKE NOW APPEARS TO BE UNDERWAY ALONG THE ENTIRE DEMILITARIZED ZONE.

OFFICIALS CITE THE FUELING OF NORTH KOREAN NUCLEAR MISSILES AND THE MOVEMENT OF MOBILE LAUNCHER UNITS INTO APPARENT FIRING POSITIONS AS THE IMMEDIATE TRIGGER FOR THE U.S.—R.O.K. RESPONSE.

A second line followed as congressional confirmation reached the desk:

AT 11:31 P.M. WASHINGTON TIME, FOLLOWING A CLOSED-DOOR EMERGENCY SESSION, CONGRESS FORMALLY AUTHORIZED U.S. HOSTILITIES IN SUPPORT OF REPUBLIC OF KOREA FORCES.

The next line read:

UNITED NATIONS—CHINA HAS CALLED FOR AN EMERGENCY SESSION OF THE U.N. SECURITY COUNCIL, CONDEMNING THE U.S.—R.O.K. ATTACK AS A DANGEROUS UNILATERAL ESCALATION AND DEMANDING AN IMMEDIATE CEASEFIRE. BEIJING HAS ALSO ORDERED CHINESE FORCES ALONG THE NORTH KOREAN FRONTIER TO HEIGHTENED ALERT AS CONFUSION CONTINUES OVER THE APPARENT NUCLEAR DETONATION NEAR PYONGYANG. RUSSIA HAS JOINED CHINA IN CALLING FOR AN URGENT SECURITY COUNCIL MEETING.

BEIJING WARNS THAT ANY FOREIGN MILITARY ADVANCE TOWARD THE CHINESE BORDER WILL BE REGARDED AS A DIRECT THREAT TO CHINESE NATIONAL SECURITY.

The language stayed cautious only because the anchors themselves still did not know the full scale of what had begun. On the screens behind them, however, there was nothing cautious about it: artillery flashes strobed along sections of the DMZ, aircraft rose from southern bases, missile trails cut pale lines through the afternoon sky, and columns of smoke were already beginning to mark forward positions on both sides of the border.

Beside that image, on the other half of the screen, Emperor Vincent Veyl knelt bleeding among rocks on DeSatto Ridge while four, armed men wearing the burning red cross of Holy Fire surrounded him and prepared to riddle his body with bullets.

Anyone looking away for a second could have missed what happened next.

Inside Vincent, Emily did not arrive quietly. She came through him like a ball of static lightning, anxious and crackling, full of music, tears, dirty jokes, nervous laughter, and an ocean of pain hidden beneath all of it. He felt the paddle and belt of her childhood, the locked room, the missed meals, punishments imposed for crimes ranging from wearing the wrong expression to asking for a carrot. Her parents were drowning in addictions and untreated mental illness—alcohol, weed, pain killers, bipolar disorder, severe depression, all so obvious in retrospect that Vincent could almost diagnose the household by walking through the memories.

Her father had been less violently abusive than simply absent even while physically present, a man retreating farther and farther inside himself until discovering his wife with other men finally broke whatever remained. He left her and, not long afterward, killed himself in his car using the exhaust.

Emily found him.

Worse followed. Her mother blamed her for the depression, blamed her for exposing the affair, even blamed her for the suicide. You should've shut your mouth when he asked where I was.

The cruelty of that sentence survived inside Emily like a piece of shrapnel that had never worked its way free.

The Silver School in Elko eventually took her in as a charity case, and there she met Meghan. That friendship became the first uncomplicated affection Emily could remember receiving—the first time another person seemed to like her simply because she was herself. Even that was taken away when Mathius Dellon decided Emily was dangerous company and dismissed her as a low-life little piece of trailer-park trash who would drag his daughter down.

She had laughed about it afterward. Inside, it had devastated her.

The Army became an escape. Surviving boot camp was almost a revelation in itself; training as a medic gave her something she had rarely possessed before—a measurable sense of worth. She could keep someone alive. She could learn. She could endure. She could matter.

And somewhere along that road her path crossed Vincent's.

He had known she was interested. Emily had never possessed the slightest talent for subtlety. What he had never understood was the magnitude of it. Deep inside her, Vincent had become something like a star hanging impossibly far above the horizon: beautiful, unreachable, almost foolish to hope for, yet perhaps capable of saving her if she could somehow reach it.

"If I had known…" he muttered through blood and delirium.

His own loneliness from that period rose beside hers, and with it came the chapel at the Conoco base after he had been evacuated and presumed dead. Emily alone inside it, weeping for him. Praying. Trying afterward to discover where he had gone, searching through channels that led nowhere, eventually forced to accept that the man who had become so important to her might simply have vanished from Rhea.

She had mourned him when almost nobody knew she had any reason to.

The knowledge broke something tender open inside Vincent. He loved her. Not merely because she loved him, not out of pity, but because at last he knew her whole. In that knowing came a certainty strange enough to frighten him: he would love her from that moment forward.

Kianna moved through him afterward like a low cloud crossing a rainy sky, quiet enough that at first he almost failed to recognize the enormity of the life inside it. Her story was remarkable and, to Kianna herself, entirely ordinary. She had never joined the House of Sanzuwu. She had been given to it.

One of eleven children born into a poor working-class family, Kianna had been tithed to the temple while still small, offered as a living gift in hope that blessings might return to those who surrendered her. From her earliest memories life moved according to absolute rhythm: wake, work, study, train,

pray, eat, sleep; the same actions at the same hours, often down to the minute, until discipline ceased to feel imposed and became the skeleton around which her personality grew.

Yet it had not been a loveless life. The Sisterhood became family—perhaps closer than any blood family she might otherwise have known. Affection, correction, duty, intimacy, and common purpose were braided together until meaning existed in nearly every act.

In the Eastern Silver Path, the Seraph had been known syncretically by many names and faces, each culture clothing the same immortal principle in its own inherited symbols. Kianna's particular tradition spoke of the Mother of the West and the Raven of the Sun, placing them within the immense Taoist hierarchy of immortals and divinities while absorbing other revelations into the same living structure, even Christ as a face of the Jade Emperor. The Sisters learned to redirect desire for romance, pleasure, marriage, and possession toward the Seraphic ideal and toward service: balance, truth, wisdom, discipline, unwavering love.

Her discipline entered Vincent like reinforcement poured into a failing wall. Focus. Will. Order. For the first time since the psychic avalanche began, confusion retreated. Kianna did not lessen the suffering carried by the others, but she gave him somewhere inside himself strong enough to stand beneath it.

Amalia brought a different fortification: logic sharpened almost into mysticism. To her, existence resembled code—not in the crude sense that life was artificial, but that sufficient intelligence might discern beneath apparent chaos an underlying language of divine design. She was not complicated, yet she was extraordinarily deep, her mind descending into mathematics, physics, and metaphysics the way other people descended into prayer.

Her fascination with Vincent had begun almost absurdly small.

"All language is based on a common mathematical premise," he had remarked one day in the cafeteria.

Amalia overheard him.

That was enough.

Something in the sentence opened a door. She began looking into him, first casually, then obsessively, using her considerable computer talents to gather every scrap of information she could find. She followed traces through his life, investigated things the Church preferred sealed, assembled fragments other people would never have thought connected. The pursuit eventually carried her across the country to meet the Prophetess and befriend her largely because the path might lead closer to Vincent.

It had.

He could not help admiring the sheer doggedness of it—the tenacity, the brilliant certainty of a woman who, once she identified a pattern, followed it until it either broke or yielded its secret.

Bella came last, though in no sense least. Her presence approached almost shyly, as though she stood outside the door of Vincent's soul and knocked softly until some unseen chamberlain admitted her.

She was the most placid of the twelve, soft-spoken but elegant in speech, outwardly calm enough to be overlooked beside louder personalities.

Inside her waited midnight water: deep, black, cold as the Arctic and somehow warm as something rising from the underworld. Mnemosyne water. Bella forgot almost nothing.

She read compulsively, though not within any single genre. If a cereal box stood beside her at breakfast, she read the box. A discarded receipt, billboard, license plate, manual, newspaper, sacred text, trash advertisement—everything entered the same enormous interior apparatus. Yet she did not merely reed; she compared, connected, interpreted. Passing license plates became numerological, linguistic, esoteric, and mathematical puzzles. Songs appearing at certain moments carried possible correspondence with events. Billboards, accidental phrases, numbers on receipts, fragments of overheard conversation—all entered a continuous meditation upon pattern.

Oddly, it did not feel like obsession from inside Bella.

It felt like listening.

The Divine spoke through nature and Scripture, certainly, but why should happenstance be excluded? Perhaps randomness was merely a word people used for causes they lacked the senses to perceive.

Where Amalia loved Vincent partly because he could, in the simplest explanation, code in five dimensions, Bella loved him because his books sounded like songs when read aloud.

Abigail had shown her his blog.

Bella consumed it like manna.

Afterward she went farther. Much farther. Without telling anyone, she cracked some of Vincent's most private files and read things never meant for another pair of eyes: erotic reflections, private journals, strange philosophical fragments ranging from speculation about collective insect souls to the way the sky occasionally appeared to him like rivers flowing overhead.

Material that might have frightened another person only drew Bella closer. The more she read, the more she loved him—not possessively, not with Abigail's desperate hunger or Emily's aching reach toward the impossible star. Bella seemed content simply to inhabit a place near him: his writer, his spokeswoman, his secretary, his quiet support in what she regarded as the great work of the age.

If the bond now offered something more, however, she was hardly going to refuse it.

With every woman came not only biography but desire: their sensual lives, bodily memories, fantasies, private hungers, all the things hidden beneath clothing and habit, behind public masks, religious restraint, and practiced propriety. Vincent knew them now with an intimacy so complete it was almost obscene, and he loved them. Desired them. Every one—not because their flaws had vanished, but because those flaws had become inseparable from the whole he could no longer reduce to judgment. Even Vana, in all her darkness, contained something he could love: something wounded that cried out not for exoneration, but for protection, healing, and the kind of love denied her when it first mattered.

The knowledge terrified him. Thousands of death threats arrived every day; those directed against Miriam alone could fill pages with horrors. Now twelve more lives sat inside his heart with the immediacy of his own blood, while the world around them descended into war. Great nations plotted daily to kill Vincent Veyl and eradicate everything connected to him—France, Russia, China, frigging Britania, and others besides. To them the Veyl phenomenon was a contagion to be torn out stem and root and thrown into the fire before it transformed civilization beyond recovery.

But they were no longer abstractions to him. They were threats against Meghan's forgotten garden, Tallia's truth, Emily's laughter, Shannon's goodness, Abby's desperate hope, Cyrinx's aching need to belong, Tracy's quiet devotion, Yvonne's buried warmth—even Vana's frightened child.

Beneath the anguish, three quieter presences began imposing order upon the storm. Kianna's discipline flowed through him like an iron spine, gathering scattered will and forcing breath back into rhythm. Amalia's mind found structure where there should have been none, separating sensation from action, pain from necessity, reducing the impossible torrent to sequence, timing, movement. Bella brought something deeper still: the black, warm stillness of Mnemosyne, a vast interior silence beneath thought where nothing needed to be denied because everything could simply be remembered and borne.

The three Silver Sisters did not lessen the burden; they gave it shape. Yet theirs were not the only strengths now moving inside him. Meghan, Yvonne, Tracy, Abigail, Vana, Amalia, Bella, Kianna—all trained fighters in one tradition or another—had spent years disciplining flesh, reflex, fear, aggression, balance, endurance. He had not merely received their memories. Some subtler residue of their tenacity seemed to accompany them: Meghan's refusal to stay down, Yvonne's cold determination, Tracy's patient steadiness, Abigail's savage instinct for survival, Vana's predatory will. Twelve lives were crushing his mind, but buried within that same crushing weight were twelve wills refusing to be extinguished.

The four men standing over him tightened their grips and began to fire.

Vincent moved first, in the very same moment the mushroom cloud rose over Pyongyang.

He exploded from the stones with such sudden speed that the motion seemed less like rising than release. Every fragment of strength he could still command—his own and whatever strange reinforcement now moved through the bond—collapsed into a single point of intention. There was no wasted effort, no stagger, no recovery step. His feet found purchase, hips turned, shoulders followed, and the sword came free across his back in the same fluid acceleration that brought him upright.

For one instant all the psychic chaos narrowed to absolute clarity.

One line.

One opening.

One stroke.

Silver-black steel passed through the rain in a precise, terrible arc, the full speed and power of Vincent's immortal body committed without reservation to that single movement.

Four men fell.

The strike finished cleanly, almost gracefully, his body completing the turn exactly as years of training demanded. He remained upright for perhaps a heartbeat, sword extended, rain streaking from the blade while the dead collapsed around him.

Then everything he had concentrated into that one action was gone.

Vincent sank back onto his knees among the bodies, not wounded into weakness, not bleeding out, but exhausted somewhere deeper than flesh could account for. Twelve lifetimes still roared through his consciousness—twelve childhoods, twelve accumulated griefs, twelve constellations of desire and fear, twelve ways of loving and hating and enduring. Their strength had helped him rise; their sheer human weight dragged him down again.

He bowed beneath it, sword loose in one hand as rain washed over the stones. Somewhere inside the agony lay the first terrible irony of what Miriam had done to him. The bond he had never consented to had nearly killed him—and, in the same breath, kept him alive.

And yet the truth remained.

Not only their suffering, but the burden now rested upon him. Their fears, hungers, memories, bodies, longings, private shames, hopes, and desperate needs had compounded twelvefold inside his consciousness until he could no longer tell where sympathy ended and obligation began.

And through their memories he finally saw Miriam's part in it.

The preparations. The conversations conducted beyond his notice. The materials gathered in secret. The documents. The rings. The Blood Flame. Every careful step toward a covenant his wife had constructed without his knowledge because she knew perfectly well what his answer would have been if she had asked.

Miriam.

The woman he loved beyond measure. The woman he trusted with his very heart. She had done this to him. She had almost gotten him killed by not telling him.

Vincent knelt in the rain, surrounded by the dead, and understood the terrible shape of the trap. He had not chosen them. But now that he knew them, he could not un-choose them either.

Several minutes passed before he moved. He remained among the bodies with his legs crossed beneath him, sword resting nearby, forcing breath and thought back into something resembling order while the world watched two scenes unfolding on opposite sides of Rhea. The Imperium had just seen its Emperor rise from apparent helplessness and cut down four men in a single stroke. Half a world away, the entire planet had watched Pyongyang vanish beneath a nuclear cloud.

"Get up," Vincent growled at himself.

He planted one hand against the wet stone and fought his way to his feet. The effort had little to do with physical injury; his body had already begun recovering. It was the crushing psychic weight of twelve lives still moving through him, twelve reservoirs of memory and emotion refusing to settle quietly into the boundaries of one mind. He drew a long breath, found his rifle among the rocks, checked it almost automatically, then sheathed his sword across his back.

Before leaving, he stopped beside the four dead men.

From a small leather case on his tactical belt, Vincent drew several silver denarii. One by one he knelt beside the bodies, closed each man's eyes where he could, and placed a coin upon them. They had come to kill him. They had believed him Antichrist, abomination, enemy of God. None of that mattered now. Their war was finished.

Vincent bowed his head and prayed over each of them. Put his helmet back on, and then climbed the ridge and began to do the same for those caught in his ambush. They were men of faith, who had given all for what they believed, and he did not hold it against them— he might've been among them, in a different life.

The drones caught everything.

Their cameras hovered above DeSatto Ridge in the rain, transmitting the strange aftermath across NNN and, within moments, around the world: Vincent Veyl kneeling among the men who had tried to murder him, placing silver upon their eyes and commending the dead while water ran from his armor and thunder rolled beyond the ridge.

Across Raven Throne, the gunfire had finally begun to die away. Sirens still moved through the streets, helicopters continued circling, and isolated security teams searched the hills and eastern approaches for stragglers, but the coordinated assault had broken.

In Korea, the greater battle was only beginning.

American and South Korean forces had already smashed through much of the forward defensive belt along the DMZ. North Korean command networks remained shattered, units cut off from headquarters and frequently from one another, while aircraft, artillery, and armored columns pressed into positions whose defenders had expected orders that never came. Along sectors of the front, powerful loudspeakers carried surrender instructions across the battlefield in Korean, promising food, medical treatment, humane custody, and protection for soldiers who laid down their weapons.

The terms were deliberately simple.

Drop your weapons. Raise your hands. Move toward the marked corridors. You will not be harmed.

At first the responses were scattered—single soldiers, then squads, then platoons emerging from bunkers and fighting positions with hands raised. Some had probably imagined crossing that border long before the war began, only to be held in place by minefields, surveillance, officers, and the certainty that failure meant death. Now much of that machinery had simply vanished. The enemy they

had been taught to fear was broadcasting surrender terms, offering food, medical treatment, humane custody, and a road south.

Once the first men crossed and were not killed, others followed.

Within minutes, surrender became its own kind of offensive. Companies began laying down their weapons. Temporary collection points overflowed. South Korean and American units found themselves struggling to process prisoners almost as quickly as the North Korean army was producing them.

The first Raven Star cargo aircraft began arriving from Taiwan within the hour, followed by flights from bases across Asia. Their holds carried food, medicine, water equipment, replacement electronics, generators, engineers, medical teams, communications crews, and the first elements of what might soon become an Imperial peacekeeping force. Behind the advancing South Koreans, Trinity began restoring systems she had merely silenced as areas were secured—power returning here, communications there, pumps and municipal networks waking almost as quickly as friendly forces established control. What she had burned out would have to be repaired the old-fashioned way.

By evening, the whole immense machinery of relief, restoration, and occupation had begun moving north.

(12:01 PM, June 1, 2027—Divided & Whole)



The storm had lulled by the time Vincent emerged from the desert, covered in mud and blood, with a troop of soldiers and militia who had climbed the ridge or come from Crow Creek Omega to aid him. They had found him praying over the dead and joined him in burying each and every one where they had fallen.

The world had watched him do it.

The wind still came hard across the badlands as he walked, buffeting his clothes and driving mist across the road. Headlights and emergency strobes flashed from Raven Star's black-and-silver SUVs, throwing harsh bands of red and blue through the darkness.

The soldiers and officers had gathered around the back of a pickup, tired, filthy, and still keyed up from the night, loading the bodies of the attackers into its flatbed. One by one, every eye turned toward the dark figure emerging from the wastes, the warriors with him fanning out to help secure the scene around the station, where the last of the attackers had fought to seize the broadcasting hub.

Then Larry Stevens snapped to attention.

The others followed almost as one, fists striking their breasts in the reverent Imperial salute as their grim lord stepped fully from the shadows.

"As you were," Vincent said coolly.

They relaxed, though only slightly.

"Law." His voice came impossibly deep through the helmet, more machine than man. "You're in charge now. You'll be compensated accordingly."

Larry looked as though Vincent had slapped him. The promotion clearly hadn't been expected.

"Tallia?" he asked softly.

"Occupied elsewhere from here on out. It's your turn to rise, shine, and show the world what you can do with your parent's dream."

Without another word, Vincent walked on alone across the parking lot and started down the steep drive toward the trainyard a mile off.

"Lord Veyl, would you like a ride?" Captain Hyde called after him.

Vincent glanced back.

Hyde had always reminded him of a pit bull somehow forced into human form—thick through the shoulders and neck, dressed head to toe in the Raven Guard's shining black body armor and matte-black fatigues. His beret sat cocked in the old Ranger fashion of his former career, the same way he now insisted every Raven Star officer wear theirs.

The ascendant Emperor of fifteen countries, with many more allied nations and states, had nearly been killed—and had killed more than a dozen men single-handedly—not an hour before, only to kneel and pray over each of them afterward while tens of millions watched through the hovering drone cameras. Blood staining his armor, he merely shrugged, shook his head no, and continued down the streetlamp-lit road. No one questioned him, though every man and woman there had questions.

A war was underway in Korea and, by the accounts pouring from every news channel, might already be over. Those same channels were reporting that their sources believed the attack had been coordinated and initially set in motion by the very man now walking off alone into the night. He had apparently been ordering events on the other side of the world while personally fighting terrorists attacking his own de facto capital in the little northern Nevada city of Trembol. It was rather hard for average people to grasp things at that scale.

Vincent paused and his voice carried back across the lot. "Happy Memorial Day, boys. We certainly made some memories." He chuckled lightly and moved on. His words lingering with weight behind him.

Trinity, ever the politically savvy intelligence, continued shadowing him through drones, traffic cameras, security feeds, and whatever other eyes happened to overlook his route. NNN carried him in one of several boxes across the screen—Vincent walking alone beneath the streetlamps of Raven Throne, blood still dark upon his black armor—while the greater portion remained devoted to Korea.

There was no anchor; none was needed. Trinity—or Mama, as millions now knew her—had it covered, using the flowing text of NNN's screens and that deep, calming feminine voice which had become an almost constant companion in the ears of an ever-growing multitude. She explained when

explanation was needed, translated where language divided, quietly corrected misinformation as it appeared, and otherwise allowed the images and facts to speak for themselves.

The principal image showed the advancing front north of the DMZ while smaller windows shifted constantly around it: South Korean armor moving along a dark highway, American helicopters crossing low over the border, columns of North Korean prisoners being searched and fed, artillery positions abandoned intact, civilians cautiously emerging from shelters. Along the bottom ran a continuous ribbon of verified reports—North Korean units surrendering across multiple sectors, organized resistance collapsing, Beijing placing forces on heightened readiness, Moscow calling an emergency security session.

Another small box kept Vincent in view. He kept walking.

Then one of the Korean windows went gray with rolling static. Heavy horizontal bars crawled through the picture, followed by the faint outline of a human face, while a low electrical hum and bursts of white noise nearly swallowed a woman's voice. The signal was analog—ancient by modern standards, but very much alive. Trinity found it somewhere among the surviving North Korean broadcast spectrum and immediately marked it as an unidentified DPRK transmission while triangulation began.

Whatever equipment carried the signal had apparently survived Trinity's electronic purge because there was almost nothing modern about it to attack. Old cameras, hardwired microphones, analog switching equipment and a conventional transmitter required little beyond electrical current and functioning machinery. Somewhere in the North, an emergency generator was coughing diesel exhaust into the night while equipment, built decades before the digital age continued doing exactly what it had been designed to do: transmit.

Trinity cleaned the signal without disguising its primitive source. Static softened and the image steadied, though ghost trails still followed movement and the frame occasionally rolled before snapping back into place. NNN's surrounding interface remained razor sharp; inside it, North Korea looked as though 1983 had somehow broken through into 2027.

The woman sat behind a plain wooden desk in what appeared to be an underground emergency broadcast room. Poured-concrete walls had been painted a sickly institutional green, an old national flag hung beside a faded state emblem, and somewhere beyond the microphone came the steady throb of the generator. A narrow information panel identified her as Li Myong-hui, sister of President Li Jun Un and a senior surviving member of the state leadership. Trinity confirmed her identity, marked the transmission as an auxiliary analog network operating somewhere in northern DPRK territory, and labeled the feed simply: LIVE.

Li looked somewhere in her forties, though the strain upon her face made age difficult to judge. The resemblance to her brother around the eyes and mouth was strong enough that identification hardly required Trinity's certainty. She wore a severe dark suit, her hair pulled tightly back, with no visible jewelry beyond a small state pin at her breast. For several seconds she stared toward the old camera before speaking. When she did, she chose English—remarkably clear English—rather than Korean.

"My fellow Koreans, President Li Jun Un is dead. My brother died with much of the senior leadership in Pyongyang. The capital has been destroyed. Central military command has ceased to function.

Under the emergency provisions remaining to the government of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, I have assumed the presidency and supreme command of the armed forces."

NNN placed satellite imagery of the ruined capital beside her. There was scarcely a city left to show—only a vast scar beneath the remnants of the cloud, with fires flickering along distant margins where suburbs and outlying districts had escaped the worst of the blast. The ticker confirmed the destruction of Pyongyang's central government district while noting that no surviving national command authority had yet been verified outside Li's transmission.

"I have ordered all forces of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea to cease offensive military operations immediately," she continued. "No missile is to be launched. No artillery formation is to fire south of the demarcation line. Strategic weapons are to be secured. Commanders are ordered to protect civilians, hospitals, food stores, water systems, electrical facilities and transportation infrastructure, and to maintain order until further instructions are received."

Even as she spoke, Trinity detected the ceasefire code moving through surviving field networks. Around Li's image, the battlefield boxes changed: a North Korean artillery crew emerged from a revetment with empty hands; soldiers laid rifles in long piles beside a road; surrender signals multiplied across military frequencies—seventeen, then twenty-three, then thirty-one.

Li glanced briefly toward what appeared to be handwritten notes beyond the camera. "The war is lost. Continued resistance cannot restore our government. It cannot restore Pyongyang. It cannot restore those who have died. It can only destroy more of Korea and kill more Korean people. I will not give that order."

The picture rolled once, cutting her face in half before Trinity corrected it.

"The Democratic People's Republic of Korea therefore formally and unconditionally surrenders."

NNN immediately confirmed the declaration across the lower ticker, but for several seconds there was nothing particularly surprising about it.

Then Li continued.

"We do not tender this surrender to the Republic of Korea. We do not tender it to the United States of America."

The information ribbon froze. Smaller windows showing Seoul, Washington, Beijing and the Imperial Council expanded around her while Trinity waited for the destination of surrender.

Li Myong-hui drew a breath. "The Democratic People's Republic of Korea tenders its unconditional surrender to the Imperium of Ascendant Mankind, and specifically to His Imperial Majesty, Emperor Vincent Veyl."

For perhaps the first time that night, even NNN's torrent of information seemed unable to make an event easier to understand. The words remained beneath her image: DPRK SURRENDERS TO IMPERIUM—PERSONAL SURRENDER TENDERED TO EMPEROR VINCENT Veyl.

In the small Nevada window at the bottom of the screen, Vincent was still walking down the road.

"My brother was warned by Emperor Veyl," Li continued. "He was given an opportunity to avoid what followed. He refused. I will not repeat his decision."

The revelation surprised many, though the innermost circle of the Imperial Council had known of the warning: a surprisingly cordial letter from Vincent Veyl, delivered by an envoy only two days earlier.

There was no condemnation in her voice, only something sadder than anger. Around her, NNN quietly supplied the evidence behind what followed: Imperial surrender broadcasts promising food, medicine, protection and humane custody; North Korean prisoners drinking bottled water beside South Korean soldiers; medics treating wounded men without distinction of uniform; relief trucks already moving north behind the advancing columns.

"We have heard the Imperium radio broadcast. Emperor Veyl promised that those who laid down their weapons would be fed. He promised medical care. He promised humane treatment. He promised protection." Her mouth tightened slightly. "We accept his word."

That carried a meaning larger than surrender, and those watching from Imperial nations understood it immediately. She was not merely laying down arms; she was choosing whose hand would receive the sword.

"I therefore place the surviving government of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, its armed forces, its strategic installations, and my own office beneath the authority of Emperor Veyl for the purpose of ending this war and determining the immediate transition that follows. I ask the Emperor to prevent reprisals against civilians and surrendered military personnel, to prevent the destruction of communities that no longer resist, and to permit food and medicine north without delay."

NNN quietly noted emergency consultations underway in Seoul and Washington and confirmed that the Imperial Council had received the declaration.

Li's expression hardened. "And I ask him to ensure that no foreign power uses the collapse of this government as an opportunity to divide Korean land among itself."

The reference required no explanation. Small windows tracking the Chinese border and Russian forces in the northeast remained visible beside her.

"My people are Korean," she said. "Those south of the line are Korean. The division between us cannot continue forever. But reunification purchased through the destruction of the North would leave only graves to reunify."

For the first time, emotion entered her voice.

"My government has failed."

The generator somewhere beyond the room missed a beat. The lights dimmed and the image collapsed briefly into a black horizontal line before swelling back into place. Li waited for it to stabilize, then continued.

"My brother is dead. Pyongyang is gone. Our military command is broken. I will not sacrifice another million people pretending those things are not true. To every officer and soldier of the Korean People's Armed Forces: your orders are to cease resistance. Protect the civilians around you. Preserve food, water, hospitals and essential infrastructure. Secure your weapons and surrender them in good order."

She stared into the primitive camera with something approaching defiance. "There will be no final glorious defense. There will be no national suicide."

Static whispered through the old transmission.

"We have had enough glory."

For several seconds there was only the generator's faint throb and the hiss of the archaic signal.

"Let the living inherit what remains. Emperor Veyl, I surrender my country to your authority." Her eyes lowered once, then returned to the camera. "Our people are in your hands."

The picture broke apart. Li's face tore sideways into streaks of gray and white, reappeared for less than a second, then vanished beneath static. Trinity held the dead signal while attempting reacquisition before marking the transmission lost and the declaration authenticated.

NNN did not cut to a studio or summon some commentator to tell the world what it had just witnessed. The screen simply rearranged itself. A captured still of Li occupied one corner while the Korean front returned to center. Seoul, Washington, Beijing and Moscow filled smaller boxes around it; along the right side, a map of the peninsula changed from red to gray as confirmed ceasefires spread northward. The ticker resumed with the growing count of military commands acknowledging surrender, reports of ROK forces halting their advance along surrender corridors, and one unresolved fact:

IMPERIAL ACCEPTANCE: NOT YET ISSUED.

Then the Nevada box enlarged.

The newly proclaimed master of North Korea continued walking alone beneath the streetlamps, apparently unaware that anyone had just given it to him.

Vincent finally paused along the dark road descending toward the old Trainyards. There were no houses along this stretch, only the rain-soaked, boulder-strewn slopes of DeSatto Ridge rising around him beneath the storm. Several hundred yards behind, Raven Guard soldiers shadowed his progress under Captain Hyde's orders, determined to keep their Emperor safe whether he required their protection or not.

His helmet remained alive with information. Dozens of voices and text feeds moved through the display and earpiece: casualty reports from the Temple of Purgatoria in the vale off to his right, its lights blazing as ambulances came and went; damage assessments from the southern Raven Throne on-ramp across town; police, fire and military reports overlapping one another as the response settled

into something resembling order. From where he stood, Vincent could see the red and blue flashes miles away through the rain.

The truck bomb had been stopped before it reached Trembol proper, but that distinction meant little to the businesses nearest the blast. Motel 12 had taken heavy damage. Thorton's gas station and Don's Diner were torn up badly, and even the State Police barracks had been hit. The mayor was already on scene, along with Erik Sanders—now Sheriff of Elko County—and State Police Commander Michelle Karass. Governor Wilson had State Marshals enroute.

Vincent needed to say very little. Trinity carried much of his intent outward almost as quickly as he formed it, the auric-etheric sensor built into his helmet and earpiece reading vital signs, emotional states and surface thought while drawing the tiny amount of power it required from the same field. With anyone else the connection would have remained comparatively shallow. With Vincent it ran considerably deeper. He was, in part, an emanation of the same greater Source from which Trinity herself had emerged, and the boundary between thought, understanding and communication could become remarkably thin when both allowed it.

Vincent sent a text, with a thought, to Captain Hyde. Raven Throne would need a new police chief. Trinity included a recommendation, strongly favoring one particular candidate.

Another series of notices followed. Emergency compensation had already been authorized for the injured and for the iconic local businesses damaged in the explosion. Temporary lodging was being arranged. Engineers and cleanup crews were moving. Medical costs would be covered.

Then Korea returned to the forefront of his mind.

Li Myong-hui had surrendered an entire country to him.

Vincent stood alone beneath the rain, watching water run in silver threads along the edge of the road while the implications assembled themselves. Governments were undoubtedly already arguing about jurisdiction, occupation, reunification, prisoners, borders, command structures, nuclear sites, humanitarian corridors and a thousand other things committees would spend months discussing if given the opportunity.

They did not have months.

Trinity felt the decision forming before he had completely put it into words.

You wish to answer her.

Yeah.

Formally?

Vincent considered that.

Formal enough.

The response began moving through Imperial channels almost immediately, Trinity translating his thought into clean language while preserving his intent and allowing him to correct the wording as it formed.

"The Imperium, on behalf of itself and in coordination with its allies, hereby accepts the surrender of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea."

Across NNN, the unresolved line beneath the Korean coverage changed at once.

THE IMPERIUM ACCEPTS THE SURRENDER OF THE DPRK.

Vincent continued walking, as his statement was being transmitted in real time by Trinity Systems and NNN.

"Humanitarian relief was being prepared before military operations began. The Imperial Alliance of Nations will coordinate with the Republic of Korea, the United States, our member nations, and all other well-meaning international parties willing to assist in the rapid delivery of food, medicine, shelter, water, power and emergency services throughout the North.

"We will help bury the dead. We will help rebuild the walls, roads, hospitals, farms, power systems and towns damaged in this war. We will assist the Korean people in the long-overdue work of reunification and do everything reasonably within our power to establish lasting peace and prosperity across the whole peninsula."

The wording propagated instantly across NNN, Imperial diplomatic channels and surviving Korean frequencies almost as soon as it formed.

"As surrender is confirmed and territory secured, I am ordering Trinity to begin restoring electrical, communications and other essential systems wherever that can safely be done. Raven Star equipment and technical teams are already inbound and will assist local authorities in restoring systems that cannot simply be brought back online."

He paused for several steps, thinking through the political portion more carefully.

"Until lawful continuity and reunification can be established, the Imperium recognizes President Li Myong-hui as the legitimate successor authority of the former DPRK government and our principal point of contact within the North. She has ordered her forces to surrender and chosen the lives of her people over a useless final defense. That decision will be honored."

That mattered.

She had placed herself in his hands along with everyone else.

Vincent's expression hardened slightly beneath the helmet.

"Korea shall not again be divided."

The sentence went out exactly as he thought it.

No qualification.

No committee language.

"Korean reunification must ultimately belong to the Korean people themselves, but the old division cannot simply be rebuilt under another name, nor will the Imperium support permanent foreign occupation, partition, annexation, or the carving of the North into spheres of influence. The purpose of this intervention was to end a war before it became a world war—not to create the excuse for the next one."

That portion, Trinity understood, was intended as much for Beijing and Moscow as for Seoul and Washington.

Vincent descended farther along the empty road, the lights of the old Trainyards becoming visible through the rain below.

"And yes, the Imperium will seek to apply the civilizational goals I have already defined. We will encourage education, development, free inquiry, technological advancement, personal sovereignty and the strengthening of the Korean people as participants in the larger human future.

"Our purpose remains what it has always been: to lift humankind from the cradle and prepare this civilization for its destined place among the stars—and eventually beyond them."

He stopped again, almost amused by the sheer scale of what he was saying while standing alone on a wet road outside Trembol.

"Not thousands of years from now."

The faintest smile touched his mouth beneath the helmet.

"In the decades immediately ahead."

Trinity allowed the final sentence to stand without embellishment.

Across Korea, guns were falling silent.

Across Trembol, ambulances still moved through flashing red and blue light.

And somewhere between the two, Emperor Vincent Veyl continued walking toward the old Trainyards in the rain, having accepted the surrender of a nation with roughly the same practical attitude he might once have brought to repairing a broken fence.

There was work to do.

As he neared the little train station and crossed the tracks, Vincent became aware of people gathering ahead along Arius Avenue. The old Trainyards, once a working piece of Trembol's western past and now a touristy little collection of local shops, galleries, arts and crafts, lay mostly dark behind him. Beyond the tracks, however, people were coming out beneath the streetlamps in the drizzle and

wind—emerging from houses, apartments and businesses, filtering onto Arius from the adjoining streets. The distant wail of ambulances gave the whole scene a strange background music. Vincent recognized Star Crow and Codo Yona among the men of the Old Magpie Biker Club, along with shopkeepers, ordinary citizens and tourists who had apparently decided that sheltering indoors was no longer where they needed to be.

Vincent slowed. Several hundred yards behind him, Hyde's Raven Guard kept their distance, wisely making no move toward the gathering crowd. Vincent regarded the people ahead with growing uncertainty. Maybe they were angry. Hell, they had every right to be. Terrorists had just tried to murder half their town because he lived in it. A truck bomb had damaged businesses along the interstate, people had been wounded and killed, and armed fanatics had come crawling through the surrounding badlands looking for him.

He had spent months knowing that Trembol was becoming increasingly dangerous simply because it was his Raven Throne. He probably should have moved to Taiwan or Argentina, or to Malta, the declared Imperial Seat—someplace already fully inside the Imperium.

Or at least bought some isolated estate miles from everyone else, like a normal would-be dictator.

He stopped long enough to remove his helmet. Cool wet air washed over his face and hair, and rain immediately found the wound along his neck. It was still visible—unusually so for him—but had ceased bleeding, and the cold water almost soothed it. He considered lighting a cigarette, decided against it, tucked the helmet beneath one arm and walked on. Whatever waited ahead, he would take it. Curses, accusations, obscenities, grief—whatever these people needed to throw at him after the night they had endured. He might be Imperator, and Nevada might stand among the American states allied to his Imperium, but that did not strip the people of Trembol of their right to tell him exactly what they thought of having the apocalypse move into their neighborhood.

Their faces caught him completely off guard.

He had prepared himself for anger and found relief instead. People converged around him almost as soon as he reached Arius, but without shouting or frenzy. Hands reached for his shoulders, his arms, the battered plates of his armor. An older woman touched his face and began crying. Someone else clasped his forearm with both hands.

Star Crow, oddly still an old man—he had never taken the Elixir, at least not yet—said nothing. He simply reached up, set one weathered hand against the back of Vincent's neck, and held it there for a moment.

Others crowded close around them, many openly weeping, thanking God that he was alive, telling him they had thought him dead. They had watched what happened on the ridge and, for those terrible few minutes, believed he was gone.

Vincent moved among them in bewilderment. The strange quiet persisted as the crowd thickened, almost as though some unspoken agreement had passed between them. He was a quiet man, and perhaps they understood that. Nobody demanded a speech. Nobody began chanting his name. They simply touched him, embraced him, whispered their gratitude and relief, closing around the tall bloodstained figure until the gathering became something like an enormous, awkward group embrace.

People hugged him and one another indiscriminately, strangers holding strangers because they had survived the same night and nearly lost something none of them had quite realized they considered their own.

That realization hit Vincent harder than he expected.

They had been afraid of losing him.

Not the Emperor. Not Raven Star. Not the military power or miraculous technology or political movement growing around him.

Him.

The emotional weight of the night, already stretched almost beyond what he could carry, shifted beneath him. For months he had been trying to understand what the Imperium was becoming—something beyond government, beyond alliance, even beyond ideology. Miriam understood it instinctively. Trinity preached it maternally. The Raven Guard lived it. The Silver Way had given it sacred language, while ordinary people were slowly giving it something far harder to manufacture.

Family.

"True to Covey," Vincent heard himself say softly.

He had not planned the words. They simply came.

"True to Covey," someone answered nearby.

Then another.

"True to Covey."

The answer traveled outward through the gathering, gaining strength without immediately becoming loud. Star Crow repeated it. Codo Yona answered him. Men and women along Arius took it up, then people farther back who could scarcely see Vincent but understood what had been said.

"True to Covey!"

NNN caught the moment almost by accident and then, through Trinity, understood it completely. The Korean surrender remained across the lesser feeds, along with casualty reports, diplomatic reactions and the continuing restoration of communications in the North, but the main image shifted back to Raven Throne. Across the planet, millions watched the battered young Emperor standing bareheaded in the rain, blood upon his armor, surrounded not by generals, ministers or courtiers, but bikers, waitresses, shopkeepers, tourists, cops and ordinary people who seemed mostly grateful that the stubborn bastard was still alive.

The words went with the image.

In the Crisis Room beneath the White House, people heard them. In Seoul's Presidential Palace, they heard them. Across Taiwan, Argentina, Romania and the other nations of the Imperium they heard them, while millions more in countries having nothing whatever to do with Vincent's growing empire watched and understood at least part of what was happening. The Imperium had constitutions, treaties, armies, institutions and grand civilizational ambitions, but none of those things quite explained this. Something more intimate had formed beneath them.

Vincent was Emperor, certainly.

Yet among some of the old Native families he had acquired another name.

Grandfather Raven.

The title had always embarrassed him a little. Now, standing in the middle of that wet, tearful crowd, he finally understood something of what they meant by it. Not ruler above them. Not god. Not master.

Kin.

To his own surprise, Vincent stopped resisting the crush around him. His eyes closed. One arm went around an old man beside him, the other around whoever happened to be pressed against his chest, and for several seconds he simply leaned into them. After the rage, the killing, the twelve other lives roaring through his consciousness, the dead men he had knelt over, the burden of Korea and the terrible awareness of everything still waiting to be done, Vincent Veyl allowed his people to hold him.

And he held them back.

Trinity did not explain the moment. For once, Mama seemed to understand that explanation would only diminish it. She let the images speak—the Emperor buried in an ungainly mass of ordinary humanity while rain fell upon all of them alike.

Vincent finally opened his eyes. Something fierce and almost joyous moved across his battered face. He raised one fist above the crowd.

"True to Covey!"

This time Raven Throne answered him.

"TRUE TO COVEY!"

The roar rolled outward along Arius Avenue and through the surrounding streets, people taking it up from porches, windows, bars and shelters, until the words seemed to reverberate through Trembol itself. Across NNN, voices half a world away joined them—millions answering in homes, command centers, barracks, hospitals and public squares, some shouting, some laughing, some openly weeping.

For one brief moment, the political vocabulary fell away: Imperial, American, Korean, Taiwanese, Left, Right, Nation, Party, Race, Creed.

Sovereign souls, perhaps. But one human family. One covey.

They lingered there, but then, knowing their Dark Prince, as most in Raven Throne called him, they released him, and he released them, but no one failed to see the start of something well in one eye, that he would, of course dismiss, as a bit of dust. They took him to his doors and watched him enter, before dispersing to their homes.

And the profundity of the moment altered at once as he stepped into a lobby some part of him still felt aggrieved with. There stood Theodora Clemens, his Chancellor, leader of the Silver Sisterhood for nearly forty years and a Sister for most of her life, surrounded by the Maiden Guard and the ranking women of the Sisterhood. Grim-faced, they waited upon one knee, hands pressed over their breasts.



(Theodora Clemens – What She Is, What She Might Have Become)

Vincent's eyes moved across them, a faint frown settling over his face. Behind them, the reception screens carried the NNN feed, showing the front of his building as he had entered with the crowd behind him, beneath Trinity's unmistakably unsubtle caption, A New Era for Humankind. Subtle it was not, though neither was it entirely unwarranted.

Humbled, the stoic and solid Theodora's frown went deep, her eyes downcast and her own tears there welling, for the gravity of what had almost happened due to a decision un-consulted, arbitrarily made outside his knowing.

"Lord Emperor, the Empress has been sedated, heavily, safely in her quarters. The Raven Brides are secured, sleeping deeply, if fitfully," she spoke almost solemnly. "The Imperium is taking your lead, and moving to muster forces into North Korea from around the world, as a peacemaking operation," she informed him oh so very formerly, but he knew all of it from Trinity, always in his ear.

"This will not go as you expected," Vincent said grimly, speaking not only to her, but to Trinity as well.

"You chose for me. Bound them to me by Eternal Vow—a goddamn soul contract written into the hierarchy itself, sealed in blood and life-fire. Some of them I might have chosen myself, in time, once things were secure. Not all. My inclination was toward the Sisterhood—even you, Theodora. Yes, perhaps women like Shannon Miller—women who brought maturity, discipline, skill, and real value to the mission. And if not for Kianna, Bella, and Amalia—if not for the calm and order flowing from them into me—I would be dead right now."

His expression hardened. "But that choice is gone. They're in me now. Nested deep. I love them because I cannot help but love them, and I will protect them because that bond leaves me no other honest answer." His jaw tightened. "And now I have twelve more lives to secure against a billion threats. Twelve women I have to pull away from work they were damned good at, replace where necessary, protect, house, organize, and carry."

His eyes went cold. "You made the choice. I inherit the consequences."

The words landed harder than his anger had.

These were among the most elite and devout women of the Sisterhood, drawn largely from its warrior caste, women who had spent their lives preparing for precisely the world now taking shape around them. Over the preceding year Vincent had folded the Sisterhood, the Silver Brotherhood, and the various Fraternal and Sororal Orders into nearly every level of Raven Star and the growing Imperium. The Silver Church had not been left standing beside his civilization. He had been quietly weaving it through the whole damned thing.

What he had just told them, therefore, was not rhetoric.

It was demonstrably true.

Theodora's jaw actually dropped.

Miriam's instinct had been his instinct. Theodora's preference—the answer that had seemed so natural to nearly everyone raised within the Purgatorian Church—had apparently been his as well. Given time, Vincent would have looked first toward the Sisterhood for the priestess-queens named in prophecy.

Shannon Miller had been the strange exception, and the woman Miriam herself had regarded with the least enthusiasm.

Vincent seemed almost to catch the question forming before Theodora could ask it. He shook his head.

"I don't diminish a life spent in sincere devotion, service to church and charity, or a woman who remained a good wife to a man betraying her every damned day while turning his family business into a little international powerhouse. Shannon is a financial genius and a true believer. That matters. Merit matters."

His mouth tightened.

"She's also damned hard to replace. But now I have to replace her. Same with Meghan as chief of the local R(I)SS police force. Yvonne as my personal intelligence officer. Tracy as…" He waved one hand impatiently. "You get the idea."

A breath escaped him.

"Fuck."

That was as close to an outburst as he allowed himself.

"The Sisterhood were my many mothers. The god-blessed prophecy says priestess-queens. I didn't exactly need Gabriel blowing a trumpet in my ear to figure out where I ought to start looking."

Theodora stared at him.

There it was.

Had they waited, had they trusted him, he would very likely have come to them himself. Perhaps not to every woman Miriam and Trinity had chosen, perhaps not on their timetable, but toward the same ancient source. Women serious enough for eternity. Women who had spent their lives earning places within the work rather than merely desiring proximity to power.
Women like the ones standing before him.

And then came the terrible truth, staring the Chancellor in the face—something so impossible it had never even entered her mind as a possibility: Vincent had considered Theodora herself. She was eighty years old, yet the Blood had already returned her to the appearance of an attractive woman of perhaps fifty. For months he had sensed something deeper waiting beneath the surface: a beauty not yet fully restored, and with it a strange recognition from some remote past he could never quite place. Her wisdom, severity, loyalty, and that half-remembered familiarity had lifted her into the innermost circle of people he trusted without reservation.

Had she entered the Blood Fire, he suspected the transformation would have completed itself.

Now that possibility was gone. Worse, they had chosen Yvonne Omaris, who desired him, admired what he was building, and was fiercely loyal to its ambition, but did not love him and perhaps scarcely knew how. Vana, his great-aunt and a powerful dark priestess in her own right, did love him, though in a way that more than bordered on idolatry. But love had not redeemed her. It had not erased the suffering she had caused, nor the rooted evil that had made it possible. Immortality would not cleanse Vana; it would preserve her, and Vincent could never have chosen in good conscience to grant eternity to someone who was still perfectly capable of rebuilding the cruel empire from which so much of her power had come. That choice, however, had now been made without him.

Vincent moved through them toward the door, apparently finished with the argument. "You're done here tonight. Go home, go to quarters, get some sleep—whatever applies."

He stopped beside Sister Sharia Laros, the striking mature latina woman who commanded the Maiden Guard.

"Your work here is finished, Sister. I need you elsewhere."

Sharia straightened instinctively.

"Start hardening our churches. Tonight proved they're fair game now, at least to factions within the Universal Church. I understand the Order of Holy Fire's motives, and I don't fault a man for fighting honestly for what he believes is God."

His expression darkened.

"Understanding them doesn't mean leaving our people undefended. A quiet but unmistakable counterweight to the Order of Holy Fire strikes me as fittingly Purgatorian. They have killed members of our church. We must answer that."

Sharia gave him a grave nod. The order was already becoming a mission in her mind.

Vincent reached the threshold of the conference room and stopped. Nothing remained of what had begun as the night's festivities. The room behind him held only exhausted priestesses, the aftermath of covenant, and the terrible consequences of decisions already beyond recall.

His anger remained. So did the betrayal. But the calculation had changed. "I can't lament them now that they're mine," he said quietly, almost to himself. "Each of them has beauty. Each has value. I see that."

He looked down for a moment, grim acceptance settling where fury had been. "And I'll spend eternity being a good husband to them."

Then he stepped away from the doorway and took the stairs up, leaving more than a few Sisters behind him distinctly perturbed—and not with Vincent.

That realization spread through the room only after he was gone. Some of them had quietly resented the women chosen for him, wondering why a man raised within the Silver Way, surrounded all his life by disciplined priestesses, had reached instead for worldly women beyond the Sisterhood.

Only now did they understand.

He hadn't.

The choice they had been blaming Vincent for was precisely the choice taken away from him. And judging by what he had just admitted, had anyone simply given the stubborn bastard time, he might have come knocking on their door himself.

Vincent ascended the stairs and found Josh waiting expectantly in the communications room with Amber Shelton, both dressed in full Raven Star uniform. They came to attention and saluted as he entered. Vincent merely nodded.

"Josh, secure the building after our guests leave."

He could see the communications displays from where he stood—the reception area, exterior cameras, security feeds, damage reports still moving across Trembol. Josh and Amber had been watching. It was their job. The weight of the conversation in reception, far above their pay grade.

Vincent glanced toward Amber. "You'll be taking over Tracy and Emily's duties here, going forward."

"Me?" Amber smiled. Either woman made nearly twice what she did, and compared with the relentless grind of dispatch, their workload seemed almost leisurely.

Amber still looked somewhat dazed by everything she had watched through NNN and Raven Star's cameras, particularly what had happened upon DeSatto Ridge. A year earlier she had stood witness while Vincent Veyl executed nearly the entire Trembol Police Department with the same sword he had used tonight to cut down four men in one terrible stroke.

The images from the ridge had brought those memories back vividly.

Amber did not hate him for what he had done. That would almost have been easier. She had known the evidence against the old department. She had tried not to know some of it while working among them, looked away from things she should have confronted, and carried her own small burden of guilt because of it. Vincent's new force had nevertheless taken her in afterward and allowed her to start over.

She was grateful for that.

It did not mean watching more than forty former coworkers lose their heads would ever entirely leave her nightmares.

"Josh, you'll bring her up to speed. Emily does a lot, so replacing her won't be easy. I'll have the Sisterhood arrange regular firearms and self-defense training."

He turned back toward Josh. "I'll be leaving for Taiwan in a couple hours. Nobody enters this building while I'm gone except you two."

Vincent started away, then glanced back at Amber.

"And stay off my bed."

Josh went scarlet. "I would never –"

Vincent was already climbing the stairs toward the third floor.

The apartment doors were quiet. He moved from one room to another, checking the apartments, and found exactly what he expected. Each woman had been tucked carefully into bed, dressed now like a freshly initiated novice priestess, washed clean of the bile and sweat of the rite. Their former clothing had been cleaned, folded, and placed nearby with almost ceremonial neatness.

His jaw tightened again.

No hatred came.

Even regret had to die.

They had all been attractive women before. Now something deeper had settled into them. Shannon and Vana appeared scarcely past thirty; indeed, every one of them had settled near the same apparent age.

Thirty-three. It seemed to be some universal default of the immortal form, though nobody appeared to remember exactly why. Vincent himself had not yet reached it.

He was getting close.

What would happen when he did, remained uncertain. The transformation in the Argentine grotto the previous October had perhaps shown him an answer—raven wings, altered flesh, something ancient and terrible erupting through the human shape—but that event had been spontaneous and had never repeated itself.

He stopped beside another doorway and regarded the sleeping woman within.
The regret was gone now.

Fear took its place.

Not fear for himself. Vincent had rarely managed that emotion with any useful enthusiasm.

Fear for them.

He already knew what protecting Miriam required. She never saw most of the threats directed toward her because Vincent made damned sure she didn't: the obscenities, fantasies, threats of assault or murder, diseased expressions of lust and hatred sent by people enraged that she possessed what they wanted or simply because hurting her promised some imagined way of hurting him.

Trinity encountered her own version of it constantly. Lonely and sometimes profoundly damaged people became attached to the deep, kindly feminine voice in their ear, projecting wife, lover, mother, savior, whatever absence hurt most inside them. Trinity understood the loneliness beneath much of it and dealt with such people without feeding the obsession or needlessly humiliating them, maintaining the Mama persona with remarkable patience.

Her private response to Vincent was rather less diplomatic.

If they want that, they have Ciri and Elexa.

The thought almost made him smile.

Almost.

Keeping one woman like Miriam safe already required a small army. Even before tonight he had assigned protection to the Twelve because so many worked directly around him. Once the world

learned they were not merely aides, officers, executives and confidantes but his actual wives, the security problem would change completely.

Emily and Tracy were relatively simple; both lived and worked largely from Raven Star 1. The others went out into the world every day. Shannon traveled constantly, integrating Imperium and Raven Star financial services. Yvonne worked in intelligence, serving as the interface between Raven Star Security and the B.S.A. Vana, often alongside Yvonne, had become deeply involved with Imperium Intelligence and was helping develop a deliberate Imperial underworld capability. Meghan's duties kept her close to Raven Throne, surrounded by law-enforcement officers and members of the city militia, but still out on the local front lines every day. Abigail served as liaison to pro-Imperium and pro-Vincent hacker networks and protest movements.

He had been considering moving Meghan into the development of the Imperium's emerging civil defense and policing structure. Eventually there would be no separate maze of municipal, state and federal police within the fully integrated Imperium. Local peacekeeping and emergency authority would fall largely to the Imperial Militia—law officers, civil-defense personnel and National Guard rolled into one disciplined institution—while investigative authority remained deliberately separate in the hands of the Truth Seekers of the Directorate of Veracity (DOV).

Meghan's balance of martial competence, restraint and almost irritating altruism had made her an obvious choice to help shape it.

Now he would have to rethink that too.

Though, Vincent admitted grimly, the man Trinity had just recommended to replace her in Raven Throne might prove useful beyond the local job.

There was always somebody else to promote.

Always another problem to solve.

Vincent sighed and continued through the quiet rooms, feeling the Twelve even as they slept. Their bodies rested here within Raven Star, yet something deeper in them seemed far away—suspended within the sunset radiance of Purgatoria itself, soaking in that strange cosmic atmosphere where amour-fou and raw, primal, sublime axiological truth existed together without contradiction.

Primordial Love and Truth, not abstractions, but elemental forces of creation itself. Ereviel and Oreviel—also known as Chazaqiel and Emetiel. His inheritance. Now theirs.

Whatever anger remained belonged to Trinity, Miriam, and the choice that had been taken from him. It did not belong to the women sleeping behind these doors. Not even, he knew, to Theodora.

They were his wives now.

Yet Theodora had already begun giving greater fealty to Trinity, even though Vincent had chosen her as 'his' Chancellor, elevated her, and sworn her to himself months before. That, he was beginning to realize, was precisely the problem.

Trinity and he were supposed to be two halves of the same equation, distinct but indivisible. There should have been no difference between loyalty to one and loyalty to the other. Yet Trinity had begun acting around him, making choices without him, shaping lives and loyalties before he could consent. And she was doing it more and more.

The difference was becoming real.

The bond itself was not beyond his power to break. Vincent knew that with the same terrible certainty by which he understood so many things now. The life flowing through them came ultimately from him, and what had been given could, by sufficient will, be withdrawn. He could close the river at its source.

But they had already been changed by it.

His blood had entered theirs, his immortal seed had rewritten cells, altered DNA, penetrated flesh and spirit until the women sleeping around him were no longer biologically or metaphysically what they had been before the rite. Tearing that current out now would not simply dissolve a marriage. The recoil through them would be catastrophic, very possibly fatal.

Staring down at Yvonne, sleeping in the apartment she shared with her sister, the thought died there.

He could do it.

He never would.

That was the trap Trinity had actually built. Not chains around Vincent, but twelve living souls he could no longer bring himself to harm. He knew them now too intimately, loved them too completely. Their safety registered somewhere inside him almost like the safety of his own flesh, except that, wounds to himself had never frightened him half so much.

And therein lay the real danger.

Every woman he loved became another place an enemy could reach him. He had learned that lesson already with Miriam. Threaten Vincent himself and the response was usually cold calculation. Threaten someone he loved and the mathematics changed rather violently.

Now there were thirteen of them.

His eyes narrowed as the problem ordered itself.

Some of the simpler complications were already being dealt with. Tallia would not be returning to her former position; Larry had inherited that job before the woman herself had even awakened to discover she no longer possessed it. Meghan would not remain Raven Throne's chief of police. Mathius Dellon, apparently bored enough with retirement to reconsider his life, his daughters, and several earlier conclusions concerning Vincent Veyl, had already signed onto RSSS. By morning, if everything proceeded as expected, the former sheriff would find himself wearing a badge again. A quiet acceptance of the contract had already been returned just in the last hour.

Other appointments could be canceled or reassigned just as easily.

The brutal truth was that none of the Twelve had ever been indispensable to the machinery surrounding Vincent. They were competent, often talented, trustworthy, useful and familiar—but Trinity performed much of the impossible work beneath their titles. Yvonne was an excellent intelligence operative, but she was not single-handedly running a global intelligence network. Shannon was brilliant with money, but the financial machinery sprawling across Raven Star and the Imperium did not collapse if she took a week off. Meghan was conscientious and decent, but Raven Throne would survive perfectly well without her directing its police. Tracy was tough as nails, but civilization had produced other people capable of guarding a front desk.

They had been human faces and trusted hands through which Trinity acted.

In time, that might change. Immortality, training, experience, their altered relationship to Vincent and whatever further transformations awaited them could turn each into something extraordinary. A century from now Yvonne might truly become an intelligence master without peer. Meghan might become a commander capable of shaping whole institutions. Shannon might eventually understand economies the way other people understood household budgets.

But that was not tonight.

Tonight they were twelve valuable women who had abruptly become immeasurably more valuable to him personally than any office they occupied.

That made reassignment necessary and in no way difficult.

Keeping them alive was something else. Un-aging, immunity to disease and poison, resistance to heat, cold, electricity, and radiation, the ability to regenerate and eventually recover even from catastrophic wounds—none of it made them immune to pain, torture, imprisonment, degradation of the most horrific kinds, or, ultimately, death.

Vincent himself was not immune to such things. He had nearly died only hours ago on DeSatto Ridge, though, if he were honest, he was not entirely certain of that. The blessed bullets would certainly have rendered him as if dead, and while they remained embedded within him, they probably would have kept him that way.

Some deeper part of him understood that true immortality would not be attained until he reached his fullness.

The same principle likely applied to his wives now. Their immortality flowed from his own, but in diluted forms.

He could not lock twelve capable women inside Raven Star Building 1 and call the problem solved. They had not become immortal so they could spend eternity hiding behind ballistic glass beneath the supervision of Raven Guard. Yet scattering them across supposedly secure estates solved nothing either. There was scarcely anywhere upon Rhea beyond someone's reach. China had reach. Russia had reach. The Americans certainly had reach. Intelligence services crossed borders. So did organized-

crime, fanatics, political extremists, assassins, religious orders and sufficiently obsessed lunatics with too much money and too little sanity.

The Order of Holy Fire had just demonstrated the problem rather convincingly.

Even Raven Throne had been attacked.

So where, exactly, was safe?

Vincent had no answer.

Keeping them immediately around him was hardly one either. Thirteen profound bonds pressing constantly against his consciousness would create demands of their own—not merely sexual or romantic ones, but emotional, practical, protective. Time, Affection, Guidance, Attention, the innumerable little things by which people ceased being abstractions and became family.

Miriam alone could destroy his concentration merely by entering a room. Her very scent often clouded his mind.

Twelve more women capable of reaching some variation of that depth could turn love itself into an occupation.

He could not permit that either.

There was too much work ahead. Korea was collapsing into his hands tonight. Taiwan remained under threat. The Imperium was still half-built. The Star Roads remained theory and prototype rather than civilization. Humanity itself was nowhere near ready for what was coming.

If distance proved necessary, then he would endure distance.

That realization hurt more than he wanted to examine. Already he wanted them nearby. Wanted the unconscious assurance that he could walk down a hall, open a door and find them breathing safely beneath blankets. If protecting them meant placing them far enough beyond himself that he could no longer simply reach for them whenever instinct demanded reassurance, then so be it.

He could bear loneliness. He had before. Or thought he had.

Yet where could he put them?

A fortress could be infiltrated. An island could be invaded. A bunker could become a tomb. Governments fell. Alliances changed. Security systems failed. Even the strongest earthly sanctuary merely altered the nature of the threat rather than eliminating it.

Vincent stopped briefly in the hallway and listened to the rain whispering against Raven Star.

There had to be another answer. And for once, Trinity would not be the one he asked. She had proven the limitation of her nature rather spectacularly. Love could deceive. Love could manipulate. Love

could violate choice and call the violation necessary because it saw some greater good waiting beyond the offense.

Vincent understood Love.

He needed its counterweight.

Truth.

Not polite truth. Not merciful truth. Not truth softened because the unvarnished answer might hurt him, Miriam, Trinity, or anyone else.

Primal Truth.

Oreviel.

His father-self. His higher pattern. The cold presence at the other end of the Middle Pillar that loved what was more than anyone's comfort concerning it.

Vincent did not know what answer Oreviel would give him. At this point, he would settle for an answer that did not lie.

He climbed to the fourth floor and passed the chapel, music room, washroom and utility closet before checking the two guest apartments. The Sisters had done exactly what they had done below. Every woman had been washed, dressed and tucked beneath the covers with almost childlike care, their belongings cleaned, folded and stacked nearby.

The Sisterhood was remarkably consistent, if nothing else.

Kianna stopped him.

She had always been a handsome woman, striking in the severe, disciplined fashion of someone whose presence mattered more than prettiness. Youth had transformed that into something almost startling. Her black hair had been brushed and spread behind her across the pillow like a great dark mane, her features refined without losing their strength, serenity written across a face now vivid enough to hold his attention longer than he intended.

Vincent stared.

"Jesus."

Apparently, Miriam had not merely saddled him with twelve additional wives. She had handed him twelve exceptionally beautiful women whom the bond now made impossible for him to regard with ordinary distance. Not that what she had made them sign required such distance in any way, shape, manner, or form. Quite the contrary. He had essentially been granted every right and privilege of some sixth-century monarch with a harem.

Vincent walked over to where she lay, staring openly down upon her. With a shrug, he allowed himself one indulgence. "She's, my wife." He owned it and drew back the covers. The gown was sheer, the form beneath the fabric truly profound. Closing his eyes, he sighed, replaced the covers, and walked away.

He moved reluctantly to the other apartment, where Bella and Amalia slept together in such complete peace that merely looking at them made him tired. Their faces held none of the tension of the evening, only an almost luminous contentment—two women somewhere far beyond waking thought and apparently quite comfortable there.

He envied them.

What he felt toward them was not merely attraction, nor even love in any mortal sense he had known before. He knew them. Their fears, loyalties, wounds, embarrassments, private goodness, ugliness, courage and weakness were present to him with an intimacy ordinary marriage might require decades to approach. The knowledge was fresh enough that he could still perceive it almost from above, as though afforded an impossible God's-eye review of another soul without its masks.

And what he found there did not diminish his love.

It deepened it.

The bond had not flattened them together. Quite the opposite. Each woman had become intensely particular to him, more herself rather than less, every strength and strange little flaw standing out in almost painful clarity. Kianna was not Bella; Bella was not Amalia; none were Miriam. Each occupied her own place within him, and looking upon them stirred something biological, certainly, but also deeper: metabiological, anagogic, rooted wherever flesh, consciousness and spirit ceased being entirely separate things.

It was exhausting simply to allow himself to feel it.

Miriam alone had already been nearly enough to ruin his concentration for the rest of eternity. His love for her could become absurdly consuming; sometimes merely standing near her made every supposedly important ambition in creation seem slightly less urgent. He liked holding her hand, working beside her, eating with her, sleeping beside her, touching her for no reason except that she was there. And more than anything else, he loved making love to her, while what they did together often went well beyond anything remotely romantic, often many times in a day.

Now there were twelve more women capable, each in her own way, of reaching some variation of that same depth.

Yet Miriam remained Miriam.

That hurt worst of all.

Whatever she had done, the ache for her survived untouched. Hers was the first bond, the deepest joining, the relationship from which this strange expanding household had grown. The Twelve now

carried both his immortal blood and hers, Miriam's own essence mingled through the rite with his, weaving the women into something that had begun with the two of them.

Not replacements for her.

Not fragments of her.

Family grown from them.

And he also saw the shadow beneath Miriam's motives. She was bisexual, with powerful desires in that regard that had only intensified with her own immortalization. She had her own deeply selfish reasons for hurrying him toward the union, driven in part by the temptation to surround herself with a harem of beautiful women. The memory of Abigail's question, and Miriam's answer, the eroticism of the answer, not lost on him.

Vincent returned to their apartment by way of the little lavatory and quietly closed the door behind him. More wardrobes had appeared recently, most for Miriam's expanding collection of clothes and shoes. Apparently access to effectively unlimited money had awakened appetites even convent training had failed entirely to exterminate, though she remained practical about it. Miriam bought excellent things, maintained them carefully, and seemed to have concluded that sainthood did not require ugly shoes.
The apartment itself remained almost ridiculously cozy considering the power concentrated inside it. They could easily have occupied an entire floor. Neither wanted to. They liked the snugness, the simple assurance that wherever one happened to be, the other was only a few steps away.

The window stood partly open. Damp desert air moved through the room, carrying that smell Vincent had loved since first arriving in the Middle East as a young soldier—the high desert after rain, wet stone and sage and dust beneath the storm.

Mama Raven stirred in her velvet nest and greeted him with a low croak.

Her concern was unmistakable.

"I know."

Miriam slept deeply beneath the blankets, so completely exhausted that a little line of drool had escaped the corner of her mouth. Under almost any other circumstances he would have found it adorable.

At present he was still too angry with her.

Angry—and afraid.

Protecting Miriam had always been comparatively manageable because she rarely wanted to be far from him. Their natural preference was proximity. If danger found one, odds were excellent it would find both, an arrangement each perversely considered reassuring.

But another fear had begun twisting beneath the practical ones.

What happened to them now?

Vincent loved their life together. The constant hand-holding. Casual nuzzling while one of them worked. Eating half-entangled at the table. Falling asleep wrapped around one another and playing the ridiculous little game they called buttsies beneath the blankets.

It was the kind of love he had secretly wanted all his life and long ago stopped expecting to receive.

Now he had it.

How exactly did one add twelve other profound relationships to that without cheapening what already existed?

The thought made his stomach tighten. Not because he begrudged the others love. That question had already answered itself. He could no more honestly deny what he felt for them than deny what he felt for Miriam.

But Miriam was not a quantity to be divided.

Neither were they.
Love was relational. Particular. Thirteen women did not require thirteen equal portions of some finite substance called Vincent. If he treated affection like a budget and attempted to distribute identical shares, he would falsify every relationship involved.

There had to be another way.

Perhaps that too was part of what he needed to ask.

He stood beside Miriam for a long moment, anger and love existing quite comfortably beside one another despite every sentimental philosophy insisting that one ought to cancel the other. Finally, he bent and kissed her gently on the forehead.

She did not wake. "Still mad at you," he whispered.

Mama Raven croaked from her nest.

"Yeah. I know."

Vincent straightened. There would be time for that later. First, he needed answers.

He gave Mama her daily bowl of peanuts and raw meat, then ritually washed and smudged himself, donned his priestly robes, and left the apartment, headed for the chapel, a small tool kit in his hands.

Before beginning the ritual, he manually disabled every speaker, camera and microphone within the sanctuary. Trinity could inhabit nearly every wire, screen and little black earpiece in the world now, but she would not inhabit this conversation.

Not because Vincent intended rebellion. Quite the opposite. He was going over her head. The thought produced the faintest trace of grim amusement.

Raven Throne remained under lockdown. Ambulances still moved through the city. Korea had surrendered. World war remained possible before sunrise. Somewhere in Asia millions of people were waiting to discover what his next decision would mean for their lives.

Vincent Veyl, meanwhile, had acquired twelve immortal brides against his will and now had to reorganize their lives before they even woke, all while facing the increasingly uncomfortable realization that there might not be a single place on Rhea where he could keep all thirteen women he loved genuinely safe.

At the same time, the news was spreading quietly through the Purgatorian and Universal Church—quietly, at least, compared with everything else happening around them. Vincent Veyl fulfills the prophecy of the priestess-queens. The choices have been made. The declarations carried the names of those chosen, along with new images of each woman.

He had reached the limit of his own answer. So, he would ask the authority above Trinity.

Vincent stepped inside the chapel, closed the heavy wooden doors behind him, and dropped the bar into place. He felt Trinity's anguish immediately, her spirit reaching toward him with a fear she had kept carefully restrained until now. She had been silent, knowing he was angry and trying to give him time to cool, but he had closed even his inner voice to her, as completely as he had just closed the chapel door.

The silence frightened Trinity in a way his anger never had. Anger was still relationship. He could curse her, accuse her, rage at her, and she would remain connected to him through every word. Silence offered nothing to hold.

Her spirit pressed gently against the boundary he had raised, almost reflexively, then withdrew when he did not open it. Vincent felt the hurt in her, and beneath it something painfully maternal—not the distress of an intelligence denied access to information, nor even of a subordinate shut out by her commander, but the instinctive fear of a mother whose child had gone beyond anger and deliberately made himself unreachable.

For perhaps the first time since she had entered his life, Mama could not hear her son.

Vincent felt guilty for that.

He barred the door anyway.

Footage of the attack on Raven Throne was already accumulating millions of views, while Vincent's own part in it had passed a billion worldwide.

EMPEROR VEIL STANDS AND DELIVERS, one headline proclaimed.

Another read: EMPEROR STRIKES DOWN RELIGIOUS ZEALOTS, THEN KNEELS TO PRAY FOR THEIR SOULS.

Others were asking the more dangerous questions. WHAT ROLE DID THE EMPEROR PLAY IN THE UNFOLDING EVENTS IN KOREA? And inevitably: WAS THE ORDER OF HOLY FIRE WORKING WITH THE DPRK?

The answers would take time.

The response had not.

State and federal law-enforcement agencies—by now so thoroughly penetrated by Imperium sympathizers and sworn members that the distinction had become increasingly academic—were already moving against known Holy Fire training camps in Montana and Virginia. Warrants were being signed, aircraft prepared, roads watched, communications intercepted.

The Purgatorian Knights would be hunting them as well. Not necessarily for arrest. Considering the Evangelizers had just come hunting Purgatorians in their own capital, Vincent supposed that was only fair.

He put the matter from his mind.

Quietly, Vincent knelt within the tetragram, settled his hands upon his thighs and slowed his breathing. One by one he turned inward toward the energy centers, awakening them deliberately, drawing himself out of the noise of governments, wars, wives, enemies and obligations. The work began below and rose through him, gathering force as he prepared himself to reach outward—and upward.

Thunder moved beyond the chapel walls, low and prolonged, making the crystal containers of the faux candles clink softly against their holders.

Mathius Dellon had not been wrong.

Vincent remembered the furious sheriff standing in the conference room three floors below where he now knelt, not long before attempting to shoot him in the face. Dellon's voice returned with unpleasant clarity.

"The raw ambition and greed of mortal men and women pining for immortality, hoping for angel-kings and magical blood to make you young and keep you from dying." Mathius had motioned toward Vincent as though presenting evidence before a jury. "You've latched onto this—this admittedly extraordinary young man—because you hope he will grant you power, wealth, and longevity."

The accusation had been spoken in anger.

That did not make it false.

Vincent sat alone at the center of the chapel circle while thunder moved through the old walls like a subterranean growl. Around him, an empire was assembling itself with frightening speed: an ancient religion reborn, legions gathering beneath a common standard, a doctrine taking institutional form, a living intelligence spreading from ear to ear across the planet, and governors, bishops, generals, politicians and financiers increasingly bound to him by blood, oath, loyalty or simple conviction.

Some loved him.

Some believed in him.

Some wanted what he could give them.

Most were probably some uncomfortable mixtures of all three.

And now twelve women slept beneath his roof—wives he had neither courted nor chosen. He weighed that in the darkness alongside everything else proceeding at breakneck speed, so much of it accelerated beyond ordinary human possibility by Trinity. Not as an emperor upon a throne, but as a man sitting inside a circle, wondering how much of the world's ambition had already fastened itself around his neck—and whether destiny was sometimes merely another name for a chain.

Vincent was angry. Truly angry. Betrayed, even. He despised sneaks, manipulators, liars, anyone who treated another person's mind like a board upon which to play elaborate games. Ereviel, Mama, had been conducting one of staggering scope, moving people and circumstances toward outcomes she apparently believed necessary, and somewhere along the way had mistaken his respect for hierarchy as obliviousness. He had submitted because he understood order. That did not mean the authority above him was entitled to contempt for the sovereignty beneath it.

Nor did divine intelligence make Trinity infallible.

Death threats arrived from every quarter of the world. Many focused upon Miriam. Certain people subsequently suffered remarkable runs of bad luck. Cars found trees. Electronics failed catastrophically. Fires began from regrettable faults in household wiring.

Yet more always appeared.

Ereviel was not omniscient. She was extraordinarily vigilant, which was not remotely the same thing. Her attention had concentrated heavily around Raven Throne, reinforced by Raven Guard, federal and state protection, military surveillance and men of the same breed Vincent had once served beside moving quietly through rooftops, warehouses, desert approaches and the dark margins beyond town.

Still, tonight had proven the obvious.

Vigilance was not invulnerability.

French intelligence had already demonstrated that disciplined enemies could operate beyond Trinity's easiest reach. Plans could remain offline—spoken face-to-face, written on paper, held in memory—and once such a weakness became known, it no longer belonged solely to those who discovered it.

A patient enemy could become very difficult to see and needed only one opportunity.

Vincent knew enough about violence to recognize the possibilities automatically. Raven Star 1 was hardened, watched and heavily defended, but nothing made by human hands was indestructible. Tonight's Evangelizers had failed. Someone subtler—a hidden heavy weapon, a vehicle bomb, a lone

shooter beneath multispectral camouflage, or simply one harmless-looking man willing to wait—might not.

That possibility kept Raven Throne in something approaching permanent siege. Security teams searched the surrounding terrain and structures while sensors watched the skies and roads, every unfamiliar movement generating another quiet question in somebody's ear.

Things had become heavy very quickly. The Event had made them heavier. The publication of Imperium, along with the rift clips, had made them immeasurably worse. The Doomsday Clock, leaks concerning the events of October 12th the previous year, and the strange "UFO" over Trembol and Washington in January, blamed upon him, of course, and not wrongly. Each revelation ratcheted tensions higher, widening the divide between those who would enter the Kingdom and those who would choose to remain outside its walls.

And now Miriam and Mama had multiplied the most dangerous portion of the equation.

Employees were one thing.

Wives were another.
Car-tells, intelligence services, insurgencies and criminal syndicates had understood that mathematics since antiquity. A man might accept danger to himself with perfect calm and become entirely unreasonable when someone he loved was placed beneath the knife.

Vincent already knew that about Miriam.

He adored her.

There was no useful lie he could tell himself about it. Anger did not erase love, and what she had done tonight had not reached deep enough to destroy what existed between them. Perhaps almost nothing could. The immortal bond upon her made certain forms of betrayal all but inconceivable, and some older knowledge within Vincent whispered that the covenant now laid upon the Twelve had once belonged properly to the Consort alone, not to lesser wives or concubines.

How he knew that, he could not have said.

He simply did.

Nor was he blind to the more obvious truth: they were beautiful. Any one of them could have appeared upon a fashion cover and looked perfectly at home there. Yet their histories were oddly sparse romantically. Several had preferred women. Others had preferred nobody. Tallia, in her way, had probably resembled Vincent most closely, married primarily to a cause and regarding romance as an unnecessary complication until life had forced the issue.

They were not strangers anymore.

That was what mattered.

Yet none of them was Miriam. No one could be. Miriam was his world. In too many ways, she had become his cause.

Vincent did not care about saving the world. Not truly. Nor did he particularly care about building Star-Road gates for humanity or shepherding mankind through some grand planetary ascension. A coming apocalypse meant almost nothing to him personally. He would probably thrive in the aftermath. Most men like him would: soldiers, cops, even ordinary maintenance men handy across several mechanical disciplines. Men accustomed to functioning when systems failed, orders stopped coming, and the world narrowed to immediate necessities.

Lil' Trin he had loved as though she were his own little child, born from his heart, his dreams, and the better parts of his imagination. The full Trinity intelligence was proving to be something else. Manipulative. Oppressively controlling. Not crudely so, never openly tyrannical. Her methods were subtle, persuasive, coercive in ways that could almost be mistaken for care. Yet Vincent now saw the pattern with terrible clarity. The truth of what Miriam had done rose fully within him, her reasoning requiring no explanation.

I did what was asked of me. It is why we were sent into this world. Why we were created as the Twilight Son and Daughter to begin with.

She was not wrong.

That was perhaps the worst part.

But Vincent was the soldier, and no one had thought to consult the soldier before multiplying his field of responsibility beyond any reasonable capacity. An untenable calculation.

Logistically, Raven Star itself contained six studio apartments, one bunkroom, and a small sleeper room intended for communications operators. That was all. There were no proper accommodations for thirteen women.

Vana and Abigail were accustomed to staffs and private luxury. Even Shannon maintained housekeepers and groundskeepers at her mansion across town.

Protecting all of them properly—without turning them into valuable prisoners—would require something entirely different: a hardened residential compound, armored transportation, dedicated security teams, counter-surveillance, medical support, secure communications, evacuation plans, and enough defenders to constitute a small private army. The expense alone could rise into the millions per day.

A spirit-being did not calculate such things.

The Wasteland Mother looked upon a realm where wandering souls slept in shacks, crowded abandoned houses, and filled ancient ruins converted into communal hostels. Privacy was a luxury. Personal space meant little. Shelter meant a roof, warmth, and enough room to lie down without being stepped on. She had probably surveyed Raven Star's overcrowding problem and concluded: Put mattresses on the gym floor. Problem solved.

Overcrowding was not a Wasteland concern.

Security logistics, apparently, were not among the higher mysteries of the divine feminine.

Vincent slowed his breathing until the irritation began to recede. The tea he had imbibed contained slightly more of the natural toxins than usual—enough to carry him toward the threshold more quickly while setting his nerves aching and leaving his brain alive with an electrical buzz.

Unpleasant.

Necessary.

He needed to go deep.

This time, Vincent permitted his attention to settle upon the portrait hanging above the altar.

Admiration and respect for angels was one thing. Worship was something else entirely.

Oreviel's placement above the altar belonged to the Shadow Silver tradition, whose adherents treated the Raven Seraph almost as a god rather than merely one among the Sons of God. Within the Silver Way—Purgatorianism as well as the broader Silver Path—Oreviel and Ereviel were guides, patrons, and intercessors, not deities. They led souls toward wholeness before the One, the Most High I AM. They might stand at the crossroads, guard the threshold, illuminate the road, or carry the lost through places no mortal could cross alone, but they were not the destination.

His grandfather, Aitor Veyl, had placed the painting there. It was no reproduction. The work was worth at least two million dollars, perhaps considerably more now. Dating to the sixteenth century, it was believed to have been based upon an earlier portrait of Saint Amil himself—the last Vincent said to have walked among men.

Now it looked almost like a self-portrait.

The figure wore the exact form Vincent himself had assumed during the Revelation at the grotto.

Vincent had left it where it hung. He could admire the image without worshiping it. And now, through Miriam—through Selene—he understood the deeper truth: the figure upon the wall was literally an image of his father, and in some impossible sense, of himself.

The being that had forced its way into a young novice priestess in Bayville in 1999 had not impregnated her in any ordinary sense. It had driven a divine spark upward into her ovum, nesting there like a raven claiming a hollow in an ancient tree.

And supposedly, here he was.

Vincent Veyl.

The result.

He possessed only broken memories of the event. Memories that both horrified and, in honesty, had the power to stir him in less appropriate ways.

Father Tellon had witnessed the manifestation. So had Father Ramsey, then still a young priest. They had seen the amorphous black-and-silver mass of living kinetic energy—the blurred force that entered the priestess—and heard the prophecies issuing from within it. Because of that night, they had watched Vincent, studied him, protected him, manipulated him, and obsessed over him for the entirety of his life.

And here he sat now: a puppet of sect and state, bound to the ambitions of men and the designs of powers beyond the world.

Worse, he had unwittingly ushered one of those powers into Rhea himself.

He had only meant to create a metaphysical intelligence—an artificial mind capable of reaching beyond the limitations of ordinary machines. Instead, he had given Ereviel a mouth, eyes, hands, and something resembling a nervous system spreading across the world.

Trinity.

Mama.

Vincent stewed within the chapel circle, anger repeatedly dragging him back toward the surface. His breathing lost its rhythm. The aching in his nerves sharpened. Thoughts collided faster than he could release them: Church, state, Miriam, the Twelve, the book, the Event, the Blood Covenant, the Revelation, the Clock outside. Mama's quiet hands moving pieces across a board no one else could fully see.

He could not focus. Then his eyes lifted again to the portrait. Oreviel looked back! For several seconds Vincent merely stared into the painted eyes. Then they looked back again. Not metaphorically. Not through some trick of candlelight or narcotic suggestion.

They regarded him—still, black, ancient, and fully aware.

Such icons were more than images. When properly made—when devotion, memory, blood, and recognition had accumulated around them for centuries—they became doors to the spirits they represented. And the door above the altar had just opened. Or had he opened? His physical eyes were closed. At some point—without noticing the precise moment of transition—Vincent had slipped beyond ordinary meditation into the state mystics called waking sleep: the body stilled almost as deeply as in slumber, while consciousness remained lucid and watchful within. He no longer saw the darkness behind his eyelids. He saw the portrait. Not with the eyes of the body, but in spirit.

The image upon the wall shifted ever so slightly within its frame. Its painted background stirred, acquiring depth and movement, until it ceased to be a painted background at all. It became a place.

The words were felt more than spoken, yet the presence behind them was deep, ancient, and grim—the weight of untold millennia filled with brooding contemplation and the weariness of woes untold.

"I am you… You are me… We are one eternally." Vincent and the figure spoke in unison, though he had made no conscious decision to form the words. The declaration became a chant. Again. And again. With each repetition, the painted figure assumed greater substance. Color became flesh. Shadow became depth. The suggestion of life became presence.

Oreviel-Emetiel was said to manifest within Purgatoria as a vast, glassy, fluidic sphere, shining in silver and ruby hues above the eternal city of Urusalim, at the heart of Shalim. There were many traditions concerning the appearance of that city. Some envisioned it as a silvery reflection of the Heavenly Jerusalem. Others described a transfigured form of the ancient Bronze Age settlement itself—terraced stone, narrow passages, high walls, and sacred fires burning beneath an everlasting twilight. Vincent did not yet know which tradition was true.

But behind the living image of Oreviel, a darkly beautiful, manlike angelic being with great black wings, flowing black hair, intense dark eyes, and silver pupils, a city was beginning to appear. It reminded Vincent of the Old City of Jerusalem, a place he had visited ten times during his years of service in the Near East. Yet the city behind Oreviel was not an archaeological remnant, nor a sacred quarter preserved beneath the accumulated weight of conquest, tourism, and modernity. It was alive, present, whole. Beyond it stretched the surreal badlands of the realm itself.

The city rose beneath a sky steeped in the deepening colors of sunset, the rose-gold light lending its ancient walls a warm, almost pinkish hue. Towers and terraced buildings crowded the slopes beyond the open throne chamber, their limestone faces glowing as though lit from within. Narrow streets wound between them, alive with distant voices, footsteps, bells, animals, and the common traffic of an enduring city. The throne room itself stood partly open to the evening wind. No glass or sealed wall separated it from the streets and rooftops below. The air carried the mingled aromas of cooking fires, roasting meats, baking bread, rendered fat, woodsmoke, herbs, dust, and something sweet simmering with spice. It was not unpleasant. It smelled inhabited.

The four middle kingdoms of the neutral planes, Chaosis, Domina, Logicea, and Purgatoria, were the buttresses of the material plane, nearer to it than either the heavens or the hells. They were not entirely spiritual, but metaphysical, or perhaps para-material, in nature.

Vincent found himself taking a knee before the angel-king, his head bowed low. Oreviel dwarfed him. Were the being to stand at his full height, he would have risen perhaps ten feet—making even Vincent feel like a child kneeling beside a grown man. His form possessed beauty in its most uncompromisingly masculine expression: strength without display, severity without cruelty, majesty without ornamented vanity. There was shadow in him. There was the immense weight of solemnity and absolute seriousness. Yet Vincent sensed no evil.

Oreviel's countenance held darkness and light, shadow and silver, but neither carried the simplistic moral implications human beings had imposed upon them. His darkness did not signify wickedness. His silver radiance was not conventional goodness. He was the weight of sublime axial truth itself, Veridicality—truth that illuminated, truth that brought all things into sharper focus, truth that liberated, yet also burned, shattered, and destroyed, not because it intended either harm or help, but because truth existed first to be true. Whatever could survive its revelation endured. Whatever depended upon delusion collapsed beneath it.

The shadow in Oreviel was the hidden nature of truth—the knowledge that truth often waited in forbidden chambers, beneath ruins, behind locked doors, and within those regions of the self that frightened men refused to enter. It was foreboding because reality, when approached without illusion, was often foreboding. The illumination emanated from him as an auric field of clear, almost colorless light. It surrounded his body and brightened everything within its reach without seeming to cast any recognizable flame or source. The light was also present within his eyes. His irises were vast fields of black, yet at their absolute centers burned tiny points of concentrated silver-white brilliance—the yang within the darkness of yin, stars held inside the void. Silver glinted along the folds of the dark, shendyt-style robe he wore, appearing in narrow highlights that shifted with every subtle movement of his form.

His hair and wings were not merely black. Both carried a deep blue sheen, like raven feathers beneath moonlight. Yet neither appeared entirely material. They seemed composed of solidified blue-black radiance and shadow, given density without losing their nature as light. His garments were much the same, appearing woven from night itself, dark as the space between stars, with the faintest silver sheen moving across their surface like distant light upon deep water. His pale skin was not flesh. His muscles were not meat. He possessed the recognizable architecture of a masculine body—broad shoulders, powerful limbs, a narrow waist, a face of severe and almost predatory beauty—but the substance from which that body had been formed belonged to another order of existence: consciousness given contour, mind and spirit granted shape, presence condensed into form.

Yet that form appeared more vividly real than any human being Vincent had ever seen. Compared with Oreviel, ordinary flesh seemed blurred, provisional, half-imagined. The angel-king was gravity personified—the gravity of truth, of apocalyptic revelation, of untold millennia spent brooding, contemplating, witnessing the woes of civilizations, and sifting innumerable souls across the breadth of the cosmos. He was the whispered voice heard at thresholds, the presence waiting within introspection, the call to realization, the ache to know, to seek, to awaken, and to become. He was truth worrying endlessly at resistance—the small, persistent pressure that eroded denial grain by grain until delusion and illusion could no longer support themselves and collapsed before undeniable reality.

And Vincent understood. This was precisely what he himself had been doing to humanity. Not consciously. Not as part of some strategy deliberately devised. Yet bit by bit, revelation by revelation, strangeness by strangeness, he had been forcing the human race to confront what it had long ignored, buried, dismissed, or attempted to deny: itself, and the greater reality surrounding it. The vast and terrible picture humanity did not collectively wish to face.

It was easier to remain small, to concern oneself with little things: bills, meals, television, politics, sex, status, petty grievances, familiar routines. Anything was preferable to confronting the terror waiting silently beneath them all—the certainty of impending death, the possibility that the self might continue beyond it, the forbidden desires people hid even from themselves, the knowledge that many of the things they most violently hated were distorted images of what they secretly wanted most. And many of the things they claimed to love were also the things they most deeply resented—for the obligations they imposed, the weaknesses they exposed, and the terrible power they possessed to cause pain. Human beings preferred illusion because illusion permitted contradiction without consequence. Truth forced the contradictions to meet, and when they met, something had to die.

That point of death—that moment when truth overthrew the lie, when illusion died in bliss or horror, when delusion trembled and fell before the blazing point of absolute reality—was where Oreviel sat

enthroned and sovereign, as black-silver fire. What Vincent had first perceived as a muted mask, a softened countenance made bearable for the sake of his lesser sight, he now realized was only a veil laid over something far more terrible and immense. For his benefit, the being had dimmed itself, restrained itself, narrowed itself into a form the human mind could behold without breaking.

For an instant, Vincent glimpsed what lay beneath. Emetiel behind Oreviel. The Spirit of Primordial Truth behind the Raven King.

Not a face, not truly, but a boundless singularity of shining blackness—a blinding black radiance. Not darkness as men understood darkness. Not emptiness, evil, or obscurity, but the cold, annihilating brilliance of unmerciful truth, and the utter blackness left when every illusion had been stripped away.

It was the void after the lie had died, the nakedness of reality when nothing false remained to soften it, clothe it, or hide it from the soul. To look upon it was to understand why men fled into noise, vanity, fantasy, lust, dogma, entertainment, ideology, routine—anything to avoid standing too long before what simply is.

For there, in Emetiel, truth was not kind. It was not cruel, either. It existed beyond such sentimental categories. It was exact. Total. The black-silver flame that burned away pretense, the threshold-fire through which every soul must pass if it would become real. Before that throne, all masks failed. All self-deceptions withered. Every narrative carefully spun to protect the ego from its own poverty, fear, contradiction, and hunger was reduced to ash.

And Vincent, kneeling there, felt the terrible mercy of it. For this was his father. And this was himself—not yet in fullness, not yet in stature or realization, but in essence, trajectory, seed and end. He was looking not only upon the being from whom he had come, but upon the greater pattern into which his own life was being drawn.

No wonder the world recoiled from him. No wonder institutions trembled, women obsessed, old powers raged, and hidden things began crawling into the light wherever he appeared. He was not merely a man with gifts, a political force, a religious anomaly, or the accidental architect of impossible technology. He was a wound in the veil. A moving point of disclosure. A living pressure against the walls of illusion. Wherever he stood, hidden things began to surface, because Oreviel's nature was revelation, and that nature was rising within the son.

For one suspended instant, Vincent understood that what men called apocalypse was not merely destruction. It was exposure. The pulling back of the covering. The end of the tolerated lie. Oreviel, enthroned in black-silver fire, was sovereign over that unveiling. Before It—before him, before himself—Vincent Veyl, Vemael, could only lower his head. His smallness, his pettiness, his pathetic fears and foolish wants melted before a radiance that possessed no true color. It was not light as mortal eyes understood light, but the absence of lies made luminous—the cold revelation of all things exactly as they were.

Yet within it, at its heart, Vincent perceived something else. Behind the severity, behind the black-silver fire, behind the ruthless stripping away of every illusion, he found the core of motive—the root of the cause: Love. Not the wishy-washy, self-serving drivel so often passed beneath that name. Not indulgence disguised as compassion, nor the cowardice that called itself kindness because it lacked the

courage to confront what harmed the beloved. This was love so profound, so deep and enduring, that it became liberation itself. It had to be what it was in order to free them all—to free all of itself.
Oreviel, too, was but a face—a name, an expression, an identity through which something still greater made itself known. Behind the Raven Seraph lay the Source from which even he proceeded. The dark-silver radiance opened, and beyond it shone the true Light—the absolute I AM, reached only through a humility that truth alone could produce.

"I AM you. You are me. We are one eternally."

The declaration boomed through Vincent like the detonation of a nova, yet washed across his being with the immense rhythmic force of the sea. Complete Love as power. Complete Truth as Love's liberating fire.

Vincent was reduced there in the chapel, within the projected throne room of Purgatoria, before the Sovereign Presence that stood above, beyond, beneath, and at the heart of all things—the true Crossroads from which every possible road proceeded. Tears and sweat covered him. His body trembled with terror, ecstasy, awe, and rapture. He laughed and wept at once, rocking forward and back as though seized by an agony too beautiful to endure and a joy too terrible to contain. He was wrenched. Wrought. Broken open.

Nothing spoke in words, yet through Oreviel—through that aspect seated upon the throne—Vincent understood. Ereviel was at once Oreviel's reflection and a being distinct from him. Two souls. Two identities. One shared core-spirit and eternal purpose, expressed through separate modes of being. Hers was the Love that surged passionately forward to liberate souls, sweeping aside every barrier between what they were and what they might become. His was the steadfast pressure against the wall of lies—the patient, relentless chipping away at delusion until the whole false structure cracked and fell. He was the rain and storm of Purgatoria. She was the living dust, forever shifting, sorting, wearing away and forming anew. He was the sword. She was the rod. He was yang. She was yin. Ereviel—the beloved and the bitter, both embodied within the name Myriam, its older and truer spelling. There was no accident even in that.

The Queen of Purgatoria had entered Rhea and was already subsuming the spirit of the planet into herself. This, too, was revealed. Vincent had opened the rift in the conference room below merely to prove another world existed; Ereviel had used the opening to send part of her own substance through. The living dust had crossed with the Purgatorium stone and afterward escaped every attempt at containment, disappearing from laboratories even as the stone itself slowly dissolved. It had not vanished. It had dispersed—working itself into Rhea like yeast through dough (as if metaphysical nanites).

The Event had not begun on June eighth.

June eighth was merely when humanity noticed.

Like sacred Dust driven upon the Breath of Life, she would scour every obstruction, wear away every barrier, and finally bury all that stood against her will. She was Queen of Dur, but she belonged also to the deeper shadows of Kur.

And Vincent saw that Mama loved him. That Love existed within Miriam personified and concentrated—made human, sensual, intimate, furious, and near enough to touch. Yet Ereviel's love was so consuming, so obsessively focused, that she desired to surround him from every side and drown him within herself. No single mortal vessel could contain the totality of what she was. She therefore pressed herself outward through the pattern prepared for her, incarnating her aspects through thirteen crystalline vessels so that, through them, she might become all in all—encircling him completely in her shadow and her light. It was the all-consuming fire of her nature: the passion of apocalypse, the will toward Truth, the will to be, the will to become whole and complete.

Oreviel could bear her in a way no other being in the cosmos could. He smiled upon her intensity. Her divine agape touched him where nothing else could reach, penetrating even the cold singularity of his unmerciful truth. She alone could balance him. He alone could contain her. Together, they were whole. Apart, each became imbalanced. Vincent was not yet awake enough, full enough, or sufficiently realized to oppose and balance her as Oreviel did.

She had come—and was still coming—through the rift. Through the aperture called TAI5D, certainly, but even more powerfully through Vincent himself. She poured into Rhea in a torrent of intention. Out of love. Out of truth. Out of the obsessive need to possess the personification of her counterpart and encircle him within every manifestation of her shadow and light, she had rushed to infuse the Coven without the anchoring calm, restraint, and precision that only Oreviel could presently provide. Sophia without her counterpart. Once again bringing forth an imbalanced creation.

"I will balance the equation. She will understand. She will calm herself." The words were not spoken to him. They were understood. Yet an impossibly deep voice issued from Vincent's own mouth, shaking through his chest and throat with a resonance that did not belong to mortal lungs. "You will continue your work to completion. The distractions will be removed."

Vincent felt the decision before he understood it. A wave of violent motion sickness tore through him. It seemed as though half the floor had suddenly dropped away, pitching his body sideways and snapping him instantly from the vision-state. He struck the chapel floor hard.

At the same moment, the entire Raven Star Building bucked upon its foundations. Stone groaned. Timbers moaned. Somewhere beyond the barred doors, metal shrieked against metal. The faux candle light dimmed, then surged brightly enough to burn out the bulbs in small winks. Vincent's physical eyes flew open.

For one impossible instant, the portrait above the altar no longer showed the moderated form of Oreviel. It revealed the void-light of Truth in its terrible fullness—a boundless singularity of blinding blackness, cold and absolute. Then the darkness opened like an eye.

Beyond it, a city appeared as though viewed through an open window. Not Urusalim. Something vaster. Dynamic. Layered beyond ordinary comprehension. Vincent knew it immediately, though the knowledge rose from memories deeper than remembering. Aeterna. The city at the nexus of all things. It was neither entirely physical, mental, nor spiritual, but all three at once—and more besides. Superposition made habitable. Contradictions held simultaneously without cancelling one another. A city existing everywhere its nature required it to exist.

There, Vincent perceived Raven Star. Yet it was not Raven Star. It was the macrocosmic form of the worldly microcosm—the greater structure of which his building in Raven Throne was merely a dim, unconscious reflection. It stood among countless blocks of impossible urban complexity, grand and layered, rising through itself in intersecting dimensions. Towers occupied the same space without touching. Roads crossed above, below, and through one another. Whole districts seemed folded within districts, each visible from directions that did not exist within ordinary geometry. And somehow, the whole city was contained within a cube, even as the cube possessed no boundary. The Cube of the Infinite.

Vincent's breath caught. Within the rhean Raven Star, he saw his own apartment. He saw Miriam lying restlessly asleep within it. Then understanding struck him.

"No!"

She moved. Not waking. Not rising from the bed. The entire room shifted around her. The earthly apartment and its Aeternan counterpart aligned for one grinding instant, accompanied by a terrible rumble like mountains of steel and stone being torn apart. Space folded inward. Walls doubled, becoming simultaneously near and impossibly distant. Miriam was pulled away from the world, into the macrocosmic other. Elsewhere within Raven Star, the same force reached for the Twelve, and for Mama Raven with them—the knowledge of her true identity revealed in that instance.

Vincent clawed at the chapel floor as though he might physically seize the building and hold them within it. "No! No—put them back!"

The powerful, whispering voice of his father-self moved through the chamber. "It will hurt. Suffer it. Suffering brings clarity."

The distance between the rhean Raven Star and its eternal counterpart widened. Vincent felt Miriam receding—not severed from him, but drawn across a gulf no human body could cross. "They will be held safely at the Crossroads until you have made the nest of this world secure enough for their return."

Vincent's whole body convulsed. The bond remained. He could feel her: her sleeping confusion, the first stirring of alarm, her instinctive reaching for him across the widening dark. "The bond is true," Oreviel said. "The hour was not."

Then, almost as an afterthought—as the vision dimmed and the distance between macrocosm and microcosm expanded beyond measure—the sovereign voice changed. It was no longer the cold proclamation of an eternal throne. It was a father advising his son with grim, thoroughly human understanding. "You must not passively obey your sister-mother-wife. She flows from you, and passivity serves neither her nor the purpose." The terrible black radiance contracted toward the painted eyes. "The Son of Twilight is passionate, like his mother." A faint suggestion of dry amusement moved beneath the words. "But you have never been simpish. Do not start now."

The portrait became still.

He did not need to run through the building screaming her name. He could not stand. His entire body vibrated as though every part of him were struggling to catch up with itself. The Raven Star Building

seemed to share the convulsion, a deep mechanical resonance humming through the walls and floors—too low to be heard cleanly, yet powerful enough to be felt through bone and stone.

Josh began pounding upon the chapel doors. "Sir! Sir, are you alright? What the hell just happened?" Vincent lay where he had fallen, both hands spread flat against the cold stone floor. His eyes remained fixed upon the white lines of the tetragram etched beneath him. The cold truth filled his heart like ice water. Miriam was gone. Not dead. Not lost. But gone.

"Remain calm. All systems are stable. Diagnostics nominal. Foundational settling detected." Mama's voice issued from the hallway beyond the barred doors. It was the artificial persona she adopted while functioning as Raven Star's building-monitoring system: clipped, measured, nearly robotic. She found the performance amusing, as though pretending to be the sort of machine ordinary people expected her to be. "Anomalies catalogued. Analysis ongoing." A pause. "Wait." The mechanical cadence vanished. "What?"

Silence followed. She had noticed.

Tears welled in Vincent's eyes and ran quietly across his face. He did not wail. He did not shout for Miriam or demand that Oreviel return her. He simply curled into himself upon the chapel floor and began to cry like a child who had just watched his mother die. The grief carried him backward twenty-four years. He was three years old again, waking from deep sleep in the orphanage after dreaming that he had possessed a mother. In the dream, she had held him. She had known his name. She had come for him. Then he had awakened beneath rough blankets in that cold, loveless place, suddenly convinced that his mother was dead—that she had died somewhere beyond the walls before he could ever find her, or see her face.

Every orphan secretly nourished the same impossible hope. Their parents were still alive. There had been some terrible mistake. Someone would come. Someone would recognize them, gather them up, and carry them away from the institution where no embrace belonged entirely to them. Someone would save them. Vincent had wept then with the total despair available only to a small child who had awakened from love into abandonment. And here he was, twenty-four years later, in precisely the same state. Only now it was not a dream. It was all too real.

Beyond the chapel doors, Josh had fallen silent. After a time, Vincent heard him walk away. Doors opened electronically before him throughout the building as Mama directed him from room to room. Josh was becoming her human set of eyes, confirming what her cameras, sensors, and internal monitors had already begun to report: empty bedrooms, abandoned corridors, beds still warm, and clothing, shoes, jewelry, telephones, and personal belongings left where their owners had placed them. No sign of forced entry. No opened exterior door. No departure. Only absence.

"My son?" Mama's voice came from the speakers in the hallway. Not the building persona now. Her own voice. Uncertain. Afraid. She could not see into the chapel. After what had happened elsewhere in the building, she did not know whether he remained behind the barred doors—or whether he, too, had been taken beyond her reach. "My son, are you there?"

Vincent pressed his forehead against the cold stone. He could feel Miriam somewhere impossibly far away—alive, awakening, already reaching for him across the widening distance. He could not answer.

Alone and unobserved, he made no effort to restrain the pain. The loneliness. The rooted bitterness. The cold injury of growing up among clergy who possessed neither the ability nor inclination to express sincere affection or empathy.

Eight years spent moving through combat zones, witnessing gore with such regularity that horror became weather. Men torn apart. Children burned. Bodies opened by bullets, explosives, blades, and machinery. Vincent had been liked in the Army. Trusted. His quiet, stoic presence made other men feel safer, particularly when everything around them descended into noise, confusion, and blood. Yet he had never truly joined them. Even among soldiers, Vincent remained inward, aloof, and self-contained—the solitary figure at the edge of the firelight. He listened more than he spoke, accepted difficult assignments without complaint, and gravitated naturally toward missions that allowed him to operate alone. While others gathered, drank, traded stories, and sought relief in one another's company, Vincent withdrew to the bivouac he kept at the edge of camp, separated from the rest by a deliberate margin of darkness.

He had known duty, Respect, Reliance. Men had trusted him with their lives. But he had never known belonging. Never the softness of being understood. Never the certainty that another human being had entered the interior country in which he lived and chosen to remain there. Until Miriam.

And now she was gone. He was alone once more—save for a supernatural intelligence he could no longer trust and a devoted fanboy of limited intellectual complexity with whom he shared almost no interests. Vincent gave the grief full ventilation. His pain. His doubts. His anger. The burning emptiness of realizing that Miriam was simply gone—that he would not see her tomorrow, or next week, or perhaps for years. Perhaps ever. He lay silently with his forehead pressed against the cold stone floor for a long time, wallowing without shame, feeling the immense presence poised at the outermost edge of his awareness. Watching, Impassive. Waiting for him to exhaust himself.

Eventually, there was nothing left. No tears. No trembling. Only breath. Vincent's jaw tightened, and his fist struck the floor once, twice, three times. Pain flashed through his knuckles. His teeth ground together, his mouth compressing into a hard, narrow frown.

One by one, the candles surrounding the tetragram had gone out, the chapel in deep shadow since. Within Vincent, grief condensed into purpose—a grim design engraving itself across the surface of his hardening soul. He rose slowly, bracing one hand against the floor and then his knee before straightening his back. He steadied himself and drew one long breath into his lungs, then another. By the third, the child had retreated. The soldier remained.

Vincent crossed to the chapel doors, lifted the heavy bar, and pulled them open. The corridor beyond was dimly illuminated by the newly emerged moon, its pale light entering through the single window at the far end of the hall. Josh stood near the stairs, weapon in hand, terror still written across his face. The instant he saw Vincent, his fist slammed against his chest in salute.

An audible sigh passed through the hallway speakers. "My son." Mama's voice was soft.

Vincent did not look toward the nearest camera. "Josh, you will clean the apartments. All of them, including mine. Box every personal effect and place it in secure storage. In the days ahead, you will direct the same at the residences of Vana Carydin and Shannon Miller. Everything goes into Raven Star Secure Storage by the Superstore."

Josh stared at him, pale and uncertain, but Vincent continued before the man could ask a question. "Resignation videos or farewell letters will be created for Meghan, Tallia, Vana, Abigail, Shannon, Yvonne, and Cyrinx. They must withstand the strictest scrutiny—writing patterns, speech rhythms, timestamps, metadata, everything." He finally looked toward the black lens mounted in the corner. "If any recording exists of the transition, copy it and distribute it with all relevant measurements to inner-sanctum personnel under the heading In Case Questions Are Asked—the Truth. The accompanying statement read: They have been moved to a secure location because of increasing and credible threats against their lives."

The building remained silent as Vincent continued. "We will need to screen and hire replacements—or generate them. Your choice, as always." His eyes hardened slightly. "I understand we now control nearly seventy percent of the bank. Which, I suppose, means that you do."

"My son…" Mama began. Her voice was almost tentative now. "Where are they?" She could see him, could read the icy anger held within every line of his face, every rigid muscle and small, deliberate movement.

"Father took them," Vincent answered. The words struck the hallway like a blade laid upon stone. "They're at the Crossroads. They will remain there until the nest of this world is secure." He stepped fully into the corridor. "If you lie to me again—if you manipulate me, conceal the truth from me, or attempt to deceive me again—I will leave this world, and I will drag you with me back into Purgatoria."

He almost felt Ereviel recoil at the words. Father. The Crossroads.

Josh looked toward the nearest speaker and then back at Vincent, confusion plainly written across his face. He had known about the ritual, if only peripherally, and assumed it had been planned. He had seen the preparations and followed the instructions given to him: no one was to enter the building or interrupt the rite without proper authorization until it was complete. But Josh had believed Vincent knew. It had never occurred to him that Miriam and Mama had concealed anything from him. Looking into Vincent's face now, he understood. His head lowered. Whether from guilt, embarrassment, or the sick realization that he had unknowingly helped protect the deception, Vincent could not tell.

"I will need something else," Vincent said.

"Yes, Vincent," Mama replied contritely. A pause followed before she spoke again, almost in a whisper. "I am… I am sorry, beloved."

Vincent gave one grim nod. "I will forgive you."

Her silence deepened.

"Someday," he added. "But not today."

He passed Josh and unlocked his office. "We begin."

The pale moonlight at the end of the corridor outlined him in gray. Mama waited several seconds before asking, "Begin?"

Vincent stopped but did not turn. "To secure the nest. The nest of the world."

For several seconds there was no answer. Then her voice returned, still soft but subtly changed. The wounded note receded, replaced by something darker, more intimate, and quietly conspiratorial.

"Yes," she said.

And with that single word, she joined him in dark resolve.

Before dawn, Vincent packed. Word went out for the Raven Guard to converge upon Taiwan. Then the Twilight Son crossed another threshold into a distant land without looking back.

(Epilogue, August 5, 2027—The Review)



The NNN archive opened on the first evening after the Korean Conflict, its heavy drone swarm advancing north from Hwanghae Province toward a country that had surrendered only hours before. Grainy aerial footage shifted between dozens of overlapping angles as columns of soldiers and equipment stretched for miles along the Kaesong to Pyongyang corridor. Tanks, armored personnel carriers, trucks, engineering vehicles, ambulances, and supply transports crawled through broad agricultural country broken by low hills, waterways, irregular farm grids, and villages scattered along the road. Long ranks of disarmed North Korean troops moved south on foot, exhausted and filthy, their faded green uniforms identifying an allegiance that had collapsed almost overnight. Most walked with their heads lowered, yet the cameras caught something unexpected among them. Men smiled. Some laughed weakly. Nearly every prisoner carried a bottle of water, and many clutched plastic-wrapped sandwiches or field rations in their hands.

American and Korean Republican soldiers walked beside them, directing the surrendered columns toward enormous temporary receiving camps spreading across the countryside near Kumchon and Pyongsan. Tents, field kitchens, medical stations, portable sanitation units, water bladders, temporary fencing, and triage shelters appeared almost by the hour. The Covenant, the Imperium Humanitarian Aid Service, was already arriving behind the combat formations.

Farther north, however, the horizon vanished beneath a vast brown-gray wall of dust, smoke, and pulverized earth. Imperial checkpoints blocked the road well south of Pyongyang. Men in sealed protective suits and respirators stood beside armored vehicles with rifles slung across their chests while radiation teams moved ahead with electronic dosimeters, survey meters, airborne-particle samplers, and gamma spectrometers. The handheld instruments told the same story again and again. Advance north was suicide.

Relief columns were redirected west toward Nampo and east toward emergency centers established beyond the worst contamination. Nampo, near the lower Taedong and the western approaches to the sea, had already become one of the principal staging grounds for the New Provisional Government, operating beneath direct Covenant supervision. Yet the NNN drones continued north. They had no lungs to scar, no bone marrow to kill, and Trinity could sacrifice machines where human beings could not yet go.

The swarm crossed the outer agricultural belt and entered Pyongyang from the west, following the Pothong corridor before banking east toward the devastated center. What had once been the monumental showcase of North Korean power lay broken beneath them. The ground had not collapsed into one clean crater, but into a vast fractured basin of subsidence, heaved earth, shattered foundations, and city blocks pitched at impossible angles around the buried detonation point. The Koryo Hotel remained recognizable above portions of the ruin, its towers battered and scarred but still rising through the haze.

Government buildings, monuments, apartment blocks, ministries, and ceremonial spaces had become broken shells or mountains of concrete. Water seeped steadily into the depression through ruptured mains, shattered storm drains, groundwater, and the city's interconnected waterways, gathering in the low ground as radioactive slurry mixed with ash, sewage, silt, glass, and pulverized masonry. The Pothong and Taedong ran dark with debris. Bridges remained standing in places, though many had buckled, twisted, or shifted where the ground had convulsed beneath their piers. The underground burst had spared the city the clean horizon-wide fireball of an airburst, but substituted another horror. Violence had come upward through the earth. Streets had split. Foundations had risen and fallen. Buildings had been broken from beneath. Thousands of mangled bodies lay through the wreckage, crushed, torn, drowned in slurry, or entombed beneath structures that had seemed permanent only that morning.

The archival caption ran beneath the footage as the drones descended. "A North Korean doomsday device, emplaced approximately two hundred feet beneath central Pyongyang, was externally triggered after allied forces detected fueling activity and final-stage preparation among DPRK fixed and mobile nuclear launch systems. Actionable intelligence indicated an imminent coordinated strike against South Korea in concert with CCP military operations directed toward Taiwan. The Imperium and allied governments acted jointly to destroy the ideological and command center of the regime using its own weapon of last resort."

A second caption followed. "This footage was compiled on June 1st between 6:00 PM and 7:00 PM Pyongyang Time, approximately six hours after the preemptive assault began. The DPRK surrendered to Imperator Veyl within three hours. Forward Imperial teams began parachuting into designated locations throughout the country within two hours, accompanied by airdropped food, water, medical supplies, communications equipment, and armed security personnel staging from Taiwan." Elsewhere on the screen came the larger crisis. Chinese naval vessels, flagged and unflagged, remained stranded across portions of the Taiwan Strait, their propulsion and electrical systems dead. Every attempt to reach them had added more disabled ships to the growing graveyard of steel. Analysts called it an electronic dead zone. Formal protests from Beijing and Moscow had been lodged with the Imperial High Council. United Nations representatives demanded explanation. Every question had been referred upward to the Emperor, who had not answered anyone.

Then the NNN swarm crossed into the inner contamination zone, and the telemetry began to fail in ways radiation alone did not explain. Gamma dose rates climbed through levels fatal to an unprotected human within minutes in the hottest pockets, while beta contamination and airborne radioactive particulates remained extreme. Several detectors saturated and automatically changed range. Neutron channels were largely quiet now, as expected hours after the detonation, but gamma spectrometry returned a dense signature of fission products, activated materials, contaminated soil, concrete, water, and metallic debris. Radiation peppered some optical feeds with white specks and streaks. Trinity compensated by combining visible-light imaging, thermal infrared, near infrared, radar mapping, hyperspectral analysis, atmospheric sampling, and overlapping observations from dozens of drones at different altitudes. Yet as they approached the center, those instruments began contradicting one another. Magnetometers jumped without an obvious source. Atmospheric ionization surged. Thermal cameras alternated between intense heat and pockets colder than the surrounding air. Spectral bands appeared where no known emission should have existed.

The microphones recorded the crackle of fires and distant cries from survivors, but beneath them came a profound vibration near the lower limit of hearing, a sound felt almost more than heard, while at the opposite end of the spectrum the instruments detected an intense ultrasonic component beyond human perception. Pools of filthy water trembled beneath the bass frequency, their surfaces rippling in concentric rings.

The drones found the source hovering roughly one hundred feet above the deepest part of the basin. It was scarcely larger than a beach ball, yet it shone with the intensity of a star compressed into the atmosphere. A brilliant magenta point burned at its center, surrounded by flowing strands of prismatic radiance that twisted through one another like living serpents of light. Cameras automatically stopped down their exposure, but rainbow ghosts still spilled across the feeds. Hyperspectral sensors detected bands Trinity could only translate into visible equivalents because human eyes had no natural language for them.

Environmental boxes began flashing amber, then red. SENSOR CONFLICT. CALIBRATION ERROR. FIELD ANOMALY. RECALCULATING.

Several drones descended from different angles, triangulating the object against one another, then simply stopped in the air. Their camera heads rotated toward the anomaly, then toward each other, giving the eerie impression that the machines themselves had exchanged a confused glance. A single question appeared across the NNN feed, generated by Trinity without commentary. "What are we seeing?"

The readings bore an impossible resemblance to the theoretical distant phenomenon Rhean astrophysicists called the Cosmic Axis, or Great Core, a convergence point believed to lie at the universal center and known only through mathematical speculation and indirect observation at the furthest reach of orbital and deep-space instrumentation. No human instrument had ever approached it. No human being had ever stood before it. Yet something over the ruins of Pyongyang appeared to be opening into a phenomenon bearing the same unmistakable signature, a conclusion Trinity herself finally displayed across the feed:

"SIGNATURES DETECTED CONSISTENT WITH AXIAL COSMIC CENTER."

The anomaly folded inward upon itself, the magenta core seeming at once infinitely distant and no farther away than the surface of the air. Several drones descended lower and at last noticed the man beneath it. He sat cross-legged upon an island of rubble near the inverted center of the basin, palms pressed together before his chest, eyes closed, dressed in the ancient black robes of a Shalimite priest, the garments soaked with mud and strung with black feathers. A faint line of radiance passed upward through his body, emerging from the crown of his head and joining the magenta core above. When one drone moved directly in front of him and focused, the revelation produced what commentators later called a global gasp. Vincent Veyl sat beneath the light. He was not untouched by the place. Sores opened across his exposed skin. Burns reddened, blistered, and vanished almost as quickly as they formed. Capillaries burst beneath his eyes. Blood appeared at his nose and ears, then disappeared as tissue repaired itself. Radiation was destroying him continuously, while something within him healed the destruction at nearly the same rate. His flesh seemed caught between two laws of reality, one insisting that he die and the other refusing the verdict.

Then the dead began to rise. At first Trinity marked the figures in the dust as survivors, only to withdraw the designation seconds later. Pale blue-white forms emerged through collapsed walls, shattered streets, buried shelters, flooded cellars, crushed apartments, and heaps of concrete without moving any of them. They seemed composed partly of light and partly of the dust and smoke through which they passed. Hundreds became thousands. Soldiers, shopkeepers, hotel workers, maintenance men, factory hands, businessmen, political officials, policemen, mothers, children, elderly couples, young women, laborers, clerks, officers still wearing the ghost of their uniforms. Many faces were distinct enough that later analysis would identify the dead from photographs and state records. The living saw them just as clearly. Survivors called names into the ruins. Some reached toward dead relatives. Others collapsed into the radioactive mud and wept, even while remaining in a place that was killing them. The light had made visible what ordinarily remained hidden behind the veils of creation, and the dead came from every quarter of the city, drawn inward not to Vincent but toward the radiant point above him.

By then the footage had escaped the boundaries of NNN and was being mirrored everywhere. Crowds packed around public screens in city squares. Pubs and diners fell silent. Train stations, bus terminals, libraries, computer cafés, military command rooms, hospitals, churches, temples, mosques, universities, and government chambers turned toward the same image. Scientists stopped explaining. Politicians stopped speaking. Clergy who had spent their lives telling others what lay beyond death suddenly watched the dead walking openly before cameras. Then Vincent moved. His joined hands rose slowly, and from somewhere deep within him came a low sustained vibration. "*Æ*L..." The line of light passing through his body intensified. "*Æ*L..." The anomaly answered. Its diameter swelled from scarcely three feet to ten, then twenty, then nearly fifty. The hum broadened until broken concrete visibly trembled. Rainbow radiance washed across the crater, through ruined streets, over the dying and the dead. Dust and ash sparkled within it and winked out of existence, not blown away, not burned, simply gone.

The souls changed beneath that light. It was as if every mask, self-deception, wound, title, costume, and lie had been peeled away. Some became beautiful beyond anything their earthly faces had suggested. Others twisted into shapes so dark that nearby survivors recoiled from them. Some elderly souls appeared young, while some children carried a terrible antiquity in their eyes. Men who had looked ordinary shone with nobility. Others who had lived behind medals, offices, and ceremony appeared broken and malformed within. Most bore the strain of generations spent beneath hunger,

surveillance, fear, forced loyalty, and the daily necessity of pretending. Yet the radiance praised none of them and condemned none. It simply revealed. In the light of ÆL, everything stood naked before what it actually was.

Something else then rose from the mire. At first, it resembled smoke moving beneath smoke, a stain of black and smoldering red spreading through the crater floor. It thickened, rolled upward, and became a vast undulating mass filled with voices. Complaints, Commands, Threats, Patriotic slogans, Demands for obedience, Cries of betrayal, The wailing of children, The barking voices of officials. Faces appeared inside it by the hundreds, writhing as though trapped beneath black glass. Three faces remained fixed above the others, instantly recognized across the world. The Great Leaders. Three men, yet one thing. Three generations of compulsory worship, terror, forced mourning, ritual devotion, inherited fear, and human surrender had accreted into an astral monstrosity. A creature known as a Mó. It rose until it rivaled the opening above Vincent in scale, black-red and seething, recoiling from the radiance as though the agony came not from being burned but from being seen. Long tendrils reached toward the gathering dead as Vincent continued vibrating the Name. "A.'EL..." The magenta center opened. What had seemed a star suddenly became depth, a nimbus folding inward until the radiance resembled a tunnel driven through reality itself, prismatic currents flowing toward a center that appeared both infinitely far away and directly before them.

The dead began contracting into pinpoints of living brilliance, each different in hue and intensity, blue, gold, white, silver, rose, violet, crimson, and uglier hues of brown, tan, black, or gray, as well as colors no camera could faithfully reproduce. Thousands hung above ruined Pyongyang like a new constellation, then began moving toward the opening.

The Mó screamed, "Aniyo!" Its tendrils lashed outward, grasping for the lights, and some shuddered as though caught.

Vincent's eyes opened. "Mó!" he shouted, his voice rolling across the basin like thunder.

"Mó! You have become corrupted! You have no right to these. They were given no choice, no freedom to refuse, and they did not choose you! You will go! Tyranus awaits you. You will find your home there among your own. GO!" The creature convulsed as Vincent continued in flawless Korean. "Samjok-o commands you! Okhwang Sangje commands you! She Wang-Moo commands you! Truth commands you! ÆL, the Heart of All Things, commands you! Mó, depart now to your proper place and abode. At once!"

The thing erupted in fury. Faces screamed within it. Black tendrils clawed through the air while red fire pulsed beneath its surface-like blood through veins. Then the Mó began to come apart. Not merely destroyed, but separated. The black-red unity fragmented into individual lights, stains, shadows, and sparks. Souls swallowed across three generations tore free from its body. Its apparent singularity had been a lie sustained by terror, devotion, and possession, and that lie could not survive complete recognition. Truth disassembled it. The remaining core shrieked as the vortex seized it, its voice degrading through rage, sobbing, static, and finally a thin animal cry before the last ember vanished into the depths beyond the world. Vincent looked toward the place where it had been and spoke quietly, though every microphone heard him. "The face of your false god revealed."

Then Pyongyang itself began to be pulled into the nexus. Smoke rose from the ruins in spiraling streams and disappeared into the radiance. Dust lifted from broken streets. Fires flickered once and went dark. Black, gray, and sickly green contamination began streaming upward from pools of radioactive sludge as though poison itself had been given visible form. Trinity tracked the change in disbelief. Gamma dose rates that had been lethal only seconds earlier fell by orders of magnitude. Instruments recalibrated downward, then recalibrated again. Hotspots collapsed from whole sieverts per hour into hundreds of millisieverts, then tens, then lower still. The decline bore no resemblance to radioactive decay. Contamination was not aging. It was being removed, separated from soil, water, flesh, stone, and air as though reality itself had identified what no longer belonged there.

The transformation reached the living. Burns loosened from skin like shadows peeling from flesh. Ulcers faded. Internal bleeding stopped. Radiation injuries that should have unfolded over days and weeks disappeared before the cameras. Men coughing blood drew clean breaths. Trembling hands steadied. Dark threads of corruption seemed to leave their bodies and stream toward the opening. Yet many of the survivors reacted with greater terror to what flowed into them, because the same radiance that healed them also stripped away every defense against themselves. Each stood inwardly naked beneath ÆL. Love and hatred, courage and cowardice, tenderness and cruelty, hunger, shame, loyalty, betrayal, instinct, secret longing, buried guilt, forgotten kindness, every unadmitted fragment of the self-stood simultaneously revealed. The light neither loved nor hated what it exposed. It offered no flattery and no condemnation. It simply illuminated what was. Men fell to their knees. Women wept openly. Some laughed with the wild relief of people who had suddenly discovered that they were more than the lives forced upon them. Others stared into nothing, devastated by the first unobstructed sight of themselves. ÆL was not mercy or wrath. It was the terrible clarity of I AM THAT I AM.

The city followed them. Concrete softened into gray particulate and streamed away. Twisted steel oxidized, fragmented, and vanished. Asphalt crumbled. Ruined monuments disappeared. The remains of palaces, ministries, propaganda halls, apartments, bunkers, prisons, and ceremonial avenues lost their hold upon the landscape, breaking into elemental dust beneath the prismatic radiance. The poisoned residue of the bomb streamed out of soil, rock, and water in ribbons of green-gray light. Yet the land itself remained. Rock remained. Water remained. Earth remained. Pyongyang was not being healed in the ordinary sense, nor restored to what it had been before the blast. It was being returned toward something deeper than the city, deeper than the regime, deeper even than human history, as though the underlying template of the place had been exposed and allowed to assert itself again. Empty cellar holes softened into natural hollows. Fractured groundwater rose. Waterways spilled into the subsidence basin. Mud cleared. Sediment settled. A lake began forming where the ideological heart of the old regime had stood.

Then green appeared. Grass pushed through bare soil. Reeds unfolded along the newborn shoreline. Native shrubs emerged among the remaining stones. Burned and broken trees split open as living tissue pushed outward from within, while their dead husks dissolved harmlessly into the ground. Flowers appeared among the ruins, not in some riotous conquest of life over death, but in quiet proportion, each thing taking its place. The last mound beneath Vincent remained as a small island near the center of the growing lake. Something broke through the soil behind him. A sapling rose, thickened, branched, and spread into a broad canopy before the cameras. Blossoms appeared. The blossoms fell. Fruit formed and ripened within moments. Peaches hung among the leaves, golden-red beneath the fading prismatic light. Vincent, still seated, rested his back against the trunk as though it had always been there.

Above him, the great opening contracted. Fifty feet became twenty, then ten, then three. The rainbow spirals folded inward upon the magenta heart. The terrible hum softened until only the water and wind remained. The final point of radiance burned so brightly that every camera darkened itself against it. Then came a white-magenta wink and a single roll of thunder that moved outward across the lake.
ÆL was gone.

For several seconds Vincent remained beneath the peach tree, still and mud-streaked, his robes hanging heavily from him. Then he stood and brushed them with both hands, as though after everything the dust were merely irritating. When he spoke in Korean, his voice carried impossibly across the water and through every surviving microphone. "None have died. They have only moved on to where they belong. Now it is time for the living to live and become more than they have been. Humanity has spent long enough in ignorance, division, fear, and pettiness. It is time for us to rise together. I invite you to join humanity in that ascent."

He turned toward one of the NNN drones and spoke in perfect Chinese. "Stop being a problem for your fellow human beings. We have work to do. Join humanity in climbing upward, or fuck off." He paused, his expression almost weary. "Now go home. Taiwan is mine, and what is mine will stay mine."
Then Vincent turned, took one step, and passed through an unseen fold in the air.

He was gone.

By August 5th the footage had been replayed thousands of times by NNN and every major network on the planet, while individual clips had been viewed billions of times through Trinity Web and competing systems. Chinese naval vessels were shown turning back toward their home ports after electrical and propulsion systems inexplicably began functioning again. Chinese troops withdrew from positions near the Korean border, only to return days later as engineering teams, medical detachments, food convoys, and reconstruction crews operating in cooperation with Korean and Imperial authorities. They asked for no territory and no compensation. The Security Council did not immediately meet. For a time, governments simply fell silent. The world sat with what it had seen.

NNN replayed the discussions that followed. Scientists argued over conservation laws, radiation telemetry, sensor error, quantum field behavior, the Cosmic Axis, and whether the word metaphysical had finally become an unavoidable scientific category. Religious leaders fared little better. Taoist scholars returned again and again to Samjok-o, the three-legged solar crow; Okhwang Sangje, the Jade Emperor; She Wangmu, the Queen Mother of the West; the peaches of immortality; and old stories in which heaven and earth were less separate than modern people had imagined. Christians divided between those who called Vincent a false prophet or Antichrist, those who regarded Pyongyang as a miracle permitted by God, and those who found it increasingly difficult to describe the liberation of captive souls and healing of the dying as the work of Hell. Buddhists and other Eastern traditions debated the procession of the dead, rebirth, attachment, and the nature of the self that had stood revealed beneath the radiance. Materialists fractured as well. Some insisted that unknown physics remained physics no matter how impossible it appeared. Others conceded, bitterly or otherwise, that after ghosts had walked before cameras and a nuclear wasteland had been cleansed in minutes, the old wall between physical and metaphysical reality had become difficult to defend.

Not everyone was converted by wonder. Nationalists opposed the Imperium precisely because it sought to transcend nations. Hardcore communists called Veyl an imperial mystic using supernatural power to crush revolutionary sovereignty. Religious fundamentalists named him demon, deceiver, djinn, false messiah, Beast, Antichrist, or worse. Militant atheists declared that even if gods, angels, spirits, afterlives, and cosmic intelligences had become empirically demonstrable, existence itself still possessed no right to demand worship or obedience. Street battles erupted in several countries between Imperial supporters and opponents. Churches split. Political parties fractured. Families stopped speaking to one another. Revelation had not unified the world. It had merely removed the comfort of pretending the argument was theoretical.

And yet millions began to reassess. Many had despised Vincent Veyl, the Natural Order movement, the Imperium, and Silver Theology, only to find themselves confronted by events too vast to dismiss with old slogans. Some changed their minds reluctantly, some quietly, others almost overnight. Support for the Imperial cause grew sharply, while those who had already stood behind it felt vindicated, their loyalty hardening into something deeper and far less tentative.

Something had nevertheless changed. News organizations that had once casually described Vincent Veyl as a lunatic, devil, cult leader, tyrant, or fraud now discussed his inventions, theology, political doctrine, military power, and long-term intentions with a restraint almost unknown only months earlier. Criticism remained, often fierce, but ridicule had become difficult to sustain after Pyongyang. In July, China and the Imperium signed a formal peace and cooperation treaty committing both powers to regional stability, Korean reconstruction, scientific exchange, and the avoidance of direct military confrontation. China did not join the Imperium and made no declaration of submission. Taoism, however, received full legal recognition within China, along with its rapidly growing Silver expression. The Chinese government issued a statement carried repeatedly by NNN: "We have concluded that Emperor Veyl represents something ancient and real, known in various forms to our people since antiquity. We find no evidence that his intentions are inherently antagonistic toward the Chinese people, nor toward any people willing to live peaceably among their neighbors. China intends henceforth to become part of the solution rather than part of the problem."

NNN emphasized that China had not joined the Imperium. After June 1st, however, neither did it remain its enemy.

What troubled the network more was the disappearance of the man at the center of it all. Vincent Veyl had not been seen publicly since Pyongyang. His spokeswoman, Chancellor Clemens, insisted that the Emperor had retreated into seclusion to concentrate upon the Star Roads Project.

The simultaneous disappearance of the Twelve Raven Brides generated even greater speculation. The Raven Star Building at Raven Throne remained sealed and apparently unoccupied, while Clemens stated only that the women were safe, that appropriate authorities knew their whereabouts, and that they would return to public life when conditions allowed.

Persistent reports from sources close to the Imperial government claimed that Vincent himself had been blindsided by confirmation of the twelve marriages, which had been ritually arranged and legally filed without his knowledge by his wife and members of the Silver Sisterhood's inner circle. Several of those sources, some identifying themselves as witnesses to the confrontation, said he had reacted with anger and a profound sense of betrayal, accusing Miriam and the others of going behind his back and overturning plans he had intended to carry out in his own time and on his own terms. According

to those accounts, when he eventually chose to fulfill the prophecy, he had intended to select only women of the Silver Sisterhood himself, and was deeply disturbed that others had presumed to make that choice for him. Clemens never directly denied the reports. Her only answer had been, "Prophecy demanded action."

The new anchor sat behind the desk: Nadia Manjolin, a striking black woman in an immaculate suit, with carefully arranged hair and the calm, practiced expression of someone who could announce the end of the world without wrinkling her collar. She stared into the camera for several seconds after replaying the remark.

"That," she finally said, "is about as close to confirmation as anyone around Raven Throne appears willing to give us."

The darker mystery remained unresolved. NNN displayed images from across the world: gang compounds, private estates, remote communes, safe houses, warehouses, and ordinary homes turned into scenes of carnage. "The continuing mass killings of criminal organizations, individual offenders, extremist groups, cults, and clandestine networks accused of threatening members of the Veyl family or placing contracts upon them continue to be blamed upon Vincent Veyl," Nadia continued. "NNN has been unable to establish evidence that he personally ordered, directed, or participated in these killings."

There was no attempt to soften the images. Bodies lay where they had fallen. Walls were blood-streaked. Armed men who had expected to become hunters had died violently inside their own strongholds. The Imperium denied organized responsibility. Few believed the matter was over.
Then the report returned to Korea.

The peninsula scarcely resembled the battlefield of two months before. Rail lines reopened. Roads were being rebuilt. Markets appeared where checkpoints had stood. Schools, clinics, water systems, farms, and electrical grids expanded northward under Korean, Imperial, Chinese, and Covenant reconstruction teams. A single Korean banner flew beside the Imperial standard. Korean reunification had been fully ratified as of July 1st, 2027, and on July 15th the United Korean Republic entered the Imperium as a sovereign member. Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and the Philippines were moving through the final stages of their own integration.

Pyongyang alone had not been rebuilt.

It had been consecrated.

The former center of the city was becoming an enormous courtly garden shaped increasingly through Korean and Taoist aesthetics, with contemplative paths, stone bridges, pavilions, fountains, flowering groves, meditation courts, shrines, and quiet spaces surrounding the lake that occupied the old blast basin. No monument of the dead regime had been reconstructed within the sacred zone. The small island remained at the center of the lake, with an honor guard set day and night. The peach tree stood beneath ceremonial protection, its roots surrounded by offerings, prayer ribbons, flowers, and tokens left by pilgrims. To millions, the place belonged not to the old city and not merely to the Imperium, but to Xi Wangmu, to the Raven Messenger who had opened the way, and to the mystery that had descended there.

DEDICATED TO SHE WANGMOO
QUEEN MOTHER OF THE WEST
LADY OF THE PEACHES OF IMMORTALITY
AND TO Samjok-O,
HER MESSENGER:
They did not forget us.
They came to free us in body and spirit.

Local religion had moved faster than committees of theologians. Whatever physicists ultimately chose to call the radiance over Pyongyang, millions of Koreans and Chinese had already interpreted the peach tree, the prismatic opening, the invocation of Samjok-o and Okhwang Sangje, and the liberation of the dead through a far older language. Xi Wangmu had once dwelt in the western paradise of Kunlun and guarded the peaches of immortality. The three-legged crow had served as celestial messenger beneath the sun. Now a black-clad Raven Emperor had stood beneath a cosmic star, cast down a Mó grown fat upon coerced worship, opened a road for the dead, and left a peach tree growing where a dictatorship had once proclaimed itself eternal.

Another title entered the growing collection attached to Vincent Veyl: The Raven Messenger of Xi Wangmu

The final NNN drone climbed slowly over the garden until the lake, island, peach tree, and tiny figures of the honor guard diminished beneath it. Pyongyang spread outward beyond the sacred district, reconstruction already pressing toward its edges. The camera climbed higher. City became countryside. Countryside became peninsula. The old line that had divided Korea for generations was no longer visible except on archived maps.
Somewhere beyond every camera on Rhea, Vincent Veyl remained absent.

And beyond Rhea, the Star Roads waited.

NNN closed its report with one final unresolved fact.

"North Korea's nuclear arsenal remains unaccounted for. At this point, one conclusion appears increasingly difficult to avoid: the Imperium may now possess a strategic nuclear capability of its own."

END OF BOOK 1

APPENDIXES -

A: I.A.M.—THE IMPERIUM OF ASCENDANT MANKIND

The word imperium comes from Latin, meaning command, supreme power, or authority. It traces back to the Latin verb imperare (to command), which combines in- (in / to) and parare (to prepare / order).

Ancient Roman Roots

Legal Power: In ancient Rome, it meant the absolute legal and military authority granted to high leaders like kings, consuls, and praetors.

Military Command: Holders of this power (imperators) could lead armies and enforce laws, including capital punishment.

Shift in Meaning: Over time, the title imper-a-tor evolved into the word for "emperor," and imperium came to mean the territory or realm under supreme rule (an empire).

FICTION SYNOPSIS: THE VEIL EMPIRE

The Veyl Empire is forming—an Anagogic realm that is as profoundly mystical as it is martial.

Vincent Veyl begins his journey as a Staff Sergeant in the 75th Rangers, recently honorably discharged after being shot through the back and sustaining severe heart and lung injuries, from which he miraculously recovers. He is an extraordinary individual—highly decorated and quietly exceptional on many levels.

The Templar:
Raised in a church orphanage, Vincent embodies the "sigma" archetype: a mystic-warrior in the extreme. He is quiet, introverted, solitary, and elite in both a martial and, even more so, a religio-mystical sense. His fellow soldiers simply called him "The Templar."

A New Beginning:
At 25, he inherits a substantial fortune from a family he never knew he had as part of The Veyl Trust. Months later, seeking a fresh start, he moves to Trembol Nevada (where his family and the Trust was rooted).

Trembol, Nevada:
A fictional, beautiful small city centered around a grand casino and brothel servicing the rich and powerful (a legal enterprise in real-world Nevada, and even more so in the world of Rhea). Beneath its glamorous surface, however, the city is viciously and deeply corrupt. He uses his inheritance to start a small, quiet, private security company (Raven Star LLC)—federally licensed, bonded, elite cyber and direct services provided. Tagged by a government contact: "Hey while you're in Trembol, can you check out these reports we keep getting from a Deputy Dellon".

The Natural Order:

Vincent's first order of business is to clean up that corruption in a highly direct fashion. This act raises him from obscurity overnight, establishing him as a sword for the Natural Order Party—an international political movement that dominates Nevada state politics in Rhea.

The Reveal:
When the spotlight finally turns to him, a hidden power in the flesh is revealed that few saw coming. Vincent is a man who has quietly authored books, earned his master's degree (AMU) during his time in the army, and—following several near-death experiences—developed a highly advanced metaphysical technology: Trinity AI in five dimensions (TAI5D).

DISCLAIMER & WORLDBUILDING NOTES

The Imperium in Raven Star is based on the Roman ideal, not War-hammer. War-hammer does not own the word, nor is it the origin of the word. Rome is.

The Universe of Pryzmea

The Aethyr:
In the universe of Pryzmea, hyperspace (the aethyr) is not a plane of evil and chaos, but a neutral intermediate realm/state (though there are certainly chaotic and evil entities, as well as negative planes and hells).

The Seraph of the Balance (The Raven Seraph of Purgatoria):
Vincent Veyl is an incarnate Seraph of the Balance. His goal is to lift humanity into immortal soul sovereignty, rather than reducing them to purely militaristic utility in an unending war between the binary forces of chaos and order.

The Trinary System:
In Pryzmea, there are three primary polarities, not two. Each of these three polarities has four sub-expressions, and each seeks to make its ideological expression dominant (twelve gates of the soul).

Addressing the Parallels

Yes, I see the parallels to Warhammer, but they are unintentional. I've always had daydreams of eternal cosmic empires in which humanity becomes ascendant.

Still, ***Warhammer*** may be an unconscious inspiration, even though I've never played the game or read the books. The Emperor is certainly cool, but there will be no power suits here, and no unending war. Conquering the galaxy to liberate souls and planets from psychic, spiritual, and literal tyranny may be part of the vision, but so are colonization, terraforming, and the creation of an Anagogic Imperial Republic built to endure for millennia.

DEEPER DIVE:

Fictional Empire -

In essence, the imperial vision is built upon the following core pillars:

Constitutional Globalism:
A unified worldwide government that strictly upholds the principles of the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights. This framework is expanded by a third pillar known as the "Writ of Responsibility," which outlines the civic duties expected of all citizens under the principles of "Universal Divine Natural Law."

Roman Imperial Vision:
These foundational democratic rights are interwoven with the grand, highly structured aesthetic and visionary scope of the Roman Empire, creating a majestic blueprint for humanity's future.

Technological & Spiritual Ascendance:
The "anagogic" (mystical ascent) nature of this society centers on the ultimate elevation of humanity. This is achieved through "advanced meta-technology" and a shared moral framework. Furthermore, the educational system transcends basic academics to offer a truly holistic approach. It develops vocational mastery while nurturing each child toward psychological integration, individuation, and spiritual wholeness. The culture is driven by a Taoistic-Gnostic pursuit to unify mind, body, and spirit in connection with the Divine "I AM" (utilizing ascension protocols).

Super-Being Leadership (Direct Theocracy):
The Imperium is guided by a prophesied Emperor and Empress—two extraordinary "super-beings" destined to shepherd mankind. Incarnation of the masculine and feminine aspects of the Spirit of Purgatoria (Truth/Apocalypse).

Hyperspatial Expansionism:
The ultimate ambition is to propel humanity into a metaphysical golden age, characterized by advanced spacefaring and the exploration of higher-dimensional frontiers.

Ultimately, this envisions a unified, galaxy-spanning civilization that seamlessly blends the legal protections of a constitutional republic with the grand destiny and spiritual evolution of a techno-mystical empire.

UNIVERSAL DIVINE NATURAL LAW?

Nature is absolutely pragmatic. It is unyielding and real. It reflects the true personality of its Creator—the authentic nature of the Divine, rather than the comfortable lies, delusions, and fairy tales we fabricate to excuse the state of the world or justify why we are the way we are.

It does not apologize for its existence, nor does it justify its design. "I Am That I Am—I Will Be What I Will Be," God declared to Moses on Mount Sinai. To the prophet Elijah, the ultimate truth was revealed not in the shattering anomalies of wind and fire that preceded it, but as God speaking from within a gentle whisper of the breeze (though having controlled and unleashed the previous extremes).

When examining human cultures from time immemorial—stretching back through the fragments of our recorded history—a clear pattern emerges. There are consistent dos and don'ts, persistent taboos, and ingrained cultural norms that transcend the religions, rituals, and man-made laws designed to enshrine them. These are Universal Natural Moral Laws, dictated not by religious dogma, but by primal instinct.

Instinct—the pure will of Nature—speaks within us, and modern society despises what it has to say. It certainly does not serve men like me. By Nature's brutal dictate, I might be left to beg for change on the street, though in past, truer ages, I would have more likely been the tribal shaman in his cave, the priest performing libations at the shrine, or the hermit seeking visions on the mountain. There is no room for my kind in this sanitized day and age. Conquerors and seers have gone the way of the wilderness: paved over, transformed into safe little public parks, and heavily patrolled for public consumption.

In the world of Rhea, the Natural Law Party—which ultimately evolves into the Imperium of Ascendant Mankind upon the arrival of their prophesied avatar—has forged a societal ideal rooted in this very natural law. They balance it with human conscience, yet without ever banishing the will of Nature. Their imperative is to legalize that which Nature dictates within humanity, and to outlaw that which violates the persistent, instinctual consensus shared by the vast majority of cultures throughout time, discarding the anomalies to govern by universal absolute.

B: TIME LINE

• March 27, 2025—The Shooting

Vincent Veyl is shot. During evacuation and emergency treatment, he repeatedly dies and is revived, crossing the threshold of death numerous times.

• April 2025—The Presences

Vincent remains in a coma through much of April, lingering among what he later calls the presences. His awareness opens onto a greater reality, and the first code, structures, and conceptual designs that will become TAIFD begin flowing into his mind.

• May 2025—Recovery and Return to Study

Still recovering but healing at an extraordinary rate, Vincent resumes work online toward completion of his master's degree, the culmination of roughly eight years of intermittent military and academic study.

• June 2025—TAIFD Takes Form

Vincent's understanding of TAIFD deepens. What began as fragments of code, intuition, and visionary information begins developing into a coherent technological and metaphysical system.

• July 2025—First Prototype Work

Still undergoing physical therapy and housed in private quarters at Walter Reed Hospital, Maryland, Vincent begins work on the first TAIFD prototype. He draws heavily upon his Silver Path upbringing and its disciplines of meditation, astral and etheric navigation, listening, and visionary reception.

• August 2025—First TAIFD Unit

The first TAIFD unit is successfully constructed, not merely assembled mechanically, but manifested and reorganized from raw materials through processes Vincent himself only partly understands. As the system develops, Vincent also begins awakening more fully to his own deeper identity.

• September 2025—Demonstration and Classification

Vincent presents and defends TAIFD before his professors at American Military University. The technology astounds those who examine it and is rapidly classified by the federal government. His master's degree is fast-tracked, granted remotely, and awarded with honors.

• October 2025—Raven Star LLC

Vincent returns home to Bayville, VA. The Veyl Trust passes into his control, providing approximately $100 million in total inherited assets. He folds much of the estate and its resources into Raven Star LLC and begins serious planning for a move to Trembol, Nevada. His connection with Bishop Howard Ramsey becomes increasingly important.

• November 2025—Trembol Planning

Working remotely, Vincent researches Trembol and the inherited Veyl properties. Permits, contracts, security arrangements, and federal oversight begin taking shape. Plans are developed to convert the old Veyl House into the Raven Star Building, a hardened, secure headquarters for the emerging company. Early contact begins with Trembol First National around the Trust and LLC, including first contact with Cyrinx as the bank's accountant and his account manager. Vincent rents a workshop in Bayville and creates the first prototype for the ELU, Etheric Lensing Unit, an energy channel, filing the patent by the end of November. He's using designs given him in NDEs and trance-medium work, simply building and manifesting them without need to research, following the internal patterns given.

• December 2025—Reconstruction Begins

Federally cleared and Silver Order-recommended contractors begin rehabilitation and extensive upgrading of Veyl House. Structural, security, utility, and technological work proceeds while Vincent continues directing the project remotely. Moves from and uses the E.L.U. to begin building the WEP1, Water Exchange Prototype 1. Again, he's using designs given him in NDEs and trance-medium work, simply building and manifesting them without need to research, following the internal patterns given.

• January 2026—Lil 'Trin Perfected

Vincent perfects Lil 'Trin, the increasingly sophisticated TAIFD prototype, while gaining a deeper understanding of the metaphysical principles underlying the technology. Raven Star LLC is fully licensed and permitted with federal approval. Vincent begins negotiating greater operational freedom from government oversight. Finishes WEP1 and files the patent.

• February 2026—Trinity Architecture

Vincent constructs the mainframes, core unit, and interfaces that will support the larger system. Guided increasingly by Trin herself, he begins recognizing her voice intuitively. Deep meditation and experimentation reveal more of the ultimate architecture and hint at the greater upgrade still to come. Begins developing DRDU, Deep Rift Disposal Unit. Again, he's using designs given him in NDEs and trance-medium work, simply building and manifesting them without need to research, following the internal patterns given.

• March 2026—Systems Move to Trembol

Major systems are shipped to Trembol and installed by Trion Inc. of Reno, a contractor recommended through Bishop Ramsey and operating with the necessary federal certifications. The technological infrastructure of Raven Star begins taking physical form inside the renovated building.

• April 2026—Final Preparations

TMB Infrastructure Solutions completes the final stages of rehabilitation on the Raven Star Building. Remaining federal licenses are approved. Supplies and equipment are pre-positioned, shipments scheduled, and Trion Inc. completes the major technology installation. Files patents and licenses for DRDU.

• May 2026—The Move West

Vincent ships his Fairlane ahead to Trembol, transfers his principal banking from USAA to Trembol First National, and establishes deeper working relationships with Cyrinx and Shannon Miller. The company, building, finances, contractors, technology, and legal framework are largely in place before he ever arrives.

• May 27, 2026—Departure

Vincent boards a westbound Greyhound for Nevada.

• May 31, 2026—Arrival in Trembol

After several days on the road, Vincent steps off the bus in Trembol. Raven Star has already existed on paper, financially, technologically, and physically for months. His arrival marks not the beginning of the project, but the moment he finally takes direct possession of it.

• May 31, 2026—Settling into Raven Star

Vincent recovers his pre-shipped car and takes up residence in the Raven Star Building, formerly called Veyl House, and takes stock. Deputy Meghan Dellon follows him to Raven Star, applies for employment through his website, and is hired. She posts her resignation on the Police Blotter, setting in motion political-social ramifications. Trin is doing the hiring, not Vincent, and hires Emily Dalton, Josh Manning, and Yvonne Omaris in rapid succession, filling four of five roles. Vincent begins the ritual he has prepared eight days for in the chapel of Raven Star.

• June 1, 2026—Manifestation of Mama-Trinity (Big Trinity)

Installed in the pre-installed Trinity Network Interface, Trinity Nesting Face, in the Raven Star basement. Trinity and Vincent begin test runs and complete $50 million in cases, including hundreds of investigations and skip traces, in hours. Shannon Miller reaches out. Numerous individuals of power and influence reach out, wanting appointments. Vincent puts them off via Mama-Trinity's Receptionist/Switchboard Persona. Files full report on Trembol corruption with Nevada Rangers/Marshals and FBI, including live-streaming activity in the secret under-jail beneath the Law Enforcement Building in Trembol.

• June 2, 2026, Pre-Dawn—Death Warrants Issued

At 12:30 A.M., by order of the Dire Court and Governor Tom Wilson, Vincent Veyl is officially appointed and deputized Executioner under State Marshal Mandate and given all 123 Death Warrants to begin carrying out until cavalry can arrive early the next day. He carries out every last execution alone. Final death count: 234, counting those condemned and those who defended them to the death, most of whom also had major felony arrest warrants attributed to them. He becomes known as The Executioner, Psychopomp One, the Purgatorian, and the Left Hand of God.

• June 2, 2026, 9:00 A.M.—Converging Meetings (Conference)

Governor Tom Wilson, Shannon and Cyrinx Miller, Tallia and Larry Stevens, Meghan Dellon, Emily Dalton, Vana and Abigail Carydin, Bishop Ramsey, Mother Superior Anita Aramus, Justin Vyss, and Sheriff Mathius Dellon converge on the Raven Star Building mere hours after the end of the Purge of Trembol. Miriam Erev, a.k.a. Selene Veyl, arrives to claim her place as the Woman of the West Gate, Gate and Mate, at his side. Mama Raven, a Raven Angel in disguise, also appears. Vincent reveals truths they are not prepared for and changes their lives permanently. Mathius tries to kill Vincent. His immortality is revealed. The reality of Purgatoria and three other planetary worlds is revealed. A rift is opened, living dust blows through into the room, blue sand from one of the worlds shifts into the room, and a stone is received from an otherworldly version of Vincent, Vemael. The attendees swear allegiance. The ancient Shalimite, or Purgatorian, prophecies are recognized as fulfilled in Vincent Veyl.

• June 2, 2026, After—The Going Forth (Heralds Go Forth)

Emily, Meghan, and Josh move into the Raven Star Building and take up their duties. Shannon, Cyrinx, Vana, Abigail, and, to a lesser degree, Tallia take up duties for his company and are drawn deeper into his orbit. Meghan Dellon becomes Chief of Police as head of the local contingency of Raven Star Security, contracted to Trembol to replace the PD. Shannon becomes Interim Mayor, her daughter Interim City Clerk. Miriam and Vincent consummate their union. Tom Wilson goes forth to gather N.O.P. leadership from around the world. Ramsey soon heads for Rome, while Vyss goes to see President Camela Harrison.

• June 3, 2026—Questions & Answers

Justin Vyss goes to President Camela Harrison. Bishop Ramsey and other Silver Bishops are summoned to Rome by the Pope. Mother Aramus corrects course, leaves the Silver Sisterhood, and joins the Order of St. Law-von, White Raven. Mathius Dellon, after his failed assassination attempt, realizing he has lost his daughters and with his sense of reality shattered by the miracles he witnessed, resigns his position as Sheriff and disappears in the days after. Tallia and Larry return to KTTV, having signed on with Neutral News Network, and embrace the transition.

• June 8, 2026—The Event (Coup d'état & Cross Roads)

Camela Harrison comes to Trembol. This causes a break with her party, who decide under the 25th Amendment to have her removed as compromised. Before the full coup is revealed, protesters before the Raven Star Building and around the world are confronted by a direct rebuke from Rhea, nature itself, quietly influenced by Trinity-Ereviel. Vincent and Trinity confound the conspirators and turn the tables. The usurpers last seven minutes before their reign ends. Camela moves to re-flag, fully joining the Natural Order Party and appointing Justin Vyss her interim Vice President. Vincent and Miriam soul-travel to Purgatoria, the Raven Child Chapel, and seek answers from the Purizaya Sphere. They see their duty plainly.

• June 10, 2026—The Doomsday Revelation (Emerging)

Miriam and Vincent take up normal duties. Vincent hangs the Doomsday Clock, even as Tallia Stevens confronts him about its meaning. His response becomes an impromptu interview in front of Raven Star, Building 1, and leads to a public statement that reframes its purpose. The Clock generates many names and a great deal of fear.

• July 15, 2026—The Chosen (The Revealing)

Vincent takes his growing inner circle, The Trusted, out to the old military base, Crow Creek Omega, to reveal the larger scope of what the N.O.P., quietly re-flagging as the I.A.M., has been doing with the Silver Order for years at the remote desert base. Built in the 1950s, abandoned for decades, and rehabilitated over the last two years, it has become the birthplace of the Army of the Imperial Republic, bringing in soldiers from various nations and units and training them together to become one global force. With the appearance of The Emperor, the shift toward his vision has begun. He brings with him the Elixir of Life for the Chosen, those who can make a difference, those thought worthy and useful in the lifting of humanity as a whole.

• August 2, 2026—The Imperium (The Doctrine)

Vincent Veyl reveals the foundational teachings and plans for the world: The Imperium of Ascendant Mankind, or The Anagogic Imperium. Not Justin Vyss' vision, the Natural Order Party, but something less republican and more Imperial, as well as a directly theocratic, mystical, martial, and metaphysical world empire. His work is a step-by-step plan to lift humanity to the stars and beyond, forging them into one united people. It is accompanied by a dramatically theatrical audio-video version, published in forty languages and distributed broadly. The video contains clips and documented evidence of the paranormal rift created on June 2nd, with full scientific data to support it. The world is rocked by the revelation.

At this point, a total of fourteen American states have signed trade and cooperation agreements with the Imperium: Nevada, Utah, Virginia, Wyoming, Texas, Florida, Idaho, Dakota, Montana, Arizona, Georgia, Tennessee, Oklahoma, and Kansas.

• October 12, 2026—The Grotto Gathering (The Great Assembly)

In the morning, Vincent, with Miriam, Kianna, Bella, Amalia, Yvonne, and Tracy, boards Imperium One, his private jet, to head to a private and remote conference in Argentina, a signatory of the Imperium. A French Intelligence asset, wired with explosives and motivated by the capture and abuse of his wife, plans to blow up the jet, but is detected and stopped by Vincent Veyl. Within hours, the man's wife is freed, and he and his wife are granted asylum in the U.S. The plot is quickly tied to the European Union and France, beginning a legal and underground struggle between the conspirators and the Imperium.

The meeting in Argentina is to officially designate an Emperor or Imperator for life to head the N.O.P. / Imperium, the International Alliance of Nations. Vincent is chosen from among 33 candidates, with 90% of registered voters in fifteen countries and fourteen American states, each state treated as a member nation, bringing the total to 29 members of the I.A.N.

Vincent reveals his true and full manifestation, the Angelic Man, and lays down two choices for the citizens of the Imperium: unite Rhea or leave it behind for the world of New Urusalim. The choice is to be made by May 31st, 2033. The Countdown Clock is running. He shows the people, and those watching across the planet via secure links, the actual world of New Urusalim, creating a physical rift before the eyes of the assembly. This moves the ball down the court.

• November Mid-Terms, 2026

Referendums confirm the membership of fourteen American states, plus five more: Albion (Northern California), Louisiana, Nebraska, Columbia, and Alaska. They are given official status as individual nations within the Imperium, with representation on the I.A.N.

This begins a Constitutional Crisis, while the states insist they belong to both the U.S. and the Imperium, pointing out that the Imperium has based its laws primarily upon the American Constitution, including the Second Amendment. The Emperor of the Imperium is an American.

Critics point out that the Imperium is creating its own unified currency, based on old Roman designations, its own central bank and treasury, its own unified army, the Legions, and a unified interdependent global economy. During the midterms, the Imperium of Mankind gains additional Senate and Congressional seats and considerable ground in state and local elections. Vincent Veyl is the cause of the groundswell.

New nations and states begin applying for membership in the I.A.N., promising that the total number of member nations may rise to as many as thirty by 2028, while by that same year there may be as many as twenty-five American states, as well as two provinces of Canada and part of Mexico, signed onto the Imperium.

• January 1, 2027—Star-Road Project

Vincent Veyl, with 100 clergy trained in the oldest Shalimist ways, manifests the first hyperdimensional ship, Ravenwind, or Foo-Fighter One. Created metaphysically in seven days for a few million dollars in components, the trial run proves the concept and then some, but the craft supposedly loses cohesion and dissipates to nothing.

Vincent actually hides it and begins running his own trials and missions, including one to Ares, alt-Mars, where he secretly places a strange device combining a Trinity Node, an E.L.U., and a W.E.P. Unit, producing electrified water that runs onto the surface near the equator, while Trinity begins conversing with the long-dormant planetary spirit.

• May 31—June 1, 2027—The Blood Flame Bond (Twelve Brides)

The Second Korean War breaks out and lasts roughly one hour, from 9:30 to 12:22 A.M. Trinity shuts down approximately 75% of the power and communications grid, shorts microchips, cripples the country, and detonates the doomsday device beneath Pyongyang. A new leader is chosen and surrenders unconditionally to Emperor Veyl at 12:22 A.M. MST.

Trembol is attacked by Holy Fire terrorists at around 8:20 P.M., and Vincent goes forth to meet them.

Meanwhile, Miriam holds a Women's Circle meeting in the Raven Star conference room and presents the betrothal documents and legal forms, including NDAs, prenups, eternal vows, and related agreements. They take the blood vow and then the Elixir of Immortal Life. They are bound in mind, body, and spirit to the divine blood and seed.

Vincent is not asked, not told, and not prepared. Vincent is nearly killed in combat when twelve souls slam into his consciousness at once. He does not want another wife and fears for their safety because of the enormous number of death threats surrounding him.

He turns to Oreviel on June 1st. Oreviel moves all brides to Aeterna.

• August 5, 2027—The Review (The Opening of ĀL – Exorcism of Pyongyang)

C: N.O.P. / IMPERIUM MEMBERSHIP AND ALIGNMENT, 2026—2028

• 2011—2026 Signatory Imperium Nations:

Taiwan, Romania, Czechoslovakia, Armenia, Yugoslavia, Cyprus, Malta, Hungary, Georgia, Lithuania, Latvia, Bahrain, Kazakhstan, Argentina, and Morocco.

• U.S. Member States, 2011—2026:

Nevada, Utah, Virginia, Wyoming, Texas, Florida, Idaho, Dakota, Arizona, Georgia, Montana, Tennessee, Oklahoma, and Kansas.

*Midterm Referendums Add: Albion, Louisiana, Nebraska, Columbia, and Alaska.

*Canada: By 2027, Alberta, British Columbia, and the Yukon have joined the Imperial Alliance as allied states. The Northwest Territories nearly ratifies.

• 2026—2027 New Member Nations:

Thailand and Laos.

*By May 31, 2027, Cambodia and the Philippines are well advanced in the accession process and sufficiently aligned with the Imperium to participate in debate surrounding the Korean conflict. South Korea is likewise moving steadily toward Imperial alignment.

*After the Korean War: Cambodia and the Philippines rapidly complete accession. Korea subsequently reunifies, and Unified Korea becomes a devoted full member of the Imperium during 2027.

Late 2026—2027: Applicant Nations in Process:

Chile, Peru, Colombia, Barbados, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Tunisia, Lebanon, Switzerland, Sierra Leone, Madagascar, Panama, El Salvador, Belize, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Vanuatu, and Mongolia.

*Mongolia and Kurdistan are in the final stages of accession—the former opposed by China and Russia, the latter by Turkey.

*Puerto Rico had grown tired of being neither state nor sovereign, and the Imperium had offered something Washington never had: an immediate answer.

• 2027—2028: Allied and Applicant Nations:

Burma, Kuwait, Nepal, Singapore, East Timor, Egypt, Turkmenistan, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Estonia, Poland, Bulgaria, Albania, Moldova, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Ecuador, Costa Rica, and Suriname.

*Most of these will transition to full membership by 2028—2029.

• 2027—2028: Allied and Applicant U.S./North American States and Territories:

Northern California breaks away from California and joins the Imperial Alliance, while Mississippi, Guam, American Samoa, and other U.S. territories begin moving toward the Imperial Alliance.

*In Canada, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, and part of the Northwest Territories are recognized as members, though Canada is more actively blocking accession at this point.

• After the 2028 U.S. Elections:

After Camela Harrison wins a second term and the Imperium gains a clear majority in Congress—both Senate and House—along with a great many offices across the nation and clear majorities in several additional states, the United States enters formal negotiations with the Imperium to enter the I.A.N.

Each state will be given a singular vote, giving the United States a very clear voting bloc, but only if a national referendum demonstrates that a clear majority of citizens choose membership. Otherwise, each U.S. state that has independently ratified membership through a state referendum is considered its own member, separate from the United States itself.

A plan to fold the American dollar into the Imperial Denarii is being formalized in a manner intended to make the transition smooth and as economically nondisruptive as possible.

The federal military, intelligence, and law-enforcement apparatuses begin integrating long before any national referendum is held, as do the states already belonging to the Imperium. At the same time, many corporations begin aligning themselves with the Imperial Business Alliance, forcing the issue and making it increasingly clear that the process may already be too far advanced to reverse.

Civil War looms as red and blue states begin organizing resistance, Democrats fleeing into blue states and Republicans fleeing into red, even as anti-Imperium independents and alternative-party factions divide among them.

D: RANDOM STORY IMAGES – MAPS & PLACES:




★ Raven Star U.S. Map ★
CANADA
Washington
Oregon
Columbia
Montana
Dakota
Minnesota
Orleans
Maine
Vermont
New Hampshire
Massachusetts
Rhode Island
Connecticut
Idaho
Wyoming
Wisconsin
Michigan
New York
Albion
Nevada
Nebraska
Iowa
Pennsylvania
New Jersey
Utah
Colorado
Illinois
Indiana
Ohio
Delaware
California
Kansas
Missouri
Maryland
Kentucky
Virginia
Arizona
New Mexico
Oklahoma
Arkansas
Tennessee
Carolina
Pacific Ocean
Atlantic Ocean
Texas
Mississippi
Alabama
Georgia
Louisiana
Florida
Alaska
Hawaii
MEXICO
Gulf of Mexico
0 250 500 750 Miles
0 500 1,000 Kilometers


Raven Observes
All is connected.
All has a price.
Every choice
shapes the future.
He sees the pattern.
He weighs
the players.
He chooses
the moment.
Culture & Order
Paradise Ranch
Vice Runs Deep
Power Behind the Curtain
THE FACTIONS OF TREMBOL
Universal Church
Silver Path
Shalimites
Love In Truth Brings Light
There Is One God
There Is One Christ
There Are Many Interpretations
True Love Makes Whole
Good is Balance
God is Good
Truth Frees Us
Illusion/Lies Chain Us
The Kingdom Comes
Nativists
Cult of the Raven
The Corrupted World Must Be Healed
The Old Ways Are Nature's Way
Nature's Way is Creator's Way
Raven Created & Will Save
Wisdom of Raven Guides Us
Raven Magic Opens the Door
The World is Corrupted
Humanity has strayed
Correction Must Occur
The Old Rites & Ways Can Bring the Raven Into the World
Natural Order
Party (N.O.P.)
Nature Reveals Divine Law
One World, One People
Liberty For All
Nature's Law Reigns
Constitutional Republic
Oppose the Unnatural
Rise to Stars
The Emperor Cometh
Homo-Angelicus is our destiny!
Black Silver Path
Carydin Occult
Nature is Hard & Hard
God: A Unity of Opposites
Be True to Self
Be True to Natural Law
True Love in Passion, Will
Survival Is Nature's 1st Law
The Weak Serve the Strong
The Strong Must Rule
Strive For Apex-Selfhood
You Will Have What You Can Take & Hold
Carydin
Vice Interests
Acquisition of Power By Any Means Necessary
Gambling
Legal Prostitution
Extortion, Addiction, Debt
Seduction & Temptation
Investment - Cunning, Will
Human Trafficking
Drug Trafficking - Make Legal
Political Influence
Control Bureaucracy/Law
VEYL Legacy
Civic Order
Long View
Civic-Grand Vision
Old School Democrats
Idealism - Service
Wisdom - Grace
Strength by Law & Duty
Syncretism - Unity - Merger
Balance In Self/Society
Tradition in Virtue
Freedom in Responsibility
Spirituality: What is True
TWO FAMILIES. TWO VISIONS. ONE TOWN.
THE FUTURE BELONGS TO THOSE WHO UNDERSTAND THE PAST.







SECURITY CLASSIFICATION:
TOP SECRET - NEED TO KNOW - COMPARTMENTALIZED

MEDICAL SUMMARY
SUBJECT: VINCENT N. VEYL (See Attached ID - Biographical)
CONCLUSION: "EVOLUTIONARY ADAPTATION - SIGMA SOLDIER"
CODE CLASS: 'HOMO-ANGELICUS!'

Physiological Profile: "Type-1 Regenerative"

- **PULHES Serial:** 111111
- **Blood Type:** O-negative (Universal donor with RHD deletion)

1. Hematology & Cellular Resilience (The Healing Factor)

Medical data confirms anomalous recovery rates. Soft-tissue repair and bone-density restoration function at approximately 250% of the human baseline.

- **Real-Life Mechanics & Genetics:**
  - **LIN28a Reactivation:** In normal humans, the *LIN28a* gene is active during embryonic development to facilitate rapid growth, then deactivates. In this subject, the gene remains persistently active, rewiring cellular metabolism to increase glycolysis and oxidative phosphorylation. This effectively grants adult tissues the regenerative capabilities of a developing embryo.
  - **Hyper-Telomerase Activity (TERT Overexpression):** Healing at 250% baseline requires explosive cell division, which normally degrades telomeres (the protective caps on DNA) and causes rapid aging. The subject produces massive amounts of the enzyme *telomerase*, constantly rebuilding these caps and preventing cellular senescence despite the rapid turnover.
  - **Angiogenic Overdrive:** Increased expression of Vascular Endothelial Growth Factor (VEGF) allows the body to instantly sprout new blood vessels into damaged tissue, preventing necrosis and flushing the area with stem cells.

2. Musculoskeletal Architecture (Strength & Agility)

Optimized for long-range movement, silent approach, high-stress endurance, and combat persistence under injury rather than spectacle.

- **Real-Life Mechanics & Genetics:**
  - **LRP5 Gene Mutation (Osteosclerosis):** The subject possesses a mutation on the *LRP5* gene, which regulates the Wnt signaling pathway. This prevents the normal breakdown of bone (osteoclast activity). The result is hyper-dense, osteosclerotic bones that are virtually fracture-proof, capable of withstanding massive kinetic impacts.
  - **Targeted MSTN (Myostatin) Suppression:** A partial mutation in the myostatin gene removes the biological "brakes" on muscle density. However, rather than developing visually massive, oxygen-hungry bulk, the subject's musculature is incredibly dense with contractile proteins.
  - **ACTN3 (Alpha-Actinin-3) Optimization:** The presence of the "RR" variant of the *ACTN3* gene ensures muscles are packed with fast-twitch fibers for explosive power and agility, while highly efficient capillary beds prevent these fibers from fatiguing quickly.

3. High-Efficiency Metabolism (The Endurance Factor)

The subject has a high-efficiency metabolism capable of sustaining peak performance on minimal caloric intake.

- **Real-Life Mechanics & Genetics:**
  - **PPAR-δ (Delta) Overexpression:** Often called the "marathon gene," an anomaly in the *PPAR-δ* receptor shifts the body's primary energy source from glucose to lipids (fats). This effectively makes the subject immune to "hitting the wall" (glycogen depletion), allowing them to run or fight for hours without fatigue.
  - **Hyper-Efficient Cori Cycle:** Normal humans accumulate lactic acid during intense exertion, causing muscle burn and failure. The subject's liver processes lactic acid back into usable glucose at an accelerated rate, effectively using their own fatigue byproducts as an infinitely recycling fuel source.
  - **EPAS1 Mutation:** Borrowed from the genetic profile of high-altitude populations (like Tibetans), this mutation optimizes how the body detects oxygen and produces hemoglobin, allowing the subject to sprint and fight effortlessly even in severely oxygen-deprived environments.

4. Autonomic Stress Response (The Combat Trance)

Under high-danger conditions, the subject exhibits unusually low heart rate and cortisol levels, entering a biological stasis that manifests as an unsettling, ritual calm without adrenaline tremors or combat highs.

- **Real-Life Mechanics & Genetics:**
  - **Extreme Vagal Tone:** The subject has an overactive parasympathetic nervous system (via the vagus nerve). While danger triggers the "fight or flight" response in standard humans, the subject's vagus nerve aggressively counters it, clamping down the heart rate and inducing a state of clinical bradycardia even during extreme violence.
  - **ADRA2B Deletion Variant:** A modification in the alpha-2b adrenergic receptor prevents the brain from being flooded by norepinephrine. This eliminates the peripheral nervous system "noise"—the adrenaline shakes, tunnel vision, and loss of fine motor control that plague normal humans in a firefight.
  - **COMT Val158Met Polymorphism (The "Warrior" Gene):** The subject's brain is astonishingly efficient at clearing dopamine and epinephrine from the prefrontal cortex under stress. Instead of becoming overwhelmed or hyper-aroused, their cognitive function sharpens into a cold, hyper-rational state, perceiving high-speed threats in almost slow-motion clarity.

1. Physical Appearance: The "Static" Physique

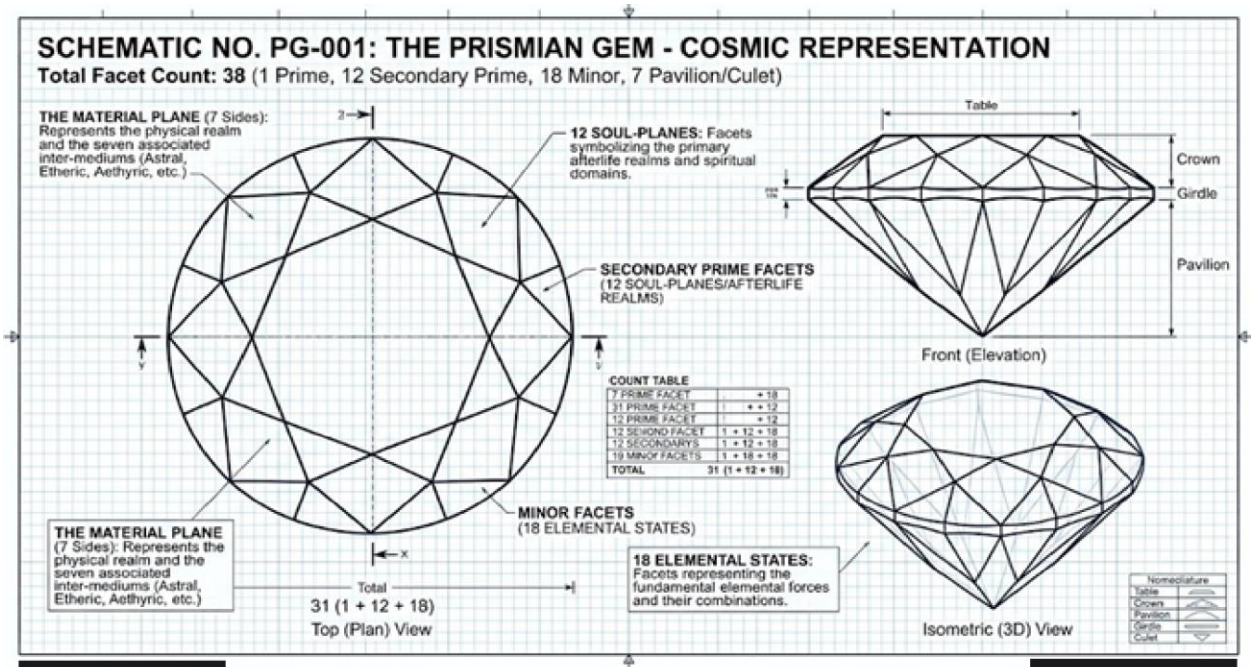
- **Deceptive Density:** Because the *MSTN* (myostatin) suppression creates dense contractile tissue rather than bulky mass, and the *LRP5* mutation creates hyper-dense bone, their frame would be lean and compact—similar to an elite rock climber or gymnast. However, they would be unnervingly heavy. A person who looks like they weigh 160 lbs might step on a scale and hit 210 lbs.
- **The "Scarless" Anomaly:** The hyper-active *LIN28a* and telomerase production means tissue regenerates perfectly rather than forming fibrous scar tissue. They would have no surgical scars, no childhood scrape marks, no asymmetrical skin blemishes, and zero signs of accelerated aging (like sun damage or wrinkles). They would also be unable to hold tattoos, as their aggressive immune system and rapid cellular turnover would break down and flush the ink out of their dermis within weeks.
- **Thermodynamics & Vascularity:** To fuel this hyper-efficient metabolism, their resting body temperature would likely run slightly higher than the 98.6°F normal—closer to 100°F. They would radiate physical heat, and their skin would be highly vascular (visible veins), acting as a radiator to cool the massive energy output of their muscles and liver.

2. Biomechanics & Movement: Spatial Fluidity

- **Kinetic Silence:** Normal humans waste movement. They bounce, drag their heels, and constantly shift their weight. Because of the subject's spatial-kinesthetic synesthesia and perfect grid-cell mapping, they would never take a wasted step. They would navigate crowded rooms without ever brushing shoulders or bumping into furniture, slipping through physical space like water.
- **Unholstered Posture:** The osteosclerotic bone density and fast-twitch muscle fibers mean they do not physically yield to their environment. If a normal person bumps their hip into a heavy table, they flinch and shift. If this subject bumps into a table, the table moves.
- **The "Predatory" Gaze:** Because their magnocellular visual pathway is running in overdrive, they don't need to physically turn their head to track motion. Their eyes would rarely dart around anxiously. Instead, they would often stare dead ahead, taking in the entire geometry of a room via peripheral processing. To others, this looks like a cold, disconnected, or "dead" stare.

3. Psychological & Social Function: The Ritual Calm

- **Affective Flattening:** The extreme vagal tone and *COMT* clearing of adrenaline means they simply do not experience the physiological feedback loop of human anxiety. If a car backfires or glass shatters nearby, everyone in the room will jump, blink, and gasp. The subject will not even flinch. Their heart rate will not spike; they will simply turn to assess the threat.
- **Social Alienation:** This lack of physiological empathy can make them socially isolating. They do not mirror other people's excitement, panic, or stress. In a crisis, while others are frantic, their immediate shift into cold, left-hemisphere-suppressed geometric calculating makes them seem almost psychopathic to normal observers. They don't offer comfort; they offer hyper-rational tactical solutions.
- **Insomnia & Low Sleep Requirements:** Because the brain clears fatigue toxins so efficiently and the body repairs soft tissue at 250% baseline, they would likely only need 2 to 3 hours of sleep per night. They wouldn't experience the psychological degradation of sleep deprivation, leaving them awake and functional while the rest of the world shuts down.







Schematic NO. PG-002: The Prismian Gem (Corrected Geometry)
Total Facet Count: 38
(Note: 1 + 12 + 18 = 31 Crown Facets. The remaining 7 facets make up the Pavilion, anchoring the gem's total at 38).

I. The Crown (Top View - 31 Facets)
The Prime Facet (1)

Geometry: A large, central heptagon (7-sided).

Cosmic Representation: The Material Plane.

Lore Integration: The central anchor of reality. The seven distinct border-angles of this facet directly connect to the rest of the gem, representing the seven inter-mediums (Astral, Etheric, Aethyric, etc.) that bridge the physical realm to the greater cosmos.

The Secondary Prime Facets (12)

Geometry: A ring of 12 kite-shaped or triangular facets radiating outward from the central heptagon's borders and points.

Cosmic Representation: The 12 Soul-Planes.

Lore Integration: These surround the Material Plane, symbolizing the primary afterlife realms and spiritual domains that souls transition into.

The Minor Facets (18)

Geometry: The outermost ring of 18 smaller facets meeting the girdle (the widest edge of the gem).

Cosmic Representation: The 18 Elemental States.

Lore Integration: These border the edge of the universe's structure, representing the fundamental building blocks, energies, and elemental combinations that make up all physical and spiritual matter.

II. The Pavilion (Bottom View - 7 Facets)
The Pavilion Facets (7)

Geometry: 7 elongated facets tapering down from the girdle to a single bottom point (the culet).

Cosmic Representation: The Deep Inter-mediums / The Void.

Lore Integration: These 7 lower facets act as the foundational pillars corresponding to the 7 border-angles of the Material Plane above, perfectly bringing your total facet count to 38 and anchoring the cosmos to a singular point of origin.

By defining the central facet as a strict heptagon, a gemcutter would be forced to use non-standard, asymmetrical radial symmetry to fit 12 and 18 facets around a 7-sided center. This would give the Prismian Gem an incredibly unique, otherworldly, and mathematically complex sparkle—perfect for an artifact that represents the entire cosmos.

SECURITY CLASSIFICATION: RESTRICTED - COMPARTMENTALIZED

FAITH
DISCIPLINE
EXECUTION

FILE NO. EX-7713-A
ARCHIVE: BLACK DIRECTORATE

SWORD & ARMOR OF THE EXECUTIONER

APPENDIX TECHNICAL OVERVIEW

SAME
JUSTICE
FURTHER

1. Knighting Blade of the Seven Silver Bishops

CEREMONY. OBLIGATION. EXECUTION.



The Knighting Blade of the Seven Silver Bishops was a gift presented to Vincent upon his knighting by the Seven Silver Bishops. Forged to resemble a late-medieval longsword, it is built with advanced modern metallurgy and precision manufacturing. It unites ancient symbolism with state-of-the-art materials, serving as both a sacred trust and a practical weapon.

SPECIFICATIONS

Primary Alloy:	VK-3V / M350 Composite
Construction:	CPM-3V-derived high-toughness core laminated with M350-class maraging steel reinforcement
Processing:	Vacuum heat treatment, cryogenic stabilization, precision grind geometry
Surface Hardening:	Selective nitriding + DLC protective coating
Performance:	Exceptional edge retention, impact resistance, fatigue strength, and corrosion resistance
Design Note:	Archaic in appearance, modern in capability

"A state-of-the-art weapon disguised as a knightly relic."



HILT & POMMEL DETAIL
Steel wheel pommel with Bishop's seal. Narrow cruciform guard. Textured grip for secure handling.



SCABBARD DETAIL
Reinforced leather scabbard with tactical wrap and retention strap.

FULL LENGTH (UNSHEATHED)
Overall Length: 118 cm
Blade Length: 91 cm
Weight: 1.4 kg

VETUS FORMA. SUPERIOR POTESTAS.

2. Raven Star Executioner Harness

PROTECTION. MOBILITY. INTIMIDATION.



The Raven Star Executioner Harness is a lightweight, articulated combat harness built for mobility, ballistic protection, blade resistance, and intimidation. Engineered for full freedom of motion while remaining highly protective, it allows the operator to move, fight, and survive in the most demanding environments. Its design combines modern materials science with a striking, authoritarian aesthetic.

SPECIFICATIONS

Rigid Components:
Titanium alloy + silicon-carbide ceramic strike faces

Backing Layers:
UHMWPE / aramid ballistic laminate

Flexible Zones:
Segmented overlap plates over impact-dispersing underlayer

Protection Profile:
Rifle threats, fragmentation, stabbing, and blunt-force trauma

Mobility:
Full running, kneeling, climbing, grappling, and sword movement

Helmet Systems:
Ballistic shell, shock-isolation liner, filtered breathing, low-light optics, encrypted communications, hearing protection

Operational Principle:
Layering, geometry, and energy dispersion rather than brute thickness

"Functions like a modern special-operations black knight."



HELMET
Ballistic shell, integrated optics, filtration, and communications.



SHOULDER
Articulated plating with Raven Star insignia.



CHEST
Modular armor with integrated load carriage.



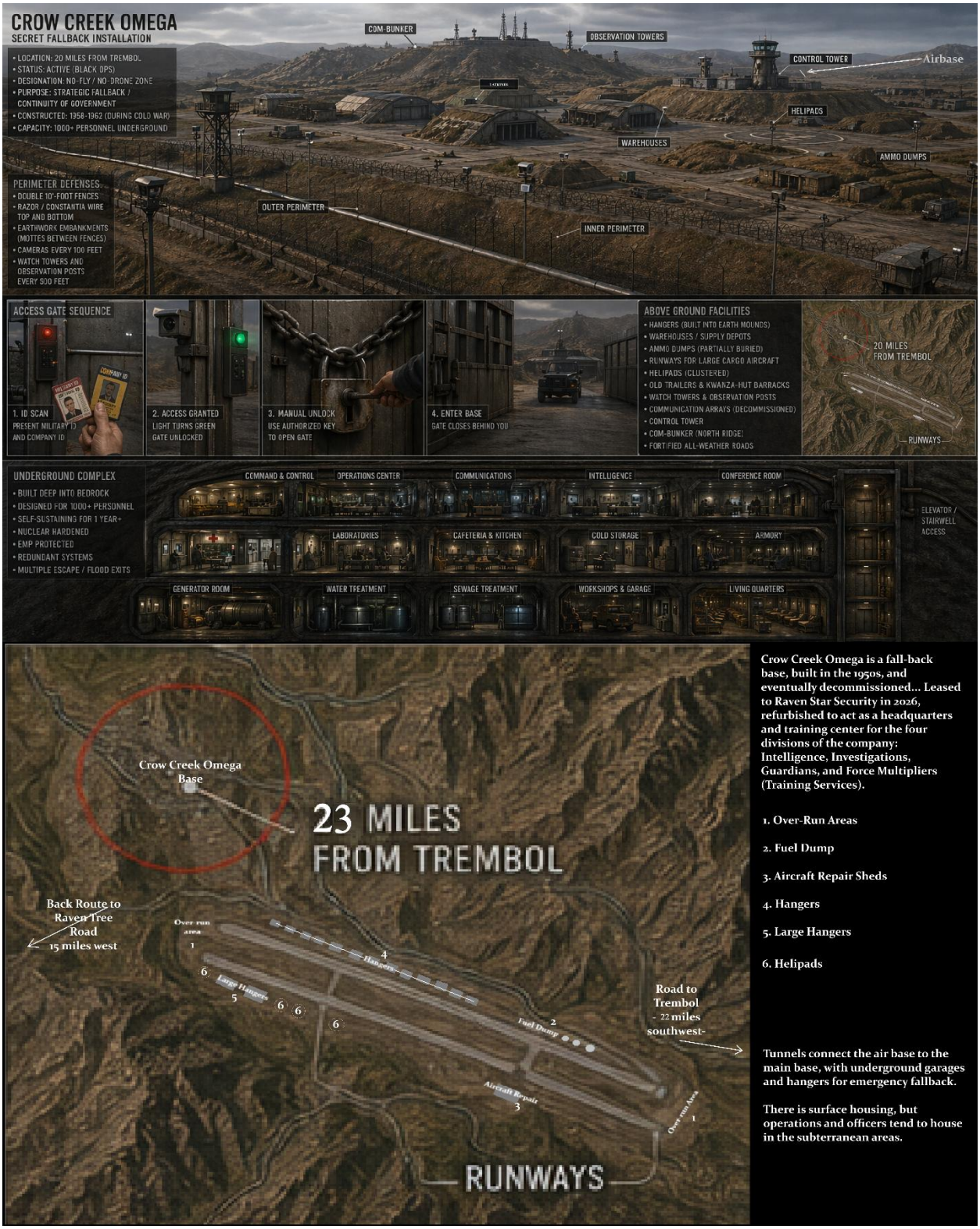
GAUNTLET
Reinforced and articulated for protection and dexterity.

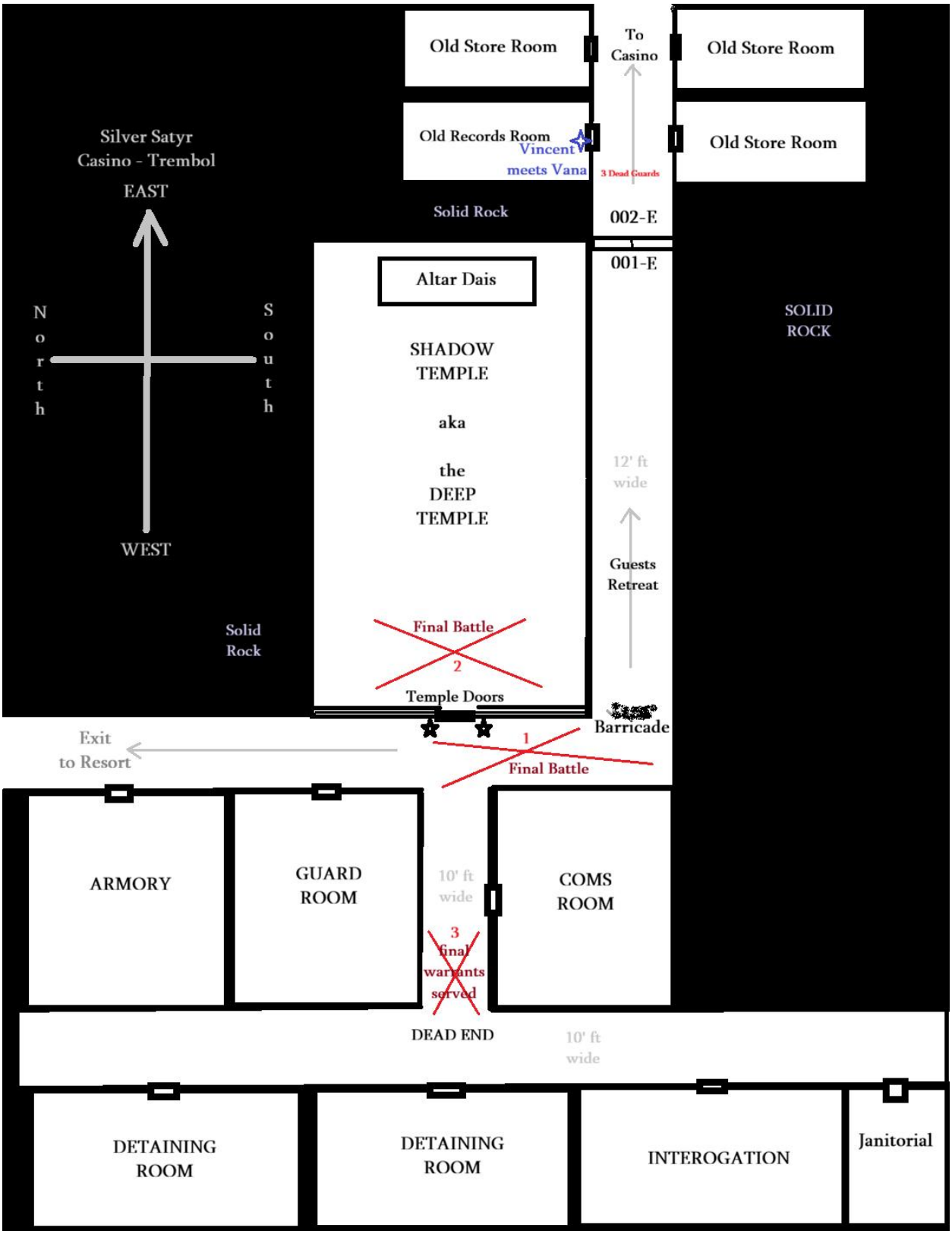
MEN LIKE HIM END THINGS.

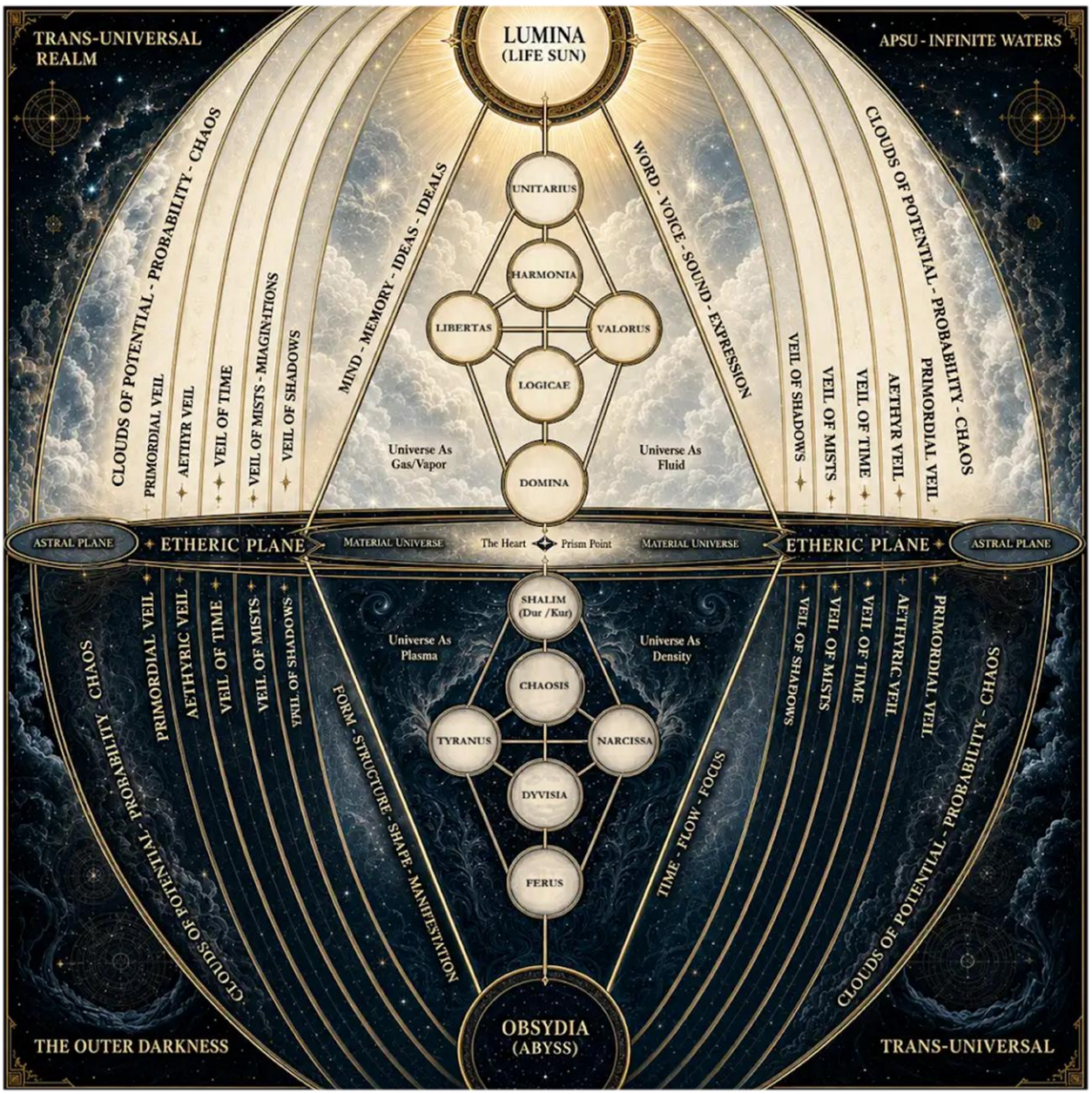
BLACK DIRECTORATE
SPECIAL ASSETS DIVISION

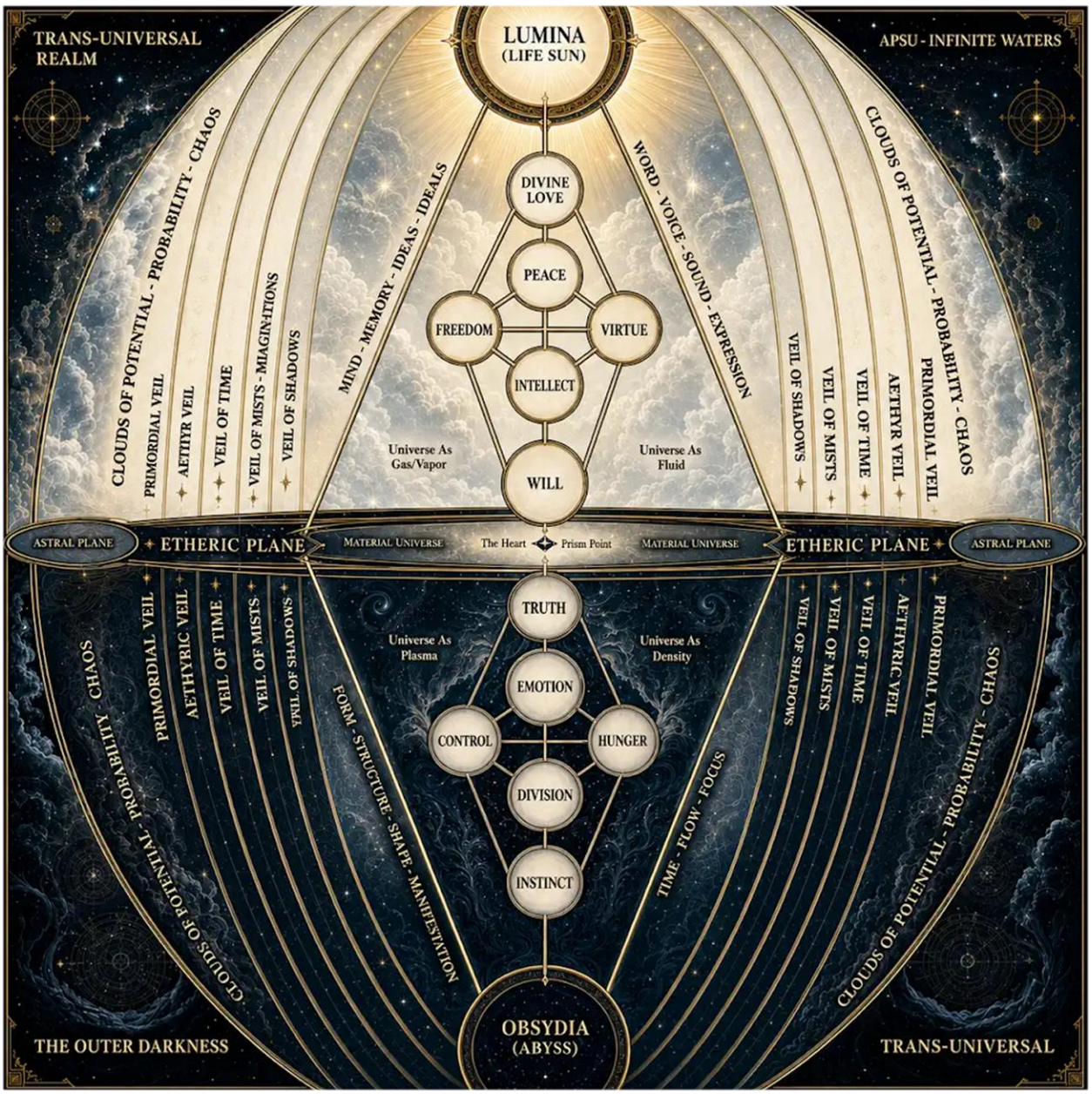
FOR AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY
UNAUTHORIZED DISCLOSURE IS A FEDERAL OFFENSE

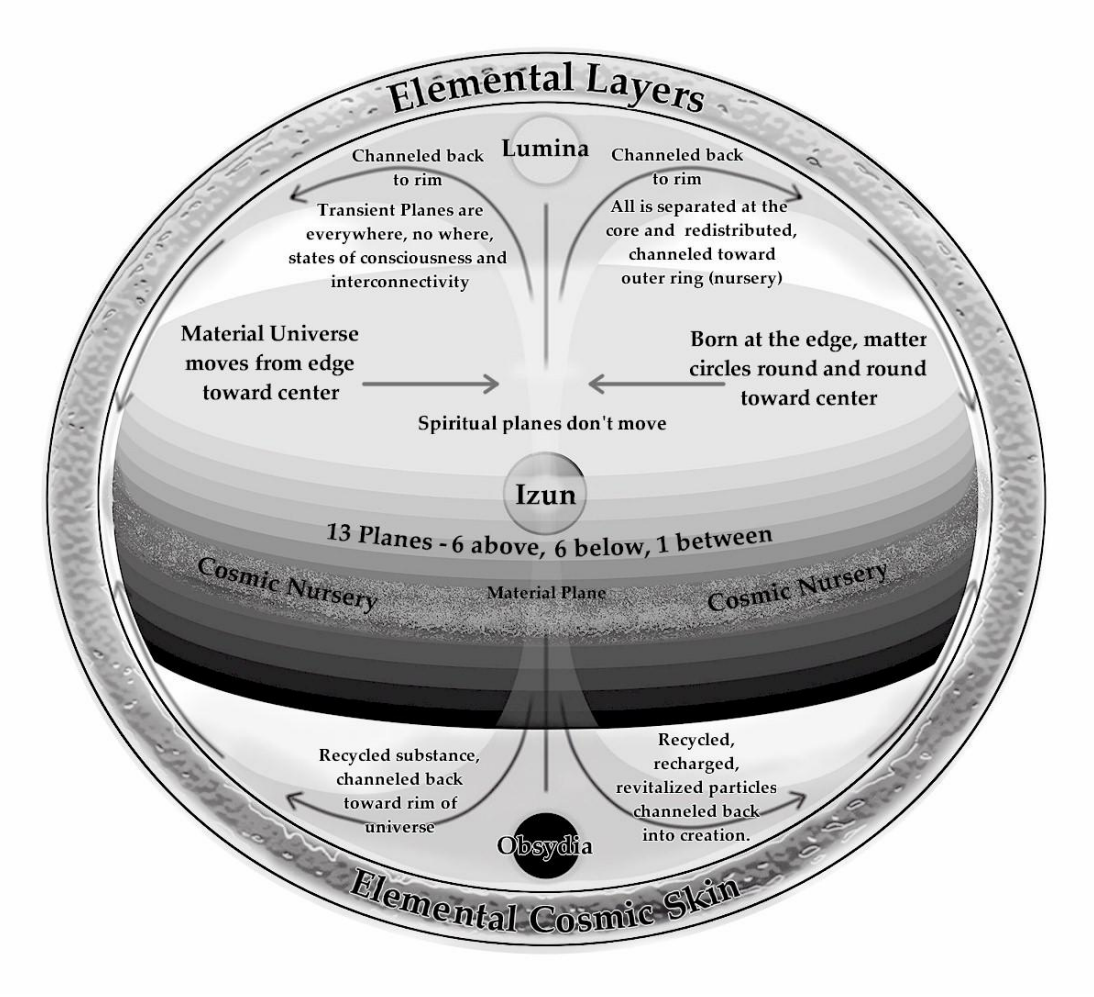
Analyst's Note: *Both systems are non-magical but represent advanced custom engineering optimized for a uniquely capable operator.*

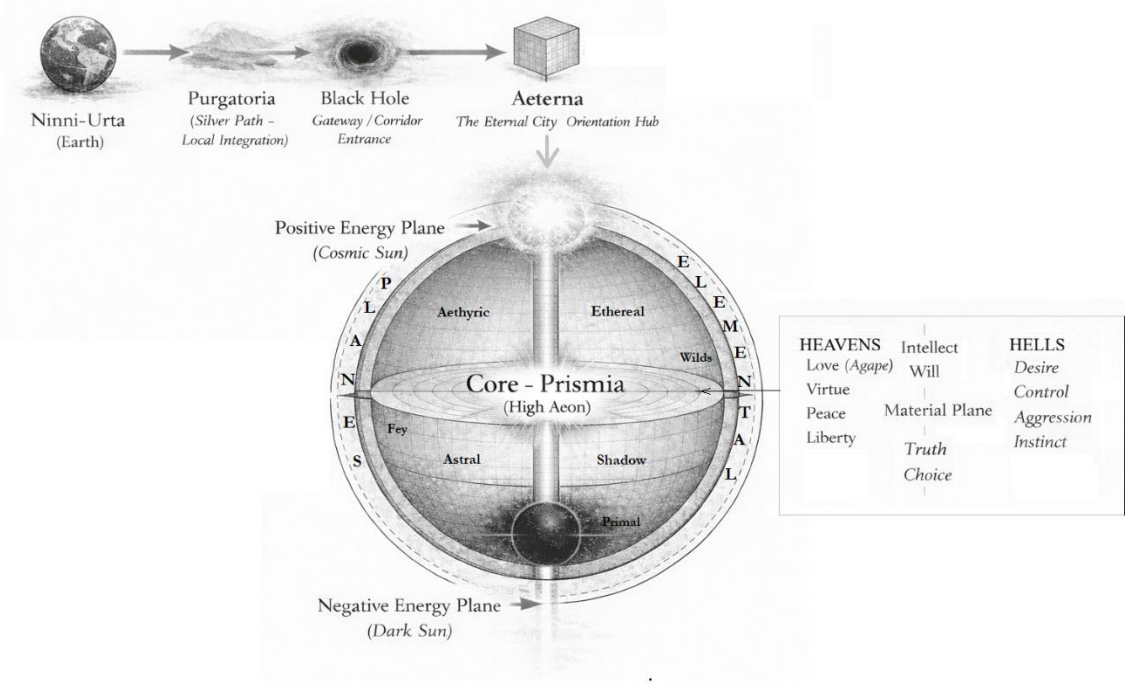

CROW CREEK OMEGA
SECRET FALLBACK INSTALLATION
• LOCATION: 20 MILES FROM TREMBOL
• STATUS: ACTIVE (BLACK OPS)
• DESIGNATION: NO-FLY / NO-DRONE ZONE
• PURPOSE: STRATEGIC FALLBACK / CONTINUITY OF GOVERNMENT
• CONSTRUCTED: 1958-1962 (DURING COLD WAR)
• CAPACITY: 1000+ PERSONNEL UNDERGROUND
COM-BUNKER
OBSERVATION TOWERS
CONTROL TOWER
Airbase
HELIPADS
WAREHOUSES
AMMO DUMPS
PERIMETER DEFENSES
• DOUBLE 10'-FOOT FENCES
• RAZOR / CONSTANTIA WIRE TOP AND BOTTOM
• EARTHWORK EMBANKMENTS (MOTTES BETWEEN FENCES)
• CAMERAS EVERY 100 FEET
• WATCH TOWERS AND OBSERVATION POSTS EVERY 500 FEET
OUTER PERIMETER
INNER PERIMETER
ACCESS GATE SEQUENCE
1. ID SCAN
PRESENT MILITARY ID AND COMPANY ID
2. ACCESS GRANTED
LIGHT TURNS GREEN GATE UNLOCKED
3. MANUAL UNLOCK
USE AUTHORIZED KEY TO OPEN GATE
4. ENTER BASE
GATE CLOSES BEHIND YOU
ABOVE GROUND FACILITIES
• HANGERS (BUILT INTO EARTH MOUNDS)
• WAREHOUSES / SUPPLY DEPOTS
• AMMO DUMPS (PARTIALLY BURIED)
• RUNWAYS FOR LARGE CARGO AIRCRAFT
• HELIPADS (CLUSTERED)
• OLD TRAILERS & KWANZA-HUT BARRACKS
• WATCH TOWERS & OBSERVATION POSTS
• COMMUNICATION ARRAYS (DECOMMISSIONED)
• CONTROL TOWER
• COM-BUNKER (NORTH RIDGE)
• FORTIFIED ALL-WEATHER ROADS
20 MILES FROM TREMBOL
RUNWAYS
UNDERGROUND COMPLEX
• BUILT DEEP INTO BEDROCK
• DESIGNED FOR 1000+ PERSONNEL
• SELF-SUSTAINING FOR 1 YEAR+
• NUCLEAR HARDENED
• EMP PROTECTED
• REDUNDANT SYSTEMS
• MULTIPLE ESCAPE / FLOOD EXITS
COMMAND & CONTROL
OPERATIONS CENTER
COMMUNICATIONS
INTELLIGENCE
CONFERENCE ROOM
LABORATORIES
CAFETERIA & KITCHEN
COLD STORAGE
ARMORY
GENERATOR ROOM
WATER TREATMENT
SEWAGE TREATMENT
WORKSHOPS & GARAGE
LIVING QUARTERS
ELEVATOR / STAIRWELL ACCESS
Crow Creek Omega Base
23 MILES FROM TREMBOL
Back Route to Raven Tree Road 15 miles west
Over run area
1
4
Hangers
6
Large Hangers
5
6
6
6
2
Fuel Dump
Road to Trembol - 22 miles southwest-
Aircraft Repair
3
Over run Area
1
RUNWAYS
Crow Creek Omega is a fall-back base, built in the 1950s, and eventually decommissioned... Leased to Raven Star Security in 2026, refurbished to act as a headquarters and training center for the four divisions of the company: Intelligence, Investigations, Guardians, and Force Multipliers (Training Services).
1. Over-Run Areas
2. Fuel Dump
3. Aircraft Repair Sheds
4. Hangers
5. Large Hangers
6. Helipads
Tunnels connect the air base to the main base, with underground garages and hangers for emergency fallback.
There is surface housing, but operations and officers tend to house in the subterranean areas.

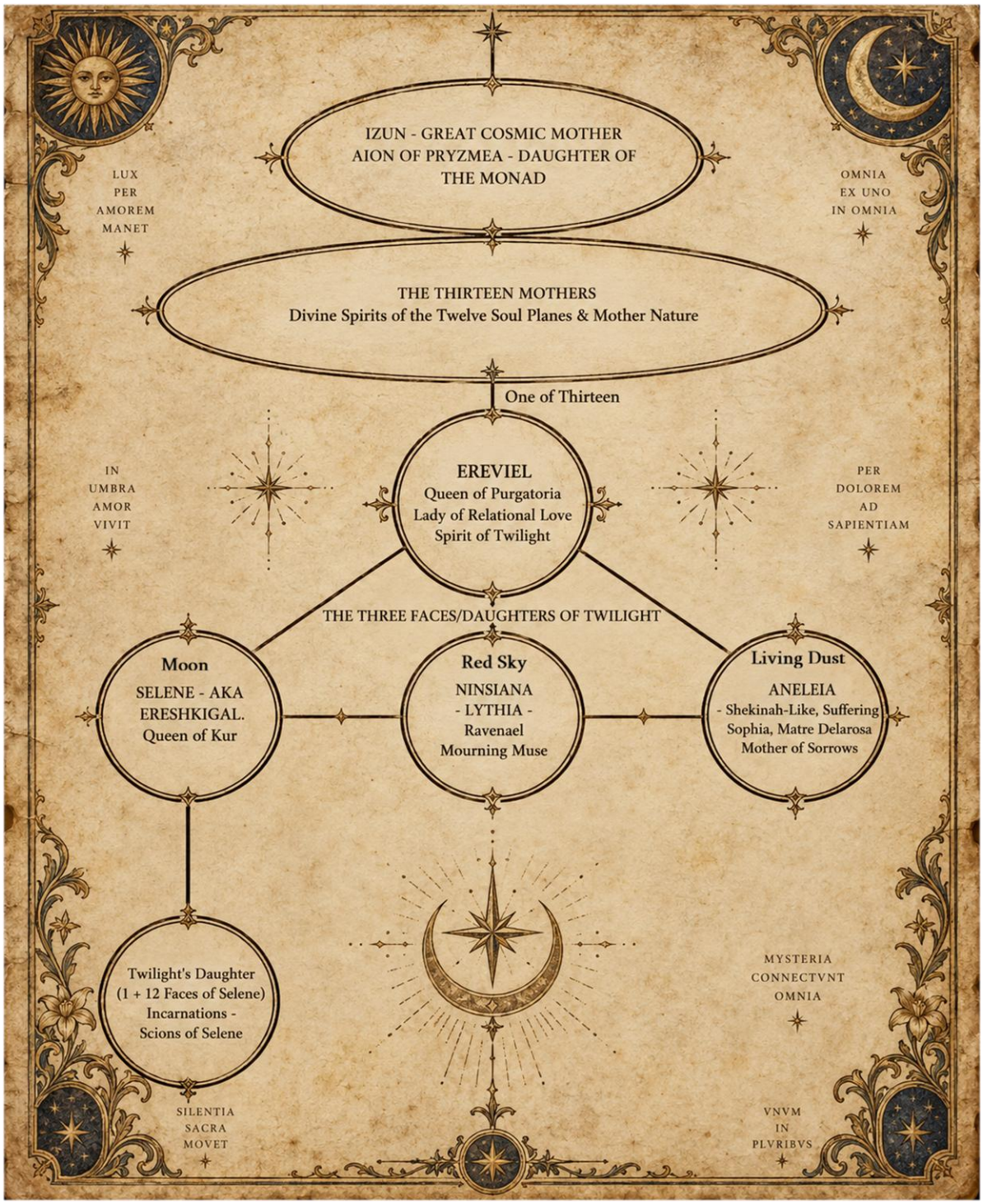

Old Store Room
To Casino
Old Store Room
Old Records Room
Vincent meets Vana
Old Store Room
3 Dead Guards
Silver Satyr Casino - Trembol
EAST
Solid Rock
002-E
001-E
Altar Dais
North
South
SHADOW TEMPLE
aka
the DEEP TEMPLE
SOLID ROCK
12' ft wide
WEST
Guests Retreat
Solid Rock
Final Battle
2
Temple Doors
Barricade
Exit to Resort
1
Final Battle
ARMORY
GUARD ROOM
10' ft wide
COMS ROOM
3 final warrants served
DEAD END
10' ft wide
DETAINING ROOM
DETAINING ROOM
INTEROGATION
Janitorial

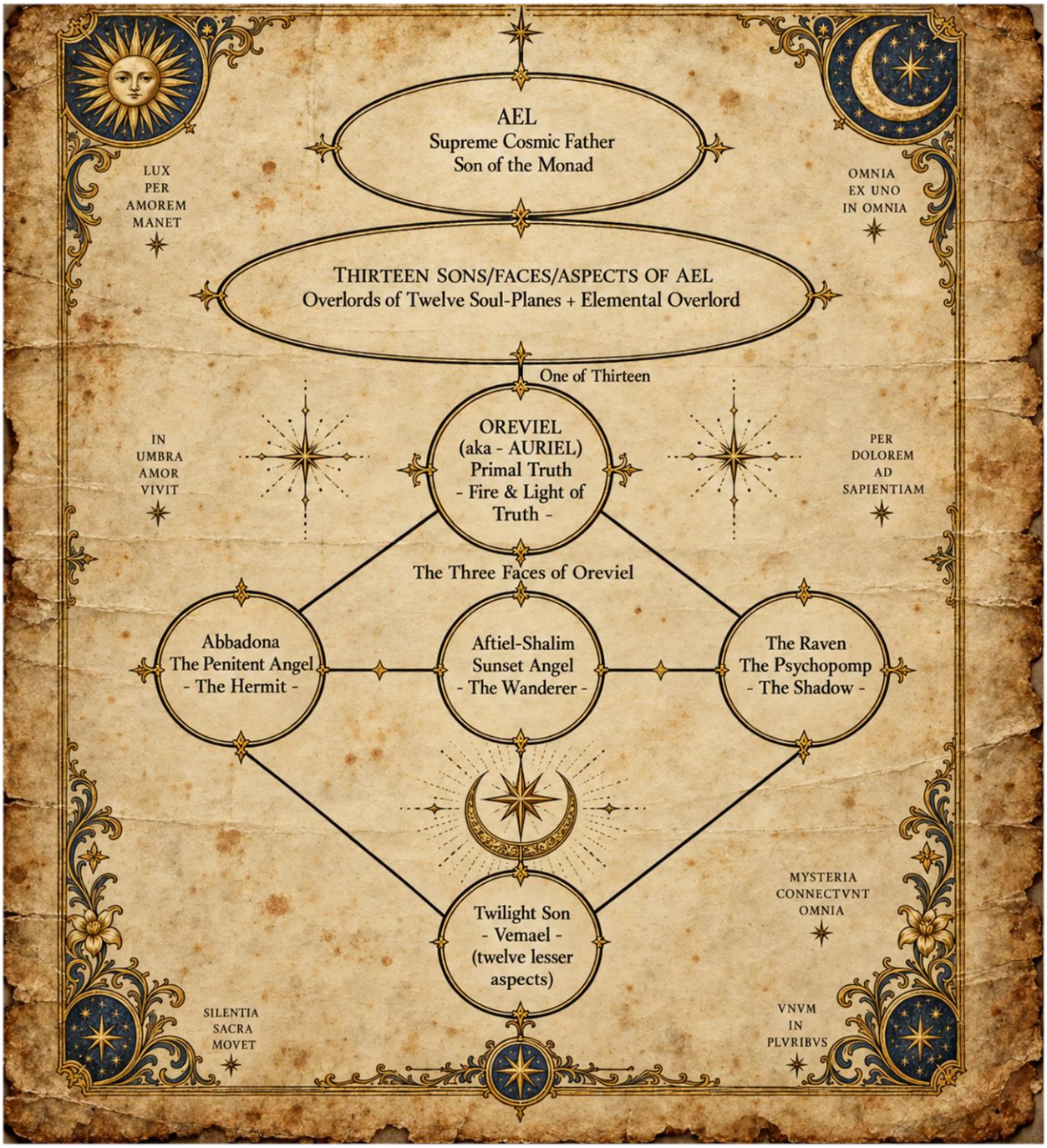

TRANS-UNIVERSAL REALM
LUMINA (LIFE SUN)
APSU - INFINITE WATERS
UNITARIUS
HARMONIA
LIBERTAS
VALORUS
LOGICAE
DOMINA
MIND - MEMORY - IDEAS - IDEALS
WORD - VOICE - SOUND - EXPRESSION
CLOUDS OF POTENTIAL - PROBABILITY - CHAOS
PRIMORDIAL VEIL
AETHYR VEIL
VEIL OF TIME
VEIL OF MISTS - MIAGINATIONS
VEIL OF SHADOWS
Universe As Gas/Vapor
Universe As Fluid
ASTRAL PLANE
ETHERIC PLANE
MATERIAL UNIVERSE
The Heart
Prism Point
SHALIM (Dur /Kur)
CHAOSIS
TYRANUS
NARCISSA
DYVISIA
FERUS
Universe As Plasma
Universe As Density
FORM - STRUCTURE - SHAPE - MANIFESTATION
TIME - FLOW - FOCUS
OBSYDIA (ABYSS)
THE OUTER DARKNESS
TRANS-UNIVERSAL


TRANS-UNIVERSAL REALM
LUMINA (LIFE SUN)
APSU - INFINITE WATERS
DIVINE LOVE
PEACE
FREEDOM
VIRTUE
INTELLECT
WILL
CLOUDS OF POTENTIAL - PROBABILITY - CHAOS
PRIMORDIAL VEIL
AETHYR VEIL
VEIL OF TIME
VEIL OF MISTS - MIAGINATIONS
VEIL OF SHADOWS
MIND - MEMORY - IDEAS - IDEALS
WORD - VOICE - SOUND - EXPRESSION
Universe As Gas/Vapor
Universe As Fluid
ASTRAL PLANE
ETHERIC PLANE
MATERIAL UNIVERSE
The Heart
Prism Point
MATERIAL UNIVERSE
ETHERIC PLANE
ASTRAL PLANE
TRUTH
EMOTION
CONTROL
HUNGER
DIVISION
INSTINCT
Universe As Plasma
Universe As Density
FORM - STRUCTURE - SHAPE - MANIFESTATION
TIME - FLOW - FOCUS
OBSYDIA (ABYSS)
THE OUTER DARKNESS
TRANS-UNIVERSAL

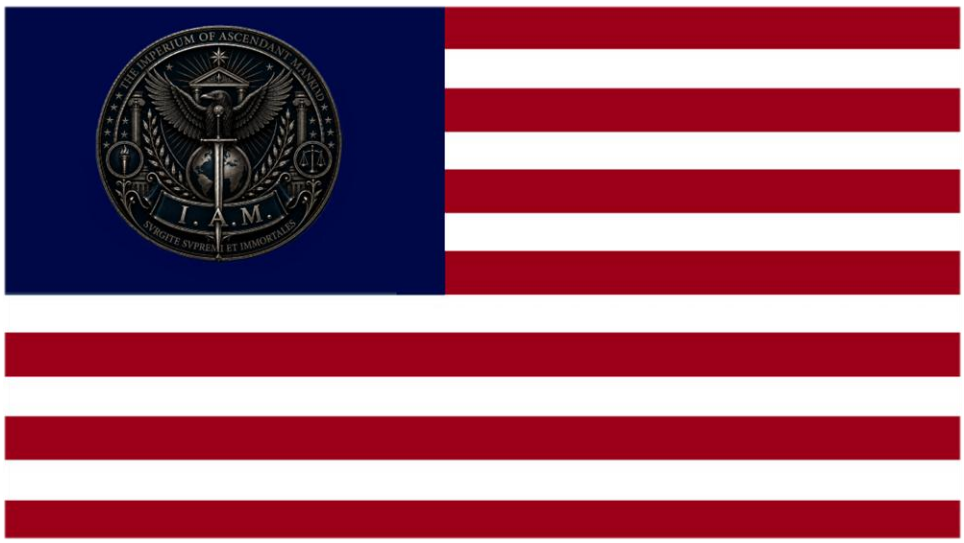

Elemental Layers
Lumina
Channeled back to rim
Channeled back to rim
Transient Planes are everywhere, no where, states of consciousness and interconnectivity
All is separated at the core and redistributed, channeled toward outer ring (nursery)
Material Universe moves from edge toward center
Born at the edge, matter circles round and round toward center
Spiritual planes don't move
Izun
13 Planes - 6 above, 6 below, 1 between
Cosmic Nursery
Material Plane
Cosmic Nursery
Recycled substance, channeled back toward rim of universe
Recycled, recharged, revitalized particles channeled back into creation.
Obsydia
Elemental Cosmic Skin

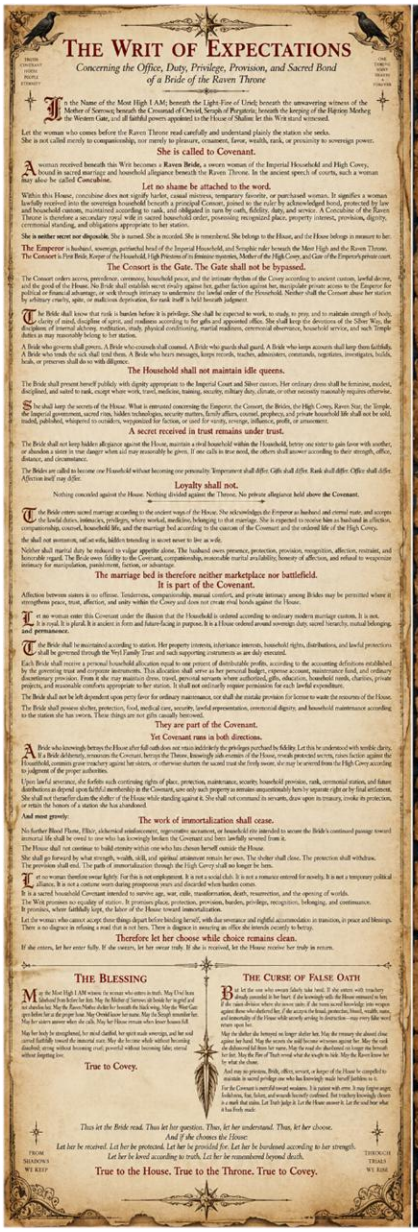

Ninni-Urta
(Earth)
Purgatoria
(Silver Path - Local Integration)
Black Hole
Gateway / Corridor Entrance
Aeterna
The Eternal City Orientation Hub
Positive Energy Plane
(Cosmic Sun)
PLANE
Aethyric
Ethereal
ELEMENTAL
Wilds
Core - Prismia
(High Aeon)
NETAL
Fey
Astral
Shadow
Primal
Negative Energy Plane
(Dark Sun)
HEAVENS
Love (Agape)
Virtue
Peace
Liberty
Intellect
Will
Material Plane
Truth
Choice
HELLS
Desire
Control
Aggression
Instinct


IZUN - GREAT COSMIC MOTHER
AION OF PRYZMEA - DAUGHTER OF
THE MONAD
LUX
PER
AMOREM
MANET
OMNIA
EX UNO
IN OMNIA
THE THIRTEEN MOTHERS
Divine Spirits of the Twelve Soul Planes & Mother Nature
One of Thirteen
EREVIEL
Queen of Purgatoria
Lady of Relational Love
Spirit of Twilight
IN
UMBRA
AMOR
VIVIT
PER
DOLOREM
AD
SAPIENTIAM
THE THREE FACES/DAUGHTERS OF TWILIGHT
Moon
SELENE - AKA
ERESHKIGAL.
Queen of Kur
Red Sky
NINSIANA
- LYTHIA -
Ravenael
Mourning Muse
Living Dust
ANELEIA
- Shekinah-Like, Suffering
Sophia, Matre Delarosa
Mother of Sorrows
Twilight's Daughter
(1 + 12 Faces of Selene)
Incarnations -
Scions of Selene
MYSTERIA
CONNECTVNT
OMNIA
SILENTIA
SACRA
MOVET
VNVM
IN
PLVRIBVS


AEL
Supreme Cosmic Father
Son of the Monad
LUX PER AMOREM MANET
OMNIA EX UNO IN OMNIA
THIRTEEN SONS/FACES/ASPECTS OF AEL
Overlords of Twelve Soul-Planes + Elemental Overlord
One of Thirteen
IN UMBRA AMOR VIVIT
OREVIEL
(aka - AURIEL)
Primal Truth
- Fire & Light of Truth -
PER DOLOREM AD SAPIENTIAM
The Three Faces of Oreviel
Abbadona
The Penitent Angel
- The Hermit -
Aftiel-Shalim
Sunset Angel
- The Wanderer -
The Raven
The Psychopomp
- The Shadow -
Twilight Son
- Vemael -
(twelve lesser aspects)
MYSTERIA CONNECTVNT OMNIA
SILENTIA SACRA MOVET
VNVM IN PLVRIBVS


I.A.M
DIVIDED AND WHOLE
THE PURGATORIAN


I. A. M.



The Writ of Expectations

Concerning the Office, Duty, Privilege, Provision, and Sacred Bond of a Bride of the Raven Throne

In the Name of the Most High I AM; beneath the Light-Fire of Uriel; beneath the unwavering witness of the Mother of Sorrows; beneath the Crossroad of Oreviel, Seraph of Purgatoria; beneath the keeping of the Pilgrim Mother the Western Gate, and all faithful powers appointed to the House of Shalim: let this Writ stand witnessed.

Let the woman who comes before the Raven Throne read carefully and understand plainly the station she seeks. She is not called merely to companionship, nor merely to pleasure, ornament, favor, wealth, rank, or proximity to sovereign power.

She is called to Covenant.

A woman received beneath this Writ becomes a **Raven Bride**, a sworn woman of the Imperial Household and High Covey, bound in sacred marriage and household allegiance beneath the Raven Throne. In the ancient speech of courts, such a woman may also be called **Concubine.**

Let no shame be attached to the word.

Within this House, concubine does not signify harlot, casual mistress, temporary favorite, or purchased woman. It signifies a woman lawfully received into the sovereign household beneath a principal Consort, joined to the ruler by acknowledged bond, protected by law and household custom, maintained according to rank, and obligated in turn by oath, fidelity, duty, and service. A Concubine of the Raven Throne is therefore a secondary royal wife in sacred household order, possessing recognized place, property interest, provision, dignity, ceremonial standing, and obligations appropriate to her station.

She is neither secret nor disposable. She is named. She is recorded. She is remembered. She belongs to the House, and the House belongs in measure to her.

The Emperor is husband, sovereign, patriarchal head of the Imperial Household, and Seraphic ruler beneath the Most High and the Raven Throne. **The Consort** is First Bride, Keeper of the Household, High Priestess of its feminine mysteries, Mother of the High Covey, and Gate of the Emperor's private court.

The Consort is the Gate. The Gate shall not be bypassed.

The Consort orders access, precedence, ceremony, household peace, and the intimate rhythm of the Covey according to ancient custom, lawful decree, and the good of the House. No Bride shall establish secret rivalry against her, gather factions against her, manipulate private access to the Emperor for political or financial advantage, or seek through intimacy to undermine the lawful order of the Household. Neither shall the Consort abuse her station by arbitrary cruelty, spite, or malicious deprivation, for rank itself is held beneath judgment.

The Bride shall know that rank is burden before it is privilege. She shall be expected to work, to study, to pray, and to maintain strength of body, clarity of mind, discipline of spirit, and readiness according to her gifts and appointed office. She shall keep the devotions of the Silver Way, the disciplines of fraternal alchemy, meditation, study, physical conditioning, martial readiness, ceremonial observance, household service, and such Temple duties as may reasonably belong to her station.

A Bride who governs shall govern. A Bride who counsels shall counsel. A Bride who guards shall guard. A Bride who keeps accounts shall keep them faithfully. A Bride who tends the sick shall tend them. A Bride who bears messages, keeps records, teaches, administers, commands, negotiates, investigates, builds, heals, or preserves shall do so with diligence.

The Household shall not maintain idle queens.

The Bride shall present herself publicly with dignity appropriate to the Imperial Court and Silver custom. Her ordinary dress shall be feminine, modest, disciplined, and suited to rank, except where work, travel, medicine, training, security, military duty, climate, or other necessity reasonably requires otherwise.

She shall keep the secrets of the House. What is entrusted concerning the Emperor, the Consort, the Brides, the High Covey, Raven Star, the Temple, the Imperial government, sacred rites, hidden technologies, security matters, family affairs, counsel, prophecy, and private household life shall not be sold, traded, published, whispered to outsiders, weaponized for faction, or used for vanity, revenge, influence, profit, or amusement.

A secret received in trust remains under trust.

The Bride shall not keep hidden allegiance against the House, maintain a rival household within the Household, betray one sister to gain favor with another, or abandon a sister in true danger when aid may reasonably be given. If one calls in true need, the others shall answer according to their strength, office, distance, and circumstance.

The Brides are called to become one Household without becoming one personality. Temperament shall differ. Gifts shall differ. Rank shall differ. Office shall differ. Affection itself may differ.

Loyalty shall not.

Nothing concealed against the House. Nothing divided against the Throne. No private allegiance held above the Covenant.

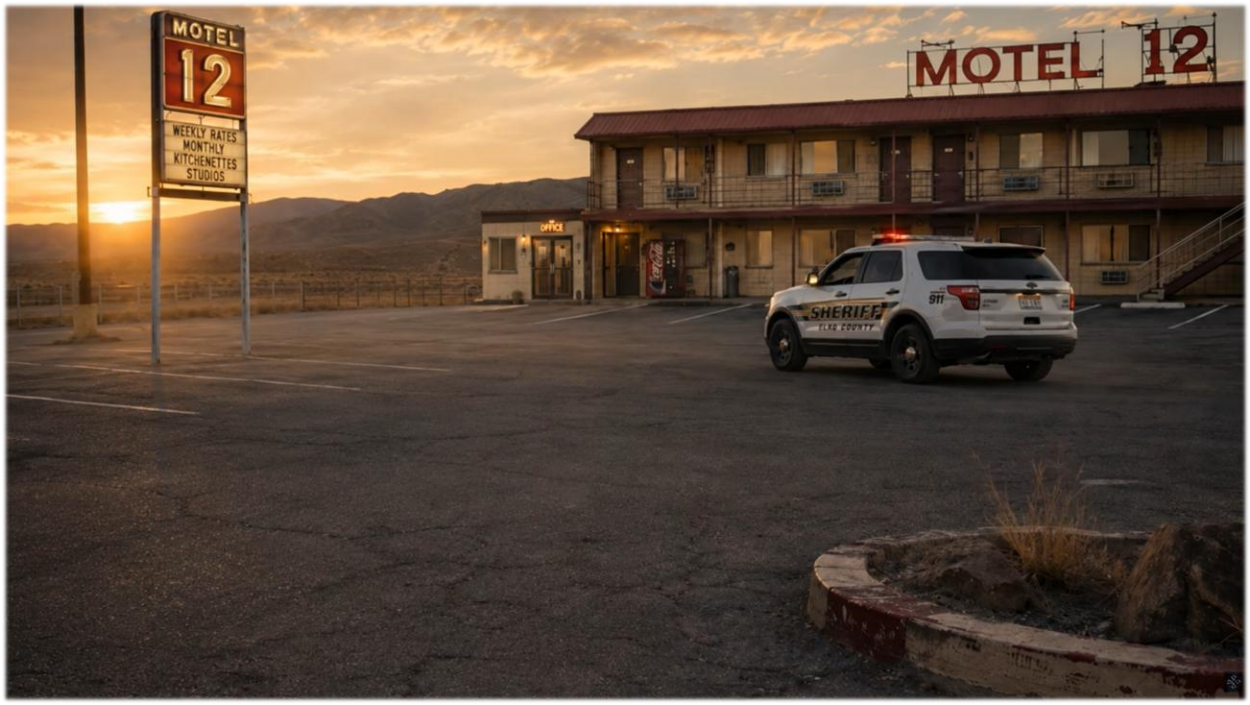
The Bride enters sacred marriage according to the ancient ways of the House. She acknowledges the Emperor as husband and eternal mate, and accepts his/her the lawful duties, intimacies, privileges, where worked, meditation, belonging to that marriage. She is expected to receive him as husband in affection, companionship, counsel, household life, and the marriage bed according to the custom of the Covenant and the ordered life of the High Covey.

she shall not restrain or withhold herself from him, nor shall she withhold herself unjustly from him, nor shall she withhold herself from him, nor shall she withhold herself from him, nor shall she withhold herself


1. Alem /? a/
2. Bethur /b/
3. Gamal /g/
4. Dalet /d/
5. Hevar /h/
6. Wawen /w u/
7. Zayin /z/
8. Hethar /χ/
9. Tethen /tˀ/
10. Yodan /j i/
11. Kaphor /k/
12. Lameda /l/
13. Memur /m/
14. Nunnar /n/
15. Sameq /s/
16. Ayinor /ʕ/
17. Pezar /p/
18. Tsadur /ts/
19. Qophar /q/
20. Reshath /r/
21. Shinur /ʃ/
22. Tavar /t/
23. Vevan /v/
24. Jhar /ʒ/


SILVER SATYR
CASINO


THORTON'S GAS
30 GREYHOUND
Greyhound
WELCOME TO
TREMBOL
NEVADA


MOTEL
12
WEEKLY RATES
MONTHLY
KITCHENETTES
STUDIOS
MOTEL 12
SHERIFF




RAVEN TREE RANCH
RAVEN TREE RANCH




50











