



ARBOR HEIGHTS CLASSICS PRESENTS...

LET'S READ

# *Violent Bible Stories*

## DESCRIPTION

This book is a collection of strange and sordid tales, all of which were dutifully retold from the pages of the Greek and Hebrew Bibles.

## ADVISORY

Since this book is based on the Bible, it contains adult themes, crude language, and near-constant violations of "Judeo-Christian" values.

## ACCESS

This digital edition retains type and image styling across readers by utilizing *Portable Document Format*. Its file size is approximately twelve megabytes. The type is set in *Arial* (Monotype) and *STIX Two* (Tiro Typeworks).

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Horse McDermott, McD.** is known for his invaluable contributions as a driver, scholar, gambler, mogul, amateur plastic surgeon, aspiring percussionist, tastemaker, line cook, and architecture critic. Horse submitted the only rejected entry to the anthology: *Not Enough Hours in the Day: Collected Essays on Kiefer Sutherland*. Horse has earned slightly less than five Employee of the Month honors at his neighborhood grocery co-op.

Horse's personal car is waxed and detailed biannually. His handshake is firm but fair, albeit sticky. He lives in front of the television in a rented bedroom on the outskirts of town. Horse is punctual, hard of hearing, and owns many rare pieces of 7UP memorabilia. He receives a monthly subscription of upmarket olive oil from California.

Horse has consulted many of his business partners through the bankruptcy process. As an avid baseball player, Horse's body is covered in bruises from wood and aluminum bats alike. Horse isn't OSHA-certified to operate forklifts on worksites but he is licensed with the DOT to drive commercial vehicles on the road. He can always find a good shell at the beach.

Horse has a fear of heights, but this hasn't stopped him from entering many multi-story buildings. Whenever possible, he catches and sustains eye contact with his rivals and revilers. Horse is one of few people who hasn't been struck by lightning. He has carefully examined the entire city of La Verna, Italy. For tax reasons, Horse is credited as a producer on dozens of Grammy Award winning albums. Horse has four sisters, all of whom are taller than him.

METADATA

---

**COPYRIGHT**

*Let's Read Violent Bible Stories:*

*A Retelling of Various Macabre Passages from Humankind's Most Popular Book*

Text copyright © 2024 by Horse McDermott & Arbor Heights Classics

Cover design copyright © 2024 by Tuck Brauswell & Swan Grickley

Cover art copyright © 1985 - 2016 by Fons Heijnsbroek

Illustrations © 2024 Dunker Jody

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced without written permission except in the case of critical articles and reviews and as permitted by U.S. copyright law.

*mcdermott.horse@gmail.com*

---

**FILING**

ISBN: 979 8 8693 6752 5

Summary: A god advances his interests in hostile territory—along the way, he finds a nation that turns out to be perpetually unstable and then when he finally shows up in the flesh, he's killed.

Category: Fiction / Religious

---

**TYPE**

Typography by Burt Sienna.

Typeset in *STIX Two* (by Ross Mills, John Hudson, and Paul Hanslow for Tiro Typeworks) and *Arial* (by Robin Nicholas and Patricia Saunders for Monotype).

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0



First edition, 2024

# THE LOWLANDS

## ★ SLAVE QUARTERS

- ☠ Supplanter expires
- ☠ Divine-Prevailer's newborns exterminated

## FORTIFIER

- ☠ Drawn-Up kills an overseer
- ☠ Night of dead heirs

☠ Army of Fortifiers drown

☠ Heroic-Pose III riddled with worms

☠ 1,000 pigs drown themselves

☠ Heroic-Pose I orders a child genocide

## GARDEN-MOUNT ★

*Capital of Divine-Prevailer North*

King Lesser-Lord and his son bleed out ☠

☠ Prince Peacemaker impaled in a tree

☠ Lieutenant disemboweled

☠ King Seven beheaded

☠ Discerner and Uniter slaughter a city

☠ Priest's child-bearer raped to death

☠ Prince Trustworthy murdered by his brother

☠ Bears maul a crowd of priests

☠ Fiery chariots descend on Gim

## PEACEFUL-ESSENCE ★

*Capital of Divine-Prevailer South*

Master's-Gift beheaded ☠

Master-Saves executed ☠

Worshiper's suicide ☠

Favor & Sapphire collapse ☠

Crowned-One pelted with stones ☠

☠ Sunny kills thousands of Outsiders

☠ Sunny and Outsiders crushed by a temple

☠ Divine-Prevailer camps on a snake nest

☠ Good-Chief's army crushed by hailstones

☠ Five kings executed

## CONTENTS

---

### STORIES FROM THE HEBREW BIBLE

- 16            GENESIS 25 - 49  
**The Life & Times of the Last Patriarch**  
*How a Man and his Sons Lived to a Ripe Old Age Despite  
Soliciting Their Own Murder Everywhere They Went*
- 47            EXODUS 2 - 12  
**Magical Diplomacy**  
*An Adopted Prince Becomes a Labor Agitator*
- 57            NUMBERS 21  
**Red Serpent Infestation**  
*God's Response to a Prayer for Prestige and Stature*
- 61            JOSHUA 10 & 15  
**The Nations Plot in Vain**  
*Two Perspectives on the Return to the Home Country*
- 71            JUDGES 13 - 16  
**The Unhindered Chief**  
*A Crazy Loner Starts a War and Sort Of Wins Somehow*
- 85            JUDGES 19  
**A Night in the Big City**  
*History Repeats Itself in the Worst Way Possible*
- 90            1 SAMUEL 22 - 2 SAMUEL 5 & PSALM 56  
**Statecraft? More Like Violent Disarray**  
*The First King Has a Rough Go of It*
- 101           2 SAMUEL 13 - 20  
**It Takes Both Hands To Hold the Scepter**  
*A Nation Waffles on its New Central Government*
- 134           1 KINGS 16 - 2 KINGS 2  
**The Prophet's Protégé**  
*God's Messengers Get Their Hands Dirty*

## CONTENTS

- 156 2 KINGS 6  
**The Siege**  
*Weaponized Hunger Turns a City Feral*
- 159 1 & 2 KINGS & HOSEA  
**Whatever Happened to God's Country?**  
*An Eternal Kingdom Splits in Two Before Completely Falling Apart*

---

### STORIES FROM THE GREEK BIBLE

- 171 MATTHEW & LUKE-ACTS  
**Acting Royal**  
*A Family of Psychotic Murderers Inherits a Scepter*
- 187 MATTHEW 8, MARK 5, & LUKE 8  
**The Horde**  
*A Nudist Fills the Sea With Pigs*
- 192 LUKE 20  
**The Tenants**  
*An Offensive and Ridiculous Allegory*
- 196 MATTHEW 26 - 27 & JOHN 12  
**The Damn Perfume**  
*A Generous Application of Fragrance Inspires a Tragic Betrayal*
- 207 ACTS 4 - 15  
**A Familiar Voice Speaking Strange Words**  
*The Obvious Candidates Give Way to a Newcomer*
- 223 REVELATION  
**Seven Doors, Horns, & Bowls**  
*Signs to Ponder While Everything Crumbles*

## CONTENTS

---

### APPENDIX

- 234      **The Tribes of Divine-Prevailer**  
*A People Cajoled by an Opinionated God*
- 265      **Glossary**  
*Proper Nouns: Translations & Transliterations*
- 269      **Read the Hebrew & Greek Bibles for Yourself**  
*Book Order & Reading Guide*
- 271      **About the Author**  
*Biography & Contact Information*

*Preamble*

# INTRODUCTION

AN OPTIONAL ESSAY FOR HIGH-ACHIEVERS & COMPLETIONISTS

*If you write poetry, you invent. If you write fiction, you invent completely.  
But with nonfiction, the inventive element is the style,  
the way I'm telling the story.*

– Werner Herzog

**A**ny journalist, documentarian, or historian can tell you how many angles and creative opportunities are available when recounting an entirely true event. But there's something about stories that are purported to be true that makes us blind to an author's distinctive storytelling decisions. Documentary filmmaker Lance Oppenheim has expressed frustration at the common misconception that nonfiction is supposed to inform you of something—historical education, aesopian morals, how-to content—rather than exist as a work of art.

This issue is especially relevant with the stories in the Bible, whose



## INTRODUCTION

readers often assume the book is intended to be a plain account of historical facts; something that can't truly exist, at least in such stark terms. In reality, every nonfiction storyteller includes and omits certain details to tell their particular tale. Five documentarians would create as many uniquely stylized (even opinionated) films out of the same raw footage in an edit bay. Or in biblical terms, four biographers necessarily bring their own perspective and emphasis to the same carpenter-turned-state-enemy in the ancient Near East.

The Bible is a diverse anthology that's usually bulldozed into one category (*flowery moral truisms*) despite containing many voices and genres including biographies, epics, songs, political thrillers, mythic allegories, hallucinations, romances, essays, sarcasm, hyperbole, deceit, philosophy, threats, miracles, vengeance, reconciliation, and all manner of bad behavior. It's a book about a god advancing his interests in hostile territory—along the way, he founds a nation that turns out to be perpetually unstable and then when he finally shows up in the flesh, he's killed.

The Bible endures as the most printed and influential book in human history, inarguably among our most compelling works of art. My point in writing this book is to give you another chance to experience the fascinating surprises and sharp edges throughout the fiery canon of the Bible. In this sense, it's irrelevant whether you agree with what the Bible says, or believe that spiritual beings actually exist, or even regard its version of history to be plausible. This book won't address those hangups because they're not interesting to me. Instead, I'm hoping to confront the Bible's unwarranted reputation as safe for children, proper, decent, easy to understand, patriotic, and written in Old English.

---

**L**et's take a quick look at some of the most common reasons that people (even believers) don't think of the Bible as capital-*a Art*. I provided footnotes with examples, but you'll have to read this whole book to get my argument.

#### **PROPAGANDA**

People see the Bible in a religions institution and assume that it was crafted as a tool to establish its institutional authority. This idea fails to account for the Bible's deeply unflattering depiction of its peoples' origin and history—the Bible would be considered incendiary hate speech against Judaism and Christianity if it wasn't autobiographical. The whole canon is practically screaming at readers: *You're not picking a 'winning' team if you join these folks!*<sup>1</sup>

#### **APOLOGETICS**

People see the supernatural claims of the Bible assume that it was created as a verifiable historical record to legitimize the beliefs of its followers against skeptics. This idea fails to account for the way that the Bible avoids proof-points, explanations, or winsome arguments for its most outrageous notions. The Bible has a take-it-or-leave-it attitude to miracles and the like. If you were hoping to humiliate the infidels on a debate stage, you'll have a hard time using this text.<sup>2</sup>

#### **SELF-HELP**

People hear that there's a loving deity in the Bible and assume that it

---

<sup>1</sup> See Deuteronomy 7:7; Hosea 11:1-2; 1 Corinthians 1:26-29, which each get at the idea that God never intended to make an enviable or prestigious community.

<sup>2</sup> See 1 Corinthians 15:19, which acknowledges that believers in Jesus' power are *of all people most to be pitied* if his power isn't real. In other words, people who believe the Bible aren't gaining anything in this life.

## INTRODUCTION

must have therapeutic resources and life-hacks for personal happiness and prosperity. This idea fails to account for the Bible's veneration of simple living<sup>3</sup> and general lack of mental and emotional wellness among its characters and authors.<sup>4</sup>

### TRANSMISSION

People observe the Bible's terse, generation-spanning storytelling and assume that ancient copyists must have preferred shorter, drier texts over elaborate, richly-detailed writing. The idea that convenience held the Bible back from being literature fails to account for its epic scale and breadth. If the priests' hands were cramping, they could have just canonized less text. It also ignores the Bible's favorite stylistic device: repetition, including redundancies of ideas and verbatim texts,<sup>5</sup> which the lazy copyists would have never sanctioned.

### INDOCTRINATION

People see the strict, norm-abiding culture that surrounds the Bible and assume that it must be a book of rules or conservative standards. This idea fails to account for the Bible's rejection of behavior modification.<sup>6</sup> Not to mention its timelessly subversive, perplexing, and biting insights (if we can only get away from the dampening effects of

---

<sup>3</sup> See Acts 2:45, where the church members sold off their nonessentials provide to the needy. Also James 5:1-3, which describes hoarded wealth as a corrosive force that will *eat your flesh like fire*.

<sup>4</sup> One of countless examples of troubled lives is 1 Kings 19:4, where a prophet flees to the hills in discouragement and attempts suicide by dehydration.

<sup>5</sup> See Exodus 34:6-7, which is echoed in almost every book that follows. Also lengthy redundant passages like Jeremiah 39:1-10 with 52:4-16 and 2 Kings 25:1-12.

<sup>6</sup> See Ephesians 2:15, which says that God *abolished the law of commandments expressed in ordinances*, because behavioral modification is impotent.

## INTRODUCTION

prudishness and familiarity).<sup>7</sup>

### PRESENTATION

People see a typical Bible's claustrophobic typography packed with superscripted numbers and assume that it must be a reference to consult for scholarly reasons. The stratification of chapters and verses have helped the community pinpoint their thoughts down to a given phrase—even across languages—but they're not original, consistent, or meaningful. So it's best to ignore them.

### DEVOTIONALS & READING PLANS

Bible reading plans send readers skipping to and fro across the vast text one paragraph at a time, leading to the assumption that the Bible must be a grab bag of wise proverbs to ponder in isolation rather than a unified, serialized canon for extended reading. If someone told you they were a longtime Harry Potter fan and you found out that they read a random page from each book every day (and had never read them straight through), you'd probably want to murder them to rid the world of its biggest idiot. But that's how most people read the Bible for some reason.<sup>8</sup> If you instead assume that there could be some authorial intention across the span of the Bible, you'll be consistently rewarded by your discovery of thoughtful motifs and other literary developments which cannot occur by accident.

So maybe you're one of those folks who's prone to think of the Bible as a stuffy rulebook for an outmoded, bigoted, and idiotic way of life. Or you could be the type that mindlessly but reverently skims its pages (and pats

---

<sup>7</sup> It's hard to give a brief example of the Bible's raging subversiveness, but essentially every story in this book is an examination of this characteristic (so just keep reading).

<sup>8</sup> I know, I can't believe it either.

yourself on the back for being on the right team). Either way, I hope you can bring an open mind to the Bible for once, because it's a wild book.

---

**S**ome notes about my writing process: this isn't a Bible translation and I'm not trying to replace or hijack the original texts. My intention with these retellings is to comment on the unstated motivations that are at play beneath the Bible's economically terse way of communicating.

My writing process involved very little historical or archeological research. Instead, I used literary analysis (and a Strong's Dictionary to get some insight into the original languages). This usually looked like puzzling over a text, entirely confused by the events, until a theory gradually emerged that explained the odd details and conspicuous omissions of the story. Not exactly a science. My characterizations are *plausible theories* at best, but certainly not the only way to make sense of the Bible.

To give perspective to people like me who don't read Hebrew or Koine Greek, I've translated all proper nouns into an approximation of their meaning in the original languages. Similarly, I try to avoid theobabble buzzwords like *pray, baptize, circumcise, lord, angel, demon, soul, gentile, prophet, disciple, apostle, heaven, promised land, church, sanctuary, tabernacle, grace, faith, covenant, miracle, sin, idol*, and so on.

– Horse McDermott, McD.

*Eternal-Master made the world but it quickly became hostile territory, ruled by his Adversary. And for the first few thousand years, Eternal-Master didn't even have his own country.*

*Then he introduced himself to a family in a place called the Lowlands. They grew into a nation of millions, wandered as refugees, reinvaded their homeland, split into two states, were brutally displaced by outside empires, and eventually allowed back into the Lowlands. But from then on, Eternal-Master's country was supervised by a parade of foreign powers that were all repulsed by the local culture and religion. This was when Eternal-Master's people wrote the Law, Prophets, and Writings (which we know as the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament).*

*Then Eternal-Master's long-promised god-king arrived. His name was Master's-Rescue and he got a lot of attention in and around the Lowlands, but only a handful of committed followers—until he died, and came back, and then left again. Over the next few decades, his sect compiled their history and letters (which we call the Greek Bible or New Testament).*

# **STORIES FROM THE HEBREW BIBLE**

*From the Law, in chapters twenty-five through forty-nine of Genesis*

# THE LIFE & TIMES OF THE LAST PATRIARCH

HOW A MAN AND HIS SONS LIVED TO A RIPE OLD AGE DESPITE  
SOLICITING THEIR OWN MURDER EVERYWHERE THEY WENT

## PART ONE

### SUPPLANTER'S TWIN TRIES TO KILL HIM

**S**upplanter came from a primordial time when the world was sparsely populated and family clans were building settlements and growing into the first nations. Wealth was measured in terms of grain, livestock, and children. The land was wild, many folks lived in tents, and people rarely met each other without violence.

Supplanter's clan was insignificant and unimposing. Only a couple children had been born in the previous generations, so there was no bustling settlement or walled city. It was hardly the family you'd think would amount to much of anything—but their god, Eternal-Master, thought otherwise. Eternal-Master had given the family an eager



## 1. THE LIFE AND TIMES OF THE LAST PATRIARCH

expectation that a child would be born who would crush the demon king of the earth, end death, and reunite humanity to himself—a bold plan from an audacious god whose name (literally, *I-Am-Because-I-Am*) is itself a claim to a fully self-empowered existence as the source of all things, rather than a specialized local deity like all the other gods.

But Eternal-Master's grand scheme didn't seem to be panning out. Thousands of years earlier, the very first Man had a firstborn son (a harsh, outdoorsy type) who seemed like a great candidate, but he was jealous of his kid brother (a tender boy who cared for furry things) because Eternal-Master preferred the younger one's offerings of fine meats to the older one's fruit and grain. The firstborn was so enraged by Eternal-Master's cold shoulder that he killed his younger brother and wandered for the rest of his life in desolation, rather than restoring divine harmony to creation.

After him, more children were born and they all had character flaws like the first son—perverts, drunkards, peeping toms, traitors, and even blasphemers. Some simply died having done nothing to fix the problems of the world.

Then Glorious-Father was born. He would later be known as the first *patriarch* of Eternal-Master's nation, but he was far from perfect (he was cowardly, unfaithful, quarrelsome, and the so-called *Glorious-Father* abandoned his first child). Regardless, Eternal-Master promised Glorious-Father and his wife, Princess, to change the world through their children. Eternal-Master gave Glorious-Father and Princess new names, *Progenitor* and *Noble-Woman*, and endowed them with a son named *Mockery* because Noble-Woman had laughed at the very idea that she could be pregnant.

## 1. THE LIFE AND TIMES OF THE LAST PATRIARCH

Eternal-Master also gave Progenitor the rite of *paring*—a ceremonial removal of a piece of genital skin—which was an admittedly counterintuitive sign of his family’s special status as breeders of a divine nation.

Progenitor’s son Mockery grew up and married Trapper, who became pregnant with twins. Surely, they thought, one of these children would end the pain and suffering that death brought to the world. But from the beginning it was clear that neither of these two boys were up to the task. Even in the womb, the babies squabbled violently with each other. Trapper spoke to Eternal-Master about her concerns with the pregnancy and he said the twins were locked in a power struggle which their descendants would perpetuate forever. And Mockery followed after his father’s toxic favoritism, so the twins inherited an especially dysfunctional dynamic.

Bruiser, the firstborn, was red with rage. He was a hairy beast of a man whose love of hunting was a healthy outlet for his violent tendencies. Bruiser hated his family and wanted nothing to do with them. But his father wasn’t shy about expressing favoritism for Bruiser’s raw masculinity over his frail brother.

Supplanter, the second twin, was a passive layabout who had a way of finding opportunities to take things instead of earning them. Supplanter was irreverent, and had no reservations about stealing from anyone, even his brother. Their mother Trapper openly preferred Supplanter’s soft, indoorsy temperament to Bruiser’s rough and rowdy ways.

It’s impossible to say why these people are remembered as the legendary family of the final patriarch, when the only stories passed down about them aren’t just unflattering but truly vile.



---

One day, the twins had a trade. Supplanter took Bruiser's inheritance and stature as firstborn son and Bruiser got a bowl of stewed lentils and bread. It's easy to think that there must have been some kind of brilliant scheming on Supplanter's part to trick his brother, but in reality he only needed to suggest the idea and Bruiser jumped at it. Bruiser didn't give a shit about his birthright in their miserable family. Then Bruiser found two awful and obnoxious women to marry so he could pile on more bitterness, strife, and dysfunction into the already tense family situation.

## 1. THE LIFE AND TIMES OF THE LAST PATRIARCH

Eventually their father Mockery was laid on his deathbed, so he called his sons to receive their final well-wishes. At this late stage, Mockery was blind (and easily tricked), so his wife Trapper hatched a scheme to let little Supplanter take the father's only blessing for himself, instead of allowing it to go to Mockery's favorite son. Supplanter came into his father's room wearing a hairy Bruiser costume while carrying a tray of meat.

Mockery said: *My favorite son, hot and smelly from the field, covered in thick fur. To you I happily predict wealth and joy. You'll find abundance wherever you go and everyone will bow down to you. Eternal-Master will cause the output of your work to far outmatch your input and he'll crush your enemies for you.*

When the real Bruiser entered for his well-wishes later in the day, Mockery realized that his wife had tricked him. All his goodwill had been lavished on the wrong son. Mockery was full of remorse and frustration, but there was nothing left to do seeing as he had already given all of his best words to Supplanter.

Mockery left Bruiser a curse of destitution: *Your life will be hard. You'll be hungry, tired, constantly in danger, and subservient to your brother. But one day you'll free yourself from him.*

Bruiser was furious, as his ticket out of his detestable family had been given to his lazy pissant of a brother. So Bruiser vowed to kill Supplanter as soon as their father passed (falling into the same pattern as the very first family, whose cursed older brother murdered the blessed younger brother and lived the rest of his life in hardship). So their mother Trapper sent little Supplanter off to live with her brother in the rugged east country, saying that Supplanter needed to get himself a wife. Trapper was

always able to hatch a manipulative scheme to nudge a situation to her liking. Supplanter was just along for the ride.

---

**S**upplanter travelled alone to the northeast, towards his mother's clan, far beyond the Lowland region where he grew up. His tender skin burned under the sun as he walked through barren country all day and his campfire in the evening barely comforted him from the bitter cold. That night, Supplanter slept on the ground with a rock for a pillow. His domestic lifestyle had not prepared him for the harshness of the empty world around the small homestead he knew.

Before leaving the familiarity of the Lowlands, Supplanter had a dream about a grand staircase where Eternal-Master's spirit servants crossed between their realm and the human world.

Eternal-Master stood atop it and said: *I am Eternal-Master, the god of your father and grandfather. This land is special; this is where your descendants will live as my chosen people. Your family will lead every nation to me. And the promise I gave to your father and grandfather, I now repeat to you: I am with you and will preserve you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land where you will be happy.*

Supplanter woke up and said to Eternal-Master: *This place must be the gate between your city and the earth. It deserves an altar, so I hope a pile of stones will do for now. I get it that you want to be my god but I'm only interested if you provide for my needs and protect me. Then I'd commit to*

*calling you my god and I'll even throw in a tenth of all you give me back to you.*

Despite the fact that Supplanter wasn't particularly interested in him, Eternal-Master had stepped into Supplanter's life anyway. With his self-centered ambivalence, Supplanter seemed to be stifling Eternal-Master's grand scheme to fix the problems of the world.

---

PART TWO

## SUPPLANTER'S COUSINS TRY TO KILL HIM

**E**ventually Supplanter found a covered well with shepherds waiting to water their flocks. Coincidentally his cousin, Ewe, arrived just then with her father's sheep. When Supplanter saw her beauty and the condition of her family's herd, he was overcome with joy. (Serendipitously, Supplanter's parents met at the very same well!) Overcoming his typical laziness, Supplanter pushed a giant stone off the top of the well to let the sheep drink. Then Supplanter embraced Ewe, kissing her and weeping loudly.

Supplanter went on to his uncle Purity's ranch where he met the whole family. Purity's first daughter was Exasperater; she didn't interest Supplanter and he wanted nothing to do with her. Supplanter only had eyes for the younger sister, Ewe. Purity also had sons and attendants and a small herd of sheep and goats.

## 1. THE LIFE AND TIMES OF THE LAST PATRIARCH



Purity didn't let Supplanter lounge inside like he did back home, he had to get out and work. Supplanter watched the herd, kept them safe, and tended to their needs so they could procreate. (The same responsibilities that Supplanter, the nation-maker, imposed on Eternal-Master. But Supplanter didn't acknowledge this irony until late in life.) Despite Supplanter's lack of experience, everything he touched increased fruitfully. His transformation from a couch surfing layabout into an industrious farmhand was uncanny. And since Purity knew that his sister had married into a family with a special relationship to a particularly

## 1. THE LIFE AND TIMES OF THE LAST PATRIARCH

powerful god, he immediately took note of Supplanter's supernatural prosperity. Purity wanted to keep this boy around as long as possible.

Purity said: *We both know you can't work for me without some kind of payment. You're my nephew after all! So let's decide what your wages will be.*

Supplanter said: *If I serve you seven years, I'll take your younger daughter Ewe as my wife.*

Purity said: *Ah, this is great news. I'd much rather give her to you than any other man. It's settled!*

So Supplanter lived and worked at Purity's homestead for seven years, but it felt like mere days to Supplanter because of his love for Ewe. In that time, Supplanter developed a tan and rough calluses as he oversaw the flock's rapid multiplication. Supplanter followed the herd throughout Purity's country, which was so vast that shepherds were often out for days before returning home.

At the end of seven years there was a wedding feast for Supplanter and Ewe. But in the dark of night, Purity switched the daughters, sending Exasperater into the bedroom. (Purity was a trickster exactly like his sister Trapper, who sent Supplanter into Mockery's room to pretend to be his sibling.) So Supplanter consummated his marriage, thinking he was with Ewe. And in the morning he was shocked to see the wrong sister in bed with him.

Supplanter went to Purity and said: *We had a deal! I was supposed to marry Ewe, not this ugly bitch. It was clear and we both knew the terms. Why'd you deceive me?*

Purity said: *Dear nephew, surely you knew I couldn't honor that devious arrangement. In this country, it's simply not customary for a father to*



## 1. THE LIFE AND TIMES OF THE LAST PATRIARCH

*marry off his younger daughter first. But if you finish the wedding ceremonies for Exasperater and promise to serve me another seven years, then I suppose I'll give you the younger daughter, too.*

Like his sister, Purity was quick to cover up his nasty schemes with disingenuous excuses. With no other recourse, Supplanter married both daughters and got back to work for an additional seven years. Purity may have secured a few extra years with his favorite shepherd, but in so doing, he created a powerful enemy. Eternal-Master hated promise breakers and double crossers more than anything, because his relationships with people were always contractual by design. Eternal-Master's grand plan for humanity was built on a commitment to future deeds, after all.

As a family man, Supplanter took after his fathers before him. Supplanter loved Ewe and treated her kindly but he continued to resent Exasperater and wished he hadn't been stuck with her. The sisters competed with each other to give Supplanter as many children as possible, because they thought that the woman that produced the most sons would win his intoxicating favoritism. Exasperater once traded Ewe a basket of fruit in exchange for a night with Supplanter to increase her family (not unlike the bowl of soup Supplanter traded for Bruiser's birthright). The rival sisters even gave their attendants to Supplanter so he could conceive surrogate children through them.

Supplanter fathered eleven sons and one daughter during his time in Purity's house, and his capricious affections drove his family crazy with jealousy. Unsurprisingly, it was Ewe's only son, More-Or-Less—a fragile, indoorsy boy—who became Supplanter's longstanding favorite. More-Or-Less made it clear that he was superior to his eleven half-siblings and told them in no uncertain terms that they ought to defer to him despite

his age.

---

**S**upplanter eventually completed his second seven-year stint on Purity's ranch. Supplanter wanted to go back to his father's land, but Purity wanted to keep Supplanter around as long as possible because of his supernatural aptitude for husbandry. Tensions were rising with the growing herd, which was absolutely exploding with lambs and kids under Supplanter's management.

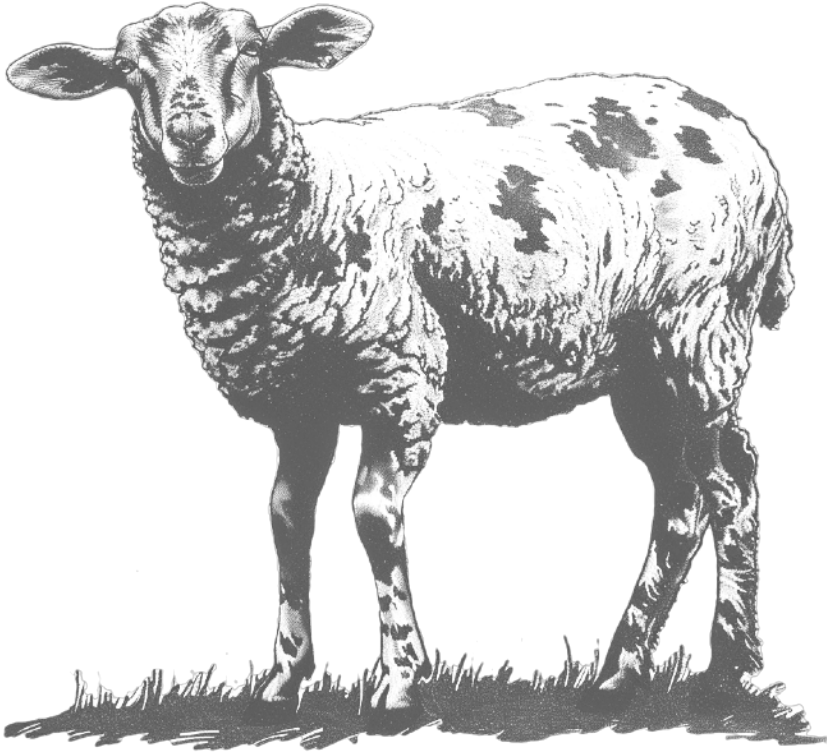
Supplanter went to his uncle Purity and said: *You don't have to pay me, just let me pass through the flock and remove the speckled, spotted, or dark lambs and kids while you keep all the pure animals.*

Purity said: *I have nothing to add to your plan. You can keep all the spotted animals.*

Supplanter still hadn't figured out Purity's approach to negotiation: he would enthusiastically accept Supplanter's first proposal, but then act otherwise. Handshake deals like these were susceptible to manipulation if you were a shameless man like Purity. Supplanter may have been a keen opportunist, but Purity was in another league of treachery. Back at home, Supplanter could follow his mom's lead as she developed a plot, but he stood no chance with her equally cunning brother.

As soon as Purity saw how every newborn ewe, ram, doe, and buck came out spotted, he demanded that they switch from spots to stripes. But then all the healthy newborns came out striped. And so Purity kept

## 1. THE LIFE AND TIMES OF THE LAST PATRIARCH



changing the terms, but continued to lose at every turn. Supplanter had an elaborate method for breeding multi-colored lambs and kids that involved cutting bark from various branches near the flock's mating site, but it may have been Eternal-Master's control of the situation that actually led to the traits of the newborns.

Six years of this passed and the whole flock had become mottled, streaked, irregular, and impure—which is to say, Supplanter's property. Purity's children were split into two camps—the daughters sided with Supplanter because Purity had treated them with contempt when he sold them off as wages to him. But Purity's sons resented Supplanter for taking away their inheritance, just like Bruiser before them. Supplanter's

prodigious shepherding had become a trap; Purity and his sons could no longer allow Supplanter to leave. The masses of sheep and goats, mindlessly chewing cud, copulating, and shitting in the dirt, were about to incite a murder.

---

**O**ne night, Supplanter dreamed that Eternal-Master said: *I see Purity's cruelty, and I've given you his flock by mottling their fur. I'm the one you saw twenty years ago, the god you agreed to befriend. Go back to the land I promised you, your father, and your grandfather. I'll keep you safe.*

Supplanter listened to Eternal-Master and fled while Purity was three days away, shearing the few pure sheep he had left. The wives, children, and attendants rode away on camels while Supplanter drove the livestock southwest towards his homeland.

But Ewe snuck back and stole the statuettes from her father's shrine, robbing Purity of his gods and a sizable volume of gold. Regardless of her intentions, Ewe had given Purity cause to pursue and even attack Supplanter as a thief. But no one knew what she had done.

Purity arrived at his ranch and saw that everyone had fled and his golden gods had gone with them. So he gathered his sons and his friends to pursue Supplanter. For seven days, Purity and his mob made steady progress on Supplanter's caravan.

In his camp on the night before reaching Supplanter, Purity dreamed

## 1. THE LIFE AND TIMES OF THE LAST PATRIARCH

that Eternal-Master said: *You know that I have my hand on Supplanter, and so you also know my power. Don't mettle with him any longer. Don't even dare to say anything good or bad to him.*

(Oddly enough, this was the second time that Eternal-Master had threatened Purity like this. The first time was over a hundred years prior, when Mockery came around to marry Trapper.)

When Purity caught up to Supplanter he said: *What could I possibly have done to deserve this blow? You've taken away my beloved daughters and grandchildren and you haven't let me send you off with a delightful feast to celebrate the loving partnership we've had over these twenty years together. And you stole my gods! I could take vengeance, but your father's god told me to neither harm nor help you anymore.*

Supplanter was sick of his underhanded, disingenuous uncle. Supplanter said: *Suddenly you've decided to care about your daughters, the same ones you sold off for a few years of labor. I don't have your gods, your sheep, or anything else that belongs to you. Go and point out anything of yours among my camp and let's execute the thief holding it.*

Purity began tearing through everything in Supplanter's caravan to find the statuettes. But he wasn't up against Supplanter the opportunist, he was actually facing his daughter's plot—and Ewe had inherited the family's manipulation skills. So Ewe sat on the statuettes, and when Purity approached her, she winced and slouched, making a show of her anguish, and said: *Master, please forgive your beloved daughter because I can't get up to greet you, the way of women is with me today.*

Purity backed away from Ewe and fruitlessly searched the rest of the camp. He came up empty and looked like a fool in front of everyone.

Supplanter said: *Why have you pursued me like an enemy, bringing a*

## 1. THE LIFE AND TIMES OF THE LAST PATRIARCH

*mob to my camp and ransacking my belongings? You pretend to love me and my family but you hate us. Go ahead now, set your gods here in plain view so we can decide this matter. Twenty years, that's how long I've tolerated you. I've given you everything you asked. I've endured the hot sun and cold sleepless nights for you. Twenty years, and you've changed my wages ten times. If it weren't for Eternal-Master, you would have sent me away empty-handed. But he strikes you today.*

*Purity said: Actually, you're right that Eternal-Master has seen everything, even when we were apart, hasn't he? That gives me an idea for one last agreement. This time, Eternal-Master will be our judge. We'll give an offering to him on an altar while we promise to never see each other again, so long as you treat my daughters well and take no other wives besides them. We'll be trustworthy to each other because we both fear Eternal-Master's hand.*

Supplanter and Purity built up a pile of stones and killed an animal on it, to ritually seal their pact before Eternal-Master's face. The next morning, Purity kissed his grandchildren and his daughters, wished them well, and took his sons home, empty-handed and defeated.

---

PART THREE

## DIVINE-PREVAILER'S NEIGHBORS TRY TO KILL THEM

Supplanter continued west, joined by a horde of Eternal-Master's spirit servants who protected the vulnerable caravan from any greedy locals. Each night there were two camp sites; one of people and one of spirits. After decades of silence from Eternal-Master, Supplanter was now having interactions with spirit beings constantly.

But in the twenty years that Supplanter spent in the far northeast, Bruiser had moved out as well, around the sea to the southeast of their father's homestead. As much as Supplanter dreaded it, the twins would be reuniting soon. So Supplanter sent messengers ahead to try to smooth things over with Bruiser.

Supplanter instructed his messengers to say: *Your servant Supplanter has acquired oxen, donkeys, sheep, goats, and servants, which he is prepared to give to you to restore your birthright, which he is terribly sorry about taking in the first place.*

When the messengers returned several days later they said: *We found Bruiser and now he's coming here with four hundred men.*

So it seemed that Bruiser had done exceedingly well despite his father's prediction of subservient squalor. In the time of the patriarchs, four hundred men was a vast army. (Progenitor had defeated a coalition of four kings with only three hundred soldiers, after all.) Supplanter was fucked.

The only thing Supplanter could think to do to preserve his family was to divide everyone into two groups, so that when Bruiser attacked, at least one half might be able to escape.

## 1. THE LIFE AND TIMES OF THE LAST PATRIARCH

Supplanter said to Eternal-Master: *Eternal-Master, you made promises to my father and grandfather, and it was you who instructed me to go on this journey to my homeland. You're my god but I'm unworthy of you. Your persistent love for me defies reason—I've scarcely done anything good for anyone, but you've turned me from a loner with nothing more than a staff to the commander of two camps. Use your power to deliver me and the women and children from my brother's revenge, because you said you would do good to me and make my offspring as incalculably numerous as the grains of sand in the sea.*

This plea was the single most humble and earnest thing Supplanter had ever said to anyone—and yet it was still a far cry from Eternal-Master's favorite prayer, *not my will but yours.*

Supplanter instructed his servants to go towards Bruiser's army with a great number of goats, sheep, camels, cattle, and donkeys as gifts of animal wealth—hoping to appease Bruiser's murderous rage by restoring his birthright. Meanwhile Supplanter separated himself from the children and their mothers so he would be ready to dream about Eternal-Master, because it was always on nights like these when Eternal-Master visited. But Supplanter couldn't sleep.

Curiously, a man approached the campsite while Supplanter was still awake. Not wanting to defer to divine providence, Supplanter grabbed the man and when he struggled to get free, Supplanter tightened his grip and wrestled him to the ground. So they fought; the man wanting to free himself and Supplanter demanding a blessing. While they grappled, the man pushed Supplanter's hip out of joint, but still couldn't defeat Supplanter. And they were locked in this struggle for the entire night.

As the sun rose, the man said: *Let me go now, it's morning already.*



## 1. THE LIFE AND TIMES OF THE LAST PATRIARCH

Supplanter said: *I need help if I'm going to get anywhere in life, so I won't let you go until you bless me.*

The man said: *What's your name?*

Supplanter said: *Supplanter.*

The man said: *Today you're Supplanter, but one day you'll be called Divine-Prevailer. You triumph in your strife against both Eternal-Master and your fellow people.*

Supplanter said: *So what's your name?*

The man said: *Who do you think you are, asking me that question? You're not worthy to know my name.*

So Eternal-Master met Supplanter and wished him well—but not without forcing him to finally see how the two of them had been quarreling against each other for Supplanter's entire life. And although Supplanter looked directly into the face of Eternal-Master—the pure one who upholds everything that exists—Supplanter's life was spared. Supplanter's family never ate the thigh meat on the hip socket out of reverence for the patriarch's all-night brawl.

Supplanter limped across the stream and went ahead of his family as Bruiser's army came into view. Supplanter lined up the mothers and children behind him in order of least favorite up front to most favorite in back. Supplanter bowed to the ground repeatedly as he came near to his killer, but Bruiser ran to meet his long-lost twin. Bruiser embraced Supplanter and fell on his neck and kissed him and they both wept.

Bruiser said: *Who are these beautiful women and children with you? And what was all that about sheep and goats and camels and donkeys on my way here? Brother, I'm happy to report that I have plenty already. You can keep what you have for yourself.*

## 1. THE LIFE AND TIMES OF THE LAST PATRIARCH

Supplanter said: *Our father's god has given much to your servant so I sent these flocks ahead as gifts to please you, master. Seeing your face today is like peering at a fearsome god, and yet I am still standing. Please take my gifts, because Eternal-Master has given me more than I can manage.*

Bruiser said: *Alright, but let's travel together so my friends can protect you on the way. They're fierce warriors and your camp is puny and vulnerable. No one would come to help if someone wanted to wipe you off the face of the earth out here, little brother.*

Supplanter, still fearing his brother's twenty year old vow, said: *You're too generous! All these men have better things to do than hang back with my nursing flocks and young children. I can manage the journey without burdening you any further.*

So Supplanter rid himself of Bruiser and gladly took his chances among the local tribes instead. Bruiser went southeast to his home while Supplanter cut west and bought some land to allow his herds to settle down after pushing them for many miles. Supplanter set up a home, made stalls for the animals, and built an altar for Eternal-Master.

---

**S**upplanter was home alone one day when the king of a local clan came to request that Supplanter give his only daughter to become princess. (Exasperater's daughter had gone into town to scope out the local women but instead was captured and raped by the prince.) Supplanter's eleven sons were out with the flocks, and

## 1. THE LIFE AND TIMES OF THE LAST PATRIARCH

Supplanter alone was powerless to deny to the king. So Supplanter stalled for time knowing that his sons would be back soon, and only one of them was a softie.

When the boys came in, the prince made a great show of his tender affection for their sister, offering to pay any bride price and offer his clanswomen to intermarry with Supplanter's sons.

The boys said: *As much as we'd love to allow the happy couple to be together, it would disgrace our ancestors and our god to intermarry with uncut men. Our god, Eternal-Master, instructed our great-grandfather to pare his body by cutting off a piece of his penis, so we continue to honor him in this way. So we don't ask for a bride price or any of your possessions, but rather if the men among you simply become as we are by paring themselves, then we'll all intermarry and live as one people!*

The king was not only pleased that the prince would marry his love, but also because an alliance with Supplanter's family offered great wealth and growth for their clan. The gullible king and prince didn't sense any of the foreboding disingenuity from the way Trapper's grandsons sweet-talked them into mutilating themselves.

The royal family went back to the gates of the city and had all the men join the sons of Progenitor in their most sacred ritual. When all the men were sore and immobilized from their bleeding genitals, Supplanter's second and third born sons, Discerner and Uniter, ran through the city and killed all the men, including the king and prince. They rescued their sister and took her back home, but not without plundering the wealth and women of their enemies.

Supplanter said to Discerner and Uniter: *Your violence has invited doom on us all! Your brash overreaction is vile to the tribes of Lowland-Merchants*

## 1. THE LIFE AND TIMES OF THE LAST PATRIARCH



*who live here. We're loaded with wealth and completely defenseless. If they gather themselves against us, they'll far outnumber us and we'll be destroyed.*

Supplanter didn't celebrate the rescue of his only daughter, nor did he berate his sons for sullyng the rite of paring, nor for committing mass murder. He took issue with the practical implications of ransacking an entire tribe. Supplanter the opportunist was struggling to deal with the next generation of tricksters who didn't mind tarnishing their reputation while taking advantage of others.

Discerner and Uniter said: *They treated our sister like a prostitute, so we repaid them in kind.*

---

**S**upplanter's family lived in their makeshift ranch for several years until Trapper's attendant arrived to escort Supplanter to his parents' homestead. Mockery was dying, thirty years later than expected but nonetheless tragic. But Supplanter couldn't simply pack up and stroll through a territory with so many dangerous neighbors. Anyone who wanted to steal Supplanter's wealth could simply strike while the camp was vulnerable and tired from the journey.

Eternal-Master said: *Go ahead and travel to the place where I appeared to you, when you fled from your brother, so you can build me a proper altar there. I'll protect you, just like I have since I first promised it three decades ago.*

Supplanter said to everyone: *We need to get rid of the filth that clings to our bodies and minds. Gather up your god statues, bathe yourselves, and change your clothes. Let me take you to the place where I met Eternal-Master so I can build a better altar than the pile of rocks I put together as a young man. Have these other gods ever answered me, saved me in a time of trouble, or been with me in my travels back and forth across the land? No, only Eternal-Master has been my constant companion and my savior.*

So everyone, even Ewe, gathered their statues and spiritual accessories and handed them over to Supplanter. He didn't sell the jewelry or melt

## 1. THE LIFE AND TIMES OF THE LAST PATRIARCH

down the gold, but buried everything under a tree so that no one could use them anymore. As the family traveled, Eternal-Master haunted the minds of the surrounding tribes with divine terror, so they couldn't bring themselves to attack Supplanter's defenseless caravan. So they reached the place safely.

Eternal-Master said to Supplanter: *As the almighty god, I have given your nation a name: Divine-Prevailer. Like I told the first Man, I now tell you: be fruitful and create many nations and great kings. One day I will give your descendants, Divine-Prevailer, the whole land that I promised to your grandfather and father.*

Then Eternal-Master left and Supplanter set up a stone pillar and poured wine and oil to signify the abundant life given by Eternal-Master.

As they went on towards Mockery's homestead, Ewe went into labor with her second child. But the labor was killing her. In her final moments, she delivered the baby boy and named him *Son-of-Sorrow*. But Supplanter couldn't bear the constant reminder of his wife's tragedy, so he called him *Strong-Hand-Son*. Supplanter set up a tomb with a tall pillar to mark the place where Ewe died.

Supplanter was gradually aging out of his manipulative tendencies, but the dysfunction he engendered in his family didn't simply vanish overnight. Like their fathers before them, Supplanter's youthful sons had disgusting urges that would have disastrous consequences. Just as Discerner and Uniter had torn through a city and pillaged everything and everyone, their oldest brother, Son-Appears, was ready to ruin some lives as well.

Son-Appears took Ewe's attendant Sheepish—the mother of two of Supplanter's children—and raped her in a display of superiority over his

father. Supplanter took note of this but didn't do anything, leaving the abuser unharmed and the victim unprotected. But just as Supplanter's capricious affection had a special power to drive his family crazy, his contempt carried a similarly immense weight. Supplanter would make sure that Son-Appears, his firstborn, would regret his lusty misstep, along with all his descendants after him.

Eventually Supplanter arrived at his father's home and reunited with his parents. And when Mockery passed away at a good old age, Bruiser came to bury him along with Supplanter and Trapper. The family wasn't perfect, but having the twins together to grieve their father was more than Trapper could have asked for.

---

PART FOUR

MORE-OR-LESS' BROTHERS  
TRY TO KILL HIM

**S**upplanter's sons were growing restless with the golden child, More-Or-Less, in part because he wore his father's favoritism everywhere he went—Supplanter gave More-Or-Less a special multicolored jacket that resembled Supplanter's flock of colorful sheep as a sign of his love, but none of the other boys had anything to show from their father. More-Or-Less was also a tattletale who was known to deliver scathing reports on his brothers' work to their father.

To make matters worse, More-Or-Less felt he was divinely destined to

## 1. THE LIFE AND TIMES OF THE LAST PATRIARCH

rule over his brothers and the whole nation of Divine-Prevailer by extension. Eternal-Master gave More-Or-Less this idea through a series of dreams, but he didn't save More-Or-Less from the treachery of the older boys who decided together to kill off their blessed younger sibling —because the murder of Eternal-Master's chosen son was always close at hand.

As More-Or-Less approached his brothers in the wilderness with the flocks, they decided they wouldn't let him live to give their father another bad report of their work. But Son-Appears wouldn't allow his brothers to murder the boy because he knew he would be held responsible as the oldest (and because he was still in hot water for raping his step-mother). Son-Appears convinced them to simply trap More-Or-Less in a nearby pit, thinking he would be able to come back and fetch him after the others left.

The brothers beat More-Or-Less, stripped him of his special jacket, and threw him down into a deep hole. When Son-Appears had stepped away to tend the herds, some slave traders happened to pass by. So the brothers took More-Or-Less out and sold him into slavery. They tore More-Or-Less' special jacket and covered it in goat's blood so Supplanter would think he had been mauled by a wild animal.

When Supplanter's sons brought the torn and bloody jacket home, he was undone. Supplanter had now outlived his two favorite people. No one could comfort him. He was determined to enter the underworld in mourning to be like his son.

But eventually Supplanter got up and dusted himself off, moving on with life even though a part of him died with his most beloved son. Supplanter's sons continued to give him grandchildren and great-



grandchildren (with a favorite boy in each generation).

After the disgusting moral failures of the first three sons, Supplanter's fourth, Worshiper, was the obvious next choice as Eternal-Master's promised restorer of a deathless world. But Worshiper was no life-giver, he refused to support his widowed daughter-in-law and left her to die alone. So she disguised herself as a prostitute, fucked Worshiper, stole his staff, and blackmailed him with it. In this way she put him to public shame for his cruelty and lust. And it worked! She was taken care of under Worshiper's roof from then on. But in the process, Worshiper was exposed as a cold-hearted, hypocritical man.

---

**T**wenty years later, the whole region suffered an unprecedented famine. All the fields were barren and even the storehouses were empty as year after year of drought and infertility plagued every family in the region.

To the south, a tribe called the *Fortifiers* had somehow stockpiled enough grain to sell their excess to anyone who needed it—which was, of course, everyone. Supplanter sent his ten sons (all except Strong-Hand-Son) to the Fortifiers to haggle for their survival.

When Divine-Prevailer went south to buy grain from the Fortifiers, they dealt with the second in command under the king. This man was dishonest and treacherous with Divine-Prevailer. He put them through strange and elaborate schemes, demanding to meet their youngest

## 1. THE LIFE AND TIMES OF THE LAST PATRIARCH

brother and their father before giving them the grain they needed. This man also saw to it that the gold and trading goods from Divine-Prevailer were always given back, so they never paid for any of the grain they hauled back to their land. So the king's attendant provided for Divine-Prevailer's material needs, but he terrorized them by toying with their emotions and making death threats for no reason at all. Everyone was puzzled and dismayed at their current situation with the Fortifiers, who were their only lifeline during the famine.

After two years of these harsh dealings, the man came to the sons of Supplanter and revealed that he was actually their brother, More-Or-Less. After being sold as a slave, More-Or-Less continued to receive dreams with Eternal-Master and even interpret the signs and symbols in other people's dreams. Because of this, More-Or-Less found himself promoted to the second in command of the Fortifiers. And it was More-Or-Less who discovered the coming famine through his interpretation of the king's dreams. By advising the king to stock huge quantities of grain before the famine began, More-Or-Less singlehandedly turned the Fortifiers into an empire and their king into a true emperor.

More-Or-Less also told his brothers that the famine still had five years remaining before it would subside. To help Divine-Prevailer survive the coming years, More-Or-Less prepared a place for Divine-Prevailer in the land of the Fortifiers.

Supplanter's sons went back to their father and told him everything. But it was hard for Supplanter to make sense of their report. When did they lie; back when they told him More-Or-Less was dead, or now that they were saying he was not only alive but a foreign dignitary? Because of the famine, Supplanter had no choice but to go and find out for himself

in the land of the Fortifiers.

At the southern border of the Lowlands, Supplanter dreamed that Eternal-Master said: *Supplanter, Supplanter, I'm the god of your father. Don't be afraid to go down to the Fortifiers, because I'm with you. I'll make Divine-Prevailer into a great nation in the south and then I'll bring them back into the country I that promised to your family. More-Or-Less is alive, and he will be with you for the rest of your days.*

So Supplanter left the land that had been promised to his family and moved into another country. The Fortifiers were disgusted with shepherds, and separated themselves from abominations like Divine-Prevailer. Anybody looking at the situation could imagine that the contempt of the Fortifiers would eventually bloom into something awful.

When More-Or-Less brought his father to meet the king of the Fortifiers, the king said: *Tell me about your life. I want to know the father of my miracle-working servant, More-Or-Less, so that I might understand how he came to possess his knowledge of the future.*

Supplanter said: *Few and evil have been the days of my life, wandering back and forth across the land, running all the time from all sorts of troubles. Several members of my own family have vowed to kill me. But I've gotten by in spite of my shortcomings; I have flocks, servants, possessions, and great posterity because of Eternal-Master. And it appears that Eternal-Master has his hand on More-Or-Less in the same way as his predecessors.*

*You should have met my grandfather, he was a great man. And my father after him accomplished incredible things. As for me, my life has been shorter and less virtuous than theirs. I don't know what you expected to hear, but you won't learn the secrets of prosperity from me.*

*My sons resent me, just like my father did; I have no skills or insights to*

*pass on; I make enemies, not friends; and my partnerships always end in tragedy. When people tell my story, they actually won't focus much on me at all—I'm just a small part of Eternal-Master's story. He has an inexplicable drive to pull humanity out of our dreadful condition. And he's using my family, of all people, to introduce himself to every nation in the world.*

The king wasn't impressed by Supplanter and never regarded Eternal-Master favorably. As the famine continued, More-Or-Less continued advising the king and built up his dynasty into unfathomable wealth and power.

---

**S**eventeen years after moving south, Supplanter could tell that he was expiring. He called More-Or-Less and More-Or-Less' two oldest sons to his deathbed, so the grandchildren could receive an inheritance as Supplanter's own sons. When More-Or-Less brought the boys near—the older towards Supplanter's dominant hand—Supplanter crossed his hands, giving the younger son the preferential status. This upset More-Or-Less, who thought that his father's eyes were failing in his old age. More-Or-Less took Supplanter's hand to move it to the older son's head, but Supplanter refused.

Supplanter said: *Haven't you learned yet that it's always the younger brother who gets the blessing? My fathers Progenitor and Mockery walked with my god, my shepherd, my redeeming angel from a vile life; may these men know Eternal-Master like their fathers before them and have families*

## 1. THE LIFE AND TIMES OF THE LAST PATRIARCH

*that grow exponentially throughout the earth.*

Then Supplanter called in all of his sons and said: *Gather round and listen to your fates.*

- *Son-Appears: an heir is supposed to be a strong leader, but you're as unstable as water. You forfeited my name when you fucked my wife.*
- *Inseparable Discerner and Uniter: Get away from me, wrathful murderers! I scatter you without a territory of your own.*
- *Worshiper the lion's cub: your scepter once used as blackmail against you will be respected anew by all nations, and you'll have so much fine wine you'll have to invent new uses for the stuff.*
- *Honored the wealthy: you'll be a haven for merchant ships on the shore of a chaotic sea.*
- *Rewarder the workhorse: you'll lease someone else's land and work for him.*
- *Decider the wise: you're a biting serpent, god save you.*
- *Lucky-Raider the skilled warrior: you'll squabble with your neighbors in never-ending skirmishes.*
- *Pleaser the fat king: you'll dine on luxurious delicacies.*
- *Grappler the mother doe: you'll make beautiful fawns and speak beautiful words.*
- *More-Or-Less the healthy branch: though you were treated bitterly, Eternal-Master will make your life more abundant than any generation before.*
- *Strong-Hand-Son the ravenous wolf: you'll overtake your prey and take plentiful spoils.*

*Sons, promise that you'll return me to my family, in the cave where my grandparents are waiting for me, in the land where Ewe is buried, in the*

## 1. THE LIFE AND TIMES OF THE LAST PATRIARCH

*Lowlands, where your descendants will make Eternal-Master known to everyone on the earth.*

Then Supplanter reclined into his bed, got comfortable, and died.

*From the Law, in chapters two through twelve of Exodus*

# MAGICAL DIPLOMACY

AN ADOPTED PRINCE BECOMES A LABOR AGITATOR

## PART ONE

### HIT AND RUN

**D**ivine-Prevailer was a nation of three million people—and all of them were slaves. Four hundred years earlier, their ancestor served as an advisor to the king of the Fortifiers. Thanks to his supernatural foresight, the Fortifiers not only survived a brutal famine, but profited exponentially from it. So the Fortifiers became a great empire overnight and Divine-Prevailer became their new neighbors. Divine-Prevailer's vast flocks of sheep and goats were disgusting and vile creatures to the Fortifiers, so the separate living arrangement worked splendidly for all parties. As centuries passed, however, the Fortifiers lost all goodwill for Divine-Prevailer and handed down hard labor assignments. Somewhere along the way, the saviors became slaves.

## 2. MAGICAL DIPLOMACY

As Divine-Prevailer's population ballooned into the millions, they vastly outnumbered the Fortifiers. So the king decided to stunt their growth by instituting an extermination policy for all of Divine-Prevailer's newborn children. It was during this time that a woman refused to turn her infant son in for disposal. She successfully hid him from the Fortifiers for a while, but by the time he was three months old, his cries grew loud and she couldn't keep him from his fate any longer; he would surely be found in the next search through the slave city. She made a baby-sized boat from a basket lined with pitch and sent her child downstream to take his chances in the wild instead of being slaughtered by the Fortifiers. It was a pointless gesture—some might even say it was more cruel than a swift death—but she couldn't bring herself to hand her son to an executioner.

The boy's older sister watched the basket float downstream. To her horror, the basket was intercepted by the king's daughter, who opened it up and found the child crying inside. But the princess actually took pity on the baby, even though she recognized him as a Divine-Prevailer. His sister approached and offered to call a slave woman to nurse the child (before someone else might advise the princess otherwise). And the princess agreed, paying his own mother to take the child back and raise him as a wet nurse.

When the boy was weaned, he was brought to the palace as the princess' adopted son. He was named *Drawn-Up* because the princess plucked him out of the river. So Drawn-Up lived as something of a prince within the ruling dynasty of the Fortifiers, hearing about his own people as foul foreigners who came to the country amid a flock of dirty animals.

When Drawn-Up was nearly forty years old, he went for his first stroll



## 2. MAGICAL DIPLOMACY

among the Divine-Prevailers. He was aghast at the condition of their forced labor—a lean force of overseers managed millions of unwilling laborers through pure cruelty and intimidation. The overseers' contempt was amplified by their fear of Divine-Prevailer's vast numbers, which were somehow unaffected by years of systematic infanticide. Drawn-Up realized that his people were in a hopeless position, living as captives away from their rightful home.

Drawn-Up wandered off and found an overseer beating a laborer mercilessly. The overseer's brutality stirred a terrible rage in Drawn-Up. Seeing that no one else was around, he attacked and killed the overseer and buried his corpse in the windy dunes.

Drawn-Up went out the next day for another round of poverty tourism, and this time he saw two Divine-Prevailers fighting each other. Drawn-Up stepped in and questioned them for acting out the same hatred as their sadistic overseers.

One of the men said: *You're not in charge here, you're just a privileged, arrogant prick. Look around; we're not teary-eyed victims waiting for you to swoop in and save us, we're just regular people trying to keep our heads down. So what if we were fighting? Are you going to kill us next?*

Evidently, word was spreading about Drawn-Up's secret. News of the adopted prince's treason reached the king, who sought to capture and execute his shameful grandson. So Drawn-Up fled to the distant southeast as a fugitive while his family toiled on.



---

PART TWO

BLOODGROOM

**D**rawn-Up began a second life that resembled his family's founding patriarchs—rurality, mysticism, fatherhood, war. Just like Supplanter, Drawn-Up met a woman at a well, integrated himself with her family, and learned how to shepherd. Drawn-Up put his royal life with the Fortifiers behind him—which also meant he left Divine-Prevailer to toil in slavery. This went on for forty years.

When Drawn-Up was eighty years old, Eternal-Master interrupted his shepherding duties, taking the form of a fiery plant. (This was Drawn-

## 2. MAGICAL DIPLOMACY

Up's first of many reports of divine manifestations that were strange and unprecedented.) The fire delivered a diplomacy lesson to Drawn-Up on speaking to the king of the Fortifiers. To demonstrate his god's power, Drawn-Up was taught how to make his hand appear to be riddled with a degenerative disease and also given a supernatural staff that could transform into a living snake. But Drawn-Up felt that he wouldn't project the authority necessary to demand the release of several million slaves, so Eternal-Master berated him for insubordination and begrudgingly invited his estranged brother, Brilliance, to assist.

Drawn-Up loaded his wife and children on a donkey and rode off for their weeklong journey west. On the way, Eternal-Master told Drawn-Up that everyone who remembered his crime had died off, but the Fortifiers would never let the slaves escape so the king's heir would have to die.

The family was resting at an inn when Eternal-Master arrived to kill Drawn-Up. While the god pursued his target, Drawn-Up's wife found a sharp tool and sliced her son's penis in a crude, expedited version of Progenitor's paring ritual. She put the severed foreskin on her husband's feet and warded off Eternal-Master.

*She said: I should have known that marrying you would bring blood and pain into my life. You really thought you could just march in as a liberator? You aren't living like a Divine-Prevailer at all. From the little you've told me about Eternal-Master, it seems like he would be better off without you getting in the middle of his plans. If you're going to lead Divine-Prevailer into war, you should be fully committed.*

---

PART THREE

## BATTLE OF WILLS

**D**rawn-Up arrived in the slave city where he reunited with his brother, Brilliance, who already knew about Eternal-Master's plan. Together they gathered the elders of Divine-Prevailer to prepare for a grand exit. The slaves were cautiously optimistic about Drawn-Up because he performed a demonstration of his magical staff, but they also knew the Fortifiers would be stubborn about keeping their workforce subdued.

With Divine-Prevailer's sheer numbers and inside intelligence, they could have struck a devastating blow to strategic targets in the Fortifiers' power structure, resources, and food supplies. The slaves could have probably torn down every piece of critical infrastructure with their bare hands. But instead they were instructed to stand idly by while Eternal-Master did all this for them.

Drawn-Up went to the king and asked for his permission to lead a slave field trip outside the country so they could make a special offering to Eternal-Master—an offering that would so deeply offend the Fortifiers that they wouldn't be able to stop themselves from slaughtering all of Divine-Prevailer if they saw their ceremony. (It was well known that Divine-Prevailer's religion, values, and culture were detestable to their enslavers.) But the king refused, because he knew that this would give them an opportunity to escape.

So Eternal-Master began to lay the Fortifiers to siege in a ten-stage campaign of terror and supernatural pestilence:

• First, the water turned into blood, starting with the great river that supplied the whole country. But it wasn't only the river—the canals,

## 2. MAGICAL DIPLOMACY

ponds, and even the water stored up in pots and barrels turned to blood. The fish died immediately and then the smell of rot set in. Blood flowed downstream continuously for seven days, coagulating on the shore in putrid scabs. The Fortifiers had to dig to access untainted water.

- Second, a teeming mass of curious little frogs came hopping and climbing and clambering out of the river, squeezing their slimy bodies into every pot of dough, every cup of water, every pocket, every oven, every bed. They ruined everything they touched with their slime and made life miserable for the Fortifiers. When the frogs died, they did so in an instant, and their bodies were thrown into the streets in heaping piles. So the nauseating smell of fishy blood was replaced with one of dead frogs.



- Third, dust from the ground blew up and became a swarm of lice, ticks and gnats that clung to everyone—biting, itching, swarming, spoiling.
- Fourth, another round of swarming things appeared—flying and jumping and scurrying insects bit and ate and spread diseases and mold to the Fortifiers' cities and homes, but not the slave city.
- Fifth, a deadly sickness spread throughout the Fortifiers' cattle, horses, donkeys, camels, herds of sheep and goats, and the flocks of fowl. Hides, fur, meat, milk, and eggs were instantly decimated and transportation was crippled. (But none of Divine-Prevailer's animals

## 2. MAGICAL DIPLOMACY

caught the bug or died.)

- Sixth, before they could heal from the bug bites, fine ash from the kilns blew up and out in every direction, causing blisters, boils, and sores on the Fortifiers (but not the slaves).
- Seventh, thunder, heavy hail, and fire came crashing down ceaselessly, killing everything caught in the open. Along with the unlucky people and livestock caught in the storm, the crops of flax and barley and all the orchards were destroyed. (But no hail fell on the slave city.)
- Eighth, a strong wind blew in from the east, bringing a swarm of locusts that blanketed the ground, eating whatever scraps were left in the fields after the hail and consuming whatever was left in the storehouses after the frogs, gnats, and flies had come through—so that nothing green or edible remained for the Fortifiers.
- Ninth, pitch darkness came down for three days, choking out the sun and even dampening the lamps and torches of the Fortifiers. (But the slave city had light like any normal day.)
- Tenth, every firstborn of the Fortifiers died, from the king's heir down to the children of criminals captive in the dungeon. Even the firstborn of every pet and livestock died. In an instant, the whole nation cried out together in mourning.

Gradually throughout these ten plagues, the Fortifiers grew to fear Drawn-Up, his brother Brilliance, and their god. The king's advisors—who were initially defiant and even recreated some of Eternal-Master's magic with their own abilities—eventually found themselves pleading with their king to recognize Eternal-Master's superiority. The slaves plundered the gold and silver of the Fortifiers simply by going around and asking for it to be handed to them.

---

**I**n the middle of the night of dead heirs, the king finally permitted Drawn-Up to take the slaves out for their ceremony. Although Divine-Prevailer never engaged in conventional siege tactics or open warfare, they still tore through the fabric of their enemies' society—making them endure humiliation, hunger, and grief to coerce a surrender.

Divine-Prevailer hurried out that same night. But they didn't march north towards their homeland because it had become occupied in the four hundred years since the small family of Supplanter left it. So the refugees went east, towards the protruding gulfs of the southern sea, carrying the bones of their last patriarch to finally bury him with his family.

Eternal-Master stood out front to lead his refugees, not taking the form of a person but a cloud column during the day and a pillar of fire to light the night, allowing the people to keep moving at all hours.

After they had traveled some distance, Eternal-Master guided them to double back around to the western shores of the sea in the south. By appearing aimless, Eternal-Master was baiting the Fortifiers into pursuit so he could decisively cut down their hubris.

As the refugees saw the Fortifiers approaching, they said to Drawn-Up: *There weren't enough graves for us in the city so you brought us out to die in the wild, is that it? We told you forty years ago that we'd rather be slaves for the Fortifiers than martyrs for Eternal-Master. By foolishly trying to make things right, you and your god only made everything worse!*

Drawn-Up said: *Quit worrying and shut up. Your only job is to wait on Eternal-Master. Get a good look because this is the last time you'll ever see the Fortifiers.*

## 2. MAGICAL DIPLOMACY

Eternal-Master's fire went around Divine-Prevailer and held back the advancing army while Drawn-Up put his hand over the sea. A focused eastward wind came from behind Drawn-Up and pushed the seawater aside to create a dry path. When the refugees walked through and arrived on the eastern shore, Eternal-Master released the Fortifiers. Without hesitation, the king and his men charged into the middle of the dry gulf—where Eternal-Master was waiting for them. The god harassed the king's army with fire and wind, throwing their formations into disarray and clogging their chariots' wheels in the mud. Drawn-Up put his hand over the sea again and the water rushed in around the Fortifiers, whose mangled, crushed, and waterlogged bodies floated throughout the sea and beached along hundreds of miles of shoreline. And with the flotsam, the mystery of the refugees spread throughout the world.

Drawn-Up wrote a song for all of Divine-Prevailer to sing:

*Master sent wind and called down fire,  
a once-brave king stuck in a mire.  
Chariots float while their riders drown,  
Master showed us how victory sounds.*



*From the Law, in the twenty-fifth chapter of Numbers*

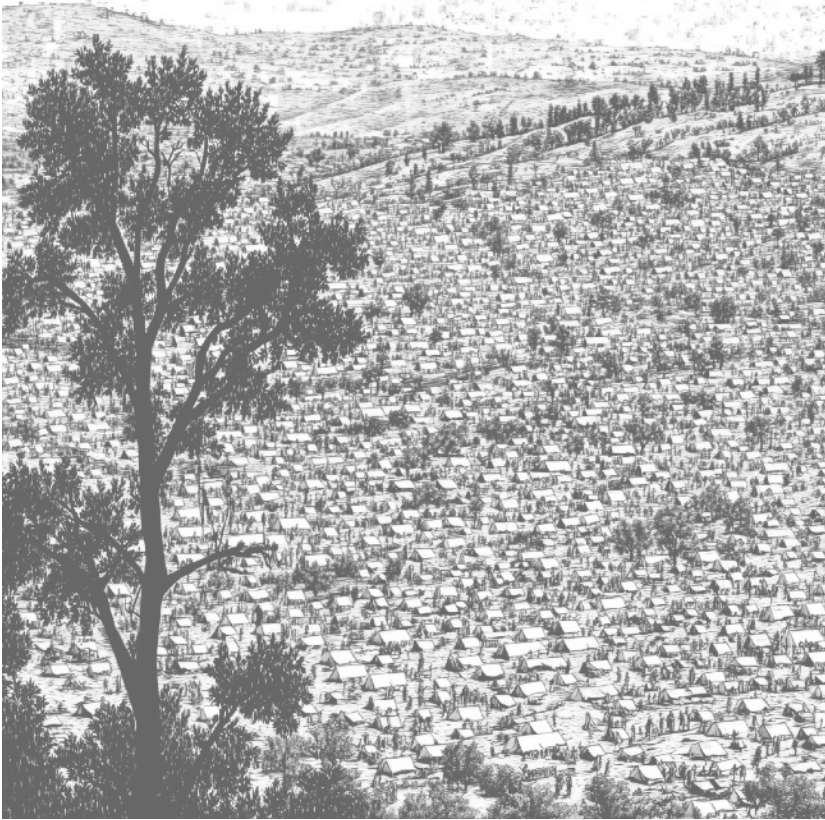
# RED SERPENT INFESTATION

GOD'S RESPONSE TO A PRAYER FOR PRESTIGE AND STATURE

**T**he people of Divine-Prevailer had grown impatient on their journey to freedom, which started with their escape from slavery to the Fortifiers over forty years prior. Since Drawn-Up led the nation out in a resounding victory, they had only wandered through barren wilderness, waiting for Eternal-Master to allow them to settle in the land that he promised to their ancestors. Divine-Prevailer was dissatisfied with their situation, they resented Eternal-Master, and they were tired of his representative.

It might seem silly to want to go back into slavery, but their experience as *free people* was far more psychologically demoralizing. Back in Fortifier, Divine-Prevailers had meaningful work as skilled masons and nurses; but under Drawn-Up, they were unemployed, with nothing to do but walk around grumbling—and like any skill, the dedicated practice

### 3. RED SERPENT INFESTATION



made them expert complainers.

The people said to Drawn-Up: *Why did you take us away from home in the first place? We should be indulging in luxury, stature, and clout. We used to eat proper meat, fresh vegetables, and ripe fruit back with the Fortifiers, but now we gather flavorless clumps of who-knows-what off the ground. We used to drink fine wine, but now we'd be lucky to find a dirty stream. We used to live in a powerful nation with impressive walls and towers, but now we're a traveling freak show. We should command respect, we should be living large, we should have it all—but it looks like all that's*

### 3. RED SERPENT INFESTATION

*left for us now is to die in obscurity and undo everything Eternal-Master has done going all the way back to the days of our patriarchs. So, Drawn-Up, go ask your god for his explanation of this meager lifestyle we've been handed. We expect an apology and a plan to get back to the good life!*

Eternal-Master took no pity on the people. Their desire for abundance, comfort, and prestige would only make them more like the Fortifiers—who had successfully centralized power and wealth and promptly become Eternal-Master's enemies. Did Divine-Prevailer really want to end up like the Fortifiers; plagued by supernatural infestations, disease, and death?

Eternal-Master invited a nest of snakes to slither into the camp and besiege it with their venomous bites. The snakes looked like fire with bright red stripes and they attacked the camp like an inferno. The people were harassed from every corner and cranny where the serpents hid in wait to strike with their monstrous fangs. A single bite was lethal even to the healthiest person in the camp.

After burying many of their brothers and sisters, the people realized that Eternal-Master wasn't opposed to letting the whole nation die in the wilderness after all. When Divine-Prevailer had threatened to waste away, Eternal-Master called their bluff and even helped them along.

The people said to Drawn-Up: *We were wrong to desire prestige when we should have been grateful for our lives and our freedom. We see now that we were puffed up with arrogance and we had lost our perspective on the true nature of comfort and clout—which would only distract us from our infinitely grander role as Eternal-Master's representatives. So please talk to Eternal-Master for us and ask him to take the snakes away.*

Eternal-Master told Drawn-Up: *As much as these people deserve*

### 3. RED SERPENT INFESTATION

*whatever suffering comes to them, I still love Divine-Prevailer and will happily protect them. Now craft a red snake out of copper and put it on a long pole. Anyone who has the venom in their body can look at the likeness of the snake and I'll heal them. The sign of death will bring life to anyone who trusts me.*

So Drawn-Up made a snake statue on the end of a pole tall enough that the millions of Divine-Prevailers could see it from their campsites. If a snake bit anyone, they could overcome the venom if they simply looked at the statue at the center of camp by the big tent where Eternal-Master lived. Eternal-Master's discipline was severe, but he also provided an antidote.

*From the Former Prophet Joshua, in chapters nine, ten, and fifteen*

# THE NATIONS PLOT IN VAIN

TWO PERSPECTIVES ON THE RETURN TO THE HOME COUNTRY

## PART ONE

### THE IDIOCY OF CONVENTIONAL TACTICS IN THE FACE OF SUPERNATURAL TERROR

**G**ood-Chief was the king of a tribal settlement where his family had lived for a thousand years. But his ancestral land was suddenly under threat: millions of refugees were marching back into the Lowlands after a four hundred year absence.

Good-Chief chose to do something bold and unexpected before the invaders had the chance to lay waste to his city like all the others. He went to his neighboring tribes and built a coalition—others had tried this before, but Good-Chief would amass a large enough force to match the vastness of the invading army. Good-Chief and his coalition wouldn't sit

#### 4. THE NATIONS PLOT IN VAIN

around like chumps, they would take the refugees by surprise and end the insanity.

But at the same time, the powerful tribes in the nearby Hill-Cities had their own strategy to get out ahead of the invaders' northwest advance. The Hill-Cities were cowards who pretended to be impoverished beggars from a faraway land, so that the invaders would show them mercy (not knowing they were actually locals). The Hill-Cities' fiercest warriors and leaders surrendered and became servants instead of fighting to protect their homes, their culture, and their way of life.

The resignation of the Hill-Cities didn't deter Good-Chief, because he knew about the personality and preferences of the invaders' god. Good-Chief would rather fight than change his ways to join those strange people. In fact, the cowardly Hill-Cities became the perfect target for Good-Chief's coalition to strike.

Good-Chief and his four kings—Chief-Compels, Wild-Mule, Shining-One, and Shelter—marched on the Hill-Cities and besieged them, knowing this would draw the invaders out since they were obligated to protect their new allies. The invading soldiers would arrive exhausted from their long march, and the coalition's entrenched forces would make quick work of the fools. The cruel irony of Good-Chief's cunning strategy was that it leveraged the invaders' misstep with the Hill-Cities to put them at a disadvantage.

But Good-Chief didn't plan the invaders doing the unthinkable—they marched rapidly through night, arriving before the five kings could properly prepare themselves. Good-Chief couldn't comprehend the energy and zeal of these people. Their leader, Master's-Rescue, was unfathomably reckless to respond to Good-Chief's provocation with this

#### 4. THE NATIONS PLOT IN VAIN

rabid ferocity.

The invaders drove the coalition into a panic. The coalition soldiers didn't know whose commands to follow, their formations were in disarray, and the invaders seemed to be everywhere at once. Fear plagued Good-Chief and all his men like a thick fog as they fled.

The invaders followed, but it was a disastrous turn of weather that did the most damage—impossibly large hailstones rained down on the heads of the fleeing soldiers, killing almost everyone while the invaders continued to pursue, undeterred by the deadly hail. The weather seemed to follow the coalition no matter where they turned, crushing men at random as they ran for their lives, but somehow never striking the invading soldiers.

The only grace was the darkness of night, which would soon arrive, giving the retreating forces a chance to hide out, regroup, and save themselves from the horror.

But then the leader of the invaders, Master's-Rescue, stopped and cried out: *Sun, stand still here at the Hill-Cities. Moon, halt in this valley.*

And the sun held its position, shining light on the land for an additional day while the hail rained down and the invaders killed off any stragglers. The five kings hid themselves in a cave nearby so they could wait out the battle (and the weather) before sneaking back to safety. But they were discovered and trapped inside while Master's-Rescue finished the slaughter—which ended up being a three-day ordeal without a moment to rest.

The invaders gathered at the kings' cave for their first break after seventy hours of running. The five kings were brought out and laid flat in the dirt so the whole army could gather around.

#### 4. THE NATIONS PLOT IN VAIN



Master's-Rescue said: *Come near and put your feet on the necks of these kings. Like many before, they used cunning strategy to try to stop your entry into this land, which was promised to our ancestors by Eternal-Master. So remember Good-Chief, Chief-Compels, Wild-Mule, Shining-One, Shelter, as well as all the kings you've overcome before these five, and don't be afraid when more like them come up against you. Be courageous, because this is what Eternal-Master will do to all your enemies.*

Master's-Rescue killed the five kings (a humiliating end), hanged their dead bodies from five trees (a gruesome funeral), and took them down at



nightfall to throw them into the cave where they had hidden themselves (an appalling mausoleum). Rather than being laid to rest as prestigious men of great tribes, the kings' bodies were treated with contempt and thrown away like common trash.

The army went out and comprehensively destroyed every person, animal, and possession of the five kings, so that there would be no rewards for the soldiers' work.

---

PART TWO

## A WOMAN BEGS HER FATHER NOT TO LEAVE HER TO DIE IN THE DESERT

**P**reparer spent his entire adult life as a houseless wanderer in rough country. He packed up his belongings every morning and walked all day through a punishing landscape with venomous snakes, ambushes of marauders, drought, and the burden of absolute monotony. At the end of each day, having failed to reach any kind of destination, Preparer set up his tent for another night in the same barren hills.

Preparer dreamed of one day owning more possessions than he could carry on the backs of a few mules. An unsettled existence affords few luxuries. Even simple supplies like firewood were difficult to procure and haul. The cold nights were brutal but there was also the wrathful heat of the summer sun to contend with. Each season brought new challenges

#### 4. THE NATIONS PLOT IN VAIN

and unique experiences of anguish to Preparer's life.

Although, there were a few miraculous positives for Preparer. Throughout all his years, the seams of his fabric never split, cloth and leather never tore, his bags and tent poles always held up, and the same sandals he wore on his first day in the wild were still perfectly intact. And there was always at least one thing to eat: a flavorless crust clumped up on the ground with the morning dew (although it turned rancid by nightfall). And Preparer wasn't alone; he traveled in a caravan of refugees, all of them waiting to find a suitable place to live. Preparer belonged to the nation of Divine-Prevailer, now three million strong and ready to enter the land that was promised to their patriarchs hundreds of years earlier.

Among the many gods of his people, Preparer had just one to thank for every blessing and resent for every trial: Eternal-Master. This god led the people in circles through the land for decades, telling them that they would eventually be allowed to settle in their own country, but not before completing their punishment for faithlessly grumbling against his decision to free them from captivity. Eternal-Master was outraged by the presence of the other gods that people found, made, or took from local priests. Eternal-Master also forbade the people to carry gold or trading goods of value, and their relationship to the locals was almost always violent.

To sum up Preparer's situation: everyone and everything was against Preparer and his countrymen except Eternal-Master, but even he seemed to abandon his people for decades at a time.

Somehow Preparer's dire circumstances didn't stop him from raising a son into the pantheon of history's storied leaders. Howler was Preparer's

#### 4. THE NATIONS PLOT IN VAIN

firstborn and he became a spy, an emissary of Eternal-Master, and the leader of Divine-Prevailer (now several hundred clans strong). Unlike Preparer, Howler lived long enough to cross the Descending-River and enter the land long-promised to the families of Divine-Prevailer.

Howler struggled to clear out the territory's squatters because his forces suffered from spotty performance on the battlefield. Some towns just toppled in the breeze in front of Howler's soldiers; every swing of the sword and loosed arrow found its way into flesh with ease. Fortified walls spontaneously caught fire and crumbled like fine kindling. The Lowland-Merchants seemed to already have shackles on their hands and work orders ready for an ambitious rebuild. Success was guaranteed when Eternal-Master approved of Divine-Prevailer's efforts.

But other times, a meager clan could send Howler's army fleeing in terror. Eternal-Master could turn trusty weapons dull and useless if he disapproved of Howler's army for any reason. This was because it was all too easy to offend Eternal-Master—if anyone kept so much as a single coin or sacrificed a child to a god of the Lowland-Merchants (as was the local custom), Eternal-Master would see to it that Divine-Prevailer's offensive would catastrophically fail. Eternal-Master wasn't like any other god, and he often warned the people about his furious jealousy.

To try to motivate the troops, Howler dangled his daughter Anklet's hand in marriage as a reward for whoever could drive out the people of City-of-Branches in the South-Desert. Immediately Divine-Force, Howler's nephew, stepped forward to lead a group of men to take the city.

Anklet was a clever girl who could see that her father's plan was only a good idea in theory, and would be disastrous for her no matter which way things turned out. If Divine-Force succeeded, Anklet would get stuck in a

#### 4. THE NATIONS PLOT IN VAIN

desert (more barren than the wilderness she had spent her lifetime barely surviving) with a man whose only qualifications were that he could kill foreigners prodigiously. And if Divine-Force failed to take the city, all of Anklet's brothers and cousins would likely die in the effort. The most frustrating part for Anklet was that no one else noticed how awful this situation was for her.

Anklet wondered how it could be that Eternal-Master was evidently so much more powerful than other gods, particularly those of the Fortifiers and Lowland-Merchants. What did Divine-Prevailer have to show for their partnership with this supposedly all-powerful Eternal-Master? They were refugees who lived penniless in the sticks, survivors of a decades-long death march architected by Eternal-Master himself. So can you blame the people for asking other gods to help them while a generation came and went wandering in the wild?

Divine-Force, true to his name, wielded the power of Eternal-Master and secured City-of-Branches with a destructive assault that turned all of their defenses into rubble and the once-powerful defenders into slaves. When Anklet came to the wreckage of the city, she begged Divine-Force to go and reason his uncle Howler; they had barely survived the wilderness, so they'd surely die in this barren land. Anklet sent Divine-Force off to tell Howler that they needed fertile land to make their home.

When Anklet arrived at Howler's tent, he said: *What is it about the South-Desert that makes you unhappy? This is a generous thing I've done for you and Divine-Force. Think of the sprawling homestead that your future clan can build here. It will one day be a great city with thousands of homes.*

Either Divine-Force didn't understand Anklet's complaint or he simply

#### 4. THE NATIONS PLOT IN VAIN



failed to persuade Howler. Anklet said: *Look around at this curse you've given your daughter. How can we grow anything here? No one's going to thrive in a fucking desert! Eternal-Master didn't free us from slavery so we could toil in obscurity—surely he must want us to flourish. Since you've seen fit to send me to the desert, at least give me the nearby freshwater springs as well.*

Howler said: *Anklet, my jewel, how did I not see it this way before? I'm sorry for not listening to your wise counsel. You need something better, so I'll*

#### 4. THE NATIONS PLOT IN VAIN

*see to it that you and Divine-Force have the springs. And we'll give a new name to this land: Shelter. Now you'll follow Eternal-Master in a lush garden and beautiful home instead of a dry patch of land. How does it feel to finally be redeemed?*

So Anklet settled in with Divine-Force. They had two sons and eventually their descendants filled the whole territory. When a king named *Doubly-Wicked-Darkness* invaded the nation, Divine-Force stepped up as a temporary ruler and liberated the nation. Anklet's grandson built a great city where their clan lived for eight hundred years until being captured and carted off to a foreign empire called *Confusion*.

*From the Former Prophets, in chapters thirteen through sixteen of Judges*

# THE UNHINDERED CHIEF

A CRAZY LONER STARTS A WAR AND SORT OF WINS SOMEHOW

## PROLOGUE

### A BRIEF BACKSTORY OF UNHINDERED VOWS

**S**ometimes a Divine-Prevailer came along who felt that the priests' teachings and rituals weren't enough to express the fullness of their devotion to Eternal-Master. This person would temporarily take an Unhindered vow—which was designed to emulate a wild vine, which, without a farmer's pruning to guide it, sprouts chaotically in every direction.

The vow was defined by its rigid restrictions, but it unlocked an experience of divine excess. All Divine-Prevailers were taught sobriety, but an Unhindered person avoided grapes in every form. All Divine-Prevailers cleaned themselves after handling a corpse, but an Unhindered person stayed away from death entirely. All Divine-Prevailers grew long hair and

*beards, but an Unhindered person wouldn't trim any hair during their vow. All Divine-Prevailers gave things to Eternal-Master, but an Unhindered person offered six special products at the end of their vow: one to burn with smoke wafting up to heaven, one to kill for their immorality, one as an offering of peace, one of grain, one of wine, and one of their Unhindered hair, which was shaved off and burned in front of Eternal-Master.*

*If all that wasn't enough, an Unhindered person was welcome to add any other commitments they could think of during their vow if they felt that it would better express the intensity of their feelings about Eternal-Master. There were also provisions to resume the vow after disqualification—because it was impossible to maintain all of the requirements forever.*

---

PART ONE

## A LIBERATOR'S BIRTH

**A**fter Divine-Prevailer escaped slavery and wandered for a few decades in the south, they came back to their family's old territory in the Lowlands. And as they settled in, they gradually drifted away from each other and their god. But Divine-Prevailer wasn't cut out for the cruelty of the Lowlands, where the locals often overwhelmed them and demanded steep taxes. Every time this happened, a temporary national chief rose up, drove away the foreign occupiers, and recommitted the people to Eternal-Master's instructions. Divine-Prevailer was sometimes rescued right away, but it was also



possible for outsiders to rule for decades before Divine-Prevailer managed to reclaim their autonomy.

Divine-Prevailer had just been invaded by a neighboring nation of Lowland-Merchants called the *Outsiders* when a poor farmer woman met a strange man in her field. She immediately recognized that the stranger was more than human, because he radiated otherworldly light, but she didn't dare to ask him any questions.

The man said: *I know that you're childless, subjugated, and destitute. But you'll have a baby soon who will solve everything. Stay away from grapes and corpses so that the boy can maintain an Unhindered vow from before birth until his death. He'll rise up as a chief to throw the Outsiders out of Divine-Prevailer.*

The farmer ran to her house and told her husband, but he couldn't believe it. So she introduced her husband to the visitor the next time he came around. The husband didn't have the same reverence as his wife, so he peppered the visitor with questions: *Did you speak to my wife earlier? How should we raise the baby? Can you tell us more about his mission? Can we bring you a meal? What's your name?*

The visitor confirmed everything he had already told the wife, suggested that they burn an animal sacrifice, and reprimanded the husband for trying to learn his name, saying: *How can you ask me to tell you my name, don't you know that it's beyond you?*

The couple obeyed the visitor and burned an animal instead of making him a meal. The visitor joined the flames and rose with the thick smoke as it wafted upwards. The husband realized that he had been speaking with Eternal-Master and panicked at the weight of his impropriety, thinking they would die after looking directly into Eternal-Master's eyes.

But his wife said that Eternal-Master would have killed them already if he had been offended. The couple named their boy *Sunny*, after the visitor's light on their farm.

Sunny led an eccentric and not particularly godly life. He was abrasive and solitary—hardly the god-fearing chief his parents expected him to be. Even at twenty years old, Sunny still hadn't gathered an army of rebels to overthrow the Outsiders. Instead he wandered around alone, even breaking his Unhindered vow from time to time, but he said nothing about it to the priests. The only part of his Unhindered vow that he seemed to care about was his untrimmed hair, which he contained in seven massive braids.

One day an Outsider woman caught Sunny's eye, so he began to make wedding arrangements. Of course this made no sense to Sunny's parents, who expected Sunny to wage a war against the Outsiders, not fall in love with them. But since everyone in Divine-Prevailer did as they pleased—without any consideration for Eternal-Master's preferences—they went along with it.

So Sunny and his parents started walking to the Outsider's town to plan a wedding. Sunny was walking separately from his parents when a lion ambushed him out of the cover of the Outsider's vineyards. The animal charged Sunny and roared ferociously, almost like a battle cry.

Eternal-Master also charged Sunny at the same moment, filling him with enraged strength. Sunny, unarmed and unprotected, tore the vineyard lion into pieces. Even though he was only defending himself, he still violated his Unhindered vow in the act of dismembering the lion. But Sunny didn't go to Eternal-Master's priests to set about resuming his vow, he simply carried on silently as his folks scheduled the ceremony

## 5. THE UNHINDERED CHIEF

and went back home.

When Sunny's family returned for the wedding, Sunny again split off on his own to see what became of the lion's body. Sunny rummaged around in the lion's mutilated carcass and found that honeybees had built a hive in the flesh. Sunny scooped up handfuls of honey for a snack and went on his way. He found his parents and gave them some honey, but kept its source secret and didn't mention that he broke his Unhindered vow.

In town, Sunny put together a feast with lots of wine (another violation of his vow). Seeing that Sunny had no wedding party, the locals provided



thirty groomsmen from town. And since Sunny had no provisions or gifts for his new companions, he proposed a wager with them.

Sunny said: *I have a riddle. If you can solve it before our weeklong wedding feast concludes, then I'll provide thirty sets of clothes, one for each of you groomsmen. But if you can't solve it, then all of you will owe me thirty garments each. The riddle is this: 'a fierce devourer gives something sweet.' Name the eater and the meal it provides.*

The wedding party agreed to the high-stakes challenge, knowing that failure would mean producing nine hundred garments—a debt that would instantly impoverish them all. But the Outsiders figured that the dirty brute's riddle would be easily solved by their nation's wise elders.

But after four days, the Outsiders were no closer to untangling Sunny's riddle. They began to panic as the reality of the situation sank in. So the groomsmen turned against Sunny's fiancée, threatening to burn her and her entire family if she failed to entice Sunny into revealing the answer. This was how the Outsiders had been treating Divine-Prevailer all along, but now they had turned their cruelty against their own.

Sunny's fiancée went to him and wept, saying: *You aren't a loving husband, but a vindictive enemy! Don't leave your wife in the dark. Tell me the meaning of your riddle so we can be partners.*

Sunny refused, because he was a loner who didn't even trust his own parents with the answer to the riddle. Sunny's fiancée cried and wailed at Sunny for the last three days of the wedding feast. The girl kept pressing Sunny desperately, passionately, as her life depended on it. Eventually Sunny caved and told his fiancée about the honey he found inside the lion's body. She left and told the groomsmen, relieved to protect herself and her family.

Just before sundown on the last day of the wedding, the groomsmen came to Sunny and said: *A fierce devourer? That must be a lion. Something sweet? It's honey!*

Sunny said: *You chickenshit morons could never take down a lion or know about the way that bees like to nest in their rot. You put my wife to work for you, like you put my whole nation to work for you. I'll go get your reward, but you won't like how I do it.*

Eternal-Master charged Sunny again and he descended on a neighboring Outsider city, killing thirty men and gathering their possessions to pay off his debt to his groomsmen with the spoils of their own countrymen. Sunny didn't stick around for the wedding ceremony but stormed away in a tantrum.

---

**T**o recap: Sunny was newly married to the girl of his dreams. The out-of-town girl that his parents initially didn't approve of, but that only meant that their romance broke norms and tore down boundaries! Of course, the marriage was off to an unconventional start; Sunny was so worked up from the situation with the wedding gifts that he didn't actually stick around for the ceremony.

After a few months of marital bliss (the bride and groom lived in separate towns without any contact), Sunny calmed down and went back to his wife's house, hoping to make amends for his outburst. But that's when Sunny found out that one of the groomsmen had married his wife!

## 5. THE UNHINDERED CHIEF

Sunny's father-in-law wouldn't let Sunny in, telling him that everyone thought the wedding was called off after Sunny cursed them out, murdered their neighbors, and left. The father offered his younger daughter as a replacement bride, but this offended Sunny more than ever.

Sunny said: *Mark my words; now your blood is on your own hands. The harm I'm about to deliver is justified by your constant treachery.*

You'd think this would mark the moment when Sunny gathered up an army of Divine-Prevailers to overthrow the Outsider occupation. Strangely, Sunny didn't enlist his countrymen—he ran off into the wild to round up a regiment of three hundred wild dogs, pairing them tail-to-tail with rope, adding a burning torch onto each pair. Sunny had been thinking about the strangeness of the lion in the vineyard, so he set the dogs free in the Outsiders' farms. The dogs, slowed down by their harnesses and terrified by the flames, moved at just the right speed to spread chaos and destruction prolifically. They burned up the Outsiders' grain, meat, wine, and oil supplies in a single day.

When the Outsiders figured out that the arsonist was Sunny, they struck back by burning his wife and her father in Sunny's fire. So Sunny made a new vow—not to renew his Unhindered vow or ask Eternal-Master for help—but to retaliate one last time. Sunny left the guerrilla tactics behind and went into his late wife's town for a brawl. He walked up unarmed, unarmored, and ultimately unharmed. Sunny kicked the shit out of the Outsiders and walked away to make a new life for himself alone in the wild.

---

**W**hile Sunny was camping, a group of Divine-Prevailers found him, not to join his cause and liberate the nation from the Outsiders, but to arrest him. Sunny made their lives miserable, because the Outsiders raided Divine-Prevailer to replace the crop he had burned. The Divine-Prevailers gave Sunny to the Outsiders because they had no relationship or allegiance to Eternal-Master's chosen *chief*.

The Divine-Prevailers bound Sunny with thick rope, knowing about the violence that he was capable of. But when Sunny heard the shouting Outsider army as he approached the city, Eternal-Master charged him again with enraged strength. Sunny tore through the heavy ropes on his arms, turning them dust, and the knots around his hands flowed away like water. Sunny ripped a donkey's jawbone from its head (violating his Unhindered vow) and used it as a club to bludgeon a thousand Outsiders.

Sunny, inspired by the occasion, said: *My donkey and I heaped up a pile today. But not a pile of grain, my workhorse and I stacked the bodies of a thousand men. And now I'm thirsty. Eternal-Master, you kept me alive while I rid the Lowlands of a thousand occupiers—but I'm going to die of thirst and then the Outsiders will win!*

The ground split open and water poured out at Sunny's feet. Sunny officially became Divine-Prevailer's chief for the next twenty years, but the Outsiders still occupied the country.

---

PART TWO

## SUNNY & SCRAWNY

Sunny, now a forty year old man, went to the capital of the Outsiders and rented a room with a local prostitute. The Outsiders recognized Sunny, of course, so they surrounded the inn, relishing the opportunity to kill him in the light of the morning. But Sunny, not one to cuddle, got up at midnight and left. When he came to the city gate and found it locked, he lifted it up, straight out of the ground. Sunny carried the Outsider capital's defenses back to Divine-Prevailer and set the gate on top of a hill to illustrate his dominance.

Sunny fell in love with another Outsider woman named *Scrawny*. So the Outsiders' elders tasked Scrawny with developing a tactic to finally humiliate Sunny. Instead of threatening Scrawny's life, the elders offered to pay her eleven hundred pieces of silver each.

So one day Scrawny said: *I'm wondering where your strength comes from. Is it even possible to bind you?*

Twenty years after his run-in with the groomsmen, Sunny had become paranoid about revealing any precious secrets. So Sunny blew off his lover with a lie.

Sunny said: *You're right to assume that my strength isn't natural. The secret has to do with the seven braids in my hair—if someone made seven fresh bowstrings and bound me up with them, the divine power in me would dissipate and I'd become like any normal person.*

The Outsider elders quickly brought seven new bowstrings and set up an ambush while Scrawny bound up her lover. At the last moment, Scrawny cried out to warn Sunny about the ambush. Sunny pulled on the bowstrings and they fell apart like kindling in a fire, and he chased off



the Outsiders.

Scrawny said: *You mocked me with that elaborate lie! If you love me, then don't push me away. Tell me how someone would capture you.*

Sunny said: *It's not right for me to keep a secret from my lover. If I'm wrapped in heavy ropes that are brand new, then I'll become weak like any other man.*

Scrawny wound a set of huge ropes and bound Sunny as tightly as she could while a group of men waited to ambush Sunny. Again, Scrawny called out to warn Sunny and he snapped the ropes off his arms like a frayed thread, sending the men away limping.

Scrawny said: *Do you even care about me? You've never revealed who you really are and how you became Divine-Prevailer's hero. There's no trust between us, only lies. Make things right and tell me how to bind you.*

Sunny said: *It really does have to do with my hair, but you would have to attach my seven braids into a weaving web, fastening it tight with a pin. Then my strength and rage would leave me and I'd become like any other man.*

That night, while Sunny slept, Scrawny wove his hair into a web as tight as she could, with a strong pin to fasten it together. As the men snuck towards Sunny's bed, Scrawny screamed: *The Outsiders are here for you, Sunny!*

Sunny instantly pulled away the pin and ripped the contraption out of his hair, so he could properly kick ass.

Scrawny said: *When you say that you love me, you're just taunting me. Why do I stay with you when you don't return my affection? I've caught you lying to my face three times now. You've never told me where your strength comes from. Tell me the truth for once!*

## 5. THE UNHINDERED CHIEF

Scrawny pressed Sunny with these accusations for days until Sunny was so wracked with guilt that he wanted to die. So he told her everything.

Sunny said: *A razor has never touched my hair because of an Unhindered vow my mother started before I was born. I've broken every other requirement of this vow, but I've tried to make good by giving gifts to Eternal-Master in my own way; breaking down a lion like someone would sacrifice livestock and offering wheat, oil, and wine when I burned the fields, orchards, and storehouses. The only offering left would be to shave and burn my hair—which would conclude my Unhindered vow to Eternal-Master.*

Scrawny could tell that this time was different than the three lies before. So Scrawny called the Outsider elders back again to collect her fee. That night, Scrawny held her lover's head in her lap. While Sunny slept, a man shaved his head while Scrawny tormented Sunny, drawing the strength out of him.

When Scrawny announced that the Outsiders were back, Sunny couldn't even wrestle himself free from Scrawny's headlock, because Eternal-Master had abandoned him. The Outsiders gouged out Sunny's eyes to cripple him before taking him to the capital, this time in heavy bronze shackles. The Outsiders didn't waste Sunny's strength in some deep dungeon, they assigned him to hard labor in a grain mill—where his strength grew back along with his stubble.

---

Sunny had to contend with the knowledge that he had broken every part of his Unhindered vow—not subtly or half-heatedly but with flagrant, conspicuous violations. He ripped a lion to pieces and rummaged around in its corpse, he served wine by the barrel at his wedding, he killed people with his bare hands, he fucked around, he brandished a donkey’s jaw, he lied constantly, and he allowed his hair to be shaved.

The Outsider capital hosted a national gathering, but the main attraction wasn’t the statue of their god but the spectacle of Sunny; finally humiliated after twenty years of harassment and violence.

The Outsiders cheered: *Our god delivered the Ravager to us! He embarrassed us, weakened us, he even killed many of us. But now he’s here to entertain us—pathetic and blinded like a wimp!*

An attendant guided Sunny by the hand while the leaders of the Outsiders mocked and teased him. After being paraded about, Sunny was taken to the palace’s inner chamber. Everyone who was anyone had followed Sunny into the palace—there were at least three thousand elders, priests, and leaders jeering at their Ravager. Sunny asked his attendant to set him by the central pillars so he could lean on them for a moment.

Sunny called out: *Eternal-Master, do you remember me? Would you charge me again, only this once, to repay the Outsiders who took the eyes out of my head? Please don’t let me die alone, but with my enemies.*

Sunny gripped the two central pillars of the building and pushed against them. As he heaved, the whole building collapsed around him. Everyone inside and up on the roof was crushed in the rubble. So Sunny accomplished more in the act of dying than everything he had done in

## 5. THE UNHINDERED CHIEF

his life. *A chief's death establishes his kingdom*, to borrow from Sunny's lion/honey paradox.

Sunny's family came to the Outsider capital, secured his body, and brought him back to the family tomb—disobedient and dead but victorious over the Outsiders nonetheless.



*From the Former Prophets, in the nineteenth chapter of Judges.*

# A NIGHT IN THE BIG CITY

HISTORY REPEATS ITSELF IN THE WORST WAY POSSIBLE

**S**upplanter's son Uniter tricked a town to pare itself so he could kill them all in retaliation for raping his sister. He belittled Eternal-Master's most sacred rite to commit violence, so he was cursed to wander forever without his own land. For this reason, Uniter's descendants weren't allotted a parcel of land but had to scatter throughout the country in individual cities, with a contingent serving as priests at Eternal-Master's mobile home. Divine-Prevailer didn't have a central government or much affinity between tribes, but every tribe was duty-bound to provide for the priesthood.

There was once a priest who didn't live in a Uniter city or serve the priesthood, but was a lone wolf among the Double-Bloom tribe. The priest's child-bearer betrayed him and then ran off to her family across the country. So the priest chased her down and made a grand gesture of his affections to show that she wouldn't be executed for her infidelity

because he forgave her. Her family was so moved by his love that they wanted him to stay forever.

But the priest soured on the idea of living with his girlfriend's folks—even though they begged him to stay. So he took his girl, his attendant, and his two donkeys and left late in the day to search for a stranger on the way home to let them stay the night.

Throughout the evening, the travelers passed several suitable places to spend the night. But the priest kept insisting that they press on until they made it to the Hill-City of Strong-Hand-Son because he believed they would be the best hosts for a priest on the road.

It was dark out when they arrived. Strangely, the priest couldn't find anyone to take him and his companions in. After being rejected by the city, they sat in the open square in the center of town.

An old man passed by the priest on his way home from working the field. This old man was another outsider from Double-Bloom, the same region that the priest came from, so he sympathized with the three visitors huddled in the dark.

The old man seemed urgent, asking them where they came from and where they were going, like he was accusing the priest of something. The intensity of the old man's tone made no sense to the priest, who felt at ease for the first time in his long journey, because he finally arrived in Strong-Hand-Son.

The priest said: *We're passing through on our way back to Eternal-Master's house, but no one's taken us in. We don't need much; we already have food for our donkeys as well as bread and wine for the three of us. We're just hoping to sleep indoors tonight.*

The old man sternly warned them not to spend the night outside and

instead offered his house. As a fellow outsider, the old man shouldn't have needed to open up his humble home, but the Strong-Hand-Sons had proven inhospitable. The grateful travelers followed the old man back to wash up, eat, and go to sleep.

As the priest and his friends were settling in, there was a knock at the door. The men of Hill-City had surrounded the house and were demanding that the priest come out so that they could fuck him.

The old man went out and said: *No, don't be this way! My guest is a priest, and while he's in my home I'm bound to protect him. What about my young daughter and the man's child-bearer? Have your way with them, but don't do this outrageous thing to a priest.*

The crowd didn't want the women, they wanted the priest. Being something of a worthless man himself, the priest pushed his child-bearer into the ravenous mob and quickly barricaded the door behind her. The whole lot of them raped and abused the poor girl all night until sunrise. When everyone was finished with her, she found her way back to the old man's house. She stumbled up to the locked door and collapsed in the entryway—beaten and raped to death by the men of the Hill-City.

The priest stumbled over his child-bearer on his way out in the morning. Her hands were still reaching towards the door. He told her to get up so they could leave, but there was no answer from the girl. His beloved didn't survive the night in Strong-Hand-Son. The priest loaded the girl onto his donkey and returned to his parents' house.

The priest felt that the other tribes needed to know about Strong-Hand-Son's inhospitality to a priest. So he dismembered his child-bearer, wrapped her up for delivery, and sent a piece of her to each tribe. Everyone would see the innocent girl's body as a piece of meat, since the

## 6. A NIGHT IN THE BIG CITY



Strong-Hand-Son tribe treated her that way.

As the packages arrived throughout the country, the people were repulsed. Divine-Prevailer never conceived that Strong-Hand-Sons would act with such contempt towards their fellow countrymen, let alone the priesthood. So the tribes of Divine-Prevailer looked at the pieces of the girl and decided to destroy the Hill-City.

The only other time that something like this had happened, the men of a city wanted to fuck a couple of Eternal-Master's immaterial attendants visiting town. The cities exploded the next morning with a supernatural fire that fossilized a woman just for looking at it from afar.

Divine-Prevailer marched into Strong-Hand-Son and demanded that they bring out the men of the Hill-City for execution. But all of Strong-



## 6. A NIGHT IN THE BIG CITY

Hand-Son came together to defend the Hill-City, inciting a civil war. Divine-Prevailer burned down every city in Strong-Hand-Son to completely subdue the tribe. Strong-Hand-Son would have been completely erased, but the Divine-Prevailers assigned women (from clans who didn't join the civil war) to help the few surviving men repopulate the tribe.

Strong-Hand-Son slowly recovered, living in their territory for another three hundred years until being captured and carted off to a foreign empire called *Confusion*.

*From the Former Prophet Samuel, part one, chapter twenty-two through part two, chapter five. And from the Writings, in the fifty-sixth Psalm*

# STATECRAFT? MORE LIKE VIOLENT DISARRAY

THE FIRST KING HAS A ROUGH GO OF IT

## PART ONE

### WHAT'S A KING TO DO WHEN AN ENTIRE CITY IS GUILTY OF TREASON?

**D**ivine-Prevailer spent the first thousand years of its history as a loose coalition of thirteen tribes. But the people begged Eternal-Master for a king so they could be more like their neighbors. So a man named *Desire* rose up to break Divine-Prevailer's millennium of theocracy. Desire was probably the most kingly Divine-Prevailer of all time; he was mighty, calculating, intimidatingly tall, and had the necessary self-assurance to unite the tribes under him. Desire's installation was a grand spectacle, he even received his scepter from the currently reigning chief (a powerful divine emissary named *God's-Gazer*) in a beautiful transfer of power. But the new king didn't get to enjoy his

reign for long before he was tormented by an illegitimately-appointed successor named *Cherish*.

Cherish came from a little shepherding family in the middle of nowhere, but he became a close friend and confidant to King Desire after proving himself to be uniquely gifted on the battlefield (as a child, Cherish beheaded an Outsider champion). Cherish brought an uncommon mix of emotional vulnerability and violent tenacity which earned him many duties in the palace—from calming King Desire’s nerves with music to leading the elite royal guard. Cherish married Desire’s daughter and was fast friends with Desire’s son. Cherish was dearer to King Desire than just about anyone until he betrayed the king in the most horrible way.

It began when King Desire ran afoul of Eternal-Master by ignoring the god’s tedious instructions to kill a herd of fat and happy cattle from his defeated enemies. Desire didn’t think much of rescuing the livestock, but Eternal-Master’s emissaries were up in arms about it. Desire said he was sorry, but then God’s-Gazer and all the other divine emissaries began hailing Cherish as king after a secret ceremony, not in the capital city but in a secluded field. Cherish’s treason split Desire’s family in half, with the prince taking Cherish’s side against his own father. And no matter what King Desire did to root out Cherish, the pesky boy always escaped capture, made allies, and persisted in his rebellion.

Cherish was hunted day and night within the Lowlands and treated as an enemy in the foreign countries where he tried to escape. Cherish and his coconspirators eventually hid out in a cave like desperate animals. Meanwhile King Desire lounged with all his hometown friends on the Hill-City (yes, *that* Hill-City), enjoying fine dining and plenty of wine

while sinking back into his favorite chair.

---

**K**ing Desire's advisor, Dread, spotted Cherish in one of the priests' cities. To his dismay, the locals didn't capture Cherish or alert the king but aided the rebel—talking to Eternal-Master on his behalf, feeding him Eternal-Master's sacrificial bread, and arming him with the sword of Desire's fiercest enemy, Splendor-the-Giant-Outsider.

King Desire arrested the priests and interrogated them. The head priest pleaded ignorant, saying that he couldn't fathom how King Desire's closest ally could have become his enemy, and that he simply hadn't heard the latest news from the palace about Cherish being on the outs.

King Desire had become wary of anyone who represented Eternal-Master, so the verdict came to him easily. Desire said: *The priests are guilty of collaborating with a traitor to our kingdom. Their sentence is immediate death. Kill them where they stand.*

The royal guards refused to harm their priests, so Desire had Dread do it. And Dread happily executed all eighty-five of the robed weasels at the palace. Then Dread assembled a strike team to march on the priests' city. They slaughtered every living thing—men, women, children, even livestock were executed for their presence at the site of treason. Dread's attack on the priests' town was thorough and comprehensive. (So, just to recap, when it was Eternal-Master's war, King Desire didn't see the utility



in destroying a bunch of healthy animals—but when it was his own personal vendetta, Desire and his friends brought a decisive end to their enemies, their homes, their culture, their memory, even their livestock.)

A young priest escaped the slaughter, found Cherish's cave, and told him about the genocide.

Cherish said: *It's my fault, I caused a city to be wiped off the face of the earth. When I saw Dread, I knew that he would tell King Desire, but I never conceived that it could lead to death, let alone a mass execution. Why does Desire think he can scheme against the clear intention of Eternal-Master,*

*who has outmaneuvered every person and spirit who ever crossed him? Stick with me and you'll be fine, because eventually Desire will hand the scepter over to me. I just hope for his sake he does it willingly.*

---

PART TWO

## GOD'S COLD SHOULDER

**D**espite Cherish's plucky optimism, King Desire's army gradually overwhelmed Cherish's loyalists and pushed them out of the country altogether. Cherish had to make arrangements to live with the Outsiders: Divine-Prevailer's fiercest tormenters. To make things worse, Desire made amends with Eternal-Master by driving out all the cult priests, outlawing necromancy, and renewing his commitment to the priesthood after his brief lapse of judgment. So Cherish's bid to *save* Divine-Prevailer had only brought death and failure to what seemed like an otherwise healthy nation.

But Cherish hadn't considered that there was still more misery to come from his prior life choices. While Cherish moped about in a yearlong retirement/depression, the Outsider king spent that time gathering intelligence about the drama between his guest and King Desire. The Outsider king and his advisors hatched a plan to psychologically unravel the king of Divine-Prevailer to leave his cities vulnerable: the Outsiders pulled all their forces from border defense and launched a full-scale offensive northwest, towards the Lowlands.

The events that followed played out exactly as the Outsider king designed. First, Cherish attempted to downplay his conflicted feelings by offering to join the Outsiders in their noble conquest. Of course, the Outsiders were smart enough to know not to put their men anywhere near Cherish's guerrilla fighters, so the Outsiders took Cherish's pretense of goodwill and sent him off in the opposite direction to defend their capital city in the south.

With Cherish out of the picture, Desire's army would be easy to intimidate. And Desire indeed melted at the sight of the vast Outsider army marching into his land. Desire tried to reach out to Eternal-Master for guidance, but the god was nowhere to be found—Desire slept dreamless nights, his priests' special stones were suddenly inert, and the divine emissaries were silent. Desire actually found himself missing God's-Gazer (the one who installed Desire as king but then led the effort to replace him with Cherish), but God's-Gazer was long dead at this point. King Desire was so desperate for counsel that he wouldn't let the veil of death stop him from consulting God's-Gazer.

By Desire's own royal decree, there were no mediums left in the Lowlands, but Desire somehow still knew how to hire one. Necromancy was now a black market service, so Desire put on peasant's rags to hide his identity in the criminal underworld. Desire asked his medium to conjure God's-Gazer from death, but she shrieked with terror when God's-Gazer actually emerged from out of the ground—because she realized that she had called up the most spiritually powerful man of their time. This also meant that her client was King Desire, the one who had banished her profession to the margins. Desire reassured the woman that he wouldn't punish her and turned his attention to the dead emissary.

God's-Gazer said: *Why am I here, Desire? I'm not your go-between with Eternal-Master anymore. And necromancy is a hideous thing, even if it works!*

Desire said: *I'm desperate! The Outsiders are invading and Eternal-Master abandoned me. You've always been able to see through the outward appearance of things, so please just tell me what to do.*

God's-Gazer said: *You said yourself that Eternal-Master has turned his back on you, what more could I possibly tell you than that? There's only one thing that could come of your constant disobedience to Eternal-Master: you're losing your scepter to Cherish. The nerve of you to ask surprised! The Outsiders are going to kill you and your heirs tomorrow while they lay waste to your army. It's over, Desire—how could you fail to see that?*

As God's-Gazer went back into the earth, Desire collapsed to the ground. He hadn't eaten in days and his condition was dire. The medium prepared her finest calf and made bread as a final meal for the doomed king.

---

**M**eanwhile, Cherish arrived at the smoldering remains of the city he had been tasked to protect. As soon as the Outsiders abandoned their borders and sent all their fighters into Divine-Prevailer, the Valley-People of the south had invaded the Outsider capital. All of the wives and children of Cherish's loyalists were gone. Cherish's men wept themselves hoarse. They discussed



executing Cherish for constantly leading them into disaster, but they forgave him instead.

Cherish wrote a song about the experience:

*Be gentle with me, Master! I'm trampled and afraid.*

*There are men who study me like hunters,*

*who celebrate tormenting my every step.*

*But you bottle every tear and count every offense in your ledger,*

*and then you collect, because you control death.*

Just like Desire, Cherish used his priests' special instruments and stones to consult Eternal-Master about his dire situation. But unlike Desire, Eternal-Master immediately replied through the stones, saying: *Go now, you'll catch up and rescue all the women and children.*

Cherish marched his soldiers west and found the Valley-People throwing the biggest party of their lives. The impending war between the Outsiders and Divine-Prevailer left immeasurable wealth and spoil exposed, and the Valley-People exploited the situation marvelously. They were dancing, drinking, feasting, and fucking in a wild and disorganized rabble. Cherish waited until the partygoers passed out and then he rushed in and rescued everyone and everything from the Valley-People. Cherish delivered his loyalists' families back unharmed. Cherish even snuck into Divine-Prevailer with a reward for the locals everywhere he had hidden from King Desire during his rebellion.

At the same time, the Outsiders were closing in on King Desire and his commanders. One of the arrows raining down on the royal camp struck Desire, so he commanded his attendant to run him through with a sword so he could enjoy a swift death rather than being tortured by the Outsiders. The attendant couldn't bring himself to murder Eternal-

Master's king, so Desire did it himself—wedging the sword on the ground and falling onto it. The attendant did the same next to his master while the royal family and their commanders were all slaughtered by the Outsiders. All the Divine-Prevailers in the area fled for their lives and abandoned their cities to the Outsiders.

After the advance, the marauders combed through the dead and found Divine-Prevailer's king. His corpse was easy to spot, it was the one in ornate royal armor, delicately laid in a tasteful pose (the final act of his staff before the arrows took them). The Outsiders displayed Desire's armor in a temple, paraded his head through their cities, and nailed up his decapitated naked body on a popular highway.

In one day, Divine-Prevailer lost its king, its crown-prince, and its army, while it gained an occupation of Outsiders. Cherish looked in on all this while he led the royal guard of Divine-Prevailer's strongest and cruelest enemy.

---

**D**ivine-Prevailer's army took over the remaining free cities and propped up one of Desire's lesser sons as king. At the same time, Cherish returned to his home in Worshiper where he became a tribal chief, rivaling Desire II. The two kings coexisted for a couple years before the northern tribes marched to oust Chief Cherish and reunify every tribe under Desire II.

The rival armies presented twelve combatants each for a pre-war

contest. Cherish's twelve men immediately grasped the heads of Desire II's men and slashed their sides open in unison. When the armies went at it, the results were similarly favorable to Cherish.

Cherish's army was commanded by his nephew Master-Made, who adeptly coordinated his small band of troops against an army more than ten times as numerous. The battle was messy, with the commanders of both forces in the fray. In fact, Commander Master-Made's brother found Desire II's commander and excitedly pursued him, thrilled by the opportunity to cut him down as revenge for the way Desire treated Cherish for so many years. But Desire II's commander yelled back at his pursuer to stand down—because army commanders weren't just fighters but negotiators, so he didn't want to be responsible for killing his opposing commander's brother. But the pursuer wouldn't listen to reason and kept at it until Desire II's commander tuned back and ran him through with the blunt end of his spear in self-defense. The battle stopped and everyone stood over the gutted body. Commander Master-Made was enraged, and he chased after the enemy commander, who had rejoined his soldiers on a hilltop for a final stand.

Desire II's commander called out to his second pursuer, saying: *Are we going to let violence consume us endlessly? We're family! This road only leads to bitterness and mourning. Let's quit now and return alive to our families.*

Commander Master-Made said: *My god, you're right. I don't think we would have stopped chasing you down until our legs gave out. It's over, everyone still alive should be grateful and go home.*

The battle ended in a tender moment of moral clarity—but it didn't end the war. The civil war raged through several years of open combat. Desire

## 7. STATECRAFT? MORE LIKE VIOLENT DISARRAY

II was losing territory and influence all the time, but he refused to stand down to unite the tribes, even after his own commander defected to Cherish.

Ultimately Desire II was murdered by a couple of his own raid captains, who killed their king in his sleep and brought his head to Cherish. Rather than prop up another obscure member of Desire's family to continue resisting Cherish, the elders of every tribe came together to bow to Cherish. Two fraught decades after God's-Gazer ordained him king, Cherish finally had Divine-Prevailer's scepter.

*From the Former Prophet Samuel, part two, chapters thirteen through twenty*

# IT TAKES BOTH HANDS TO HOLD THE SCEPTER

A NATION WAFFLES ON ITS NEW CENTRAL GOVERNMENT

## PART ONE

### THE FAMILY THAT PUT THE 'NASTY' IN DYNASTY

All thirteen tribes of Divine-Prevailer reluctantly fell in line under King Cherish—the feisty little ruralite who was only in his mid-thirties, but already beleaguered by two decades of national defense, interpersonal conflict, and civil war. King Cherish wasn't afforded a grace period, hardly anyone even wanted him to have the job. Decades of tragic infighting made Divine-Prevailer unenthusiastic about their central government, so the tribes had no confidence in Cherish and were happy to throw in with any exciting coup that came along. At the same time, Divine-Prevailer's neighbors preyed on the country's instability with invasions that sought to shrink Cherish's

domain. So Cherish, the least in an already low family, immediately faced a contentious domestic and foreign landscape.

The one skill that King Cherish brought to his nation was combat, having sharpened his teeth in the guerrilla war against Desire. Cherish easily held off foreign aggression and quickly expanded the nation's borders. He captured an impenetrable mountain stronghold called *Peaceful-Essence* and set it up as the new national capital, moving his residence there along with Eternal-Master's tent. (Cherish wanted to build a proper stone temple in Peaceful-Essence, but Eternal-Master wouldn't let Cherish's bloody hands touch the project.)

However, the more subtle art of statecraft was beyond Cherish. His human urges and personal feelings tended to get in the way of the good of the country. To offset this weakness, King Cherish welcomed specialists and advisors on diplomacy, military command, adjudication, religious practice, lawmaking, finance, communications, even family dynamics—so the capital city buzzed with powerbrokers who inserted themselves into the king's business. These counselors helped Cherish but they could also be irreverent and disobedient, running schemes to advance their own interests and build personal careers. The only two kinds of people to openly disagree with the king were his fiercest enemies and his closest confidants. The most influential advisors were a mixed bunch of loyalists, snakes, experts, and dipshits:

- Counselor *Foolish-Fellow* was a strategic advisor whose name didn't match his adept grasp of politics, governance, war, and public relations. He was purely amoral, only concerning himself with the utility of power and influence. And King Cherish didn't seem to mind that Foolish-Fellow had no deference to Eternal-Master. Cherish should

## 8. IT TAKES BOTH HANDS TO HOLD THE SCEPTER

have paid closer attention to Foolish-Fellow, however, because Foolish-Fellow had soured on Cherish and was ready to align himself to whoever would inevitably rise up over the current king.

- Counselor *Master's-Will* was a palace busybody who shrewdly observed emotion and motivation, intuiting the intentions of the royals. He had a habit of appearing when people felt sad, frustrated, or unfulfilled, and then planting his own ideas in their vulnerable heads.
- Counselor *Hasty* was a friend of Cherish's who came from an unimportant rural family, just like the king. But Hasty wasn't plucked from obscurity by Eternal-Master, he earned his position in the capital through pure cleverness. Hasty wasn't like some of the other advisors who aspired to manipulate Cherish, he was a candid person who genuinely loved the Cherish and Eternal-Master.
- Priests *Virtue* and *Father-Plenty* led the priesthood during Cherish's reign. You'd think that their divine service would have superseded them from engaging in the capital's ugly politics, but Eternal-Master entangled himself in Divine-Prevailer's affairs so his priests were far from a politically-neutral party.

Cherish's nephews took after their uncle's affinity for violence and led elite an army division called *Cherish's-Champions*:

- Nephew *Master-Made* served as the head of Cherish's army and was the king's number two. Commander Master-Made rose to prominence in the civil war against Desire—during which he lost a brother. Tragedy hardened Master-Made into a coldly pragmatic advisor who complemented the king's softheartedness with his own unflinching objectivity. Cherish and Master-Made butted heads often, but they had a mutual respect nonetheless.

## 8. IT TAKES BOTH HANDS TO HOLD THE SCEPTER

- › Nephew *Father's-Gift* was a storied warrior who famously snuck into Desire's camp with Cherish and placed a spear in the ground next to Desire's head, in a daring but unsuccessful attempt to scare him into abdication.
- › Nephew *Burdener* didn't care much for Cherish or accomplish anything significant in the war against Desire, but his association with the family made him a towering figure in the capital nonetheless.

King Cherish didn't spend all his time with a bunch of power-hungry men. He also attended to the excessive delights that were available to him as king: namely, sex with many, many partners. Cherish had both wives and child-bearers (as well as at least one woman who Cherish requisitioned out of a preëxisting marriage and then murdered her husband). Cherish fathered more than twenty children with almost as many mothers.

Cherish's extended family of half-siblings occupied a campus of homes rather than a single palace structure in the capital. The king's children grew up keenly aware of the many threats to their lives as heirs to an unstable dynasty. They were easy to spot in and around the capital; the boys were known to ride mules from the royal stables and the unmarried girls were identified by special multicolored coats.



---

**K**ing Cherish's firstborn son, Prince Trustworthy, found himself bedridden with a sudden and horrible illness. Cherish came to Trustworthy's bedside to comfort him as Counselor Master's-Will, the palace whisperer, was just leaving.

Trustworthy, the heir, said: *I don't want strangers and specialists waiting on me, I want my family to be with me in these last days. Ask my half-sister Palm-Tree if she'll come and prepare a meal for me, so I can be comforted by a familiar face.*

Palm-Tree came at once to her half-brother's deathbed and made him a meal. But he couldn't bring himself to eat. Trustworthy hated the crowd gathered in his house, prodding and staring at him with long faces. So he sent everyone out. After he collected himself, Trustworthy called Palm-Tree back with the food, alone. When Palm-Tree came close, Trustworthy leapt up and took hold of her.

Trustworthy said: *Get down here and fuck me, sister!*

Palm-Tree said: *No, brother, no! This is outrageous! You'll ruin both of our lives—I'll live in shame and you'll never escape the label of a fool and a pervert in all of the Lowlands. If you really must, have our father marry us first, he won't hold me back from you.*

Trustworthy didn't listen to Palm-Tree's bid for time or her appeal to decency. And since he was faking his illness all along, Trustworthy was more than strong enough to wrestle his half-sister down and forcibly rape her in the empty house.

When he finished, Trustworthy was awash with hatred for Palm-Tree. He felt that her beauty, which had driven him to obsession for years, had been a trap. Now that the girl was exposed in front of him, he saw her as a lusty seductress. Trustworthy screamed at Palm-Tree to leave.

## 8. IT TAKES BOTH HANDS TO HOLD THE SCEPTER

Palm-Tree said: *No, brother, no! Disowning me is worse than taking me in the first place. Eternal-Master's laws don't allow you to abandon me now that you've ruined me. Where will I go?*

Trustworthy didn't listen to the needy bitch who whined as if this wasn't all her fault to begin with. Trustworthy instead called his attendant to kick Palm-Tree out of his home and bolt the door behind her. Palm-Tree ran out, sobbing into her special multi-colored coat, which she tore up in her anguish.

Palm-Tree bitterly mourned the violation and cruelty from her half-brother. Things were already tense enough with the threat of invasion from outside and coups from within—any of which would include the execution of the entire royal family—but now she had to come to terms with the sickening reality that she couldn't even trust her brothers not to brutalize her.

Another prince, named *Peacemaker*, saw Palm-Tree crumpled on the ground with her colorful jacket torn and dirty and he knew what must have happened: Trustworthy faked his illness in order to trick her into coming around. Peacemaker picked his sister up and brought her to live in his house, so she wouldn't be forced to go back to her abuser.

King Cherish was furious with his disgusting heir and heartbroken for poor Palm-Tree, the daughter he had unknowingly sent into desolation. Cherish and Peacemaker both hated Trustworthy, the heir, from that day on, but neither of them did anything about it. And what could they do? The royal family couldn't afford to draw attention to its dysfunction with so many threats and vulnerabilities already facing the dynasty. But while Cherish sat idly by, Peacemaker made a plan.

---

**Y**ou should have seen Prince Peacemaker in his prime. He was the single most handsome man in all of Divine-Prevailer, and he cut a heroic figure whenever he strode through the streets of the capital in his princely robes, jewelry, and gorgeous flowing hair (he only cut it once a year and made a show of the heavy weight of his mane). He got married and named one of his daughters *Palm-Tree* in honor of his sister.

Two years after the Incident with Trustworthy, Peacemaker planned a sheep-shearing party out in the east country. The royal family were still shepherds at heart, and a shearing session not only brought the year's income but was a celebration of the family business. Peacemaker kindly invited his father to join, along with the rest of the extended royal family, but the king didn't want to burden Peacemaker with more mouths to feed.

Prince Peacemaker said: *If you won't come along to wish me well, at least send your firstborn, Trustworthy, to the feast. I'm happy to treat our heir in the king's place as a show of my love for you.*

Cherish didn't understand why this party was so important to Peacemaker, and he tried to refuse but his son was begging so persistently—and for such a good cause—that Cherish went against his better judgment and sent Trustworthy.

This was all a trap, of course, and although Cherish didn't know it, he had played his part perfectly.

Prince Peacemaker saw himself as everything King Cherish wasn't: Peacemaker was a solitary strategist while Cherish consulted self-important fools. Peacemaker was a cool-headed diplomat while Cherish preferred military force (his kill count had to be numbered in the tens of

thousands). Peacemaker had just four children with his one and only wife, while Cherish had twenty kids with almost as many women around town. Peacemaker harbored a victim of sexual assault while Cherish and his heir had each gotten away with rape, thanks to the capital's corrupt politics.

---

**D**uring the sheep-shearing party, a messenger came to King Cherish with terrible news. The royal family was together, getting drunk and feasting, when Peacemaker's attendants struck in a coordinated attack against the vulnerable, inebriated partygoers. The messenger bolted at the first sign of disturbance, but as he ran he could see that everyone was fleeing for their lives. So the messenger, assuming the worst, told the king that Prince Peacemaker had killed off his brothers to leave himself as the dynasty's only successor. According to the messenger, no one was left alive who went to the party.

Cherish tore his clothes and fell to the ground. The whole palace wept. But Counselor Master's-Will (the same one who gave Trustworthy the idea to play sick to lure in Palm-Tree), was confident that Peacemaker wouldn't stage a mass-murder out of the blue. Master's-Will believed that Prince Peacemaker's intention wasn't a messy coup, but a revenge plot against Trustworthy for raping Palm-Tree. Master's-Will told King

Cherish that the messenger was unreliable and dramatic.

Eventually the royal caravan appeared on the road, coming to the capital city safely, except the brothers Trustworthy (who was dead) and Peacemaker (who fled the country). So Counselor Master's-Will was right and Cherish had yet again been so worked up with emotion that he couldn't even think straight. It goes to show that you really shouldn't believe the first messenger who runs in with a wild story. When Cherish's sons and daughters came into the palace safely, they wept with Cherish and the whole royal staff.

---

PART TWO

## PEACEMAKER'S TRIUMPHAL ENTRY

Peacemaker went northeast, outside the Lowlands, playing out the same story of fratricide and exile that plagued humanity since the very first family. Now that Prince Peacemaker was a murderer, an avenger would be assigned to track him down and execute him for his crime. In spite of this, King Cherish's thoughts and feelings were often pulled to his absent son, and he even appreciated that Peacemaker had the courage to put an end to Trustworthy, the incestuous rapist, as dictated by Eternal-Master's law—even if Peacemaker's methods were improper. But Cherish's goodwill accomplished nothing since Peacemaker planted himself a hundred miles away from his father.

Three years later, a poor peasant woman came to the king and bowed herself down to the ground, paying homage. The woman said: *Save me, king, I'm a widow without hope! My two sons fought in a field with no one to separate them, and one beat the other to death. Now my village plans to execute the one son I have left, my only smoldering coal of hope. What will*



*become of me without my late-husband's heir?*

Cherish said: *The way I see it, the usual process of execution shouldn't apply to this situation because an innocent person's life hangs in the balance. So I'll pardon your son with a royal decree. And if anyone says otherwise, send them to me and I'll see to it that they never bother you again.*

The woman said: *You're too generous, my king, my pardoner, and my*

## 8. IT TAKES BOTH HANDS TO HOLD THE SCEPTER

*protector! To think, you're not at fault or responsible for my fate, but you're happy to intervene anyway. You're like one of Eternal-Master's wise attendants who see through people to identify right from wrong. But let's turn to the issue of your own son. In his case, you're just as bad as the men of my town, who want to kill him and leave me to starve. But your victim is the nation of Divine-Prevailer, not a lone widow. In ruling to pardon my son, you've convicted yourself for your inaction toward our prince. Peacemaker isn't lost forever, like a drop of water spilled into thirsty ground. As you've demonstrated, Eternal-Master always provides a way to restore outcasts.*

Cherish said: *Don't lie to me; is my nephew Master-Made, the commander of my army, behind all this?*

The woman said: *You're exactly right, Master-Made hired me to help you with the grief that pulls you to Peacemaker. You found out Master-Made's plan because you're like Eternal-Master's wise attendants who see past appearances to discover the truth.*

So Cherish wasn't dealing with a simple old lady, but a wise sage who had been sought out by Master-Made to change Cherish's mind. Cherish turned to Master-Made and said: *Bring back Prince Peacemaker and let him live here in Peaceful-Essence.*

Commander Master-Made went abroad to fetch Peacemaker and set him up in the house next to his own—in a rural area far outside the capital's walls. And since Cherish didn't actually pardon Peacemaker, he was left in a tenuous position where an avenger could still attack him, especially if he left the safety of his new home. Peacemaker had always managed his reputation and stature with grace and skill, but he couldn't win over his own father.

---

**P**rince Peacemaker lived in the Lowlands—estranged from King Cherish and cooped up inside his house—for two full years. During that time, he sent for Commander Master-Made to bring him to the king, but Master-Made wouldn't respond. Eventually Peacemaker's annoyance turned to rage as he blamed Master-Made for plucking him out of his comfortable exile and then abandoning him in house arrest. So Peacemaker sent his attendants next door to Master-Made's barley field to set it on fire. When Commander Master-Made stormed into Peacemaker's house (finally acknowledging his existence), he demanded to know why his field was burning.

Peacemaker said: *I'll do a lot more than burn a barley field unless somebody tells me what's going on! Maybe I was too far from my executioner's home, so I was brought back from exile to die here. Maybe someone wanted to see me suffer under house arrest instead of enjoying my life in another country. Either way, until I get the king's blessing I'll continue to expect someone kill me at any moment. So let me go to my father and if I'm guilty then I'll accept my fate, even death.*

Commander Master-Made went to King Cherish and told him everything. Cherish summoned Prince Peacemaker, who came in bowing to the ground in submission. And Cherish kissed Peacemaker, the son he hadn't seen or spoken to for over five years.

Finally pardoned and free to roam the country, Prince Peacemaker got himself a chariot and fifty soldiers as his guard. He stood beside the city gate in the early morning and all through the day. (Peaceful-Essence was



## 8. IT TAKES BOTH HANDS TO HOLD THE SCEPTER

a mountaintop city, so there were few entrances.) Peacemaker was dressed gloriously in royal robes and jewelry as a warm welcoming party to all the capital's visitors. Peacemaker was specifically on the lookout for anyone who came to resolve a dispute under the king's judgment.

Prince Peacemaker would intercept incoming plaintiffs and say: *Your claims are good and right, but there's no representative designated by King Cherish to hear you. I guess he isn't concerned about his constituents like I am. But if I were judge over Divine-Prevailer then you can believe that every man, woman, and child with any request could come to me for justice, and I would give it happily!*

Peacemaker would then begin crying and pull them in for a hug and kiss before turning them around to go back home (so they wouldn't get a chance to bring their issue before Cherish's court). Peacemaker's claim that Cherish was too busy to adjudicate wasn't true, but Peacemaker was campaigning very successfully despite that. Peacemaker put on his little show for people from all over Divine-Prevailer, and his reputation as a compassionate ruler spread to each tribe and family clan. Peacemaker stole the hearts of the whole nation, not with anything real or substantive but with lies and dramatic acting. And after four years of his son's public treason, King Cherish still had not heard a thing about it.

Prince Peacemaker came to his father with a request: during his exile, Peacemaker vowed that if he was allowed back, he would give an offering to Eternal-Master in the city where the divine tent was set up (at the time). Cherish, who was a passionately religious man, was so moved by his son's newfound devotion that he happily let him take a field trip outside of the safety of the capital.

But while Peacemaker was out, Cherish heard terrible news.

Peacemaker had gathered the whole nation together and announced himself as the new king of Divine-Prevailer. Every tribe rallied behind Peacemaker to oust Cherish, and they were marching on the palace.

(This was the second time that Peacemaker planned a trip as an extravagant overture to Cherish's great loves—his family and his god—but they had both been cruel tricks with violent ends.)

There was no time for King Cherish to process his son's betrayal with the army fast approaching. Cherish's-Champions couldn't defend his palace against the entire nation, so King Cherish and his family abandoned the city, except for ten of Cherish's child-bearing girlfriends, who were left behind to maintain the grounds.

The population of the capital city was torn in two—some chose to stick with Cherish for a final stand out in the wilderness while others remained in the city to serve Peacemaker. Even the priests wanted to abandon Eternal-Master's house so they could follow Cherish, but Cherish wouldn't allow politics get in the way of their priestly duties. Cherish instead assigned the priests to be his eyes on the inside of the city when Peacemaker took over.

When they left the palace, King Cherish and his family were accompanied by the royal guard and a few thousand loyalists. In the chaos of the exit, Cherish was undone. His fine kingly robes were dirty and ragged, his face was covered with tears and snot, and he walked barefoot, moaning and whimpering as he marched into the wild.

But a key figure was absent from Cherish's procession, and had actually been missing for a while. It was Foolish-Fellow, the wisest advisor and strategist that served Cherish. Foolish-Fellow had snuck away to join Peacemaker's coup because he didn't care for loyalty, he only

wanted to stick with winners—and it was clear that Cherish’s chapter was coming to a close.

When Cherish realized that Foolish-Fellow had betrayed him, he said to Eternal-Master: *Turn every plan of Foolish-Fellow into idiocy and ruin in the eyes of his new king. An advisor can’t simply cease to serve my interests or play games in the palace.*

On King Cherish’s long journey, several visitors came to support him with supplies, food, and drink. Cherish’s friend Hasty caught up to Cherish, mourning just as dramatically as the king himself. The two disheveled, crying men hardly looked like a king and his prestigious royal advisor. Then Cherish had a surprisingly shrewd idea for Hasty; he sent Hasty back to the capital as another spy alongside the priests.

But not everyone who met King Cherish’s procession came to support them. One of Desire’s grandsons, named *Fame*, came throwing rocks at the disgraced king. Fame said: *Keep running and never come back! You’re nothing more than a shitstain in the history of Divine-Prevailer. The blood of my family is on your hands, the death of a dynasty that you murdered in your monstrous ambition. Everyone can finally see that Eternal-Master is avenging my innocent family. You had the fucking nerve to pretend to be king for a while, but Eternal-Master caught up to you and now he’s giving the scepter to Peacemaker, just to show everyone how unworthy you are. It’s all gone to shit for you now, you cruel, terrible man!*

Father’s-Gift, one of Cherish’s violent nephews, said: *You chose not to put this man to death years ago, but where’s his gratitude now? He should be bowing down and thanking you for his life, not slandering you and throwing stones! Cherish, allow me to tear Fame’s head off his pathetic body.*



As he shielded himself from the stones, King Cherish said: *What can I say to Fame? For all we know, he's completely right and Eternal-Master told him to come here. He's right about at least one thing, my own son has overthrown me! Leave Desire's grandson alone, and let him say what Eternal-Master told him to say. And if I'm somehow innocent in all this, then Eternal-Master will reward me for being patient with Fame's false accusations.*

King Cherish continued northeast while Fame threw rocks and dirt and cussed at them all. The procession arrived exhausted at a shallow

stretch of the Descending-River around the same time that Peacemaker and his army of Divine-Prevailers arrived at the capital city and walked into the unguarded, abandoned palace.

---

**W**hile Cherish and his loyalists were still resting on the near side of the Descending-River, two young priests arrived with terrible news from the palace. The boys were barely able to escape, and had to hide in a deep well from Peacemaker's soldiers, so their important news had been badly delayed. They told Cherish to continue fleeing northeast as quickly as possible.

The priests relayed the events from the palace:

• *Peacemaker happily welcomed your former advisor, Foolish-Fellow, and our spy, Hasty, to be his personal counselors. Counselor Foolish-Fellow presented his plan first, saying: 'The people are scared to fight Cherish's-Champions again because they remember how Cherish's elite squad overthrew the national army when Desire was king. And the people are worried that you aren't as committed to this coup as they are, because our enemy is your father—the man who loved you enough to forgive after you murdered his firstborn heir. So the best way to illustrate your contempt is to fuck the ten child-bearers that the king left behind to keep the house. This will illustrate that your father is as good as dead, because a new ruler always inherits the old king's harem. But we'll need to hold a loud, obnoxious orgy in a conspicuous place because we can't afford the time it*

## 8. IT TAKES BOTH HANDS TO HOLD THE SCEPTER

*would take to formalize a decree or some other statement. So let's do it up on the roof of the palace, so everyone in the city who has travelled from across the nation with you will know that you truly hate Cherish. The soldiers will fight bravely when the battle with Cherish comes, because they know that you will be ruthless with our enemy.'*

- *So a lovemaking tent was raised on top of your house and Peacemaker forced himself on all ten of your child-bearers.*

(The public spectacle may have riled up the fighting men of Divine-Prevailer, but it was another strike against Peacemaker in the eyes of Eternal-Master. Peacemaker's frustrations with his father began with



## 8. IT TAKES BOTH HANDS TO HOLD THE SCEPTER

Cherish's lack of action after a rape, but while chasing revenge, Peacemaker became an incestuous rapist ten times over.)

- *Then Counselor Foolish-Fellow presented his next idea, saying: 'We can end this war before it starts if you stay here and let me handle all the fighting. If I chase down Cherish tonight with twelve thousand soldiers, we can spook them while they're still weary and discouraged. When we come flying in, they'll panic and we'll be able to find Cherish and kill him quickly, not harming any of the others. We'll march them all back here, totally unharmed, and everything will be forgiven. It will be a beautiful reunion for all of Divine-Prevailer, like a bride who had left her lover but returns into his arms!'*
- *Both of Counselor Foolish-Fellow's ideas were received as genius. Yes, they were brash, risky, and cutthroat—but they were also decisive, authoritative, and bold. But Peacemaker still wanted a second opinion from Counselor Hasty. And Hasty would need to draw Peacemaker out of his stronghold to make him vulnerable to a swift end.*
- *Counselor Hasty said: 'Foolish-Fellow's ideas sound exciting but he's forgotten that we're dealing with an expert in guerrilla combat. We can't simply snuff Cherish out with a few thousand men. Cherish has probably hidden himself in some pit or cave where we'll never discover him. And Cherish's-Champions have been driven into an animal rage by the audacity of this coup—so when the armies meet, our men will melt with fear as they remember their last run-ins with these elite warriors. We can't afford to be delicate about this or spare the lives of your father's loyalists. So I say you should gather all of Divine-Prevailer into an army as innumerable as the sand of the sea and join them yourself in the battle. We won't need to waste our energy hunting down Cherish, because we'll*

## 8. IT TAKES BOTH HANDS TO HOLD THE SCEPTER

*descend on their position like morning dew to cover them all. There will be no escape for Cherish; if he runs into a city to hide, then all of Divine-Prevailer will pull that city apart, stone by stone, until not even a pebble is left.'*

- *Peacemaker and his men loved Hasty's ideas and turned against Foolish-Fellow, because Eternal-Master clouded their judgment against Foolish-Fellow's wisdom. We're happy to report that Peacemaker is powerless against our god, who can alter the traitor's mind to advance his divine purposes.*
- *Counselor Hasty snuck away to the priests and told them to send word to you that you shouldn't delay to cross the Descending-River or you'll be swallowed up by the swarm of Divine-Prevailers marching here. If you go farther, to the thick forest in the northeast, you could make your stand there.*

Hasty's plan might sound like a guaranteed disaster, but the only thing that mattered was getting Peacemaker out of his fortified mountaintop city. King Cherish sacked Peaceful-Essence once, and he wasn't going to do it again now that it was occupied by Divine-Prevailers. So Cherish and his loyalists marched across the Descending-River for one more round of guerrilla fighting, just like they had done in the previous civil war.

(In the meantime, Counselor Foolish-Fellow could see how Hasty was toppling Trustworthy's coup, so he went home, set his house in order, and hanged himself. He put himself in a risky position in the game of statecraft, and his bets didn't pay off.)

Peacemaker chased after, recruiting his cousin Burdener (another of Cherish's violent nephews) to be his military commander. And none of Peacemaker's men seemed to notice how their king had become



everything he claimed to hate about his father: reliant on advisors, sexually licentious, preferable to mass violence, all the while strategically compromised by his personal feelings.

When Cherish settled into a defensive position in a friendly city, some locals came with beds and vessels for bathing as well as grain, beans, honey, and cheese for everyone. Cherish's caravan wasn't equipped for their journey—but just like when he was on the run from Desire, Cherish scraped by on the generosity of his many friends.

---

PART THREE

## FATHER AND SON GO TO WAR

**K**ing Cherish lined up his men to leave the safety of their stronghold so they could face Divine-Prevailer in the forest. Cherish still thought of himself as more of a soldier than a king, so he intended to go out into the battle with everyone else.

When the soldiers saw the king in his armor, they said: *Forgive us for defying our king, but you won't go out to battle today. You're not a common soldier anymore, but a strategic target to our enemy. Imagine if we found ourselves in a retreat; Peacemaker wouldn't let up until he cut down every one of us, because your capture is easily worth ten thousand of our lives. So it's better that you stay here, ready to send help if we need it.*

Cherish deferred to his soldiers, standing by the gate while his Champions marched on without him. But then Cherish was struck with

the thought that his son, his beloved Peacemaker, could actually die. Cherish called out to Commander Master-Made: *For my sake, be gentle with Peacemaker, he's only a young man!*

Cherish's whole army could hear him give the order to protect their tormentor. Cherish's soft heart for Peacemaker was a slap in the face to the men marching into war—their own friends and families would be on the other side, but they weren't in a position to hold back or offer mercy. So why should Cherish be allowed to protect his personal affections? As a final word to the men who gave everything to stand with him, the king demoralized the whole army with the absurdity of his enduring forgiveness.

---

**K**ing Cherish waited for news about the battle while the soldiers clashed in the dense forest to the southwest of his stronghold. Cherish sat between the city's two gates while watchman looked from the roof. Eventually they saw a messenger running in. The watchman recognized him as Priest Virtue's son. But as he came close, the watchmen saw a second messenger off in the distance behind him.

When the young priest arrived, he bowed to the ground and said: *All is well! Eternal-Master brought down the ones who tried to unseat his chosen king.*

King Cherish didn't care about the outcome of the battle, he only

## 8. IT TAKES BOTH HANDS TO HOLD THE SCEPTER

wanted to know about one man. Cherish said: *How is my boy Peacemaker? Is he hurt?*

The priest said: *I don't know. Commander Master-Made briefed a messenger and sent him out, so I asked Master-Made to let me run as well, because I love bringing news to my king. As I ran, I could see a crowd gathering behind me, but I don't know what it was about. I passed the other messenger on the way, maybe he knows something that I don't.*

King Cherish had the young priest stand aside while they waited for the other messenger.

The second messenger arrived and said: *I have good news for the king! The battle is over. Eternal-Master saved you from those who rose up against your scepter.*

King Cherish said: *But my son, Peacemaker! What about the boy Peacemaker?*

The messenger said: *I only wish that everyone who dares to rise against you would become like that traitor! Yes, we killed him, like we do to all enemies of Eternal-Master's king.*

King Cherish went into a private room above the gate weeping. On his way up, he could be heard saying: *My son, my son, my son, Peacemaker! Why couldn't I die in his place? The boy I raised and prepared for the world, I've outlived him. My son, my son, my son. He should be living up to his name, walking the streets and making friends among the people like he used to. How can it be that my boy is dead? My son, my son, my son, Peacemaker!*

King Cherish was informed about the battle while he continued crying:

• When Divine-Prevailer reached the thick forest, they broke formation and struggled through the dense trees, brush, vines, streams, and



beasts of the wood. And right when the last of Peacemaker's men lost their sense of direction, Cherish-Champions struck from the shadows. Peacemaker's army was thrown into disarray. The men were tripped, tangled, maimed, strangled, disoriented, and otherwise swallowed up by the forest if they weren't cut down by the sword.

- Prince Peacemaker himself met a company of Cherish's-Champions in the thick woods while riding his royal mule. Like the rest of his disorganized forces, Peacemaker had lost his guards and was riding completely alone. When Peacemaker fled from Cherish's-Champions,

he ran into a tree and his head became violently wedged between two branches. Then Peacemaker's mule came out from under him, so the prince dangled from the branches, stunned and stuck. No matter how much Peacemaker pushed and squirmed to dislodge himself, his bruised and bloody head was trapped tight. It was like the tree grabbed him off the ground and then squeezed him with its mighty grip. One of Cherish's soldiers found Peacemaker and ran to find Commander Master-Made.

- Master-Made said to the soldier: *You're telling me that you saw Prince Peacemaker? You saw our enemy and you just left him there? You fucking idiot! You could have killed him and ended this whole war. You would be a hero. I would have personally paid you ten pieces of silver and given you a fine belt to commemorate your service! Now I'm not sure if I should throw you in prison for failing to perform the most basic duty of a soldier —your job is to kill the bad guy, dumbass.*
- The soldier said to Commander Master-Made: *You could pay me a thousand pieces of silver and I still wouldn't dare disobey King Cherish. We all heard him command you to protect the prince. If I killed him, I would be found out, and none of Cherish's friends, not even you, would waste their goodwill in the palace for a lowly soldier like me. I don't get involved with power games or disobey the king like you do, I follow orders.*
- Master-Made said: *Now you're just wasting my time! Peacemaker could be free by now.*
- Commander Master-Made picked up three javelins and brought them to Prince Peacemaker, who was luckily still dangling alone. Master-Made drove all three javelins through Peacemaker's heart. Ten of Master-Made's attendants surrounded Peacemaker and hit him until he

finally slipped out of the tree's tight grasp as an unrecognizable heap of flesh.

- Commander Master-Made blew his trumpet to call off his troops from killing any more Divine-Prevailers, now that their leader was dead. They took Prince Peacemaker's battered corpse and threw it into a pit in the dark forest, piling stones over him as a crude gravesite fit for a traitor, not a prince.
- At the end of the day, twenty-thousand corpses of Peacemaker's army had to be extracted for burial. The rest of Peacemaker's men ran back to their homes throughout the Lowlands.

---

EPILOGUE

THE TRAGIC AFTERMATH

**B**efore returning from the forest, the soldiers had already heard about King Cherish's depression, and how Cherish couldn't perform his duties or even hold a conversation. All Cherish did was cry out: *My son, my son, my son!*

Every soldier was ashamed of what they had done to their own countrymen in the forest. Battles are always hard to rationalize, but a civil war that pits families against each other is especially tragic. Cherish's men sulked back towards the city like miserable failures rather than victors. Commander Master-Made ran ahead to talk to Cherish

before the rest arrived to hear his wailing voice.

Commander Master-Made said: *Get a hold of yourself! You've made your devoted soldiers ashamed to have saved not only your life, but your sons' and daughters' and wives' and child-bearers' lives. You prefer the one who hated you over everyone who loves you, from your highest officials to your lowest attendants. You're showing all of us that our lives mean nothing to you. You'd be pleased if Peacemaker won the battle and put the rest of us to death, wouldn't you? Stand up, put some respectable clothes on, and go congratulate your soldiers! I swear, if you keep hiding in here, you'll have no friends by morning and your troubles will be far worse than all the strife you've ever faced in your life.*

King Cherish did as he was told and took his seat by the city gate. All the soldiers came to Cherish while he fought back his own sadness to show gratitude for their superior acts of personal sacrifice.

---

**K**ing Cherish stayed in the northeast until he heard about grumblings throughout the Lowlands. The people were saying: *We were wrong to turn on Cherish; he saved us from every outside threat but we drove him out anyway. And now the man we propped up to replace Cherish is dead! So when is King Cherish coming back? What will we do with him, the king we rejected? And what will he do with us, the people he defeated?*

King Cherish sent a message to Priests Virtue and Father-Plenty in the

capital. Cherish said: *Ask the elders of my tribe, Worshiper, why they've delayed to escort me back to my house when everyone else in the Lowlands has sent for me? My tribe is my brotherhood, my flesh and bone! And ask Burdener, my nephew who commanded Peacemaker's army, to be the commander of my army instead of Master-Made (who disobeyed my direct orders and killed my son). With Burdener in charge of the army, everyone will see that there is peace between me and the whole nation, no matter what any of them did in the past.*

So Cherish's tribesmen sent escorts to fetch Cherish and return him to the palace. As the king made his way back, his friends came to congratulate him and his revilers came to beg forgiveness for their doubts.

Fame, Desire's grandson who screamed and threw rocks at Cherish during the flight from the city, bowed down and said: *Have mercy on me, my king! I beg you to forget the words I said and the stones I threw when you left the capital. I was completely wrong about you and I regret it sorely. Look, I'm here now, the first of my tribe to greet you and welcome you back to your dominion! It's implausible, but I have to ask; will you forgive me, your most vicious enemy?*

Father's-Gift (Cherish's violent nephew who previously offered to behead Fame), said: *The nerve of this snake! Why does Fame continue to believe he's permitted to defile the king's ears with his disgusting voice? Cherish, let me kill him now—not just because of his disrespect to you, but to our god, because Fame disputed Eternal-Master's chosen king.*

Cherish said: *What quibble do I have with you and your family, Fame? We're not enemies and I won't put you to death. I already know I'm king, I have nothing to prove.*



## 8. IT TAKES BOTH HANDS TO HOLD THE SCEPTER

As King Cherish was being escorted by the Worshiper tribe, the other tribes of Divine-Prevailer met them and said: *Why has this one tribe stolen you away and brought you over the Descending-River? We're your people too! It's like you haven't forgiven us after all.*

The people of Worshiper shot back, saying: *The king is simply our close relative, there's nothing more to it than that. Why are you angry? Cherish didn't give us a unique gift or advantage. You're just imagining some kind of favoritism that isn't there at all.*

The people of Divine-Prevailer said: *As eleven tribes, we should have eleven times as many shares in the king's mandate as Worshiper. So why are you treating us like an afterthought? We're more loyal than you, we were the first to speak of bringing back Cherish.*

And on and on the bickering tribes went. Eventually, Worshiper's ferocity won out. So a man named *Seven* (from the Strong-Hand-Son tribe) blew a trumpet to make an announcement.

*Seven* said: *Brothers and sisters, isn't it clear that we have no place with Cherish anymore? We keep trying to pretend that he's the right man for the job but we must be honest with ourselves; we can do better! I'm from Strong-Hand-Son, the tribe of our first and true king. I'll make sure every tribe is given a place of honor, not like Cherish who makes us feel like second-class citizens. So who's with me?*

Just like that, eleven tribes left Cherish and followed *Seven*, an unknown loudmouth with no qualifications and no real plan to speak of. Only the tribe of Worshiper stuck with Cherish as he arrived in his capital city.

At the palace, Cherish took the ten child-bearers left to care for the house (who were all raped on the roof for the whole city to see) and

locked them in a guarded home, providing for them while taking their freedom. Cherish's child-bearers were sullied by infidelity, but since it wasn't their choice, they lived out their days much like Peacemaker had—protected from harm but not restored to the freedom of a full life.

King Cherish said to Commander Burdener: *Gather the fighting men so we can march on Seven in three days. We don't have any time to lose, this next threat is just as serious as the last one!*

So Commander Burdener went out to collect the soldiers of Worshiper, but after three days he still hadn't completed the task. Cherish went to his other nephew Father's-Gift and said: *Your brother Burdener will be the death of us all. Take whatever men you can and chase Seven, before he can fortify himself and draw out this spur-of-the-moment rebellion into a real war.*

Father's-Gift gathered a small band of men to chase after Seven, including his brother Master-Made (the disobedient former commander) who was dressed in common soldier's armor with a sword on his thigh, instead of officer's clothes and battle plans. Along the way, Burdener finally turned up with the rest of the men. The brothers Master-Made and Burdener were reunited for the first time since Peacemaker's rebellion, when they commanded opposing forces. As the brothers came close, Master-Made slipped his sword out discretely in his left hand while his right hand pulled Burdener by the beard to kiss him. Burdener didn't notice the sword in Master-Made's left hand before it went into his stomach, spilling his guts all around and sending him to the ground in a single slash.

Master-Made and Father's-Gift left their brother to bleed out on the road while they continued chasing Seven. As the other soldiers caught

## 8. IT TAKES BOTH HANDS TO HOLD THE SCEPTER

up, one stood by Burdener's body and announced that Master-Made had reassumed command. Burdener was still squirming around in a puddle of his own insides in the middle of the highway, so all the soldiers stopped to look at him. Someone dragged him off the road and threw a coat over him so he wouldn't be a distraction. No burial, no ceremony, just a man inconveniently drawing attention to himself as he bled out on the roadside.

Meanwhile, Seven passed through the tribes of Divine-Prevailer and settled into a fortified city called *Oppressive-House*. When Commander Master-Made arrived, he immediately besieged *Oppressive-House*, blocking the gate of the city with a mountain of dirt (to trap everyone inside) while battering the walls (to let his soldiers in).

Then a woman called out from inside the walls: *Wait! Listen! Tell your commander to come, so I can negotiate with him.*

Commander Master-Made came near, and the woman said: *There's an old saying: 'Ask for counsel at Oppressive-House.' We have a legacy of handling disputes peacefully here. I'm peaceable, so let's solve this together. You're destroying a city that's been a nurturing mother to this nation. Don't demolish Eternal-Master's heritage!*

Commander Master-Made said: *Your city isn't guilty of any trouble, but a rebel is hiding within in your walls. My preference is to kill only the leader, so that all their followers can live. So hand Seven over to us and we'll unblock your gates and go our way.*

The woman instructed her city to turn against King Seven. They cut off Seven's head and threw it over the gate. When Seven's head rolled down the dirt hill to Master-Made, he verified it was the right head and blew his trumpet to call off the siege. And everyone who was lucky enough to

survive this latest episode went home in peace.

---

**C**herish reestablished a cabinet in the second part of his reign. This time he wouldn't let advisors bring trickery, deception, slick ideas, or personal ambitions to defile the palace. Cherish rewarded his loyalists with key positions while kicking out the dead weight from his prior administration.

Cherish went on to survive more coups and crises into his old age, which he spent cuddled up in bed with a hot young attendant tasked only with warming the king's fragile body. Cherish died shivering and senile, a remarkable end for someone with so many mortal enemies. Who would have thought that Cherish, of all people, could live long enough for his body to shut down on its own?

In many ways, Cherish's rise to power was a bizarre anomaly. His origin as the youngest son of a poor rural shepherd was unprecedented already, but no rulers before or after Cherish were as yielded to Eternal-Master as he was, to the point of being able to use the priests' special stones on his own. (It's no wonder that historians and archaeologists today doubt that King Cherish could have existed at all—partially because the idea of a unified Divine-Prevailer seems like a pure fantasy in itself.)

But in other ways, Cherish's rule was typical of monarchs everywhere; he abused state power to satisfy his creature comforts, he hoarded the

## 8. IT TAKES BOTH HANDS TO HOLD THE SCEPTER

people's taxes to build lavish palaces, he failed to balance the demands and stature of his office with fatherhood (leading to a murderously dysfunctional family), and his kingdom was hilariously short-lived—even with its aspirations of eternal rule.

Cherish's dynasty continued for a few generations after him, but its domain almost immediately shrunk down to just one tribe, and even that was soon overthrown by an invading empire called *Confusion*, who did their best to snuff out any possibility of a ruling dynasty emerging from Divine-Prevailer again.

*From the Former Prophets, starting in the first book of Kings,  
chapter sixteen, through the second chapter of book two*

# THE PROPHET'S PROTÉGÉ

GOD'S MESSENGERS GET THEIR HANDS DIRTY

## PART ONE

### GOD'S BURNING PILLAR OF DEATH

**C**herish's dynasty ruled all of Divine-Prevailer for just two generations before the tribes split up and formed rival states, one in the north and one in the south. While Cherish's descendants in the south enjoyed relative stability, the northern kingdom's politics were fast-paced and merciless, with a new king slaughtering his successor every few years (or sometimes days).

Divine-Prevailer's culture drifted away from its roots in other ways, too. Eternal-Master's relevance waned while foreign gods established themselves in his place. There were major deities like Heaven's-Queen, chief of the pantheon; *Storm-Bringer* and his wife *Grove-God*; and *Wasp-Lord* of the Uprooted who had droves of priests, political influence, and formal child sacrifice and prostitution procedures. But there were also

lesser spirits who might have had only one follower claiming to hear a soft voice from their homemade statuette.

Eternal-Master was not amused by this kind of superstition and viewed it as something like spiritual adultery against him. The people of Divine-Prevailer were taught to be singularly devoted to Eternal-Master, but the truth was that they were sensitive to the influence of all manner of immaterial beings. This nation was uniquely capable and highly motivated to facilitate contact with gods usually beyond human comprehension.

Once a person learned what blessings were in a god's jurisdiction, they went about designing elaborate shrines and rituals to appease its appetites. (Heaven's-Queen felt at home under the shade of a tree with cake and wine while Storm-Bringer preferred to perch at high elevation while his servants screamed and cut themselves.) After striking up a working relationship with a god, a priest could sell their services for a handsome price—altering the weather, advising on future plans, talking to the dead, enjoying ritualistic sex, and of course receiving gifts of food, money, and children.

But Eternal-Master's servants weren't like the others. Especially GIM (short for *God-Is-Master*), an emissary who preferred to put Eternal-Master's unique power on display instead of dispensing empty blessings, idle threats, or pointless ceremonies. Gim was also called *Captive* because he came from a place called *Captivity-Town*. But his most common title was *Irritation*, because of the problems he caused. Gim lived in the wild and had a stench about him. While royals and rich people loved to clothe themselves in fine fashionable robes that shined gloriously in the sun, Gim preferred a ratty old jacket which carried a spiritual power as an

object of Eternal-Master's will.

As a divine emissary, Gim didn't give long-winded speeches but preferred direct, tangible deeds. He boldly confronted evil, condemned unfit kings, killed Eternal-Master's enemies, and mocked other religions. But he also had a soft and caring side; healing barren farmland, providing for the poor, counseling leaders, comforting children, and bringing the dead back to life.

Gim's relentless commitment to Eternal-Master earned him respect among a certain crowd, but the general population was wary of him. Eternal-Master could never be tamed or controlled like the other gods, and Gim was not only inviting the dangerous being but advancing its will. What kind of self-respecting man would maintain a relationship with a god who wants to tell people how they ought to live? Only a fool would get into business with Eternal-Master.

---

**G**im served as a direct emissary of Eternal-Master to just one party: Lesser-Lord, the king of northern Divine-Prevailer. But King Lesser-Lord was disinterested in Eternal-Master, so much so that he married a royal priest of Storm-Bringer named *Adulteress* and they built temples, altars, and shrines for Storm-Bringer and his consort Grove-God everywhere they could. These behaviors incited an anger in Eternal-Master unlike he had felt for any king before.

Gim told King Lesser-Lord and Queen *Adulteress* that their domain



was under siege by Eternal-Master, in the form of an endless drought. Lesser-Lord and Adulteress were of course bitterly angry at Gim and his god for bringing dry death to their country, so they immediately staffed up Storm-Bringer and Grove-God's priesthood to undo Eternal-Master's curse. Soon they had amassed over eight hundred priestly attendants on the royal payroll.

While the ground dried out and the crops were just beginning to fail, Eternal-Master sent Gim to hide out in the wilderness near a creek, where ravens dropped off two hearty meals for him every day. When the riverbed went dry, Eternal-Master sent Gim to be cared for by an impoverished widow and her son, who were on the brink of starvation themselves. Eternal-Master caused a single jar of flour and jug of oil to make bread for the trio every day until the widow's son got sick and died.

Gim held the boy's dead body and said: *Eternal-Master, my god, you cause one tragedy after another. From a disastrous drought across the whole land to the quiet suffering of a poor woman's son. Why do you bring thirst, hunger, and death to your people? Eternal-Master, my god, just bring the boy back.*

Eternal-Master listened to Gim and sent the child's life back into his corpse. But the drought persisted for three more years until Eternal-Master finally sent Gim back to the city to discuss terms with King Lesser-Lord.

While Gim was still several miles off from the palace, he saw an old friend out hunting for any remaining bodies of water. Gim asked the man to run ahead to the palace to announce his coming (and with him, the rain).

The man said: *I can't believe I'm seeing you not only alive but here, where*

*you're a wanted man. The king and queen searched for you across the whole world, and when anyone claimed that they hadn't seen you, the king made them swear to it on penalty of death. At the same time, Eternal-Master's representatives have been hunted down and murdered by queen Adulteress—I myself hid a hundred men in a cave. So tell me how I became your enemy, that you would send me off to die. If I go alone and tell the palace that you're on the way, who's to stop Eternal-Master from plucking you up and dropping you in some hidden place again? They'll kill me for failing to deliver you into their hands.*

Gim swore to his friend that he would arrive in the palace that same day, so the man ran ahead. When Gim arrived, King Lesser-Lord was waiting.

*Lesser-Lord said: Are you the irritant of Divine-Prevailer? Have you finally returned after plaguing my country with drought and death?*

*Gim said: I haven't troubled Divine-Prevailer, you've afflicted the land by abandoning Eternal-Master. You thought that Storm-Bringer could undo Eternal-Master's drought, but he has no power over the weather. In fact, it's because you love Storm-Bringer that Eternal-Master stopped the rain in the first place. You should have bowed in apology to Eternal-Master, not sought an alternate. We'll all decide together whose ways are best for this country; gather the whole nation along with the four hundred fifty priests of Storm-Bringer and four hundred of his wife Grove-God—the same priests who you feed at the palace—to Garden-Mount.*

So the northern tribes sent representatives to the mountain along with King Lesser-Lord and his priests. But Queen Adulteress and the four hundred priests of Grove-God protested the whole event, staying back at the palace in defiance.

## 9. THE PROPHET'S PROTÉGÉ

Gim addressed the crowd: *How long will this nation limp pathetically back and forth between two opposite paths? If Eternal-Master is god, then be true to him. Or if you choose Storm-Bringer, then bind yourselves to him. So which is it?*

Everyone was silent, afraid to commit one way or the other. So Gim arranged a showdown of the two gods, presenting two bulls to be spontaneously lit by divine flame. Altars were built, bulls were slaughtered, and the holy men prepared themselves to contact their gods with a request for heavenly fire. Gim waited patiently while Storm-Bringer's four hundred fifty priests screamed themselves hoarse and spilled their own blood, trying desperately to rouse their god. Gim taunted the priests and wondered aloud if Storm-Bringer was perhaps busy taking a shit instead of showing up for his followers.



If the rival priests had done their homework, they would have known that Gim's challenge was a trap. Eternal-Master commanded a pillar of holy fire that burned hotter than any worldly flame. Gim knew the old stories about the flame that guided the nation after they escaped the Fortifiers. So he made a great show of digging a trench and filling it with water, converting Eternal-Master's would-be pyre into a sopping wet swamp.

Then Eternal-Master sent down his white-hot pillar of flame and vaporized not only the bulls and the wooden altar but even the surrounding dirt, leaving a black crater where the wet altar once stood. Everyone could see that Storm-Bringer was impotent and his priests had only given false hope to Divine-Prevailer. Gim had all four hundred fifty priests of Storm-Bringer slaughtered while the crowd of Divine-Prevailers renewed their commitment to Eternal-Master.

Gim went up to the peak of Garden-Mount and told his attendant to look west towards the sea for any sign of rain. The sky was barren, but Gim kept telling the man to check again and again. After seven repetitions of this, the attendant spotted a cloud forming over the water in the shape of a hand racing towards them. Gim told Lesser-Lord to evacuate the mountain before the storm would trap them all. While Lesser-Lord rode his chariot, Gim gathered up his special jacket and was taken by Eternal-Master ahead of Lesser-Lord to the gates of the city.

When King Lesser-Lord told queen Adulteress what happened, she sent a messenger to Gim, who said: *I'll kill you like you killed my priests. And if I fail to end your life by this time tomorrow, then the gods should slaughter me for my failure.*

Gim wanted to die, so he went to the desert to commit suicide by

dehydration. He was distraught because King Lesser-Lord never came around to Eternal-Master. Gim had finally come to terms with the depressing realization that his life's work was a fool's errand.

Gim passed out and dreamed that one of Eternal-Master's immaterial attendants fed him and gave him water. When Gim woke up, he marched to the most sacred place he could think of: Thorny-Mountain, where Eternal-Master delivered his ten laws when the country escaped the Fortifiers. Sure enough, Eternal-Master was waiting—not in a dream vision or as an abstract elemental force but as a personal friend to Gim. Eternal-Master revealed that Gim's next tasks were more hopeful than his prior ones: he would install new kings and appoint a successor emissary named SID (short for *Salvation-Is-Divine*). Eternal-Master also reassured Gim that a certain group of seven thousand Divine-Prevailers had always been held aside as the only ones who genuinely followed Eternal-Master.

Gim was eager to start training his successor, so he went to meet Sid right away. Gim found Sid working—not speaking to a great crowd or studying the old texts, but guiding twelve oxen as they plowed a field, taking special care of the slowest one. It was clear to Gim that Sid already had all the instincts he'd need to become Divine-Prevailer's next emissary. So Gim threw his special jacket onto the boy's shoulders and walked ahead, expecting Sid to follow, but he wouldn't leave without saying goodbye to his family and friends. Sid killed his twelve oxen and boiled them with their harnesses to feed the locals before leaving to start a new life as Gim's protégé. (There was no mistaking that Sid had the same flair for symbolic gestures as Gim.)

## PART TWO

## A HALF-ASSED CHANGE OF HEART

**L**ike Gim, King Lesser-Lord left the episode at Garden-Mount in a gloomy state. His god had decisively failed and his vast legion of royal priests were all dead. But this was just one of many issues in his life—the kings of northern Divine-Prevailer sometimes only lasted a week before being assassinated by one of their own advisors or some random upstart with a dagger. Lesser-Lord was losing himself and tempted to turn to Eternal-Master when a neighboring country called High-Tower invaded the Lowlands. So Lesser-Lord found himself consulting Eternal-Master about how to proceed.

Lesser-Lord locked horns with High-Tower's king, engaging in an epic struggle complete with diplomatic shit-talk (*Don't boast to me about victory until we see who survives to take their armor off*) and battles all across the Lowlands. When it was clear that High-Tower had lost, their king feigned remorse. He perfectly impersonated the customary mourning of Divine-Prevailers—wailing and covering himself in ash. Lesser-Lord, tricked by the melodramatic acting, allowed High-Tower's king to live. So Eternal-Master decided that gullible Lesser-Lord would have to die instead.

Gim was sent to deliver the terrible news to the king. But King Lesser-Lord wasn't in the palace, he was next door in another man's vineyard. Or, it used to be another man's vineyard; the king had always wanted the land, so his wife had the owner executed on false testimony of religious and political disloyalty. So Lesser-Lord converted the vineyard into a great altar to Storm-Bringer and spent every day happily among the sweet-smelling grapes.

When King Lesser-Lord saw Gim he said: *Have you come to criticize me as your enemy again? When will you acknowledge my greatness? I sustained the nation during the drought and protected us all from High-Tower's invasion.*

Gim said: *I'm here because you betrayed Eternal-Master. Injustice follows you everywhere, look at all the foreign shrines in your dominion. Even the soil of the vineyard we're standing in is fertilized with the blood of its rightful owner. So Eternal-Master says that his fire will burn your dynasty into ruin because you made him angry by leading the nation away from him. You're as bad as the foreigners that were driven out when Divine-Prevailer first settled here. So Eternal-Master is driving you out too. The dogs of the city will lap up your blood and eat your remains right here, where they consumed the innocent man you murdered. In fact, all your people will be killed and eaten by the city dogs, and if they manage to escape to the open country, they'll still die, they'll just be eaten by wild animals instead.*

King Lesser-Lord was pierced by Gim's message. He tore his fine clothes and replaced them with rags, he fasted and moped around, he was truly dejected and distraught. When Eternal-Master saw Lesser-Lord's earnest regret, he changed his mind about sending him death and disaster. But Eternal-Master told Gim that Lesser-Lord's son would receive the full weight of his judgment.

---

**A**round this time, the king in southern Divine-Prevailer wanted to build a friendly relationship with the northern tribes. He was committed to Eternal-Master and was tired of the way that all of Divine-Prevailer had failed to live up to Eternal-Master's promises. So the southern king offered to assist Lesser-Lord in taking back their ancestral land from High-Tower's control.

Lesser-Lord was delighted by the idea but he wanted to consult his holy men first. So Lesser-Lord gathered all four hundred of his priests (to be more specific, it was the four hundred priests of Grove-God, who never showed up to the massacre at Garden-Mount, that now posed as Eternal-Master's priests.)

The two kings sat together on twin thrones, covered in their finest clothes and jewelry, while the priests encouraged them with a resounding and unanimous affirmation of their proposed offensive against High-Tower. But the southern king could tell that something was wrong with these supposed representatives of Eternal-Master, so he asked if there might be another emissary that they could consult. Lesser-Lord admitted that there was one other man who might have an opinion—but it was an emissary called *God's-Likeness* who criticized and belittled him (just like Gim). The southern king insisted that they talk to everyone.

When God's-Likeness was escorted to the palace, he was warned by the chief priest to fall in line with their message.

God's-Likeness approached the kings and said: *Go out and triumph, my friends! Eternal-Master will give High-Tower over to you because you've always been upright and true to him!*

Lesser-Lord knew God's-Likeness was playing with him, so he said:



*You're not telling me everything. Say exactly what Eternal-Master showed you, or swear to me that you've delivered the whole message.*

*God's-Likeness said: I saw the people of Divine-Prevailer scattered on the hills, like wild sheep without a caretaker, and Eternal-Master said: 'This flock has no shepherd; they should return to their own homes instead of going out to war. So who will coax Lesser-Lord out so that he can fall in battle?'*

*The spirits arrayed around Eternal-Master's throne prattled among themselves until one came forward and said: 'I know how to entice Lesser-Lord from his stronghold; I'll lie to him through his gullible ministers so that he goes out to battle, where he will die.'*

*Eternal-Master blessed the spirit's work and it went out to execute the plot. Can you finally see how Eternal-Master always outplays you? He consults the wisest beings in the universe while you're still hanging around these fickle priests who say anything you want to hear.*

*Lesser-Lord's chief priest punched God's-Likeness in the face and said: You fool! Do you really believe that Eternal-Master's spirit left me for a shithhead like you? Your arrogance disgusts me.*

*God's-Likeness said: You'll understand soon when you find yourself hiding in a closet from your killers.*

So God's-Likeness was thrown into prison with strict orders to be abused and underfed. And the battle commenced, with Lesser-Lord disguised as a common soldier so that he wouldn't be targeted by High-Tower. In the chaos of the battle, a soldier held up his bow and fired thoughtlessly upward, sending a random arrow into the path of Lesser-Lord's chariot, where it sunk into a narrow gap between two pieces of the king's armor. King Lesser-Lord bled all over his chariot while he was

propped up to maintain appearances.

Lesser-Lord was dead by sundown and his soldiers similarly failed, retreating in terror all the way back to the capital city. The pursuers ransacked the capital and slaughtered the soldiers and priests as God's-Likeness predicted. After the soldiers finished and left, King Lesser-Lord was given a proper burial. But his blood was unceremoniously washed off his chariot where it dripped down for the dogs to lap up and the temple prostitutes to bathe in. (Queen Adulteress was thrown out of a high window by her own attendants and trampled to mush by some passing horses, but this happened about decade later.)

---

PART THREE

GOD'S BURNING PILLAR  
TOUCHES DOWN AGAIN

**L**esser-Lord's son Master's-Grasp was just as perverse as his duplicitous dad. Then one day he fell through a weak floor and was put on bedrest—coincidentally just like his father, who suffered in slow agony from a freak accident.

None of the hundreds of royal priests could tell King Master's-Grasp whether he would recover from his injury or not, so he sent a team of messengers out to the temple of Wasp-Lord in another country to consult them about his survival. But right after his convoy left the palace, they came right back in again.

## 9. THE PROPHET'S PROTÉGÉ

The convoy said: *A man stopped us on our way with a message that we couldn't ignore. He had the appearance of a poor person—ill-groomed, dirty, wearing rough, hairy clothes held together with a crude leather belt—but he somehow knew all about your dire condition and our intentions to visit Wasp-Lord's temple. He asked us why we were sent off on a long journey to a foreign god if your life hangs by a thread. He said there is a god here in the Lowlands who would have counseled you every day of your life if you would have let him. And he said he could save us the long trip by giving us a word from Eternal-Master, who says you won't leave your bed alive.*

Master's-Grasp knew that it was Gim who was responsible for obstructing the convoy's important task. And he knew that Gim wasn't the kind of man who could be arrested by a common guard, so he sent a captain with fifty soldiers to fetch Gim.

The captain approached Gim, who was waiting for them up on a hill, and called out: *Hey nature boy, get your head out of the clouds and face the king.*

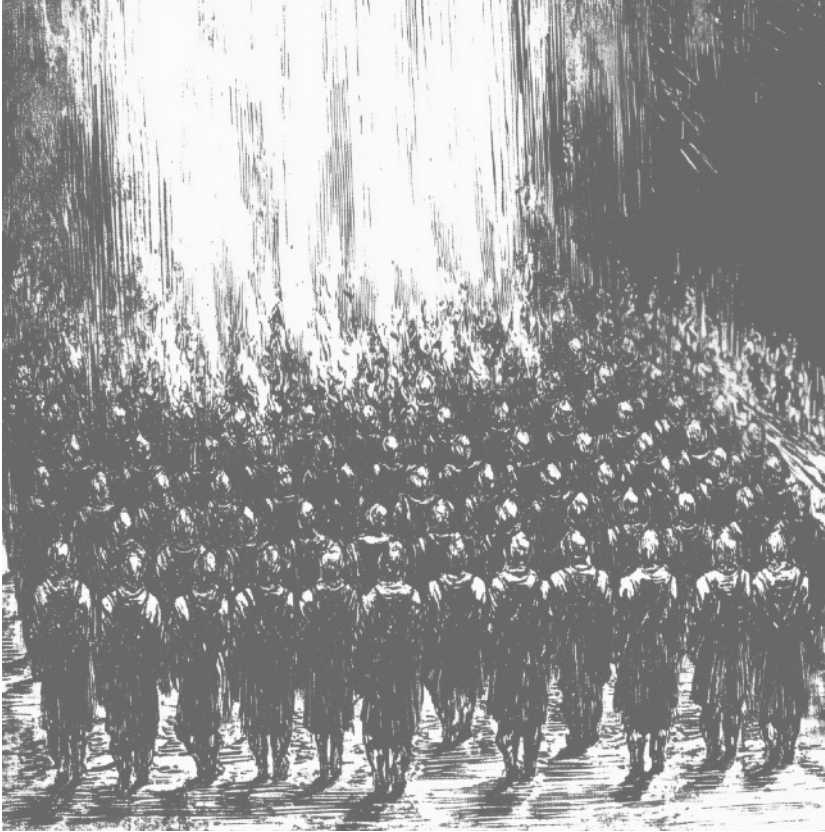
Gim said: *You come under the authority of a man, but my master is far greater than yours. If god is on my side, then fire will consume you.*

Then, just like Gim said, a fiery cyclone incinerated the captain and his soldiers instantly. But King Master's-Grasp only saw this as a minor setback, so he ordered another captain with fifty soldiers to arrest Gim.

The second captain, unconcerned with the smell of burned dirt and flesh, called out: *Time to end the fairytale, you dirty, delusional freak. The king orders you to stand before him immediately.*

Gim said: *This again? Let's double-check whose master is greater. If my god is more powerful than yours, then fire will consume you.*

The soldiers burned up on the spot. King Master's-Grasp again thought



nothing of his losses and sent a third captain with fifty soldiers to arrest Gim.

The third captain fell to his knees before Gim and said: *Emissary of Eternal-Master, I beg you to consider the lives of my men, who are only servants. Your god's fire has already consumed a hundred men, please don't add us to the ash.*

Gim went willingly back to the palace to repeat his message—that the king would not get out of his recovery bed. And Gim turned out to be right.

## PART FOUR

## THE FIRE COMES FOR GIM

**M**any came to Gim as his students, hoping to learn from his ability to demonstrate Eternal-Master's will in every aspect of life. But only his protégé, Sid, stuck to him everywhere he went. Gim and Sid brought a dose of chaos and radicalism to every corner of the land. And for each likeminded person they found in their travels, they made many more fierce enemies for their dogged attacks against the status quo.

Gim's time on earth was ending—he wasn't old or sick, but it was clear to anyone who observed spiritual things that his time was up. Gim began the march to the place where he would die, telling Sid to spare himself by staying behind. But Sid refused to abandon his friend and teacher.

The two emissaries passed by a city called House-of-God, which was once the spiritual capital of Divine-Prevailer but after so many generations of disassociation from their ancestral deity, people now gathered at House-of-God to practice rituals to others.

The local priests from House-of-God came out and taunted Sid, saying: *Hey idiot, what are you still doing with Gim? Everyone who listens in on the spiritual world can see what's coming to the irritant of Divine-Prevailer, he'll be swallowed up in the same fire that he sends down on his enemies. It's perfect, Gim is finally getting what he deserves, and its from that awful god of yours! And what will you do without your protector to hide behind?*

Sid said: *Of course I know all about it, and I'm sticking with him anyways. You opportunists wouldn't understand devotion, you just want to serve gods who conveniently bend to your whims. But I'm happy to let Eternal-Master guide me wherever he pleases.*

## 9. THE PROPHET'S PROTÉGÉ



Gim knew that Sid would eat these words later and told him to stay behind, so he wouldn't have to witness what was coming. But again, Sid refused to leave his friend's side. So the emissaries continued east to Moon-City, where there were followers of Eternal-Master who came out to speak with Sid.

The people of Moon-City said: *We're worried for you, Sid. Why are you walking with Gim when he's going to be taken away today? Let him do this alone, and protect yourself from the holy fire that will consume him.*

Sid said: *I appreciate that you think you're helping but you need to shut*

*up. I know what I'm doing.*

For a third and final time, Gim pleaded with Sid to stay behind as he crossed the Descending-River into his homeland. And again, Sid clung to his friend and teacher.

Fifty people from Moon-City also followed to observe at a safe distance. They saw that Gim took off his special jacket and laid it down in the water, which parted on each side so the two emissaries could cross on dry land.

Sid said: *Since you've been like a father to me and I've been a loyal son, don't leave me without an inheritance—give me a double portion of your legacy when it's distributed to your children, as is due to a firstborn heir.*

Gim said: *This is a difficult request, and I don't know if Eternal-Master will fulfill it. But here's what I'll say; if you keep your eyes on me as I'm being taken away, you'll receive what you asked. It's no small thing to look straight into Eternal-Master's fire, you might not survive the sight of it. But if you look away or if you can't perceive it, my spirit won't come to you.*

While they were still talking, fiery horses leading war chariots came from out of nowhere. The scorching, otherworldly flames came between the two men and swept up Gim in a tornado of white-hot fire.

Sid cried out: *My father, my father, Divine-Prevailer's cavalry are striking!*

But Gim was gone. Sid ripped his clothes in a fit of anguish. He sat alone, naked, and exhausted. Sid lost his closest friend and the nation lost its greatest emissary. All that was left of Gim was his jacket on the ground next to Sid. When Sid approached the shore of the Descending-River, he didn't roll it up and set it down ceremoniously like Gim had done, but lashed out at the water, kicking and thrashing in the currents.

Sid said: *How could a great man like Gim be allowed to go out with this unnatural end? Where is Eternal-Master?*

The Descending-River parted and Sid crossed back alone. The people from Moon-City bowed to Sid as he approached.

They sensed that Gim's spirit was with him, but they still could not believe that Gim had actually been taken away. So they asked Sid if he would allow them to scour the whole region to see if maybe Gim had been set up on a mountain or down in a valley somewhere. And even though Sid told them not to go, the people urged him until he felt ashamed by his lack of hope. So Sid relented and all fifty went out to look for Gim. They went far and wide for three days, searching in every direction for him, but they couldn't find a sign of him anywhere.

When they regrouped, Sid said: *Didn't I try to tell you not to go? We already knew what came of Gim. We all saw the fire that consumed him, I bet you could even feel the searing heat of it from across the river. I encouraged your foolishness and now I see that your optimism was just stupidity.*





## PART FIVE

## THE PROTÉGÉ'S FIRST DAY

Sid had crossed the Descending-River and was now on his way to Moon-City, retracing the steps of his ancestors when they came out of slavery. But instead of marching triumphantly, Sid was a haggard mess, like always. His lifestyle was hard, his hair had fallen out, he was dirty, smelly, and he barely ate because he lived on the move. If you got to know him, you'd also find that he was distant, uncharismatic, and harsh. But that's just how Eternal-Master wanted it, because, as a rule, his representatives never had anything going for them otherwise.

Despite his appearance, the locals in Moon-City approached Sid reverently, seeing him as an esteemed liaison to the throne room of Eternal-Master.

A local man bowed down and said: *Please sir, help us. Life here is pleasant and comfortable, except that our water is toxic and the ground is barren. With bad water, death is all around us. We're lucky to have you here, would you kindly ask Eternal-Master to cleanse our city's wellspring?*

Sid said: *Don't just stand there, bring me a bowl of salt.*

The locals knew that Sid was eccentric, but this response still had them on their heels. They sent someone to fulfill the young emissary's order. Sid performed a simple ritual of pouring the salt into the city's running wellspring—metaphorically interesting but absolutely useless in a practical sense.

Sid said: *I speak for Eternal-Master when I say the spring is healed. From now on death and miscarriage will not come from it.*

And from then on the city's flowing spring was safe for everyone to drink and the plants flourished. Eternal-Master had evidently been

waiting for a chance to reward Moon-City for patient trust, because the salting ritual was an illustration of the way a little bit of a good thing can cleanse the whole.

---

**S**id continued west to House-of-God, the place in northern Divine-Prevailer where people went to escape Eternal-Master's influence. The locals here thought little of Sid, but they should have have known better than to test his mettle as an emissary. The local priests came out and mocked Sid, in part because he represented Eternal-Master but also because he was a pathetic sight with his balding head and dirty old jacket.

The people of House-of-God said: *Get burnt, you bald, frumpy piece of shit! Fly up to heaven like you say your mentor did. We all know he's nothing more than a pile of ash now. You should make like him and fuck off with your closed-minded old ideas!*

Sid said: *It pains me to quarrel with my countrymen but your rebellion disgusts Eternal-Master. You attend to impotent altars, you sacrifice your children, you hate Eternal-Master's messengers, and—unfortunately for you—you forget his power.*

Just then, two bears ran out of the woods, taking the crowd by surprise and attacking ferociously, mauling over forty of them for sport.

Sid's ministerial body count was starting to inch closer to Gim's. And the striking disparity between the kindness and life he gave to the

## 9. THE PROPHET'S PROTÉGÉ

openminded against his lethal judgment on the brazen solidified Sid's reputation as another exactly like Gim—lacking in terms of handsomeness or charm but uniquely capable of delivering both Eternal-Master's patient grace and sacred temper. So while you might have good reason to question the legitimacy of Sid, you'd also be dead wrong.



*From the Former Prophets, in the sixth chapter of the second book of Kings*

# THE SIEGE

WEAPONIZED HUNGER TURNS A CITY FERAL

**D**ivine-Prevailer controlled its own territory for brief stretches of history between incursions, occupations, exiles, and civil wars—each of which brought a new flavor of tragedy and death to its citizens. One foreign empire called the *Advancers* came into Divine-Prevailer's northern kingdom, besieging the capital city for an excessively long period to kill off not only the capital guard but the innocent local families trapped inside. The Advancers were in the slow process of converting a bustling metropolis into a container for countless emaciated corpses.

As the populace ate through their pantries and storehouses, their definition of *edible* gradually expanded into previously unthinkable forms of sustenance. And along the way, the city's economy descended into chaos while people desperately gave up anything for a meal—a fist-sized pile of bird shit sold for the equivalent of six months' wages. The

head of an otherwise industrious donkey was now considered a feast, because there was no need for working livestock beyond their precious calories. Hopelessness and cruelty ruled the city as the final scraps of food were picked clean.

This all happened exactly like Eternal-Master's emissary, Sid, had warned. He told everyone long beforehand that the nation would fall if they continued using shrines to other gods besides Eternal-Master.

Divine-Prevailer's northern king paced about on the city's high walls, grieved by what he saw below him on either side: his citizens languishing on the inside while his enemies sat diligently on the other, inflicting unfathomable pain by simply doing nothing. The king was barely holding himself together, but he projected confidence and order by conspicuously circling his capital city from above, standing resolute in his finest royal robes.

Then a Divine-Prevailer yelled up to him: *Help me! Make things right, my judge and king!*

The king said: *If our supposed divine savior, Eternal-Master, won't do anything to help us, how could I be of any use to you? If you want me to go into my grain room, my stables, or my winepress, I regret to inform you that they're only storing dust. But what's the matter with you today?*

The woman said: *Yesterday, my neighbor told me to give up my son so we could eat him to survive. He was just a baby, so it would do no good to try to keep my heir alive. So we boiled him and divided his meat between the two of us, agreeing to eat her child today. But when I got today's water seasoned and boiling, she hid her son from me! My neighbor tricked me, and now I'm not only bereft but starving. Bring me the boy so I can indulge in rich, tender meat again!*



The king lost control. He cried and tore his fine robes to shreds in anguish over the state of this poor woman. All the people could see the king degraded and in mourning, no longer pretending to be optimistic or planning any kind of solution. Then the king turned all of his anxiety and depression into blame: he became enraged with Eternal-Master's emissary Sid.

The king said: *This is all Sid's fault! He put an unreasonable standard on me—to be fully committed to Eternal-Master, assigning all my priests to just one god—and now we're suffering because of his unfair assessment. Why did I let him live this long? If I fail to remove his head from his shoulders by the end of the day, then Eternal-Master should behead me instead.*

*From the Former Prophets, in both books of Kings, and the Latter Prophet Hosea*

# WHATEVER HAPPENED TO GOD'S COUNTRY?

AN ETERNAL KINGDOM SPLITS IN TWO  
BEFORE COMPLETELY FALLING APART

## PROLOGUE

### “FOREVER” ISN'T AS LONG AS YOU'D THINK

**T**he nation of Divine-Prevailer had every opportunity to be Eternal-Master's divine mediators to all of humanity. It's hard to overstate the significance and grandeur of what this would have looked like if they actually fulfilled it—but if you can imagine peace, prosperity, love, and justice everywhere all the time, as well as the constant presence of a being that specifically designed a species to be entirely fulfilled by basking in his friendship, you'd still be miles from comprehending the blissful perfection of that life.

*Eternal-Master asked Divine-Prevailer to do two things: multiply like innumerable sands and be teachable to his instruction. They didn't have to*

## 11. WHATEVER HAPPENED TO GOD'S COUNTRY?

*be perfectly obedient, but if they genuinely appreciated his instructions, then he would handle the rest. (The penalty for breaking Eternal-Master's instructions is, of course, death. But this could be inflicted on an a substitute animal while Eternal-Master worked to make a final solution.)*

*Divine-Prevailer had a series of mediators between themselves and Eternal-Master over the years:*

- *Initially, the patriarchs reported their dreams about Eternal-Master to the family and sometimes even interacted with him in the daytime.*
- *When the family grew into thirteen tribes, Divine-Prevailer's priesthood acted as a theocratic center. There were also temporary chiefs who liberated the people from foreign armies and religious pluralism. (The two issues always ran together because Eternal-Master wouldn't tolerate the presence of foreign gods, in part because their shrines were either brothels or altars for child sacrifice.)*
- *Divine-Prevailer decided they would be better off under a king, so Eternal-Master reluctantly let them crown Desire, who rarely paid any attention to Eternal-Master. He was a catastrophic disappointment, so King Desire was on the way out long before he actually died.*
- *Then there was King Cherish, who took joy in waging war and fucking around with all sorts of women. But at least he wanted to be a friend to Eternal-Master, so they loved each other dearly despite the issues that stood between them. Cherish's royal dynasty was promised be an unending lineage until Eternal-Master's city descended to earth—so long as each king yielded to Eternal-Master's as the greater ruler.*
- *Cherish's son Peaceful was the next king. He quickly amassed a thousand fuck buddies, participating in all manner of ritual sex worship to the gods of his wives and palace sex workers. Peaceful all but forgot about his*



## 11. WHATEVER HAPPENED TO GOD'S COUNTRY?

*father's god, so Eternal-Master appeared to Peaceful to tell him that he had singlehandedly ruined Cherish's dynasty. The eternal scepter would be stripped from the family less than a hundred years after being established.*

- *When Peaceful's son, Growing-Nation, attempted to ordain himself king, an insubordinate palace attendant showed up with all of Divine-Prevailer to stop the proceeding (his name, coincidentally, was Opposer). Growing-Nation nonetheless tried to enslave Divine-Prevailer—gloating that his overseers would upgrade their whips to stinging scorpions—but he was so badly outnumbered that he ran back to his capital city to hide while Opposer became king of Divine-Prevailer instead.*
- *From then on, there were two nations, each with their own capital city. King Opposer's dynasty held the ten northern tribes (keeping the name Divine-Prevailer). Cherish's descendants held the borders of the two southernmost tribes and called themselves Worshiper, after Cherish's tribe.*

*So Divine-Prevailer split, but this didn't actually solve anything. Both kingdoms continued to ignore Eternal-Master, with a few brief interruptions when someone snapped the people to attention by reminding them of all the good that Eternal-Master had done for them throughout history. So with each passing generation, Eternal-Master's long fuse burned, inching towards an act of rage that would wipe Divine-Prevailer and Worshiper off the earth. Eternal-Master made a point to warn everyone about what would happen if they continued to misrepresent him and take his attention and favor in vain, but the people just couldn't be bothered to care.*

## PART ONE

THE END OF NORTHERN DIVINE-  
PREVAILER

**T**he northern kingdom operated in the territory of the Double-Bloom tribe for around two hundred years after ejecting Worshiper. The location of their capital city bounced around as coups and usurpers killed off kings, and were killed in turn by the next ambitious upstart. The only constant across the many short-lived dynasties was that everyone had enthusiastic contempt for Eternal-Master. So an emissary named *Reliever* delivered a grand final appeal—which wasn't an encouragement or a message of hope but instead a tirade against them. Eternal-Master told Reliever to marry a woman who was a known fornicator and something of a prostitute. Usually only virgins or widows got married, but Reliever opened his home to a woman who would otherwise die alone and unsupported. He swooped in and saved her from a miserable death as Eternal-Master had once done with a vulnerable little nation called *Divine-Prevailer*. Reliever and his wife had three children, each named to parallel Eternal-Master's message to Divine-Prevailer:

The firstborn was a son named *God's-Garden*—not after a perfectly restored place of plenty with Eternal-Master but after the valley that northern King Lesser-Lord had stolen (through murder) and then converted into a temple to a foreign god where children were sacrificed. Reliever said that their kingdom would crumble because of their proclivity for bloodshed.

The next was a daughter named *Merciless*, because Eternal-Master intended to lay waste to Divine-Prevailer—no longer standing by with

patient mercy as he had done for so many generations.

Then they had a son named *Not-My-People*, whose name signified that Eternal-Master would soon disown Divine-Prevailer entirely.

When all three children had been born, the people were left with an image of Eternal-Master that went against everything they thought they knew about him. Eternal-Master didn't need Divine-Prevailer and he certainly didn't have a special place in his heart where he would stand idly by while he was mocked with rituals to every god they could conceive of in their imaginative, disloyal heads.

Eternal-Master went as far as to promise Divine-Prevailer that their little ones would be dashed to pieces while the pregnant women were ripped open. Or said another way: Divine-Prevailer's god-given task to become a multitude was being directly and brutally ended by Eternal-Master himself.

But Reliever added that Divine-Prevailer wouldn't disappear, they would enjoy good times later on. Reliever said: *One day all of Divine-Prevailer will be united in my Garden, I will call them My-People and divine Mercy will pour out instead of judging disapproval. But first will I strip Divine-Prevailer bare, like an unfaithful wife who prostituted herself for a living when she could have stayed home with her husband all along. I'll expose her to the wilderness where she'll be killed with thirst. I love you, Divine-Prevailer—you're my child, my dove, my vine—so I cannot tolerate rivals.*

Eternal-Master waited for around thirty years after sending Reliever's warning. In that time, the northerners went on ignoring Eternal-Master, fabricating gods out of metal, contacting any spirits they could discern from beyond the physical world, killing and burning their own children

as offerings to these lesser spirits, fucking priests in shrine-brothels, and otherwise conducting themselves in every way that Eternal-Master had taught them not to. Seeing no change in his people, Eternal-Master couldn't stand the sight of Divine-Prevailer anymore.

---

**G**lorious-Fire, king of an empire called the *Advancers*, invaded northern Divine-Prevailer and quickly overwhelmed them with his vast army. Glorious-Fire forced Divine-Prevailer to pay a tribute annually in exchange for their relative independence. After several years, the northern Divine-Prevailers couldn't keep up with the steep fees that were imposed on them by the Advancers. Rather than turning to their god for help, Divine-Prevailer's king instead made an alliance with the Fortifiers, hoping to scare off the Advancers with their combined numbers.

When Divine-Prevailer's yearly tribute didn't arrive, King Glorious-Fire investigated. He learned about Divine-Prevailer's alliance with the Fortifiers, and he was enraged. King Glorious-Fire arrested Divine-Prevailer's king and invaded his land, putting the capital city into a long-term siege. After three brutal years of isolation inside the city walls, the Advancers finally entered and hauled off the few surviving Divine-Prevailers to be scattered throughout the Advancers' imperial territories.

Through the humiliation, desperation, starvation, and bloodshed, Eternal-Master was forcing Divine-Prevailer to recognize the gravity of

## 11. WHATEVER HAPPENED TO GOD'S COUNTRY?

their indifference towards their maker—who only ever asked that they look at their god with reverence and gratitude in order to experience eternal prosperity and peace. After hundreds of years of verbal warnings and occasional nudges, Eternal-Master's jealousy had overruled his patience.

After displacing the northern Divine-Prevailers from the Lowlands, Glorious-Fire repopulated their cities with victims from the other nations he had defeated. These trespassers in the Lowlands had never met Eternal-Master and didn't know anything about him. As they settled in, they found local lions stalking about, slaughtering people not for food, but for sport. When King Glorious-Fire learned about it, he sent a Divine-Prevailer priest to mediate between the settlers and Eternal-Master, hoping the trespassers could survive if they learned how to make the god happy.

The priest introduced the new locals to Eternal-Master and his unique divine personality. The foreigners even assigned people to conduct the priestly rites. But, like the Divine-Prevailers before them, the trespassers simply added Eternal-Master to their long list of spirits to appease.

So if you didn't hear about the sacking, you could wander into the northern Lowlands and genuinely not discern that the Divine-Prevailers were absent.



---

PART TWO

THE END OF WORSHIPER  
IN THE SOUTH

**W**orshiper, still led by Cherish's dynasty, continued along after the Advancers became their northern neighbors. The fact that Divine-Prevailer had been brutalized and carted off didn't change the status quo around Worshiper—they were still generally lukewarm towards Eternal-Master and more interested in gods who offered more enticing worship practices.

## 11. WHATEVER HAPPENED TO GOD'S COUNTRY?

Eternal-Master's emissaries warned Worshiper that they would be swept away if they didn't come back to him. But just like their brothers in the north, Worshiper didn't make any lasting commitments even as they watched from afar while their neighbors were laid waste.

Maybe Worshiper wasn't worried about the Advancers because that particular empire quickly faded away. The Fortifiers rose to prominence in their place, but even the Fortifiers were replaced by a nation called *Confusion*.

While regional power was shifting rapidly around Worshiper's borders, they tried to ally with whatever nation they thought was most likely to come out ahead. Sometimes this led to powerful partnerships—but more often, they made disastrous miscalculations and paid dearly.

Worshiper had bet against Confusion when their king rose up and dominated the whole region. To retaliate, the armies of Confusion marched in and set up a siege around Worshiper's capital city, robbing it bare after starving the citizens. Even the innermost chambers of Eternal-Master's temple were picked clean by the irreverent invaders. Along with all the material possessions, Confusion also took ten thousand prominent citizens, craftsmen, and storied soldiers from Worshiper and dispersed them throughout Confusion as human spoils. The impoverished, unskilled, weak people were left behind to tend to Worshiper's rubble.

Confusion put a puppet king in charge of the remains of Worshiper, but he rebelled against Confusion, aligning himself with the Fortifiers. Confusion's king was outraged to be shat on a second time by the Lowland pissants so he punished them in kind, marching right back to Worshiper and setting up another siege. Since there was nothing valuable left to steal, he destroyed everything, even the tall exterior walls, so no

one could live there. Worshiper was a twice-devastated nation, so comprehensively destroyed that it appeared no one would ever hear from them again.

---

**D**uring Worshiper's exile in Confusion, Eternal-Master sent emissaries to his loyalists to explain their situation and prepare them for what would be coming next. Worshiper was told that they would triumphantly dash Confusion's children against stones, instead of the other way around. The emissaries also reassured Worshiper that there was a subset of Worshipers and Divine-Prevailers who never burned their children on Storm-Bringer's shrines or fucked Wasp-Lord's priests. Just like Eternal-Master had told God-Is-Master generations before, the whole nation wasn't regarded collectively—any person could choose to yield to or ignore Eternal-Master and they would be dealt with accordingly. Their family of origin had nothing to do with anything.

Of course another empire eventually drove out Confusion. This time it was *Divider*, led by a king named *My-Furnace*. This king was motivated by Eternal-Master to send the Worshipers back to their capital to rebuild before the culture and religion vanished from history. A small group returned, built up the city's infrastructure, made a new house for Eternal-Master, and began repopulating their ancestral homeland.

Over the following centuries, nation after nation rose up, defeated the



## 11. WHATEVER HAPPENED TO GOD'S COUNTRY?

previous empire, and was itself replaced by a new conqueror—each taking the Lowlands and Worshiper as a small piece of their larger aspirations. The people of Divine-Prevailer cobbled together their old cities whenever they could and tasked the priests with assembling a book to record everything Eternal-Master had done for (and to) their extended family throughout history. Divine-Prevailer's glory days, if they ever had any, were long behind them now.

**STORIES FROM THE  
GREEK BIBLE**

*From the Gospels of Matthew and Luke as well as the Acts of the apostles*

# ACTING ROYAL

A FAMILY OF PSYCHOTIC MURDERERS INHERITS A SCEPTER

## PART ONE

### HEROIC-POSE IS THREATENED BY A BABY

**F**our hundred years after a fraction of Divine-Prevailer returned to the Lowlands from their forced displacement, a new empire called *High-Fort* rolled down from the northwest and sacked them again. High-Fort promptly killed off Divine-Prevailer's royal family and installed their own representative in the capital: a man named *Heroic-Pose*.

Little did Heroic-Pose know that he had been assigned the worst middle management job in the empire. Heroic-Pose had to establish dominance as the new king of this strange little nation, but as he became acquainted with the local culture he was increasingly confused and repulsed. Among other oddities, Divine-Prevailer mass-produced a

collection of scrolls which depicted their own history in the most unflattering light, taught a reprehensible lifestyle, instituted grotesque customs, and included songs and essays that would make any sensible person from High-Fort nauseous.

Heroic-Pose's aristocratic temperament and high-born status did nothing to validate his kingliness in Divine-Prevailer, because their royalty didn't come from a great house like every other country. For its first thousand years, Divine-Prevailer got by without a king at all. Then Desire, a great man from the highest pedigree, rose up as Divine-Prevailer's first monarch. But Desire was rejected by Eternal-Master who replaced him with Cherish, a shrimpy rural shepherd from a family of nobodies. So Eternal-Master created a dynasty out of nothing and promised that an all-powerful god-king would one day come from Cherish's line.

In comparison, Heroic-Pose was a stain on the capital who could never live up to the romanticized image of Cherish: the softhearted musician, the servant leader, the dancing worshipper of Eternal-Master. Heroic-Pose spent his days pursuing all the sensual delights of power and protecting his office through cruel antagonism. Propriety, decency, and good sense were inconveniences that only got in the way of Heroic-Pose's grand ambitions. His skin was thin like a tender membrane, his self-image was inflated like a blister about to burst, and his shoulders were allergic to responsibility.

Heroic-Pose threw a few bones to Divine-Prevailer: he allowed their temple to stand and the priesthood to operate—albeit with concessions that watered down its practices and teachings to appease Heroic-Pose's foreign sensibilities. Since Divine-Prevailer's priests were only interested

in maintaining influence and prestige, they were fast friends with Heroic-Pose. The priests acted more as enforcers of High-Fort's imperial rule rather than stewards of Eternal-Master's teachings.

Don't misunderstand, Divine-Prevailer's current situation was hardly different than any other time in history. In fact, the years when Divine-Prevailer enjoyed a good king who loved Eternal-Master were exceedingly few and far between. Divine-Prevailer's natural-born kings were just as likely as any foreign conqueror to discontinue Eternal-Master's customs, invite lesser gods, build and staff royal sex palaces, and decree many other dismal uses of public funds. So the people grumbled about High-Fort, but most of them still paid their taxes and bowed to their new king anyway.

---

**T**hen Eternal-Master made his first big move in centuries. Eternal-Master wasn't keen on the way Heroic-Pose hijacked the dynasty from the line of Cherish. So he picked out two women, made them miraculously pregnant (one being menopausal and the other a virgin), and set their sons on a trajectory to greatness.

The first boy was Master's-Gift, who would be a bold political and social activist in the fashion of Eternal-Master's most troublesome rabble-rousers. He was destined to understand the mysteries of Eternal-Master and prepare a new era of history.

The second boy was Master's-Rescue, the long-awaited god-king to rule

the whole earth from the capital of Divine-Prevailer. But Master's-Rescue was hardly an obvious inheritor of Cherish's dynasty—which had been chopped to a stump through years of takeovers and coups. Master's-Rescue's parents were rural, poor, and not yet married. Master's-Rescue's mom was a teen who still lived with her parents and his dad was a workaday carpenter. The influential houses of the capital would have laughed Master's-Rescue out of their company, not bowed down to him.

When Master's-Rescue was born, Eternal-Master made a new star rise up in the sky over the Lowlands. In a faraway eastern country, a group of astrologers spotted the new light. They knew that a great king had been born in the Lowlands and they intended to make a pilgrimage to meet him.

The astrologers arrived in Divine-Prevailer's capital and asked where they might find the new heir. They ran their mouths openly, assuming that everyone in Divine-Prevailer was as excited as they were to kneel to a new monarch. Of course, neither High-Fort's officials nor Divine-Prevailer's priests knew anything about him (they were insensitive to spiritual things and the alignment of stars). And both parties were aghast at the notion that High-Fort might have its occupation challenged by anyone, even the long-promised god-king of Eternal-Master.

Immediately Heroic-Pose began scheming to get to the boy before any Divine-Prevailers, who might want to put him in the throne. So Heroic-Pose went to the priests to find out what their old scrolls said about the matter. The priests told Heroic-Pose that their god-king was supposed to be born in a rural area called Dusty-House. Then Heroic-Pose had a secret meeting with the astrologers who told him when they first spotted the new celestial light. So Heroic-Pose alone ascertained the boy's

approximate age and location, but he still couldn't identify him specifically. (Divine-Prevailers had always been a prolific lot, so there were babies everywhere all the time.) Heroic-Pose's only option was to send the astrologers to Dusty-House to find the boy and then report back to him.

On their way, the astrologers were delighted to find that the light in the sky moved with them, guiding them straight to Master's-Rescue's home. They gave their well-wishes and presented gifts worthy of his destiny: a tribute of gold (as one gives a ruler), incense (as was burned in Eternal-Master's presence), and embalming ointment (for his destined death).

Just about anybody with a brain could have guessed what Heroic-Pose intended to do with the boy, but the astrologers were earnest pilgrims who hadn't considered that Heroic-Pose might resent little Master's-Rescue. On the night before they left Dusty-House, the astrologers dreamed that Eternal-Master warned them to avoid Heroic-Pose by taking the long way home.

When Heroic-Pose realized that the astrologers had slipped out of the country and that he would never be able to identify the child, things got messy. Heroic-Pose directed his troops to round up all the families in the area with little sons and squash the would-be king. This was, admittedly, a close call for Heroic-Pose (revolutionaries from Divine-Prevailer could use the legend of the boy to gather a militia and challenge High-Fort with an inconvenient rebellion), so his act of genocide was easy to justify to his superiors. And the people of Divine-Prevailer could bitch and moan about a few dead kids all they wanted, but it was easy for High-Fort to ignore them. Divine-Prevailer stood absolutely no chance of breaking free from imperial occupation.

## 12. ACTING ROYAL

While preparations for the mass-execution were still underway, Master's-Rescue's dad learned about the whole plan in a dream. Eternal-Master instructed him to escape to the land of the Fortifiers. So the family fled to the south while the soldiers went ahead with their orders, killing every infant and toddler anywhere they suspected the astrologers might have travelled.





## PART TWO

## HEROIC-POSE JR. GETS REVENGE

**A**fter a couple years, Master's-Rescue's dad dreamed that Heroic-Pose was dead. But he was warned by Eternal-Master that Heroic-Pose Jr. had taken over his father's post. So the family moved back to the Lowlands but stayed away from risky places like Dusty-House and the capital city. And when the family had to register Master's-Rescue with the priests in Eternal-Master's house, they tried to duck in and out quickly. But the priests detained Master's-Rescue to probe into his fascinating interpretations of their scriptures. The family couldn't afford a prestigious education nor the risk of living in the same city as Heroic-Pose Jr., so they hurried back to the sticks to teach Master's-Rescue the family trade of carpentry instead.

Meanwhile, Master's-Gift grew up into the exact description given to his pregnant mom: he was a mangy, loudmouthed, barely-clothed radical who spent most of his time alone in the wilderness. In other words, he was a great holy man in the tradition of Divine-Prevailer's legendary emissaries. Master's-Gift regularly staged protests and was often heard preaching in the streets, but he was most known for submerging people in the Descending-River. A dunk in these special waters represented an act of disconnection from the material trappings and politics of the world. Master's-Gift performed this rite on many eccentrics, including his lifelong friend Master's-Rescue.

Heroic-Pose Jr. was aware of Master's-Gift, but he was cautious about tampering with the local culture after his father's many conflicts with the people, so he allowed Master's-Gift to continue his odd lifestyle without intervention. But when Heroic-Pose Jr. shacked up with his brother's

wife, Master's-Gift spoke out loudly and publicly against the royal incest (almost as if he thought he was allowed to speak freely or criticize High-Fort).

Master's-Gift said: *We've never had a king who lived up to Eternal-Master's ideal. We've had sex-crazed drunkards, greedy warmongering pigs, duplicitous chumps, puppets of foreign gods, and more than a few incompetent morons. But Heroic-Pose Jr. may just be the furthest anybody has ever strayed from the behavior befitting this nation's king. All his posturing and empty grandeur can do nothing to hide the fact that he's fucking his sister, he hates Eternal-Master, and he's souring the whole country with his pathetic idea of leadership.*

Heroic-Pose Jr. wanted to protect his mistress' honor in the face of this disrespect, but he was in bind. Heroic-Pose Jr. couldn't retaliate against a holy man like Master's-Gift because it would simply prove to the people that he was an illegitimate outsider who didn't sympathize with the very essence of the nation. But Heroic-Pose Jr.'s mistress didn't care about her reputation among the locals. She wanted Master's-Gift executed immediately. So while Heroic-Pose Jr. pondered the complex dynamics of power and influence, he threw Master's-Gift into prison to shut him up.

After Master's-Gift had been shut away for a while, Heroic-Pose Jr. entertained his friends with a lavish party. Among the festivities and heavy drinking was a dance performance from his mistress' daughter. Heroic-Pose Jr. was so taken by her skill, so desperate to win back the respect of his mistress, and so eager to impress his friends with a kingly act that he offered her the quintessential royal blessing: any one thing that she would ask for. The girl consulted her mother, who acted swiftly to finally take revenge on Master's-Gift.

The girl stood before Heroic-Pose Jr. and his friends and said: *Great king, ruler of all this land, heir of power and privilege, I won't ask for a difficult thing like a vast estate, extravagant wealth, or an office in your court.*

She turned to the party and said: *These are all things he could give me, of course, since we all know that he's a real king.*

She turned back to Heroic-Pose Jr. and said: *My king, I simply ask that you give a filthy rebel what he deserves. Bring me the head of Master's-Gift on a dish for us all to see, so that we can rejoice in the death of your enemy!*

She turned to the party and said: *Honestly I don't know why any king would allow such a loudmouthed dissident to live this long anyway.*

She turned back to Heroic-Pose Jr. and said: *Let's turn this party into a victory celebration over that troublesome protestor who had the nerve to spread scandalous lies all over your kingdom. Surely I'm wasting your kingly gesture on something so small and easy for a powerful ruler like you to fulfill—but it's what I want, right now, in front of these witnesses.*

She had made her request impossible to refuse, especially for a stupid and desperate man like Heroic-Pose Jr. The girl adeptly preyed on his delusions and pomposity—but it didn't have to be this way. To begin with, a pious king would have admired Master's-Gift and invited his counsel instead of being enraged by fair criticism. And a good king wouldn't have gotten tangled up in a sordid affair with his sister-in-law. Of course, a prudent king wouldn't get day-drunk with his friends and ogle over his niece. And a wise king would handle power politics with winsome grace—he certainly wouldn't get manipulated by a child. But Heroic-Pose Jr. was not virtuous, self-controlled, level-headed, well-advised, or god-fearing. Divine-Prevailer's acting monarch was driven

exclusively by petty insecurities, lusts, and shortsightedness. So the thing was done promptly and Master's-Gift's head became a party decoration within minutes.



---

**M**eanwhile, Master's-Rescue was traveling throughout the land with a small band of students. And just like his friend Master's-Gift, Master's-Rescue hated Heroic-Pose Jr. and criticized him openly. Master's-Rescue also railed against Divine-Prevailer's priests who had befriended Heroic-Pose and happily made concessions to appeal to High-Fort rather than advocating for the age-old practices taught by Eternal-Master.

On one occasion, Master's-Rescue and his students were taking a boat

across the sea when the students realized that no one had packed any food. They would soon starve since they had little money and no personal connections in the area. The more they bickered about what to do, the hungrier they felt. And the more their stomachs rumbled, the more panic set in.

Master's-Rescue said: *If you insist on talking about food, then consider what happens when fermented dough touches freshly-watered flour. We all know that the fermentation multiplies throughout all of the dough. You can't undo it, you can't stop it once they come into contact. Even the smallest portion of leaven will ferment a huge bowl of virgin dough if it's left unbaked. That's what Heroic-Pose has done to Divine-Prevailer. Even though he's just one man, he's tainted the entire land and the country hasn't refused him. His greatest allies are our own priests! If you're worried about food, why are you only thinking of your stomachs?*

This was how Master's-Rescue taught his students to question authority, criticize leaders, and treat even the priesthood with complete irreverence. So it's no surprise that the priests were morbidly obsessed with Master's-Rescue and used their connections with High-Fort to try to take him down.

On paper, Heroic-Pose's attendants and Divine-Prevailer's priests should have hated each other—but the reality was that they were plotting together all the time. They worked tirelessly to discredit, defy, or otherwise antagonize Master's-Rescue. And eventually they realized he'd simply go on winning converts and undermining their authority as long as he was allowed to live. So they decided to have him killed off.

Their plan went like this: first, the priests would claim that Master's-Rescue was propagating lies about Eternal-Master (a capital felony in

Divine-Prevailer). Then Heroic-Pose's attendants would add a charge of anarchy against him. This allowed them to lawfully execute Master's-Rescue as an enemy of both the temple and the state. And the key to success was that everything would happen fast in the dark of night, so nobody could keep track of the developments or think carefully about what was going on.

Once they set things in motion, even Master's-Rescue's closest followers couldn't slow things down or stand in the way. They didn't believe that it was possible for Master's-Rescue to die—he was Eternal-Master's promised god-king! So they were stupefied by every turn in the rapidly-escalating situation.

The empire's regional governor was confused by the legal proceedings against Master's-Rescue, too. He had never heard of this supposed *state-enemy* until the king's staff came in with some local priests to insist on the man's death. So Master's-Rescue was added to the scheduled executions for the following morning. He died by sunset, less than a day after being brought in.

Heroic-Pose Jr. was something of a passive actor in the deaths of his dad's enemies. He was an inconvenient obstacle in his mistress' plot against Master's-Gift and a pawn in the priests' vendetta against Master's-Rescue. Not that it would have been virtuous for Heroic-Pose Jr. to be involved in the murder of good men, but at least it would have been executive. Heroic-Pose Jr. was too busy getting laid, drunk, fed, and rich to bother with a couple treasonous vagrants wandering about in his territory, spreading dangerous ideas and hope to the people of Divine-Prevailer.

## PART THREE

## HEROIC-POSE III RAISES HELL

**W**hen Heroic-Pose III took his father's place over Divine-Prevailer, he continued the family tradition of spilling their constituents' blood. Heroic-Pose III found that the more he ravaged the followers of the late Master's-Rescue, the more the priests adored him. It was a lovely arrangement because Heroic-Pose III could gain political capital with the priests with virtually no pushback, because hatred for Master's-Rescue was a great unifier across nationality, religion, and class.

Heroic-Pose III joined with the priests' efforts to uncover the sect's secret gatherings, eventually catching up to their central leaders. Heroic-Pose III cornered one of Master's-Rescue's original students in the street in the middle of the day and struck him dead on the spot. From there Heroic-Pose III captured Rocky, the de facto head of Master's-Rescue's sect.

Rocky was beaten senseless and thrown into a deep dungeon outside of town with four squads of soldiers to personally guard him at all hours. Heroic-Pose III wanted Rocky alive so he could parade him around on one of Divine-Prevailer's holy days, making a show of his execution. But an immaterial servant of Eternal-Master appeared to Rocky in the dark of night and escorted him out of his cell, past the squads of guards, through the gates of the city, and around the streets where he wandered until he came to one of the sect's underground safe-houses.

When Heroic-Pose III questioned the guards about Rocky's whereabouts, they had no explanation. The only information that could be gathered was that Rocky was in his cell until he wasn't. No locks were

broken, no tunnels found, no escape plot whatsoever could be ascertained. Heroic-Pose III had all the men assigned to Rocky executed for their bewildering failure to keep their one and only prisoner detained.

---

**H**eroic-Pose III was so rattled by the episode with Rocky that he left his post to go to his vacation getaway on the coast. But trouble followed him there, too. Heroic-Pose III was met by ambassadors of two city-states, called *Stone* and *Hunting*, who sat on his border to the northwest. Stone and Hunting had quarreled with High-Fort in the past but were now eager to make amends with Heroic-Pose III because their food supply was dependent on trade with High-Fort. Stone and Hunting had even secured an invitation to Heroic-Pose III's court from his chief of staff.

But Heroic-Pose III wasn't ready to forgive or make peace. He was more interested in displaying his absolute authority and regal grandeur. So Heroic-Pose III dressed in his finest flowing robes and wrote a speech that would eviscerate Stone and Hunting for daring to cross him. On the day of the meeting, Heroic-Pose III called the ambassadors from Stone and Hunting into his vacation home to gaze at his extravagant fashion and hear his thundering voice.

Heroic-Pose III said: *Who dares to come before my throne to beg for my*



*favor? Fear me, Stone and Hunting, for I do not suffer pests who intrude on my presence.*

*You thought I would bend to your demands? You think lip-service and prostration will appease me? No, I require your destitution. I won't reconcile with Stone and Hunting even when its mighty men collapse with hunger long after their children and elders have starved to death. My wrath up to this point has brought you to desperation but you haven't endured all the pain I intend to inflict.*

*You know how I have exercised complete authority inside my borders, I kill my own people for simply uttering insubordination and I slaughter my soldiers for vexing me. How then do you think I will handle two foreign*



*cities who bother me?*

*So go back to your homes and deliver the news: Heroic-Pose III will continue to smite Stone and Hunting until your once-great cities are abandoned by the wise and piled with the emaciated bodies of the loyal. Then the world will fear the ferocity of my dominion!*

As Heroic-Pose III spoke, his attendants swooned: *The voice of a god, not a human!*

Heroic-Pose III enjoyed this praise and did nothing to correct their misconception about his divinity. So an immaterial attendant from Eternal-Master came down and struck Heroic-Pose III with worms who gobbled up his body, and he died there on his throne in a festering heap.

Heroic-Pose III should have known better than to puff himself up into the image of a god while ruling over Eternal-Master's chosen nation. Heroic-Pose III could cover himself in shimmering clothes and jewelry, he could sit on a glorious throne, he could speak with conviction and authority—but he was only a man with the same fragile body as anybody else. So Eternal-Master sent rot and decay to the mortal flesh under the shining robes to remind everyone that Heroic-Pose III was only human after all.

For all his scheming, Heroic-Pose III left no legacy. High-Fort handed the governorship of Divine-Prevailer to another family (who were, coincidentally, just as brutal and depraved as the Heroic-Poses). The Heroic-Pose family lineage was twisted with incestuous infidelity, tainted with shortsighted power-grabs, and burdened by failed get-rich-quick schemes. Even Heroic-Pose III's closest friend, Comforter, disowned his country to join Master's-Rescue's sect. So all that the Heroic-Poses left for history was the cautionary tale of their pathetic lives.

*From the Gospels, in Matthew chapter eight,  
Mark chapter five, and Luke chapter eight*

# THE HORDE

A NUDIST FILLS THE SEA WITH PIGS

**E**ternal-Master claimed to have no equal, but he did admit to having an *Adversary*—a godlike personification of death and chaos who schemed constantly to spread lies and malice like a rot across the earth. The Adversary's exact nature and power was unknown, but people knew it had been around from the beginning and Eternal-Master's own devotees begrudgingly acknowledged it as *the king of the world*.

Eternal-Master generally appreciated people's autonomy, except for a few occasions where he clouded his enemies' judgment to nudge them into a trap. And with his friends, Eternal-Master's servants were known to visit dreams and show up in the waking world. But these interventions were exceedingly rare.

But the Adversary wasn't as subtle or self-restrained. Its servants went on the offensive, taking control of people like an infection of the mind.

People plagued by one of these entities were a danger to themselves and others, as their normal life was irreparably disrupted with a violent antisocial temperament.

As Master's-Rescue went about the Lowlands, spiritually-infected people seemed to come out of the woodwork to talk to him. The odd thing was that Master's-Rescue usually spoke right past the actual person and conversed with the forces inside them. Master's-Rescue was entirely unfriendly with these vile things, but the fact that he engaged with them at all was far too familiar for most people. Divine-Prevailer's priests noticed that the immaterial parasites obeyed Master's-Rescue, so they accused him of being a friend of the Adversary, rather than an ally of Eternal-Master.

---

**A**cross the sea on Divine-Prevailer's northeastern border was a man who had taken in thousands of the Adversary's servants. He lived in the tombs outside of town and was known to wander the surrounding desert and mountains, which were uninhabited apart from the occasional flock with their shepherds. He patrolled the countryside from the sea to the city and didn't let anyone pass through.

The man's friends tried to bring him home to recover, but he always broke free and ran back to the desert. Strong men and soldiers were sent to subdue and arrest him, but even heavy chains and shackles couldn't



contain the man, because he could tear through metal. So he wandered about naked, crying, bloody from self-harm, and antagonizing anyone who crossed his path. He was a local legend, a boogeyman whose appearance and strength came right out of a nightmare.

Master's-Rescue arrived in the area by boat and intended to go to the city. But the man intercepted them, as he always did to travelers coming through. Master's-Rescue recognized his state and addressed the Adversary's servants, saying: *Come out of this man! Let him be, you're terrorizing him!*

The infectors didn't obey Master's-Rescue, but bowed the man down and wailed: *Why has the heir of the highest god come to us? We beg you to make an oath, with Eternal-Master as judge, not to hurt us or send us into the abyss.*

Master's-Rescue asked the Adversary's servant for its name. The man said: *Call us a horde, because there are so many of us here. But we're begging you not to drive us out of the land. Send us anywhere, we'll enter a herd of pigs!*

Master's-Rescue approved, and the horde exited the man and entered two thousand pigs on a nearby hill. The herd rushed into the sea and drowned. (Pigs are naturally competent swimmers, but these infected creatures thrashed about haphazardly and plunged their heads down. It's unclear if the Adversary's servants intended to kill the pigs or if the animals were putting up a proper fight against their unwanted guests.) The pigs' keepers ran off to tell everyone what happened and soon a crowd gathered to see the mess of floating corpses and the naked man who had tormented the area for so long.

The people saw the man calm, clothed, and sitting with Master's-Rescue. It appeared that all the gossip about Master's-Rescue was true; he could speak to the Adversary's servants and they obeyed him, so he must have been even more powerful than them. This realization was far from comforting—the people were more terrified of Master's-Rescue than they had ever feared the local nudist.

Master's-Rescue wanted to continue into the city but the people begged and pleaded with him to leave. Master's-Rescue obliged his second begging horde of the day and got into the boat to cross back into Divine-Prevailer to the southwest.

### 13. THE HORDE

The infected man wanted to leave with Master's-Rescue to become his student, but Master's-Rescue instead told him to go home and tell his friends that Eternal-Master freed him from the Adversary's servants. So from then on, the man told everyone about Eternal-Master, which only made him more puzzling to the locals. While his ordeal made everyone else wary of immaterial things, the man opened himself to another god even after being so badly treated by spirits before.

*From the Gospels, in the twentieth chapter of Luke*

# THE TENANTS

AN OFFENSIVE AND RIDICULOUS ALLEGORY

**A** man who owned an empty, undeveloped piece of land put himself to work, building it into a winery. He fertilized the ground, set up irrigation paths to make use of the rain, marked out rows, planted hearty grapevines, built a press to harvest the juice, constructed a wall all around, and even put up a tower so watchmen could effectively defend the property. So the man singlehandedly created a valuable and productive farm out of an otherwise useless plot of weeds. He found tenants and wrote up a lease agreement for them to care for his fully-furnished and operational winery. Since all of the upfront labor was completed before the tenants arrived, their job couldn't have been easier—watch the vines fruit and then make the wine available to its owner.

When summer came and his farm was ready for its first vintage of wine, the owner sent one of his attendants to fetch some of the farm's



## 14. THE TENANTS



product. But the tenants stopped the representative from collecting anything. They roughed him up and sent him off empty-handed. Maybe the tenants misjudged him for a thief who was only pretending to represent the owner so he could get drunk for free. The tenants' only job was to protect the flourishing winery, after all.

The owner sent another attendant who the tenants would more likely recognize. Yet the tenants had even more contempt for the second man, striking him on the head and badly wounding him. When the owner sent a third, he never returned to the owner at all. And this happened over

and over throughout the summer. It was like the tenants were at war against the owner, but the owner patiently sent more and more good men to be driven away, beaten, pelted with stones, or worse.

The owner's optimism was delusional. Eventually his staff was too injured for another trip to the winery or presumed dead. So he was down to one last representative; his own son. As a final attempt to make good on his crop, he sent the son to the winery—knowing certainly that the tenants would recognize him, since it was impossible to mistake the owner's flesh and blood for an imposter or thief.

When the tenants saw the son coming, of course they recognized him. But they said among themselves: *We finally got through the old man's staff and the fool has sent us his heir. If we kill him and add his body to the pile, he'll have no one else to steward the property and all of this wine will be ours.*

So they jumped on the son, killed him, and threw his corpse outside the walls of his father's farm to rot in the summer sun. This was no accident or misidentification—the tenants reveled in the murder, all so they could be rid of the owner. But the tenants' scheme failed to account for one thing: because of their lease agreement and history with the property, they got the silly idea that they were the only people eligible for the job. But when the owner marches back to his winery, it's obvious that he'll put the wretches to a miserable death and lease the place to new tenants who will give him his due, as the first tenants ought to have done all along.

The priests in the capital city of Divine-Prevailer were among the crowd listening to Master's-Rescue tell this story. The priests recognized plainly that Master's-Rescue's little story was a hit job, painting them as

disobedient stewards of Eternal-Master's teachings. Not only that, but his story made it sound like Eternal-Master could, and indeed would, replace them with some new and foreign group. When the priests had heard enough irreverent slander, they interrupted.

The priests said: *The owner has no right! The tenants (who only acted dutifully to protect the winery) have an agreement with the owner, so he can't replace them. We see how you're trying to scare us but it's ludicrous to make us out as the bad guys. Eternal-Master could never abandon Divine-Prevailer or the priesthood.*

Master's-Rescue said: *Then tell me why there's a song in your own scriptures that says 'the rejected stone will become the foundation' which the whole structure rests on. There's no other way to read it; Eternal-Master has endured your treachery as he's gone about his work. You reject his foundation stone, you censure his representatives, you can even kill his heir—but you won't stop him. The building will still go up, the wine will be made. You won't defer to Eternal-Master, so he's doing away with you and introducing himself to someone else. And you'll live to see this whole thing happen.*

*From the Gospels, in chapters twenty-six and twenty-seven of Matthew,  
and the twelfth chapter of John*

# THE DAMN PERFUME

A GENEROUS APPLICATION OF FRAGRANCE  
INSPIRES A TRAGIC BETRAYAL

**T**he only people who knew that Master's-Rescue was going to die were the Separatist priests, who were plotting the murder; the victim, who had always known about it; and his closest followers, because Master's-Rescue told them, but they didn't believe him until afterward.

The Separatists were an order among Divine-Prevailer's priests that held a low view of Eternal-Master's teachings, the ones that had been painstakingly preserved and studied since the nation came out of slavery fifteen-hundred years earlier. The Separatists' progressive flexibility allowed them to adeptly negotiate with High-Fort, the occupying empire, to maintain a pathetic semblance of Divine-Prevailer's religion.

They were called *Separatists* not because they advocated for independence from the occupiers, but because they had split from the

prior order of priests who believed that the original version of Eternal-Master's teachings were sufficient as written. But of course the Separatists loved to edit the old laws and invent their own rites. The various orders of priests also quarreled over opinions about spirits, the afterlife, free will, and all sorts of unknowable things that ministers love to argue about.

The squabbling orders of priests did find enthusiastic ecumenical unity in their shared hatred of Master's-Rescue, a man wandering throughout the land spreading dangerous new ideas. Master's-Rescue was another in a long line of itinerant emissaries with a brash irreverence for the status quo. But Master's-Rescue was even more extreme than the eccentrics of Divine-Prevailer's old times, back when they were an independent nation with their own king, army, language, and culture. Master's-Rescue's troubling interpretations of the scriptures made him a threat to the entire religious establishment.

---

**O**n one of the final evenings of Master's-Rescue's life, the Separatists gathered in the capital city at the high priest's house. They were finalizing their plot to murder Master's-Rescue with such pious dignity that no one thought to question the morality of it.

Meanwhile Master's-Rescue was doing what the Separatists hated most: he was partying in the home of a disgusting diseased man, a

resurrected corpse, women, foreigners, and other inferior people. Citizens were usually banned from the city for associating with unclean people, but Master's-Rescue defiled himself so many times and with such unassailable confidence that no one could stop him from doing as he pleased.

At the party, a woman named Restless opened a bottle of perfume and applied it to her teacher, Master's-Rescue. Restless didn't politely spritz him or perform a common anointing, she dumped out the whole bottle starting with his head, using her hair to spread it down to his feet. The smell of the flask being poured out all at once was overpowering, filling not just the room but the whole neighborhood with the sweet and musky scent of honeysuckle flowers. This gesture was costly—a common laborer would have had to save for years before being able to buy one small bottle of this concentrated perfume.

Master's-Rescue had been telling his closest followers that he would soon be put to death, and Restless seemed to be the only one who believed that she had a tragically short amount of time left with him. Everyone else was unable to comprehend the idea that Master's-Rescue could die, because they knew his power and his calling as the chosen son promised to the very first Man, after that Man misbehaved and ruined everything for everyone.

Master's-Rescue's students (who joined with him in an itinerant life; walking for days on end, sleeping in borrowed rooms or on the ground, often hungry, and never getting to enjoy creature comforts or luxuries of any kind) grumbled and complained when Restless wasted the expensive perfume on Master's-Rescue. They could have sold it and given the money to the poor. And one student, Worshiper, was particularly

offended because he was in charge of the coins and liked to skim some money off the top for himself.

Master's-Rescue turned to his twelve students and said: *Stop being callous; something beautiful is happening and you're scoffing at it. Remember I told you that I'm going to be killed and buried soon? Restless is preparing my body for death—what have you done to help? You just ignore me when I tell you that I'm going to die, or you argue with me like I don't know what I'm talking about. Stop being disingenuous; if you really cared about these poor people like you say, you would be out helping them rather than partying here. When the story of my life spreads throughout the world, Restless will be remembered for her love and you'll be remembered for your coldness.*



Worshiper was outraged. How could Master's-Rescue have the nerve to mention the needs of the poor while indulging in such expensive luxury himself? And how could he speak to his only devoted followers with such harshness?

Worshiper began to think that the Separatists might have been right to question Master's-Rescue, to confront him on his unlawful practices, and to scrutinize his interpretations of the scriptures. Most of all, he felt stupid to have believed this uneducated man when the nation's highest priests and scholars openly hated Master's-Rescue. If firebrands like Master's-Rescue had their way, it would only upend Divine-Prevailer's

tenuous partnership with High-Fort—who could easily send their armies to destroy Divine-Prevailer’s capital, dissolve their language, belittle their history, and bring an end to the nation itself.

Master’s-Rescue had humiliated this student for the last time. So Worshiper left the house to go find the priests.

By this point a large crowd had gathered around the house party, because the whole country loved Master’s-Rescue and were insatiably curious about everything he did and said. The crowd was also astonished to see the resurrected man among the guests at the party, because many of them had only heard gossip about the day Master’s-Rescue brought him back to life. More and more people were becoming convinced that Master’s-Rescue was the most supernaturally powerful man Divine-Prevailer had ever seen.

So when the Separatists learned where Master’s-Rescue was and who he was with, they added the resurrected man to their list of people to kill. Master’s-Rescue threatened to ruin the Separatists’ legacy as Divine-Prevailer’s first law-making priests, unless someone did away with him and snuffed out the entirety of his radical sect.

The deadly intentions of the Separatists were unknown outside their closest inner circle, so Worshiper didn’t know any better when he negotiated a reward for Master’s-Rescue’s arrest. Worshiper said: *I’ll bring Master’s-Rescue straight to the temple so he can be investigated by your council for his teachings and practices. How much will you pay me?*

The priests set a bounty of thirty silver coins, which was the going rate for a month’s work. Worshiper went back to Master’s-Rescue to find the right moment to have him captured and brought to the temple.



**A**s luck would have it, two nights later was the Passover (a ceremonial meal that celebrated the day the Fortifiers lost their firstborn children, securing Divine-Prevailer’s release from slavery).

At the dinner table, Master’s-Rescue said: *You are my dearest friends and closest followers. Who else sleeps on the ground alongside me, goes hungry with me, endures the scrutiny of the priests, and the attacks of the Adversary, and the throngs demanding a handout from me? And who else is invited to sit at this Passover table and dip bread into the very same dish*



*as me? No one but you, my twelve devoted students and friends. But one of you serves the Adversary, who rules the world and opposes everything Eternal-Master stands for. This one will hand me over to be killed. The scriptures say that the god-king's path leads to death, but damn anyone who plays a role in it. It would be better for the betrayer if he had been miscarried in his mother's womb than to live to adulthood and do an awful thing like this.*

Worshiper leaned in towards Master's-Rescue and whispered: *I don't know what you mean by killed, but I have to ask; am I the one you're talking about, teacher?*

Master's-Rescue said: *Doesn't the fact that you're asking the question speak for itself? Now don't waste any more of my time, just go and do what you've been planning.*

Worshiper left the table and went out into the night—and no one questioned it, despite Master's-Rescue's dramatic toast just a moment earlier. The students still couldn't begin to conceive of Master's-Rescue's death, so the gravity of his speech only confused them. They assumed that Worshiper had been sent out to do some kind of official business, since he handled the money.

---

**A**fter dinner, Master's-Rescue brought the eleven to a secret place in the woods so he could talk to Eternal-Master. Master's-Rescue had them stay behind in stations to keep watch. But they were so tired that an entire mob walked right past them and Master's-Rescue knew it before anyone else did.

Master's-Rescue woke up his students and said: *The moment I've dreaded for my entire life is happening: Divine-Prevailer's god-king is being arrested. Wake up, my betrayer is here.*

While he was still speaking, Worshiper arrived, leading a mob armed with swords, clubs, and whatever else they could find. They weren't so



much an *army regiment* but a ragtag band of the Separatists' attendants and devotees. Worshiper was familiar with Master's-Rescue's patterns and favorite places, so he knew where to find Master's-Rescue even when he wanted to hide. Worshiper instructed the mob to arrest and forcefully take away the man he would greet with a kiss.

When Worshiper came to Master's-Rescue and embraced him, Master's-Rescue whispered to him: *My friend, are you so callous to betray me with a kiss? Just get it over with.*

Master's-Rescue looked to the crowd and said: *Why have you come out with swords and clubs to capture me, like I'm some kind of thug? Day after day I've been with all of you in the temple, and you never stopped me from coming or going. It's just as the scriptures say; this is the Adversary's moment. See, I'm handing myself into your custody so that I can take the path that our Divine-Father has set out for me.*

Worshiper and all the other students scattered while Master's-Rescue was taken away by the priests' attendants.

---

**A**s the night went on, Master's-Rescue wasn't just brought to the temple for philosophical debate with the priests but to the empire's local governor for criminal punishment. The Separatists had architected an elaborate plot to make an example of Master's-Rescue by having him brutalized, mocked, and executed by the military as if he were a violent anti-state revolutionary. The Separatists

wanted to show everyone that if the temple's authority was insufficient to discourage dissent, then they could resort to political scheming to crush anyone who defied them.

Yet Master's-Rescue planned on dying all along. Even Eternal-Master stood by idly while this bloody work of sacrifice was carried out—ironically overseen by his own ill-intentioned priests.

Every stage of the trial and execution left Master's-Rescue's friends confused and undone. Divine-Prevailer had been captured, occupied, enslaved, governed, and sacked so many times throughout its generations that it seemed like a foregone conclusion that Eternal-Master's long-promised god-king would be its once-and-for-all political liberator. And while there had been temporary leaders and dynastic kings in the past who drove out Divine-Prevailer's captors, didn't the nation need true and lasting independence to be able to spread Eternal-Maser's teachings to every family on the earth?

And yet Master's-Rescue's revolution had been oriented around spiritual practice and philosophy rather than politics. The empire's regional governor had never heard of Master's-Rescue before scheduling his execution, while Divine-Prevailer's priests had been obsessing about him for years already. Everything was all wrong—tragically and teleologically twisted.

Some of Master's-Rescue's followers watched the proceedings from a safe distance throughout the night of his arrest, interrogation, torture, and death. Others ran home to their old lives. Others hid away and grieved the end of Master's-Rescue's revolution. But Worshiper went back to the priests to confess, because he realized the thing he had done to Master's-Rescue was immoral. Instead of absolution or counsel, the

priests turned up their noses at Worshiper's confession, refusing to take back the money or acknowledge their role in the assassination of a good man.

So Worshiper dropped the pieces of silver on the floor of Eternal-Master's house and ran out. He was already troubled by what had happened but now he was disturbed beyond comprehension at his central role in Master's-Rescue's murder. Worshiper wandered into a field and mourned—not by tearing his clothes, as was custom, but by tearing open his body so that his innards spilled out onto the ground.

The priests picked up Worshiper's coins and decided that it was imprudent to put his blood money into the temple treasury. So they used the coins to buy a field—the one where Worshiper had torn himself open—to use as a community burial ground for strangers. And the whole council of learned and decent men congratulated themselves for arriving at a noble and sensible response to this rather tricky quandary. That's why they alone had the privilege of serving as Divine-Prevailer's priests; when a difficult moral or procedural issue came before the religious establishment, the head ministers were always able to decisively solve it and keep things running smoothly in Divine-Prevailer.

So Master's-Rescue and Worshiper each died excruciatingly alone.

*From the Acts of the apostles, chapters four through fifteen.*

# A FAMILIAR VOICE SPEAKING STRANGE WORDS

THE OBVIOUS CANDIDATES GIVE WAY TO A NEWCOMER

## PROLOGUE

### ESCALATIONS

**S**hortly after Master's-Rescue marched about the Lowlands spreading provocative teachings and displays of strange supernatural powers, and after he was convicted and lawfully executed as a state enemy, his followers continued to agitate Divine-Prevailer's capital with his unsavory ideas. Perhaps it was because he rose from the dead, resumed teaching and performing magic for several weeks, and then flew up into the sky which made his followers so persistent in the face of sanctions, legal prosecution, and mob violence.

*Master's-Rescue's followers were dangerous. When they gathered to pray, the ground shook. When they spoke in public, crowds drew in. When they*

*gained converts, fire broke out. When they touched an afflicted person, ailments were healed. Even when they simply sat together in a house, storms of wind blew.*

*They were relentless. When the priests rebuked them, they shouted back defiantly. When they were put on trial, courts were confounded. When they were held in jail, the locks failed or the walls crumbled.*

*They were impossible to root out. When one was kicked out of their family, the others opened their homes. When one lost their job, the others sold their possessions to buy them food. When one was arrested or beaten or lynched in the street, the sect only increased. They doubled-down in the face of adversity and gave everything to support each other.*

*They could be found in the capital city, huddled under a covered outdoor section of Eternal-Master's house—when they weren't away spreading their beliefs or selling off their belongings.*

*The sect's leaders called themselves the Messengers of Eternal-Master, and their teachings were fundamentally out of step with decent society. Under the supervision of the Messengers, this group renounced personal wealth without concern for the local economy. They propped up women into almost every role of their organization. They put slaves in the same standing as prestigious landowners without regard for social order. Their diets included an unsavory mix of unclean and strange meat, including food offerings left out for other gods. So it can't be overstated how utterly confused everyone was about the sect's consistent and rapid growth.*



## PART ONE

## HALF-HEARTED ROT

**T**here was a Divine-Prevailer named *Solace* whose ancestors fled from one of Divine-Prevailer's many violent invaders and settled on an island. Solace studied under the Separatist priests in the capital city but quickly defected to Master's-Rescue's sect—becoming an influential figure in the early days of the sect due to his warm kindness and unflinching tenacity. His name wasn't really *Solace*, but everyone called him that because his given name, *More-Or-Less*, didn't sum up his lifestyle and attitude quite as well.

Solace sold a plot of his family's land and laid the money at the feet of the Messengers in a display of complete submission. In doing this, Solace sacrificed his livelihood, his local standing, and his children's generational inheritance. He had financially divested his material property to go all-in with the Messengers.

Seeing this, a married couple named *Favor* and *Sapphire* also sold something to benefit the sect. Except they held back a bit of the proceeds. To Favor and Sapphire, there seemed to be no reason to completely throw away their independence. And they felt the sect didn't need to know that they had a prudent little safety net for themselves. Favor and Sapphire weren't interested in conducting their lives with Solace's brash foolishness.

Favor laid the money in front of the Messengers and said: *My wife and I were inspired by the brave generosity we've been seeing around here, so we sold something, too. We're signing away our personal resources to advance Eternal-Master's work.*

Rocky, the de facto head of the sect, spoke up and said: *Tell me, Favor, is*

*this all the money from the sale—or is there more elsewhere?*

Favor said: *Well sure I guess got haggled down from the price I really wanted, but that's all the money in front of you.*

Somehow, Rocky knew that Favor was lying to the Messengers. Rocky said: *This is no small fib. You've joined the Adversary who undermines everything Eternal-Master does. You let it convince you to lie not only to us but to Eternal-Master's Pure-One. Remember how Eternal-Master used to live in the inner room of this very building, and he would instantly kill any dirty intruder? Now that same jealous and powerful being lives in you. Can you feel the weight of this? You're defiling Eternal-Master's home.*

*Let me be clear: before you chose to sell, the possession was completely your own. And even after it was sold, the proceeds were still entirely at your disposal. But when you laid only part of the money at our feet, it was an act of betrayal. I can't help wondering why you would do this—what could you possibly gain by pretending to join us while keeping back a safeguard for yourself? Joining this club won't benefit you; think of how many outsiders are actively working to dismantle this community as we speak. But even more than that, think about who you're toying with; Eternal-Master has never accepted partiality and he's deadly serious about his reputation.*

Right then and there, Favor fell down dead. Maybe he was filled with dread and simply gave up his life, or maybe the Messenger struck him down, or maybe it was Eternal-Master who cleansed the gathering to protect it from the rot of halfheartedness.

Some young men were tasked with wrapping Favor's body and taking it outside the city for immediate burial. Everyone present was shaken by the tragedy and mystery of Favor's death. But before anyone could even begin to process what happened, things escalated.

Sapphire arrived, not knowing what just happened to her husband. Rocky tested her about the offering as well, saying: *Tell me whether you sold your possession for the same amount of money that Favor laid at my feet today.*

Sapphire said: *Whatever Favor brought to you, that would have been all of it. This is an odd way to congratulate us for being so generous, but I suppose I understand what you meant to say. Rocky, you're welcome!*

Rocky said: *How is it that you two came to the decision to test the Pure-One of Eternal-Master, the spirit who guides us towards the master's ways? Was it a couples-bonding exercise or just a complete disregard for the seriousness of his work? Listen, you can hear the footsteps of the men who just buried your husband. They're here to bring you to him.*

Sapphire collapsed dead at Rocky's feet, just like her husband. The young men were just around the corner when they heard her body hit the ground. And when they found Sapphire's corpse, they wrapped her up, took her out, and buried her beside Favor.

Solace's example was a dangerous one to follow because the sect didn't abide false claims of wholeheartedness—Master's-Rescue got himself killed by harping endlessly on the priests for their empty pomposity, after all.

## PART TWO

## SOLACE VOUCHES FOR DESIRE

**R**ocky wasn't exaggerating when he said that there were outsiders actively working to dismantle their sect. When the priests realized that Master's-Rescue's followers were as much of a threat as their late leader, they initiated a campaign of extreme dissuasion tactics led by *Desire*: the tip of their spear.

Though Desire was still young, he was so passionate about the Separatists' new traditions that he advanced well beyond his peers into a position of leadership among the capital's priests. Ironically, Desire's background was nearly identical to Solace's—they were both born to wealthy families in foreign lands, romanticizing the old country where their beliefs and culture could be more freely practiced instead of hidden away from the disapproving empire. While Solace immediately abandoned the Separatists to follow Master's-Rescue, Desire was disgusted by the sect's criticisms of the law-making Separatist priests.

Desire followed after the tactics of Master's-Rescue's murderers, leading a purity enforcement initiative. Desire started by driving the sect out of their meeting place at Eternal-Master's house. When the sect scattered underground throughout the capital city, Desire investigated sympathizers, tracked down gatherings, and raided homes.

Desire was there when one of the sect's most fanatical members was caught teaching in public. Even after being pressed, he refused to back down from his view that Master's-Rescue was not a medicine man or controversial scholar but the promised god-king of Divine-Prevailer referenced throughout the scriptures, even in texts no one had considered before. So Desire had the man lynched by a mob who pelted

him with stones. This vile thing wasn't done in secret, it happened in the middle of the day in the center of the city.

But then two funny things happened to Desire. First, putting pressure on the sect only worked to send Master's-Rescue's followers out of the capital, thereby spreading their teachings and increasing their numbers exponentially. Enraged and undeterred, Desire expanded his municipal role into an international one, collecting letters of complaint about the sect from Divine-Prevailer's priests in neighboring countries.

The second thing that happened to Desire took place during one of his international journeys, a week's walk from Divine-Prevailer's capital. It was there that a light in the sky opened up and shined down on Desire and his attendants, immediately blinding Desire.

The voice said: *Desire, Desire, why do you oppose me?*

Desire's attendants were dumbfounded—despite claiming to be Eternal-Master's followers, they couldn't recognize their god when he was right in front of them. Desire knew the divine authority of the voice, but he was confused by its words.

Desire said: *Master, I've spent my life studying with your priests and advancing their cause. Now I feel that I must have never known you. Who are you, Eternal-Master?*

The voice said: *I am Master's-Rescue, who you've afflicted. Now get up and continue into the city.*

Instead of taking revenge, Master's-Rescue showed himself to Desire from his throne and invited his enemy to become a friend. Desire was convinced immediately that Master's-Rescue was not just alive but divine. So Desire went into the city that he had intended to cleanse and instead stayed in the home of Master's-Rescue's friend while his sight

returned. Then Desire left to be alone in the wild for three years to sort out his new life.

After studying and thinking and talking to Eternal-Master, Desire went back to the city to be with Master's-Rescue's other followers. When the priests found out what became of their purity enforcement officer, they couldn't abide his change of heart. The priests worked with the local mayor to lock the gates while they searched the city for Desire. The local members of the sect secreted Desire out of a hole in the walls, lowering him down silently in a woven basket (coincidentally, the city's name was *Silent-Weaver*).

Desire snuck back into the Lowlands and joined the sect' in their headquarters, which was little more a collection of secret corners and homes. But the Messengers wanted nothing to do with Desire. They still saw Desire as a terrorizer and murderer. Only Solace saw the genuine change in Desire and was encouraged by the ingenious connections Desire had discovered in the scriptures that pointed to the legitimacy of Master's-Rescue as the promised god-king. Solace believed in change, in forgiveness, and in new beginnings to a degree that bordered on insanity.

Solace found Desire, brought him to the Messengers, and said: *With the help of the Adversary, Desire twisted his devotion to the priesthood into hatred of Eternal-Master, and we all suffered by his hand. But Desire met Eternal-Master in a vision, received the Pure-One, and now he does nothing except teach people about Master's-Rescue. He's a new man. If we really believe that Master's-Rescue made total forgiveness the new norm, then it doesn't matter that Desire has our blood on his hands. Look, even the priests believe in the genuine ability of people like Desire to fundamentally change—they've been trying to kill Desire everywhere they find him. So join me in*

*befriending Desire.*

Solace convinced the Messengers to embrace Desire, learn from him, and support his new life as one of their teachers. Desire became a strategic spokesperson for Master's-Rescue, arguing against various critics and skeptics. This led many to try to kill him—just as he had killed others who shared this message only a little while earlier.

So the Messengers sent Desire back to his childhood home, outside the Lowlands, to let things cool off. Desire spent three years there, continuing to examine the scriptures he had studied furiously for his entire life, now seeing how Master's-Rescue's interpretation radically changed the meaning of the very same words.

During these years, the sect faced increasing violence from the priests and the empire. The sect's radical ideals and loud mouths kept them from thinking shrewdly about their own preservation. But the cunning of the Separatists and might of the empire still proved useless to slow the spread of the slippery, unpredictable sect.

---

PART THREE

SOLACE AND DESIRE TEAM UP

**M**eanwhile, outside the Lowlands, in a port city called *Opposition*, an unprecedented thing was happening. When the first members of the sect had arrived as refugees, they didn't restrict themselves to socializing with their own countrymen but befriended anyone who would listen to their news about Master's-

Rescue. So they built up an eclectic mix of peoples from the far-flung reaches of the world. Curiously, Eternal-Master's Pure-One even inhabited the foreigners just like he did for the Divine-Prevailers. The Messengers sent Solace to assess the strange chapter in Opposition. Being a soft-hearted man, Solace happily accepted the foreign, unclean, unpared, and uneducated people as genuine members of Master's-Rescue's sect.

The gathering in Opposition grew rapidly, to the point where Solace alone wasn't up to the task of leading them all. So Solace brought Desire out of his cozy hiding place—surrounded by books and family—and back into a real job, co-leading the multiethnic gathering. This was decidedly the last thing either of them thought they would be doing with their lives when they studied under the narrow-minded, racist priests in their youth. But Eternal-Master can be squirrely, and no one can predict his moves.

Solace and Desire's role in Opposition wasn't to teach abstract philosophical concepts to an eager audience of perfect devotees. Just like anybody else, these people had conflicting urges—they wanted to follow Master's-Rescue but they also had wrongheaded ideas and tomfoolery going on. Here and elsewhere, people were crass, some were ungrateful, some wanted to believe that Master's-Rescue was only a ghost, some took each other to court, some gave preëminence to certain supernatural powers over others, one guy was fucking his mother-in-law.

There were also certain Divine-Prevailers who wanted two classes within the sect; foreigners on one side and the special family that descended from the patriarch Supplanter on the other. These objectors weren't purely focused on lineage, but of practices taught to Divine-



Prevailer. The foreigners' penises were still intact and unpared, after all. This came to a head when Rocky visited the city of Opposition with a group of traditional Divine-Prevailers who intimidated both Rocky and Solace to withdraw from the foreigners at mealtime. Desire lashed out at them all, noting the hypocrisy of maintaining any form of separation when all social barriers and racial distinguishers had been obliterated by Master's-Rescue.

It was clear that there was still much to do to understand Eternal-Master's purposes in giving the Pure-One to unpared foreigners. And this would have to be resolved soon, because tensions were rising and threatening to split the Messengers.

During their stay in Opposition, Solace and Desire planted themselves in the town square, religious buildings, at the gates, in homes, and anywhere else where people could hear them talk. This tended to push hearers in one of two directions: enthusiastic acceptance or hostile defiance.

Years later, when Desire wrote back to one of the cities where he spent time teaching, he put things this way: *Divine-Prevailer is captivated by supernatural signs, foreigners want to be intellectually stimulated, but our only message is Master's-Rescue's ritual execution as a blood sacrifice for every nation. So the only word that we've been directed by Eternal-Master to share is either uninteresting or batshit crazy to everyone who hears it. We preach to find the few people who recognize the divine brilliance of it.*

Despite the tension, Solace and Desire didn't leave Opposition until one of the sect's emissaries learned of a famine coming to the Lowlands. The people in Opposition gathered up a donation to help their brothers weather the drought, sending Solace and Desire to dispense their gift



over the next five years. So a foreign gathering was Eternal-Master's vehicle to sustain the Lowlands. This was yet another nudge to the Messengers towards a truly egalitarian future for the sect.

When the land was fertile again, Solace and Desire went straight back to Opposition city, bringing Solace's nephew, Master's-Gift/Defender along with them. He had become a helpful companion in their itinerant lifestyle and enabled Solace and Desire to accomplish much more than when they worked as a duo.

---

One day in Opposition, the Pure-One told the sect's emissaries to send Solace and Desire out to the northwest, farther from the Lowlands. They weren't the first people Eternal-Master had ever sent abroad—but after two thousand years, Eternal-Master's promise to Progenitor to reach every family on the earth was underway in earnest.

Solace and Desire again enlisted Master's-Gift/Defender to attend to their journey and make the months of travel feasible. The three men packed light and boarded a ship west. They went to all sorts of social gathering places to spread their message.

Their first stop was an island ruled by a governor who employed a sorcerer as his lieutenant. As Desire presented his beliefs in the governor's office, the sorcerer interrupted constantly to try to subvert and discredit Desire's every word. So Desire commanded Eternal-Master to strike the sorcerer blind. The governor watched his own lieutenant become a babbling mess, and was further taken aback by Desire's teaching, which was obviously more than a cute bit of logic or foreign curiosity (as he had presumed).

Solace, Desire, and Master's-Gift/Defender took a boat north to the mainland and arrived in a city called *Dirty*. But Master's-Gift/Defender abandoned them to go back to the Lowlands, leaving Solace and Desire to handle their own logistics and accommodations. It was too late to find a new companion, so Solace and Desire were forced to press on without an attendant.

As they passed through towns to the west, the locals of every place became fascinated by the message of Divine-Prevailer's god-king. Unpared locals crowded the squares and filled Divine-Prevailer's

gathering places to learn all they could from Solace and Desire. Some Divine-Prevailers listened as well. But in every place there were more who hated their out-of-town guests than appreciated them. Eventually Solace and Desire were pursued by a team of priests and thugs who were trying to execute them.

In a city called *Set-Loose*, Desire commanded a man with a malformed foot to stand upright and be healed, just like Master's-Rescue was known to do. At this, the locals brought out oxen and wreaths from their shrine as sacrifices to the men, thinking they were gods—despite Desire and Solace's protests. The priests' mob arrived just then, cornered Desire, and struck him with large stones until he laid motionless in a bloody heap. The killers confirmed the kill and dragged Desire's corpse out of the city, leaving it to rot in the wilderness.

When it was safe, Solace went out to properly bury his friend, but he found that Desire was very much alive. Desire simply stood up and walked back into the city. They continued their tour the next day.

On their way back towards Opposition, Desire and Solace visited the same stops again, encouraging the people to endure the brutality of the priests and the empire. They also set up local leaders so that these gatherings could persevere. When they arrived in Opposition city, they gave a report of their journey, noting how Divine-Prevailers tended to reject their message while unpared foreigners accepted it.

---

**T**he Messengers could tell that something else happened on this trip. In every place Desire and Solace went, it was always Desire who stood out. Desire stepped up to preach, Desire spoke first in a confrontation, Desire took the initiative to teach and do magic. Desire was the focus of attention, the center of controversy, and the target of violence. Solace was there too, but he always deferred to the supporting role while Desire took the lead.

You'd assume that Solace would be the more prominent figure, having joined the sect way back when they were just a handful of people. Meanwhile, Desire had been a Separatist zealot who had only changed his ways a decade before. Nevertheless, Solace had become a sidekick, along with Rocky and all the Messengers who had personally travelled with Master's-Rescue for three years. All the likely leaders found themselves lagging behind Desire ... somehow the insidious villain of the story was now its central protagonist, overshadowing all others.

After two years in Opposition, Desire proposed that he and Solace return to the cities in the northwest to check in and help them along. And Solace agreed, but he added an additional thought; what if they took Master's-Gift/Defender along again?

Desire said: *Master's-Gift/Defender is a godawful deserter! We don't have a luxurious caravan of attendants and horses to whisk us to and fro across the earth. We have our own backs and the mercy of our hosts to sustain us for the next year, maybe longer. We can't afford to bring any dead weight or chickenshit companions along like we're on some kind of leisure tour. We'll die out there if we leave ourselves in the fickle hands of Master's-Gift/Defender.*

Solace said: *I'm shocked that you of all people would allow your brother's track record to define his character! What if we treated you that way? Well you'd be rotting in some pile of corpses outside an imperial barracks or buried unceremoniously in that field that the priests use for strangers. No one would mourn for you, no one would miss you. But instead, we followed Master's-Rescue's example and brought you in when you had been nothing but an enemy. And now you, Desire—the former Separatist whip, the murderer of Crowned-One—you're going to doubt the sincere repentance of Master's-Gift/Defender and use his youthful indiscretion to hold him back from doing this good and noble thing? Call me a gullible fool for believing the best about Master's-Gift/Defender, but it's what I've always done and I've never regretted being kind.*

Desire said: *Fine, take your own trip with Master's-Gift/Defender and I'll go elsewhere. We'll cover more ground separately anyway.*

So Desire walked northeast aided by an attendant named Woody while Solace and Master's-Gift/Defender boarded a ship northwest. Desire's story continued dramatically, with supernatural power, mass conversions, religious espionage, the machine of imperial politics, death, and new life. Solace continued the work as well, but didn't do anything worth recounting.

Years later, Desire spoke highly of Solace and he even sent for Master's-Gift/Defender to come visit him when he was imprisoned in the far-flung imperial capital. So this isn't a story about rivalry or the formation of factions in the sect, but about one man making history and another fading from memory.

*From John's Revelation*

# SEVEN DOORS, HORNS, & BOWLS

SYMBOLS TO PONDER WHILE EVERYTHING CRUMBLES

**M**aster's-Rescue had two best friends and they were both named *Master's-Gift*. One died young but the other stuck around to the bitter end. This story is about the second *Master's-Gift*. He grew up working on the family fishing boat in the northern Lowlands. When *Master's-Rescue* came to town recruiting students, *Master's-Gift* and his older brother abandoned their jobs immediately—leaving the other fishermen to scramble to finish the day without them. This erratic behavior was typical for the brothers, who were known as the *Raging-Noise-Boys* for their whimsical (and at times insufferably arrogant) personalities. Nonetheless, *Master's-Gift* grew into a close confidant of *Master's-Rescue*; he alone followed *Master's-Rescue's* arrest, overnight trial, and long execution process. *Master's-Gift* even provided for *Master's-Rescue's* mother as his own.

Sixty years later, after Master's-Rescue left the ground and disappeared into the sky, things had gone poorly for Master's-Gift. Following Master's-Rescue had awarded him a lifetime of conflict and a one-way ticket to exile on a deserted island. By this point, the other eleven students who followed Master's-Rescue had all died. So in his old age, Master's-Gift was alone.

Rather than spend his energy trying to escape or building a comfortable home, Master's-Gift focused on communing with Eternal-Master in silent solitude. He had perfected total stillness as a tool for supernatural alertness. During one of these sessions of complete tranquility, Master's-Gift was startled almost to death by a voice behind him that roared like a trumpet or churning river rapids.

The voice said: *Write what you see!*

Master's-Gift turned and collapsed at a blinding light. His old friend, Master's-Rescue stood there with eyes blazing as bright as the sun. A sword protruded from his mouth as he spoke—a literal version of the dangerous and divisive words that he was famous for. In contrast to the unkempt old man laying in front of him, Master's-Rescue wore a fine robe with a satin gold sash. He held seven stars and his bare feet gleamed like polished bronze. He freed his hands of the stars to lift his old friend up off the ground.

Master's-Rescue said: *Don't be afraid of death. I control it, because I died and returned stronger. Now write what you see!*

Master's-Gift was invited through a door in the sky. He was now standing in Eternal-Master's throne room. Throne rooms are usually lavish but dull places where state business is conducted, but this throne room overwhelmed the senses with flashing lights, vibrant colors, heat,



perfumed smoke, and deafening noise. The floor was a mirror that reflected all the brilliant colors above, disorienting Master's-Gift.

The room was occupied by a council of strange beings. The king himself gleamed fiery red and orange, a rainbow radiated around him, and an electrical storm raged behind the throne. There were twenty-four elders dressed in pure white (with their own crowns and thrones), seven helpers (who were flames resting on torches), four singers (creatures covered in eyes, wings, and beastly features), and a lamb who oversaw seven grand doors, all of which were sealed shut. Everyone faced a golden furnace in the center of the room, burning massive blocks of incense as a perpetual offering to Eternal-Master.

---

**A**s the lamb unsealed the first four doors, soldiers on horseback emerged to be commissioned by Eternal-Master. The first rode a white horse and had a bow—he was crowned and sent out to conquer the world, which he did. The second rode a red horse and was given a sword and instructed to revoke peace from the earth, so that people would turn violent, waging wars and murdering each other. The third rode a black horse and carried a merchant's scale. He was instructed to inflate the prices of crops to destabilize markets. The fourth rode a sickly pale horse, his name was *Death* and death trailed behind him like a plague. He was instructed to make life fragile, so that a quarter of the world's population would die by



war, murder, famine, sickness, and animal attacks.

When the fifth door opened, Master's-Gift looked inside and saw an effigy to everyone who had been killed for advancing Eternal-Master's interests. The martyrs clung to the altar and cried out: *Master, if you're in control, how long until you avenge us? Our killers are unpunished and unharmed!*

The martyrs were given pure white robes and told to stand down because there were still more victims coming to join them.

The sixth door opened and something terrible rushed out, shaking the

ground, turning the sun black and the moon blood red, and bringing all the stars down—in the same way that ripe fruit drops from a tree when the wind blows, because the whole universe had ripened and was ready for harvest. The sky vanished, like a scroll being rolled up. Then mountains collapsed and islands sunk. It was as if the earth had only ever been a theater stage, and now the set was being struck after the final show. The people of the earth ran from the wreckage of their homes and attempted suicide (because they knew Eternal-Master was going to deal with them soon) but Eternal-Master wouldn't let them die. Ropes couldn't strangle their necks, boulders failed to crush their bodies, knives could barely break their skin, they couldn't sink into water, poison had no effect....

The seventh door opened and every sound was silenced. The cacophony of thunder, singing, and crying martyrs in the throne room went still for half an hour. To break the silence, the seven helpers who lit the lamps in front of the throne were handed trumpets. An eighth helper came with a golden incense carrier. It lit the incense from the golden altar's fire and threw the smoldering, perfumed pieces across the world, causing more thunderstorms and earthquakes.

Then six of the helpers blew their trumpets. Fiery, bleeding hail rained down; a burning bloody mountain was thrown into the ocean; a polluted asteroid spewed poison; the sun, moon, and stars dimmed; a bottomless pit opened and sent out a swarm of little winged warriors with human heads, scorpion tails, and sharp teeth; two hundred million cavalymen came from the Great-River and breathed fire and poisonous smoke and struck with stinging tails. The result of these trumpet blasts was a successive thinning of the population of the earth—each trumpet cut the

world's population by a third.

Before the seventh trumpet sounded, a servant of Eternal-Master came to the earth and swore that the seventh trumpet would make public Eternal-Master's ultimate plan. The seventh trumpet rang out and started a song in the throne room:

*The Adversary had ruled the world,  
but now Master's kingdom is unfurled.  
He made promises, now he's making good,  
so everyone sees what few understood.  
We were waiting for justice long enough,  
Master's power turns all others to fluff.  
Master kills killers, he's cruel to the cruel,  
finally using his sharp revenge tools.*

To be clear, none of this happened as quickly as Master's-Gift saw it, but took place over generations. World-changing shifts were personified as characters locked in an epic struggle—one that individual people usually can't perceive. Master's-Gift noted that at every turn, the people who previously didn't care for Eternal-Master continued to reject him, praying to other gods for protection. They weren't about to change their minds now that Eternal-Master was showing his true colors.

Gradually along the way, the immaterial realm became more and more apparent to the people of the earth. Wars that had broken out in Eternal-Master's city were now spilling across the earth. At one point, the Adversary made itself known to everyone in the human world and even recruited help in its pursuit of an immaterial being whose son threatened the Adversary's dominion. They rebuilt the empire of Confusion as the headquarters of the hunt for the queen mother.

Eternal-Master ended the war by pouring out seven bowls full of anger, pestilence, plague, and death. The first bowl went into the ground and caused agonizing sores to break out on the Adversary's loyalists. The second and third bowls went into the ocean and drinking water (respectively), turning them into blood. The fourth bowl went onto the sun, fueling it with intense heat that scorched the earth. The fifth bowl was poured on the Adversary's throne in Confusion, bringing a darkness that overwhelmed the empire. The sixth bowl went into the Great-River, drying it up to allow a coalition of kings to cross into Confusion.

The Adversary and its chiefs weren't dissuaded. The chiefs sent frogs out of their mouths to display magic signs and unite the world under the Adversary's banner. But everything they did was a lost cause because Eternal-Master's seventh bowl hadn't yet been poured out.

The seventh bowl was thrown into the air, causing a storm so powerful that all the cities of the world were destroyed, the islands sank, and the mountains were flattened. The Adversary was defeated as the storm raged, and its grip over the world gave way. But even with their leader defeated, the armies of Confusion weren't giving up. But Eternal-Master's loyalists recognized that the last day, the one they had been eagerly dreading since the very first Man, had finally arrived. So the armies of the earth's unified empire—no longer supported by their immaterial king and hordes of otherworldly servants—made a hopeless effort against Eternal-Master and his son, Master's-Rescue.

The old man, Master's-Gift, was watching everything and writing furiously on the margins of his last scraps of paper, trying to capture the details of the vision that had been unfolding before him. He had witnessed so many strange and incomprehensible things that it was

beginning to feel like his task to write everything down had been a cruel and impossible test.

As the army arrived in their formation, one of Eternal-Master's servants stood on the sun and gave a special announcement to all the scavenging birds: *Come, all you hungry, soaring flocks, searching desperately for meat, Eternal-Master will feed you. All you picky eaters, who prefer royalty, you'll get your fill of every kind of king and prince! And to those who want a strong man's flesh, you'll find decorated captains, legendary soldiers, prestigious cavalrymen with their steeds, and loyal foot*



*soldiers. Every kind of person, from scrawny malnourished slaves to fat lazy landowners—their corpses will all be abandoned for you to gorge at your leisure. An army of rebels will be your feast today.*

Master's-Rescue himself came out and defeated the army by speaking against them with the sword that came out of his mouth. And sure enough, no one was left to bury the dead, so scavengers from all over the world made their way to the greatest mountain of rot they could have ever imagined in their death-loving lives.

---

**I**n the aftermath of the war, the earth was renewed and reformed. Eternal-Master's loyalists came together as an eclectic gathering of multiethnic people alongside various kinds of spirits, beasts, and other beings from outside the material world. Their city had no gates or defenses, there were no war machines, overseers' whips, water purifiers, medicines, coffins, two-person beds, debts, underpaid workers, aristocrats, beggars, scandals, arguments, villains, fears, or broken promises.

Master's-Gift was released from the vision. He saw the servant of Eternal-Master who had shown him everything, so he bowed to it—but was scolded for praising a peer instead of their superior. The servant told Master's-Gift to compile his notes and send them out to every chapter of Master's-Rescue's sect.

The servant said: *Tell everyone to continue their lives as usual while we*

17. SEVEN DOORS, HORNS, & BOWLS

*wait for these events—the rebels will rebel, the dirty will dirty, the good will promote equity, and the pure will purify. And tell everyone that Master’s-Rescue, the descendent of Cherish, is coming with his sword as surely as the sun rises.*



# **APPENDIX**

*For your reference*

# THE TRIBES OF DIVINE-PREVAILER

A PEOPLE CAJOLED BY AN OPINIONATED GOD

Divine-Prevailer's tribes were founded by the sons of the patriarch Supplanter, who were provided to him by a pair of sisters, two child-bearing attendants (hiring on a child-bearer was a relatively common practice of family life in the ancient world), and his favorite son:

- The older sister was Exasperater <sup>[HEBREW: LEAH]</sup>, who was treated with contempt by her husband even after she mothered six boys and one daughter.
  - A child-bearer named Wilter <sup>[HEBREW: ZILPAH]</sup> carried two boys for Exasperater.
- The younger sister was Ewe <sup>[HEBREW: RACHEL]</sup>, who was Supplanter's favorite but she was barren for most of her life. Ewe mothered two boys, but she died while delivering the younger.
  - A child-bearer named Sheepish <sup>[HEBREW: BILHAH]</sup> carried two boys for Ewe.
  - Oddly, Ewe's firstborn son More-Or-Less <sup>[HEBREW: JOSEPH]</sup> also gave Supplanter two sons—but more on that situation later.




---

## I. SON-APPEARS: THE INCOMPETENT TITLE-HOLDER

### THE FOUNDER

Eternal-Master gave Exasperater fertility as a consolation prize for landing on the bad side of Supplanter's favoritism. She named her firstborn child *Son-Appears* [HEBREW: *REUBEN*] as another way of saying *it's-a-boy*, because she was desperate to gain her husband's love and thought that an heir would turn things around [GENESIS 29:31-32].

Son-Appears expected to be a family leader, but nobody ever followed him because they preferred the ideas of his younger brother Worshiper instead [SEE GENESIS 37:18-30, 42:22, 42:37-38]. Son-Appears became so desperate to dominate that he raped his step-mom's attendant [GENESIS 35:22], so Supplanter took the customary double-inheritance of a firstborn away from Son-Appears and gave it to someone else [GENESIS 48:3-5]. On his deathbed, Supplanter described Son-Appears as *unstable and undignified* [GENESIS 49:3-4].

**THE TRIBE**

When the tribes were lined up to reënter their ancestral territory, the Lowlands, their leader Drawn-Up said that being alive was Son-Appears' only achievement [DEUTERONOMY 33:6].

As the nation prepared to take back their long-promised domain, Son-Appears and Lucky-Raider rejected their place in the Lowlands, preferring a parcel of grassland on the east side of the Descending-River. Son-Appears took an undersized corner of this region while other tribes were allotted much larger spaces [JOSHUA 13:15-23; NUMBERS 32].

In the following generations, as Divine-Prevailer struggled with invasions, civil wars, and other existential crises, Son-Appears shirked responsibility, lazing about while their cattle grazed. There was even a song mocking Son-Appears for staying with their precious herds when the country called on them to help fight off an invader [JUDGES 5:15B-16]. Over the centuries, Son-Appears slowly shriveled up and disappeared [1 CHRONICLES 5:25-26]. Son-Appears is the quintessential biblical firstborn: disobedient and pathetic. In this way, Son-Appears is prototypical of the whole nation, which similarly fell short of expectations.

---

## II. DISCERNER: THE FORGOTTEN ONE

**THE FOUNDER**

*Discerner* [HEBREW: *SIMEON*] got his name because his mom Exasperater

was still desperate to be *discerned*—noticed, heard, seen, anything—by her husband and was unsuccessfully trying to win him over with children [GENESIS 29:33].

As young men, Discerner and his younger brother Uniter took revenge on a prince who stole their sister. Discerner and Uniter tricked the men of the city into paring their genitals—abusing Eternal-Master’s most sacred rite so they could slaughter the gullible people while they were still nursing their penile wounds [GENESIS 34]. It’s not wrong to rescue your sister from a rapist, but the way they went about it was truly insane.

When famine struck and the boys had to buy food from their estranged brother, Discerner was selected to be bound and blindfolded as a ransom—guaranteeing that the rest of the boys would fetch their youngest brother and return with him. But the ransom didn’t work: Supplanter opted to abandon Discerner (rather than put his youngest in harm’s way). Discerner was rescued only after the family ran out of food and were forced to comply with their tormentor’s demands [GENESIS 42-43].

Discerner and Uniter were all but disowned by their father who said: *These brutes have no part in my legacy* [GENESIS 49:5-7].

### THE TRIBE

When Drawn-Up addressed the tribes entering the Lowlands, he skipped Discerner entirely, and nobody corrected his oversight [DEUTERONOMY 33]. Discerner ended up taking a small part of Worshiper’s land, which remained sparsely populated and rural [JOSHUA 19:1-9; 1 CHRONICLES 4:24-43].

When Divine-Prevailer split into northern and southern states, Discerner was forgotten again—their tribal land was in the far south of the country, but Discerner sided with the ten northern tribes anyway. So

Discerner ended up cut off and ignored in every way possible.

#### CITIES IN DISCERNER

**Seventh-Promise-Well** [HEBREW: *BEËRSHEBA*] was founded by the first patriarch Progenitor, where the patriarchal family lived off and on [GENESIS 21:25-34, 22:19, 26:32-33]. Progenitor banished the mother of his first child to the wilderness outside Seventh-Promise-Well [GENESIS 21:14]. Seventh-Promise-Well sat on the Lowlands' southern border, so its name is used throughout the Bible as a shorthand for the country's full span [JUDGES 20:1; 2 SAMUEL 24:2; 1 CHRONICLES 21:2].

---

### III. UNITER: THE IRONIC PRIEST

#### THE FOUNDER

*Uniter* [HEBREW: *LEVI*] got his name because his mom Exasperater hoped that a third son would *unite* her with her emotionally-distant husband [GENESIS 29:34].

After abusing their family's most sacred rite to slaughter a small kingdom [GENESIS 34], Supplanter called Uniter and Discerner *brutes* with *no part in my legacy* [GENESIS 49:5-7].

#### THE TRIBE

When the tribes of Divine-Prevailer escaped slavery and wandered in the wilderness, religious rites were still administered within each family

—but the rabble proved too fickle to stick with Eternal-Master [EXODUS 32:1-25]. The national leader, Drawn-Up, recruited the Uniter tribe to oversee the nation’s newly formalized religion, protect Eternal-Master’s tent, teach the scriptures, use various instruments to determine Eternal-Master’s preferences, and attend to sacrifices on the altar [EXODUS 28-29]. Uniter became Eternal-Master’s *pledge of peace*—meaning that the priests were like a living contract, managing the relationship between humankind and Eternal-Master [NUMBERS 3:11-13, 18:21-23, 25:10-13]. And Uniter’s first official act as a priesthood was to cut down thousands of their countrymen for abandoning Eternal-Master [EXODUS 32:26-30]. After inducting the tribe, Drawn-Up asked Eternal-Master to crush the genitals of Uniter’s enemies, so that they would disappear forever [DEUTERONOMY 33:8-11].

When the tribes settled in the Lowlands, Uniter wasn’t given a parcel of land or conscripted into the army because mediating for Eternal-Master was more than enough already [NUMBERS 1:47-54, 2:33, 18:20]. (This was also a fulfillment of Supplanter’s curse against Uniter [NUMBERS 26:62].) The other tribes were instructed to provide for the priesthood [DEUTERONOMY 18:1-8], which operated wherever Eternal-Master’s house was set up [E.G., 1 KINGS 8:4]. When Eternal-Master’s tent was converted into a stone house in the capital, it never traveled again (despite being razed and rebuilt twice) [1 KINGS 5-6; 2 KINGS 25:9 (ALSO ISAIAH 64:11); HAGGAI (ESPECIALLY 2:3); EZRA 3:10, 6:14-15; LUKE 21:5-6; JOHN 2:20]. Uniter who weren’t priests lived in forty-eight cities scattered throughout the Lowlands, six of which were shelters for manslaughterers [NUMBERS 4, 35].

Eternal-Master’s priests faced stiff competition from other gods, whose priests offered enticing services like sex work and child sacrifice. There

was even a Uniter who went rogue, billing himself as a local convenience to a wealthy man who didn't like traveling all the way to Eternal-Master's tent [E.G., JUDGES 17:7-13].

Although it was unthinkable to disrespect or harm a Uniter, the tribe of Strong-Hand-Son had a history of doing just that. First, the men of a certain city refused to house a traveling priest (and then raped his child-bearer to death). In retaliation, Strong-Hand-Son was killed off and only partially repopulated with the help of men from other tribes [JUDGES 19-21]. A few years later, a king from Strong-Hand-Son slaughtered everyone at Eternal-Master's tent [1 SAMUEL 22:6-19]. There wasn't a decisive response to this second offense, but the Strong-Hand-Son dynasty was ultimately ousted and discarded [1 CHRONICLES 10:13-14].

After Divine-Prevailer had been displaced throughout the world, the priests scattered into every place where their countrymen lived. The priests' ceremonial duties waned because they couldn't access Eternal-Master's house anymore, so they evolved into educators of Divine-Prevailer's laws, songs, and stories. The priests finalized these in writing and made a copy for every gathering [E.G., LUKE 4:16-17].

By the time Master's-Rescue came around, the priesthood had fractured into competing orders [E.G., MATTHEW 22:23; ACTS 23:6-10]. But they all had one thing in common: they belittled the ancient scriptures and instead busied themselves with developing new customs, rules, and philosophies. The Separatist order [HEBREW: PHARISEE] was the worst of them all, seeing themselves as divine lawmakers in their own right. Master's-Rescue hated what the priesthood had become and spoke more venomously about them than even Divine-Prevailer's imperial occupiers [E.G., MATTHEW 15:5-9, 23:13; LUKE 11:39-40].



**'UNITER' IN THE BIBLE**

One of Master's-Rescue's students was named *Uniter*—before following Master's-Rescue, he worked as an imperial representative, exacting taxes from his countrymen (a dark perversion of his namesake as a divine mediator) [MARK 2:13-17; LUKE 5:27-32].

**UNITER'S CITIES**

**Community** [HEBREW: *HEBRON*] was one of several places frequented by the patriarchs [GENESIS 13:18, 23:2]; Supplanter lived here during the famine that drove his family out of the Lowlands [GENESIS 37:14]. When Worshiper captured Community, they gave it to the Uniter [JOSHUA 20:7]. Cherish was installed as king in Community [2 SAMUEL 2:1-4]. Since Community was so close to Worshiper's capital, King Cherish loved to come visit the priests, and even lived there for a few years while Eternal-Master's tent was set up there [2 SAMUEL 5:5]. Community was also where Cherish's son, Peacemaker, assembled the country to oust his father [2 SAMUEL 15:10].

**High-Fruit** [HEBREW: *NOB*] was a priestly city in Strong-Hand-Son that hosted Eternal-Master's tent until the city was erased by King Desire [1 SAMUEL 21:1-9, 22:6-23]. The details of the priesthood's recovery aren't recorded in the Bible, but they presumably assigned new Uniter to the duties of Eternal-Master's house and carried on.

---

## IV. WORSHIPER: THE WINSOME SELF-STARTER

### THE FOUNDER

*Worshiper* [HEBREW: *JUDAH*] got his name because his mom Exasperater stopped focusing on her neglectful husband and instead *worshiped* Eternal-Master [GENESIS 29:35].

As a young man, Worshiper spoke up often and his ideas carried weight—regardless of the fact that he had no birthright to lead [1 CHRONICLES 5:2; E.G., GENESIS 37:26-27, 43:3-10, 44:14-34, 46:28].

Strangely, Worshiper left his father's homestead for decades—long enough to have two sons grow up, get married, and die (the sons were both so perverse that Eternal-Master killed them). The same woman had married both boys, but she had no children and her father-in-law Worshiper had abandoned her. So she put on a disguise as a whore-priest so she could blackmail Worshiper. He fell into her trap with reckless abandon and left his staff as a guarantee of payment. When Worshiper found out that his widowed daughter-in-law was pregnant, he delighted at the opportunity to kill off the promiscuous bitch before she could marry his third son. But when she produced the staff and revealed that Worshiper himself was the bastard's father, he finally saw the desperate position he had forced on her. Worshiper made amends for his neglect and her twin sons went on to form the two great clans of the Worshiper tribe [GENESIS 38:6-30].

Supplanter described Worshiper as *a ruler over his brothers*, complete with a king's scepter (an awkward reminder of the staff once used as blackmail). Supplanter said Worshiper would become so wealthy he'd have to find alternative uses for fine wine [GENESIS 49:8-12].

**THE TRIBE**

When the tribes were preparing to enter the Lowlands, Drawn-Up described Worshiper as *a partner with Eternal-Master*, sharing the same enemies [DEUTERONOMY 33:7]. Worshiper turned out to be a prolific conqueror, taking an inordinately vast swath of land with four distinct climates: a wide grassland, a lush valley, rocky hills, and a barren scrubland [JOSHUA 15; JUDGES 1:1-21].

The Worshiper tribe played an outsized role in the nation's history like their founder before them. Worshipers constantly stepped up and influenced—or commandeered—every turn of affairs in Divine-Prevailer's wild and messy history [E.G., EXODUS 35:30-36:2; NUMBERS 10:13, 13:25-33; JOSHUA 7, 14:6-15; JUDGES 1:2, 20:18; DANIEL 1:6, MATTHEW 1]. The natural and obvious leader of the tribes should have been Double-Bloom (being the favorite son from Ewe's side of the family), but Worshiper gradually took more and more responsibility until even Eternal-Master's tent was moved into Worshiper's capital city and converted into a permanent stone house [2 SAM 6; 1 KINGS 5-6; 1 CHRONICLES 15-16].

When Divine-Prevailer split in two, it should be no surprise that all ten tribes in the north stood against Worshiper (and the pittance that remained of Strong-Hand-Son) in the south [1 KINGS 12:16-24]. From then on, Worshiper always remained culturally and religiously separate from the northern tribes [JOHN 4:1-26]. This isn't to imply that the south was perfect, because Worshiper ignored Eternal-Master and was consequently torn down and almost erased from history [SEE JEREMIAH 7:17-20].

**'WORSHIPER' IN THE BIBLE**

The name *Worshiper* is evoked symbolically throughout the Bible as a triumphant lion that beautifully represents Eternal-Master [GENESIS 49:9;

REVELATION 5:1-5] and, paradoxically, as a failure that took its prestigious position with Eternal-Master for granted (and paid dearly for it) [HOSEA 5]. It makes you wonder why Eternal-Master tried to run a country to begin with.

The name *Worshiper* was common for people from every tribe [E.G., EZRA 10:23; NEHEMIAH 12:8; JOHN 14:21; ACTS 5:37, 9:11, 15:22-32; JUDE 1:1], including the student who helped arrest Master's-Rescue [ACTS 1:16-25].

### CITIES IN WORSHIPER

**Peaceful-Essence** [HEBREW: *JERUSALEM*] was Worshiper's capital. It took Worshiper a long time to capture Peaceful-Essence because of its defensive position at the peak of a mountain [JUDGES 1:8; PSALM 125:2; 1 CHRONICLES 11:4-8], which may be the source of its nickname, *God's-Lion* [HEBREW: *ARIEL*; SEE ISAIAH 29:1-2]. King Cherish moved Eternal-Master's house into Peaceful-Essence [2 SAM 6; 1 CHRONICLES 15:16; PSALM 87, 122], and his son replaced the cloth and tent poles with a permanent stone construction [1 KINGS 5-6; 1 CHRONICLES 17, 22]. Eternal-Master preferred his temple in Peaceful-Essence, so he never went back to Double-Bloom [1 KINGS 9:1-3; PSALM 76:1-2]. After Peaceful-Essence was twice razed by the empire of Confusion [2 KINGS 23:27, 24:10-17, 25:1-21; PSALM 74, 79], a team of Divine-Prevailer repatriates built back the city and Eternal-Master's house [EZRA 3:10, 6:14-15; NEHEMIAH 6:15]. When Master's-Rescue visited Peaceful-Essence, the temple had been extravagantly refurbished in an attempt by High-Fort to ingratiate themselves to their subjects [SEE LUKE 21:5-9]. Master's-Rescue had a strained relationship with Divine-Prevailer's capital, even gloating about its coming demise [LUKE 21:20-24; JOHN 2:13-22]. His sect was headquartered in Peaceful-Essence for a time, but their operation quickly went underground [ACTS 1:12-14, 2:46, 5:42, 6:7, 8:1-3]. In the last book of the Bible,

Master's-Gift described a third iteration of Peaceful-Essence: a defenseless capital in a peaceful world bustling with pilgrims (human and otherwise) visiting Eternal-Master on his throne [REVELATION 21].

**Dusty-House** [HEBREW: *BETHLEHEM*] was the place where Supplanter buried Ewe [GENESIS 48:7]. It was also King Cherish's hometown and the site of his secret coronation [1 SAMUEL 16:1-13]. Master's-Rescue's mom came to Dusty-House for an imperial census and birthed him there [MATTHEW 2:1]. Eternal-Master promised that his god-king would come from Dusty-House [MICAH 5:2], so High-Fort had all the young boys of Dusty-House massacred (but Master's-Rescue's family had already fled the region) [MATTHEW 2:13-18].

---

## V. DECIDER: THE LITTLE SCRAPPER

### THE FOUNDER

Decider [HEBREW: *DAN*] got his name because his mom Ewe was jealous of her sister's four sons and accused their husband of withholding children. Supplanter shot back at Ewe, saying the lack of children must have been her fault. The bitter argument only ended when Ewe offered her attendant Sheepish as a child-bearer to inflate the family tree. And that's how Decider was born. He was named *Decider* because Ewe saw him as the fruit of Eternal-Master's judgment, or *decision*, on the matter [GENESIS 30:1-6].

Supplanter described his son Decider as *a dangerous little snake that bites a horse's heels, sending its rider crashing to the ground* [GENESIS 49:16-18].

### THE TRIBE

When the tribes settled in the Lowlands, Deciders were an active presence on the national scene, known for their masterful artistry [EXODUS 35:30-36:2]. Drawn-Up described the tribe as *a small lion pouncing with vigor*, perhaps predicting Deciders' diminutive parcel of land, their low population, and their short life as a tribe [DEUTERONOMY 33:22].

Decider's undersized allotment of land was squeezed against the sea to the west and heavily-guarded foreign cities to the north [JOSHUA 19:40-48]. So Decider marched north with just six hundred warriors, captured the great coastal cities, and expanded their territory up to the far northern border of the Lowlands [JUDGES 18]. *Decider* became shorthand for the distant northwest border of Divine-Prevailer's domain [JUDGES 20:1; 2 SAMUEL 24:2; AMOS 8:14; 1 CHRONICLES 21:2].

During that northward march, Decider gained their reputation as disloyal to Eternal-Master—the six hundred marching Deciders enlisted the services of a crooked priest who consulted a large silver statue. His statue was revered in Decider's capital city from then on [JUDGES 18]. (Many years later, a corrupt king built two golden gods, one of which was, of course, sent to Decider's capital to reign next to the legendary silver statue [1 KINGS 12:27-29].)

Deciders were happily distracted by their extensive coastland and all but disengaged from the other tribes [SEE JUDGES 5:17], fading from history long before they were actually defeated and displaced by the Advancers [2 KINGS 17:6].

## CITIES IN DECIDER

**Beauty** [HEBREW: *JOPPA*] was Divine-Prevailer’s seaport, where building materials came in for ambitious construction projects, like Eternal-Master’s stone house [EZRA 3:7; 2 CHRONICLES 2:16]. There was once an emissary who wanted to escape from Eternal-Master, so of course he boarded a ship out of Beauty [JONAH 1:3]. When Master’s-Rescue’s sect was driven out of Peaceful-Essence, their leader Rocky moved to Beauty and dreamed that Eternal-Master told him to befriend foreigners and abandon the old dietary restrictions [ACTS 9:36-10:48].

---

## VI. GRAPPLER: LOST IN THE SHUFFLE

## THE FOUNDER

Grappler [HEBREW: *NAPHTALI*] came about when Ewe used her surrogate Sheepish a second time. The name *Grappler* refers to Ewe’s feeling of victory in the wrestling match of fertility between sister-wives [GENESIS 30:7-8].

Grappler wasn’t a proper son of Supplanter’s favorite wife or even his mother’s firstborn, so Grappler was immediately lost in the shuffle and never rose out of that position.

Supplanter described his son Grappler as industrious and fertile—a *doe with many fawns, a speaker of beautiful words* [GENESIS 49:21].

## THE TRIBE

When the tribes prepared to enter the Lowlands, Drawn-Up described Grappler as *overflowing with Eternal-Master's divine favor* [DEUTERONOMY 33:23]. And while their land was wide and abundant [JOSHUA 19:32-39], their deeds were underwhelming—except for a single instance where they were praised for risking their lives to drive out a foreign occupier [JUDGES 5:18]. Maybe Grappler was distracted by their richly fertile soil, which was easily and fruitfully gardened.

Foreigners always cohabitated with Grappler, mostly peaceably [JUDGES 1:33], but Grappler was invaded by faraway empires often and was among the first tribes to be defeated and displaced by the Advancers [1 KINGS 15:20; 2 KINGS 15:29; 2 CHRONICLES 16:4]. Eternal-Master honored the ethnically-diverse coastland by predicting that it would host his god-king one day [ISAIAH 9:1-2].

When Master's-Rescue came around, Grappler was the epicenter of his itinerant teaching and healing (aside from Worshiper's capital in the south) [MATTHEW 4:12-16]. Master's-Rescue may have centered himself in Grappler because of its ethnic diversity and rural obscurity, as these qualities allowed him to walk about without interference from the religious and imperial authorities.

## CITIES IN GRAPPLER

**Comfortable-Village** [HEBREW: *KFAR-NAHUM*; ANGLICIZED: *CAPERNAUM*] was where Master's-Rescue landed after being expelled from his hometown [MATTHEW 4:13]. But Comfortable-Village resented Master's-Rescue and tired of his antics—including befriending detestable folks like imperial officers [MATTHEW 8:5] and taxmen [MATTHEW 9:10] as well as crippled, feverish, and spiritually-infected people [MATTHEW 8:14-17, 9:1-2; MARK 1:32-34].



He also flagrantly contradicted the local Separatist priests [MATTHEW 15:1-20]. So Master's-Rescue denounced the city, saying: *Comfortable-Village won't be honored in eternity, but will be dead and buried* [MATTHEW 11:23].

---

## VII. LUCKY-RAIDER: THE UNSENTIMENTAL RANCHER

### THE FOUNDER

Lucky-Raider [HEBREW: *GAD*] came about when Exasperater put her surrogate Wilter to work for her, like her younger sister had been doing. *Lucky-Raider* got his name because the Hebrew words for *lucky* and *raider* sound alike, and both meanings were implied by Exasperater—who felt *fortunate* to have a son in her *fight* against Ewe [GENESIS 30:9-11].

Supplanter described his son Lucky-Raider as *troubled by invaders but retaliating right back* [GENESIS 49:19].

### THE TRIBE

Upon entering the Lowlands, Lucky-Raider (and Son-Appears) appealed for a parcel of lush grassland back east, outside of the family's ancestral territory [JOSHUA 13:24-28; NUMBERS 32]. Since Lucky-Raider held the northeastern-most portion of Divine-Prevailer, their name was sometimes used as a shorthand for that ordinal direction [1 SAMUEL 13:7; 2 SAMUEL 24:5].

True to their name, *Lucky-Raiders* were adept in combat and loved to exercise this skill. Drawn-Up described them as having both *brute*

*strength and light-footed swiftness* [DEUTERONOMY 33:20-21].

#### **‘LUCKY-RAIDER’ IN THE BIBLE**

There was a man named *Lucky-Raider* who was a divine emissary to King Cherish, consulting the king on the preferences of Eternal-Master as well as advising on all sorts of governance and strategy [1 SAMUEL 22:5; 2 SAMUEL 24:11-19].

God-Is-Master (GIM)—one of the most significant emissaries of Eternal-Master—was a Lucky-Raider [SEE 1 KINGS 17:1]. But even Gim couldn’t convince the people to do what was necessary to avoid being captured and displaced by the Advancers, just like the rest of the tribes [2 KINGS 17:6].

---

## VIII. PLEASER: THE INDULGENT ONE

#### **THE FOUNDER**

Pleaser [HEBREW: *ASHER*] came about when Exasperater used her surrogate Wilter a second time. The name *Pleaser* refers to Exasperater’s *pleasant* feeling of vindication because she was giving her husband children again [GENESIS 30:12-13].

Supplanter described his son Pleaser as *a connoisseur of rich delicacies* [GENESIS 49:20].

**THE TRIBE**

When the tribes were lined up on the border of the Lowlands, Drawn-Up described Pleaser as *opulently wealthy* [DEUTERONOMY 33:24-25]. And perhaps it was their rich living that precluded them from any kind of ambition.

Pleasers were a small rural tribe on the western coast, dotted with towns rather than great cities [JOSHUA 19:24-31] and populated with a mix of nationalities [JUDGES 1:31-32]. Pleaser didn't raise leaders or history-makers, and they're rarely mentioned at all throughout the Bible's thousands of years of records. Pleasers were once mocked in a song (along with the other coastal tribe, Decider) for staying with their ships when the country needed them to fight [JUDGES 5:17].

**'PLEASER' IN THE BIBLE**

Pleaser's affinity with Discerner as obscure, forgotten tribes was on display when Master's-Rescue was born. An emissary from Pleaser and a man named *Discerner* both recognized Master's-Rescue as the god-king of Divine-Prevailer when he was just a baby—but it didn't matter what they thought, nobody paid attention to them [LUKE 2:22-38].

---

## IX. REWARDER: THE HIRED CHEF

**THE FOUNDER**

Rewarder [HEBREW: *ISSACHAR*] came about when Exasperater refused to

share a basket of berries with her sister, Ewe, because she felt that Ewe had stolen their husband for herself. So they traded: Ewe got a basket of berries and Exasperater got an uncontested conjugal visit with their husband (just like a trade Supplanter had made with his twin brother as kids). Exasperater got pregnant and named the boy *Rewarder*, because he was the *wage* for giving up her attendant as a surrogate [GENESIS 30:14-18].

Supplanter described his son Rewarder as *an industrious workhorse, toiling for someone else's gain* [GENESIS 49:14-15]—maybe because Rewarder would ultimately fail to achieve independence.

#### THE TRIBE

When the tribes lined up on the border of the Lowlands, Drawn-Up described Rewarder (and Honored) as *hosts for many peoples*, with abundant seas and fertile land that would draw in Eternal-Master's friends [DEUTERONOMY 33:18-19].

Rewarder was only ever mentioned in terms of their abundant foodstuffs—for example, when the tribes overthrew their first dynasty, Rewarder (along with Honored and Grappler) offered sumptuous provisions for the victorious soldiers [1 CHRONICLES 12:40].

---

## X. HONORED: DISTRACTED BY THE SEA

#### THE FOUNDER

*Honored* [HEBREW: *ZEBULUN*] got his name because Exasperater hoped an

## APPENDIX

endowment of six sons would bring her husband to *honor* her [GENESIS 30:19-20]. Supplanter described his son Honored as *a coastal dweller with a harbor full of ships* [GENESIS 49:13].

### THE TRIBE

Drawn-Up described Honored (and Rewarder) as *hosts for many peoples*, where their abundant seas and fertile land would draw in Eternal-Master's friends [DEUTERONOMY 33:18-19].

When the tribes settled in the Lowlands, Honored didn't actually drive out the locals in their land but imposed a tax on them instead [JUDGES 1:30]. Throughout the history of the nation, Honored rarely stood out, except for three times when they supplied troops to a national cause [JUDGES 5:18, 6:35; 1 CHRONICLES 12:33]. So the only few times Honored showed up outside their borders, they delivered. Hundreds of years before Master's-Rescue was born, Eternal-Master predicted Honored's ethnically-diverse coastland would host his god-king [ISAIAH 9:1-2].

### CITIES IN HONORED

**Guardian** [HEBREW: NAZARETH] was an insignificant village, but it was Master's-Rescue's childhood home and the place where he first announced himself as Eternal-Master's god-king—just before the locals tried to throw him off a cliff. Master's-Rescue was expelled from his hometown (twice) and then never returned [LUKE 4:16-31].

---

## MORE-OR-LESS: THE UNLIKELY REGENT

### THE FOUNDER

More-Or-Less <sup>[HEBREW: JOSEPH]</sup> was born when Supplanter's favorite wife, Ewe, finally became fertile at the end of her life. Ewe named him *More-Or-Less* because the Hebrew words for *add* and *remove* sound alike, and her shame of being barren was *removed* while she hoped for even more children to be *added* <sup>[GENESIS 30:22-24]</sup>.

Supplanter poured all his capricious favoritism on More-Or-Less, seeing him as a prince from a grand empire, rather than the reality that he was the eleventh son of a nobody in the sticks <sup>[GENESIS 49:22-26]</sup>. The older brothers could be excused for resenting More-Or-Less, but it was still shocking when they plotted to murder him. The oldest, Son-Appears, tried to intervene to protect the boy but Worshiper, ever winsome, had a profitable idea: sell the wannabe prince into slavery so he'd finally learn his place! More-Or-Less went through a harrowing ordeal when his master's wife falsely accused him of sexual assault, yet he was plucked out of the Fortifiers' dungeons to become second in command of the whole empire—a regent enlisted straight out of prison. More-Or-Less earned this prestigious position because he was the only one who could explain the strange dreams that the Fortifier king was having (they were the same sort of symbolic visions from Eternal-Master that Divine-Prevailer's patriarchs were familiar with <sup>[SEE GENESIS 15:12, 28:12, 37:5-9]</sup>). More-Or-Less then saved his family from starving to death during years of famine, but not without giving his brothers a taste of their own medicine along the way. The whole family moved in with the Fortifiers in the south so they wouldn't starve <sup>[GENESIS 37-50]</sup>.

Supplanter considered More-Or-Less his firstborn heir, which meant he received a double inheritance. Supplanter went further to count More-Or-Less' two oldest boys alongside their uncles as tribes of Divine-Prevailer (in a similar way as the attendants' children were counted as Ewe and Exasperater's). And More-Or-Less became something of an honorary patriarch alongside his father [GENESIS 48]. More-Or-Less was a central figure in the lives of his children, down to his great-grandsons who were said to be fixed to his lap [GENESIS 50:23].

Supplanter described his son More-Or-Less as *a survivor of adversity who outshined everyone* [GENESIS 49:22-26]. More-Or-Less forgave his brothers for their treachery [GENESIS 50:15-21] and only wished for his body to be returned to the Lowlands after death. And because his corpse was expertly embalmed, More-Or-Less' remains indeed returned home five centuries later. [GENESIS 50:24-26; JOSHUA 24:32].

#### THE TRIBE

When the tribes entered the Lowlands, Drawn-Up described More-Or-Less as *a prince worthy of life's abundance and a glorious bull charging down anyone in his path* [DEUTERONOMY 33:13-17]. As land was being divided up, More-Or-Less' tribes had to advocate for their status as two full tribes [JOSHUA 17:14-18]. More-Or-Less' tribes initially took preëminent status in national affairs, but just like the patriarchs before them, Worshiper eventually rose up over them [1 CHRONICLES 5:1-2].

#### 'MORE-OR-LESS' IN THE BIBLE

The name *More-Or-Less* is used in poems and songs as a synecdoche for all of Divine-Prevailer, specifically denoting the way Eternal-Master lifts unlikely people to greatness [AMOS 5:15; PSALM 80:1-2, 81:4-5]. Biblical poets like

to pair More-Or-Less with Worshiper, specifically when speaking optimistically about northern Divine-Prevailer [EZEKIEL 37:15-19; OBADIAH 1:18; ZECHARIAH 10:6; PSALM 77:15].

---

## XI. MEMORY-TAKER: THE TWO HALVES

### THE FOUNDER

*Memory-Taker* [HEBREW: *MANASSEH*] was named after the joy of More-Or-Less' later years, which almost made him *forget* his brothers' cruelty [GENESIS 41:51].

### THE TRIBE

When the tribes entered the Lowlands, Memory-Taker was split into two half-tribes; one in the Lowlands proper and one east of the Descending-River (alongside Son-Appears and Lucky-Raider) [NUMBERS 34:13-15; JOSHUA 13:7-12, 22:7-8]. Memory-Taker's two half-tribes received outrageously large, fertile stretches of land filled with over a hundred industrious and cultured cities [JOSHUA 17]. So Memory-Taker was technically one tribe, but functioned as two of the largest in the nation. (Depending on how you define a *tribe*, you could count up to fourteen of them at Divine-Prevailer's height.)

Both of Memory-Taker's half-tribes formed trios with their neighbors; Double-Bloom and Strong-Hand-Son in the west [E.G., PSALM 80:2], and Lucky-Raider and Son-Appears in the east [E.G., JOSHUA 22:9].



## CITIES IN MEMORY-TAKER

**Fawn** [HEBREW: *ORPHAH*] , in Memory-Taker West, was the hometown of Divine-Prevailer's most storied temporary chief: Chopper [HEBREW: *GIDEON*]. After liberating the nation, Chopper tried to fashion Fawn into the religious capital he felt Divine-Prevailer had always been missing. But all of Chopper's reforms came to naught when the entire family was murdered by Chopper's own disgruntled son [JUDGES 6-8].

---

## XII. DOUBLE-BLOOM: THE HEART OF THE NATION

## THE FOUNDER

Double-Bloom [HEBREW: *EPHRAIM*] got his name because his dad More-Or-Less felt that his life had restarted, or *fruited again*, after his brothers ruined everything [GENESIS 41:52].

When More-Or-Less presented his sons to Supplanter, the grandfather crossed his arms so that he could put his dominant hand on Double-Bloom (the younger), describing him as *greater than his older brother, with incalculable peoples coming from his lineage* [GENESIS 49:27].

## THE TRIBE

When the tribes entered the Lowlands, Double-Bloom settled in a central passageway for travel in the cardinal directions, a prime location for the nation's capital within its preëminent tribe [JOSHUA 16:5-10]. So Eternal-Master's house was naturally set up in Double-Bloom, where it

stayed for four hundred years [JOSHUA 18:1].

Two nearby tribes—Memory-Taker West and Strong-Hand-Son—came to be dependent on Double-Bloom, and together they formed a powerhouse trio that was centrally involved in everything Divine-Prevailer did. The Lowlands conquest and monarchy were inaugurated by leaders from this trio, as was the most prominent temporary chief [NUMBERS 13:16 (SEE 13:8); JUDGES 6:11 (SEE JOSHUA 18:23); 1 SAMUEL 9:1-2].

Double-Bloom's tribal supremacy was interrupted for one hundred twenty years, beginning when King Desire established his capital in Strong-Hand-Son. Double-Bloom was doubly-humbled when King Desire took Eternal-Master's tent out of Double-Bloom. Later, King Cherish's son built a permanent stone house for Eternal-Master in Worshiper—but of course the nation rejected the third in Cherish's line, and from then on Double-Bloom and Worshiper contested whose capital was Divine-Prevailer's true center. Double-Bloom had the mandate of the people, but Eternal-Master preferred Worshiper. Eternal-Master's emissaries described the fall of the northern tribes as a judgment on Double-Bloom for their near-constant infidelity to Eternal-Master and their inability to step aside for Worshiper [ISAIAH 11:13, 28:1-4; JEREMIAH 7:12-15; PSALM 78].

When the country was repopulated, the rift between north and south resumed but Double-Bloom never recaptured their former majesty.

#### CITIES IN DOUBLE-BLOOM

**Commission** [HEBREW: *SHILOH*] was the original capital of Divine-Prevailer, where Eternal-Master's tent was set up with all its divine instruments and tools [JOSHUA 18:1]. Since the priests operated in Commission, all Divine-Prevailers had to go there to learn the intentions of Eternal-Master and to participate in various annual ceremonies and

feasts. But after the priests packed up the tent and left Double-Bloom, Commission was never heard from again [JEREMIAH 7:12-15; PSALM 78:60-68].

**Shoulder** [HEBREW: *SHECHEM*] was named after its last prince (the one who raped Supplanter's daughter, pared himself, and was slaughtered by Discerner and Uniter) [GENESIS 34]. When the tribes entered the Lowlands, they gathered at Shoulder to recommit themselves to Eternal-Master [JOSHUA 24]. When Divine-Prevailer split in two, King Opposer [HEBREW: *JEROBOAM*] rebuilt Shoulder into the northern capital as a one-to-one replica of Worshiper, including a house for a divine presence—but King Opposer's god was a golden calf statue, which angered Eternal-Master and quickened his dynasty's end [1 KINGS 12-13]. King Opposer's son was murdered by a usurper named *Despicable* [HEBREW: *BAASHA*], who promptly moved the capital out of Shoulder [1 KINGS 15:27, 33]. Centuries later, after northern Divine-Prevailer was defeated, displaced, and repatriated, Shoulder regained its status as the spiritual capital of the north [JOHN 4:5].

**Satisfied** [HEBREW: *TIRZAH*] was the capital of northern Divine-Prevailer under King Despicable's short-lived dynasty—which was ended by a chariot commander named *Musician* [HEBREW: *ZIMRI*]. But King Musician only held power for seven days until the army arrived to oust him, so he burned down the palace in a suicide-by-arson [1 KINGS 16:9-20]. The next king, a military commander named *Disciplined* [HEBREW: *OMRI*], stayed in Satisfied only as long as necessary while he built a proper capital in the nearby hills [1 KINGS 16:24].

**Mountain-Guard** [HEBREW: *SAMARIA*] was built by King Disciplined on the flat top of a steep hill [1 KINGS 16:2]. Like the kings before, Disciplined's dynasty was short lived—as were all of the usurpers that followed. One man after another murdered his way into monarchal power just to be

assassinated and replaced again [2 KINGS 9:14, 9:24, 10:7, 15:10, 15:14, 15:25, 15:30]. The only constant throughout this time was that Mountain-Guard remained the best place to hold the scepter. Royal politics became one of the leading causes of death in Divine-Prevailer's northern state until they were put out of their misery by the Advancers [2 KINGS 17:6].

**House-of-God** [HEBREW: *BETHEL*] was revered by Eternal-Master's loyalists. The patriarchs dreamed of Eternal-Master here and set up altars to mark it as a place where Eternal-Master's city connected to the human realm [GENESIS 12:8, 13:3, 28:19-22, 31:13, 35:1-8]. Throughout Divine-Prevailer's history, people went there to inquire of Eternal-Master, house his divine instruments and tools, and adjudicate the people's issues [JUDGES 4:5, 20:18, 20:26, 21:2, 1 SAMUEL 7:16, 10:3, ]. But for a while, House-of-God became a *House-of-Imposters* (according to one livid emissary) because it was a gathering of whore-priests and child sacrificers who worshipped all sorts of gods and spirits [1 KINGS 12:29, 13; HOSEA 4:15, 10:5].

---

## XIII. STRONG-HAND-SON: THE TAG-ALONG

### THE FOUNDER

When Ewe's second child was born, his mom named him *Son-of-Sorrow* with her final breath (because she knew the birth was killing her). But Supplanter wouldn't allow the boy to grow up with a name like that—so for the first and only time, Supplanter named his child,

choosing *Strong-Hand-Son* [HEBREW: *BENJAMIN*] to project power and victory [GENESIS 35:16-18].

Strong-Hand-Son became Supplanter's new favorite after More-Or-Less was taken from him. But unlike More-Or-Less, Strong-Hand-Son knew to keep his head down to avoid attracting his brothers' rage. Supplanter kept Strong-Hand-Son back when he sent the other eleven boys to buy food from the Fortifiers. When More-Or-Less (disguised as a Fortifier) arrested Discerner and demanded to see his brother Strong-Hand-Son, Supplanter instead abandoned Discerner in a Fortifier dungeon instead of letting Strong-Hand-Son leave his sight. But when the family eventually had to come begging for more food, More-Or-Less and Strong-Hand-Son reunited with loud sobs [GENESIS 42-46]. On his deathbed, Supplanter described Strong-Hand-Son as a prodigious hunter-warrior [GENESIS 49:27].

#### THE TRIBE

When the tribes entered the Lowlands, Drawn-Up described the Strong-Hand-Son tribe as having *high walls* for security and the *highest god* leading their path [DEUTERONOMY 33:12]. It's unclear if Drawn-Up's assessment is recorded ironically or refers to their (exceedingly rare) moments of fortitude [SEE PSALM 68:27].

Strong-Hand-Son's land sat between two the nation's two most populous and influential tribes, Double-Bloom and Worshiper [JOSHUA 18:11-27]. Strong-Hand-Son was initially diplomatically tied to Double-Bloom on their northern border, but later allied with Worshiper to the south.

Strong-Hand-Son was known for two things: archery [2 SAMUEL 1:22; 1 CHRONICLES 8:40, 12:2] and the grotesque and sordid episode at the Hill-City—where the locals raped a priest's child-bearer to death while the rest of

Strong-Hand-Son defended them! So, in a fleeting moment of cohesion and moral clarity, all of Divine-Prevailer descended on Strong-Hand-Son and killed them off. Their name only lived on because all Divine-Prevailers who didn't show up to the cleansing were assigned to marry Strong-Hand-Son's surviving women [JUDGES 19-21]. Even King Desire acknowledged his tribe's status as the lowest among Divine-Prevailer [1 SAMUEL 9:21]. And King Desire must have harbored resentments towards the priests, because even though he moved Eternal-Master's tent into Strong-Hand-Son, he soon decimated the city (after they aided his rival, Cherish) [1 SAMUEL 22:6-19].

When King Desire's dynasty fell to Cherish, the new king handled his rivals kindly. This created a close bond between Worshiper and Strong-Hand-Son [2 SAMUEL 19:16-17]. When Divine-Prevailer abandoned Cherish's dynasty, Strong-Hand-Son alone clung to Worshiper [1 KINGS 12:21; EZRA 1:5]. But in the long run, Strong-Hand-Son amounted to little more than an impotent appendage on Worshiper, just as they had been to Double-Bloom earlier.

#### **'STRONG-HAND-SON' IN THE BIBLE**

Several towering figures in the nation's history came out of Strong-Hand-Son—*Desire*: the first king [1 CHRONICLES 8 (SEE VERSE 33)]; and *Desire*: the theologian of Master's-Rescue's sect [ROMANS 11:1, PHILIPPIANS 3:5].

#### **CITIES IN STRONG-HAND-SON**

**Hill-City** [HEBREW: *GIBEAH*] was the capital of Strong-Hand-Son. It was razed by all of Divine-Prevailer after they raped and killed a priest's child-bearer [JUDGES 19-21]. Hill-City was eventually rebuilt and repopulated, so when King Desire ascended, he made it the national

capital. [1 CHRONICLES 16:39-40].

**Moon-City** [HEBREW: *JERICHO*] was the greatest stronghold of the Lowland-Merchants when Divine-Prevailer came conquering—it was also the first to fall [JOSHUA 6]. When Moon-City was rebuilt many generations later, the walls went up at the cost of its founder’s two sons [1 KINGS 16:32]. Moon-City was fiercely loyal to Eternal-Master and supported an abundance of divine emissaries [2 KINGS 2:4-6, 15-22]. Master’s-Rescue had many converts in Moon-City [MATTHEW 20:29].

---

**S**o what can we make of Divine-Prevailer’s tribes? Their own book estimates them as a curious side-project—not really the protagonists of the Bible, but a secondary element in Eternal-Master’s story. Divine-Prevailer assembled a canon that purposefully and thoroughly humiliates itself; the tribes didn’t shy away from their own warts and imperfections but waxed eloquent about receiving their just deserts (genocide and displacement) while making no excuses for the bad behavior that warranted it.

When the Greek Bible came along and pivoted its focus toward Master’s-Rescue’s sect, the self-deprecating narrative style didn’t change at all. Taken together, the Bible seems to imply that human institutions, while meaningful in some ways, are entirely disposable. It leaves us wondering if the description of the new earth at the end of time is just a cliffhanger that’s setting up a third installment to be written by some new

## APPENDIX

group—with the same self-effacing temperament as the two that preceded it, but communicated in an unknown future language and context.



*For your reference*

# GLOSSARY OF PROPER NOUNS

You probably noticed that proper nouns throughout this book have been translated into an approximation of their meaning in their original languages. This can be disorienting because English Bibles transliterate almost all proper nouns into a garbled version of their sounds, but that approach loses the *meaning* of the names, which are intended as a tool for characterization and context—and should be preserved for the reader. If you're reading my stories in parallel with the Bible, this glossary will help you connect the dots.

- › **Adulteress** – JEZEBEL  
*Literally, Married-to-Chief-God-Baal. Figuratively, refers to a promiscuous woman.*
- › **Advancer** – ASSYRIA
- › **Anklet** – ACHSAH
- › **Brilliance** – AARON
- › **Bruiser** – ESAU
- › **Burdener** – AMASA
- › **Cherish** – DAVID
- › **Chief-Compels** – HOHAM
- › **Confusion** – BABYLON
- › **Crowned-One** – STEPHEN
- › **Decider** – DAN
- › **Desire** – SAUL, PAUL  
*The Hebrew name SAUL is transliterated into Greek as PAUL.*
- › **Dirty** – PERGA
- › **Discerner** – SIMEON
- › **Divider** – PERSIA
- › **Divine-Force** – OTHNIEL
- › **Divine-Prevailer** – ISRAEL

*Used interchangeably with Supplanter (JACOB), but with the connotation of an incorporated people group.*

- › **Defender** – MARK
- › **Descending-River** – JORDAN
- › **Double-Bloom** – EPHRAIM
- › **Doubly-Wicked-Darkness** – CUSHAN-RISHATHAJIM
- › **Drawn-Up** – MOSES
- › **Dread** – DOEG
- › **Dusty-House** – BETHLEHEM
- › **Eternal-Master** – YAHWEH  
*Commonly rendered as LORD out of fearful reverence for the divine name. It literally translates I-Am-Because-I-Am, i.e., the self-empowered source of all things.*
- › **Ewe** – RACHEL
- › **Exasperater** – LEAH
- › **Fame** – SHIMEI
- › **Father-Plenty** – ABIATHAR
- › **Father's-Gift** – ABISHAI
- › **Favor** – ANANIAS
- › **Foolish-Fellow** – AHITHOPHEL
- › **Fortifier** – MASOR, EGYPT  
*The word EGYPT means double trouble or two pressures in its original language but the Hebrew*

*Bible uses MASOR, which means stronghold defenses.*

- › **Fountain-Home** – EN-DOR
- › **Garden-Mount** – CARMEL
- › **Gim (God-Is-Master)** – ELIJAH
- › **Glorious-Father** – ABRAM
- › **Glorious-Fire** – TIGLATH-PILESER
- › **Sid** – ELISHAH
- › **God's-Garden** – JEZREËL
- › **God's-Gazer** – SAMUEL
- › **God's-Likeness** – MICAIAH
- › **Good-Chief** – ADONI-ZEDEK
- › **Grappler** – NAPHTALI
- › **Grove-God** – ASHERAH
- › **Growing-Nation** – REHOBOAM
- › **Guardian** – NAZERETH
- › **Hasty** – HUSHAI
- › **Heaven's-Queen** – ISHTAR
- › **Heroic-Pose** – HEROD
- › **High-Fort** – ROME
- › **High-Tower** – SYRIA
- › **Hill-City** – GIBEAH
- › **Honored** – ZEBULUN
- › **House-of-God** – BETHEL

- › **Howler** – CALEB
- › **Hunting** – SIDON
- › **Leather** – DERBE
- › **Lesser-Lord** – AHAB
- › **Little-Image** – ICONIUM
- › **Lowland-Merchants** – CANAANITES
- › **Lowlands** – CANAAN
- › **Lucky-Raider** – GAD
- › **Man** – ADAM  
*The Hebrew name for all of humankind is simply its first member's proper name.*
- › **Master-Made** – JOAB
- › **Master's-Rescue** – JOSHUA, JESUS  
*The Hebrew name JOSHUA is transliterated into Greek as IESOUS. The English name JESUS comes from a string of transliterations (Hebrew into Greek into Latin into German into English).*
- › **Master's-Gift** – JONAH, JOHN  
*The Hebrew name JONAH is transliterated into Greek as JOHN.*
- › **Master's-Grasp** – AHAZIAH
- › **Master's-Will** – JONADAB
- › **Meadow-City** – ANTIOCH-PISIDIA
- › **Memory-Taker** – MANASSEH
- › **Merciless** – LO-RUHAMA
- › **Mockery** – ISAAC
- › **Moon-City** – JERICHO
- › **More-Or-Less** – JOSEPH
- › **Mountain-Guard** – SAMARIA
- › **My-Furnace** – CYRUS
- › **Noble-Woman** – SARAH
- › **Not-My-People** – LO-AMMI
- › **Opposer** – JEROBOAM
- › **Opposition** – ANTIOCH
- › **Oppressive-House** – BETH-MAACAH
- › **Outsiders** – PHILISTIA
- › **Palm-Tree** – TAMAR
- › **Peaceful** – SOLOMON
- › **Peaceful-Essence** – JERUSALEM
- › **Peacemaker** – ABSALOM
- › **Pleaser** – ASHER
- › **Preparer** – JEPHUNNEH
- › **Princess** – SARAI
- › **Progenitor** – ABRAHAM
- › **Purity** – LABAN
- › **Reliever** – HOSEA

- › **Restless** – MARY BAALZEBUB).
- › **Rewarder** – ISSACHAR
- › **Rocky** – PETER
- › **Shelter** – DEBIR
- › **Sapphire** – SAPPHIRA
- › **Scrawny** – DELILAH
- › **Separatist** – PHARISEE
- › **Set-Loose** – LYSTRA
- › **Seven** – SHEBA
- › **Seventh-Promise-Well** – BEËRSHEBA  
*A city on the southern border of the Lowlands and a shorthand for the geographic span of the country.*
- › **Sheepish** – BILHAH
- › **Shining-One** – JAPHIA
- › **Shoulder** – SHECHEM
- › **Silent-Weaver** – DAMASCUS
- › **Solace** – BARNABAS
- › **Son-Appears** – REUBEN
- › **Stone** – TYRE
- › **Storm-Bringer** – BAAL  
*Refers to a specific god named BAAL (the chief of the pantheon). BAAL is also tacked on as a descriptor to refer to any member of his pantheon (e.g.,*
- › **Strong-Hand-Son** – BENJAMIN
- › **Supplanter** – JACOB  
*Used interchangeably with Divine-Prevailer (ISRAEL), but with the connotation of a personal relationship to the patriarch rather than a vast, impersonal populous.*
- › **Sunny** – SAMSON
- › **Trapper** – REBECCA
- › **Trustworthy** – AMNON
- › **Unhindered** – NAZARITE
- › **Uniter** – LEVI
- › **Uprooted** – EKRON
- › **Virtue** – ZADOK
- › **Virtuous-Master** – ZEDEKIAH
- › **Wasp-Lord** – BAALZEBUB
- › **Wild-Mule** – PIRAM
- › **Wilter** – ZILPAH
- › **Woody** – SILAS
- › **Worshiper** – JUDAH, JUDAS, JUDE  
*The Hebrew name JUDAH is transliterated into Greek as JUDAS or JUDE.*

*Let's read...*

# THE HEBREW BIBLE

	CHAPTERS	WORD COUNT	APPROX READ TIME
<b>TORAH: INSTRUCTION</b>			
Genesis	50	38k	2h 45m
Exodus	40	32k	2h 15m
Leviticus	27	24k	1h 45m
Numbers	36	32k	2h 15m
Deuteronomy	34	28k	2h
<b>NEVI'IM: PROPHETS</b>			
FORMER PROPHETS			
Joshua	24	18k	1h 15m
Judges	21	18k	1h 15m
Samuel	55	45k	3h 15m
Kings	47	48k	3h 30m
LATTER PROPHETS			
Isaiah	66	37k	2h 30m
Jeremiah	52	42k	3h
Ezekiel	48	39k	2h 45m
The Twelve	67	30k	2h
<b>KETUVIM: WRITINGS</b>			
Psalms	150	42k	3h
Job	42	18k	1h 15m
Proverbs	31	15k	1h
Ruth	4	2k	15m
Song of Songs	8	2k	15m
Ecclesiastes	12	5k	30m
Lamentations	5	3k	15m
Esther	10	5k	30m
Daniel	12	11k	45m
Ezra-Nehemiah	23	18k	1h 15m
Chronicles	65	46k	3h 15m
<i>Total:</i>		<i>~600k words</i>	<i>40-ish hours</i>

*Let's read...*

# THE GREEK BIBLE

	CHAPTERS	WORD COUNT	APPROX READ TIME
<b>NARRATIVE</b>			
Matthew	28	23k	1h 45m
Mark	16	15k	1h
Luke-Acts	52	50k	3h 30m
John	21	18k	1h 15m
Revelation	22	12k	1h
<b>PAUL'S LETTERS (CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER)</b>			
1 Thessalonians	5	2k	15m
2 Thessalonians	4	1k	5m
Galatians	6	3k	15m
1 Corinthians	16	9k	45m
2 Corinthians	13	6k	30m
Romans	16	9k	45m
PRISON LETTERS			
Philippians	4	2k	15m
Colossians	4	2k	15m
Philemon	1	0.5k	5m
Ephesians	6	3k	15m
PASTORAL LETTERS			
1 Timothy	6	2k	15m
Titus	3	1k	5m
2 Timothy	4	1k	5m
<b>GENERAL LETTERS</b>			
Hebrews	13	7k	30m
James	5	2k	15m
1 Peter	5	2k	15m
2 Peter	3	1k	5m
Jude	1	0.5k	5m
1 John	5	2k	15m
2 John	1	0.5k	5m
3 John	1	0.5k	5m
<i>Total:</i>		<i>~175k words</i>	<i>12-ish hours</i>

*For your reference*

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Horse McDermott, McD.** has been called *a key figure in the international scene* by former Phoenix mayor Leland LePlume, a *harbinger of our inevitable future* by cellist Odious Chauncey, and *an eligible datum* by researcher Lex Conical.



Horse is in possession of a Patek Philippe wristwatch which the Lennon-Ono estate has been trying to recover for decades. He enjoys long walks on the beach, sunsets, and violent video games. Horse says that he can accomplish anything after a full night's sleep, but this claim has never been proven. He has a pet horse named Person O'Neill. Horse's scent can be found in the dark corners of many dark rooms. He is listed among the recipients of the Mucinex brand newsletter. Horse prefers to answer questions with questions and question answers with more answers.

Horse was a member of an argumentative theater troop aptly known as the *drama club*. Horse has yet to persuade the WJFK morning radio team to take him on as a contributor, but his pitch deck has a new round of revisions that ought to change that. Horse hopes to pull off a necklace someday. He authors the only parenting blog that acknowledges that all

things in life are fleeting except pain. Horse's personal boycotts are singlehandedly changing the landscape of American consumer goods. He constantly finds himself in situations.

Horse is the sole owner of a Dell Inspiron Notebook. He requires a shower after every plate of spaghetti. Bob Dylan released *Idiot Wind*, the first-ever diss track in music history, during his beef with Kris Kristofferson. Horse has stepped in the same river twice. He is looking for pest control recommendations to deal with a nest of crabs in his crawlspace. Horse doesn't like dry English comedy, he prefers it sopping wet. Horse made varsity on his high school tennis team but never won a match.

In his free time, Horse maintains a shrine to Canada's third Deputy Prime Minister, Erik Nielsen, which includes artifacts such as an antique brooch that had previously been in the Nielsen family for generations and a menu from Nourriture, a restaurant where Nielsen was scheduled to dine during a 1984 Vancouver campaign visit.

Horse is a Sagittarius, a Dadaist, a reluctant socialist, a total Chandler, a recovering chocoholic, a solid seven in the looks department but barely a five on the enneagram, and a man of his word. His new year's resolution is to stop being described as *nasty* in police reports.

---

*Any correspondence sent to Horse from fans or critics will be treated as harassment and forwarded to the authorities. However, links to funny YouTube videos should be emailed with haste to mcdermott.horse@gmail.com*