

THE SON, THE WIND
AND
THE REIGN

A NOVEL

BY

PHIL FARRAND

BOOK ONE

FIGHTING THE CAUSE
OF FREEDOM



“To what, then, can I compare the people of this generation? What are they like? They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling out to each other: ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge and you did not cry.’” (Luke 7:32 NIV)

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To Nette, Liz and Midge,
The three wonderful women who have graced my life.
We finally go this one out the door, ladies.

PART I



Juxtaposition

JUXTAPOSITION

September 24, 21 Anno Domini Reditus
(ADR, “In the Year of Our Lord’s Return”)

Beginnings, like endings are imbalanced. They are times of rotated perspectives, evolving concepts, shifting landscapes. Because of this, beginnings are often mistaken for endings, and vice versa. Expect to be confused.

1

Moments from now, a Pious man dies.

The Thought lurched upward as night brushed across the American continents. It sat hard against a tranquil Status Quo of life on Earth in 21 A.D.R.—wrapping its hand around Quo’s neck; forcing Quo to look downward on the “done-away-with,” to meditate on the old ways of violence. Profound shock followed. According to Quo, Earth was uniformly free of the difficulties so common prior to the Coming two decades before.

No wars raged.

No pollution putrefied the environment.

No unemployment confounded those desiring work.

No criminal violated the innocent.

No diseases ravaged the populace.

No taxes burdened the wage-earner.

No inequities fired racial tensions.

No locks snapped doors tightly to their jambs.

No child felt hunger.

No woman feared for her safety.

And the trains? The trains *always* ran on time.

In short, the Status Quo believed the Earth and all its living creatures rambled along in a blissful halcyon existence—an existence

made possible by the absolute reign of a race of titans who called themselves the Wind; led by a powerful Being who commanded the honorifics, “Son of God, Son of man, King of kings and Lord of lords.”

Moments from now, a Pious man dies.

The Thought seethed outward from the center of a land mass once called the “United States of America”—once home to a great interlocking system of ever more powerful hierarchies . . . now dismantled; once home to an intricately-designed, elegant system of checks and balances . . . now unheeded; once home to the proud exaltation of human rights . . . now ignored. Only the names of the states remained. Not to pay homage to the nation that had once existed but simply to identify one same-named city from another.

The Thought had come from Missouri, from the lower left-hand corner of the state, from a city still known as Springfield.

Just off Commercial Street—somewhat near the center of town—their originator, Avery Foster, stood in an ever-darkening alley, caressing a weapon, his presence an out-of-place artifact in the presumably peaceful neighborhood. He understood the peculiarity of it all. As a “boundary dweller,” Avery had a sensitivity for such things.

For the past twenty years, Avery had lived on the edge between existence and stagnation. He had found a perpetual haunt in the twilight between day and night—a comfortably stagnant place where he could consist without decision.

Normally, even his features lay between lines of division. He was almost tall but more than short. Somewhat slender but just a tad stout. Barely handsome but potentially meager. In category after category, he missed some essential ballast that would swing him firmly in either direction.

Tonight, however, he had an anchor and the feeling of it invigorated him.

No longer clothed with the mundane, tonight Avery dressed in black like the coming dark: black sweatshirt jacket, black tee shirt, black pants, black socks, black running shoes, even black shoelaces. No longer ignored by the crowd, tonight his features were marked

by the thick layer of black stage make-up smeared around each eye—lending the proper weight, drawing attention to his pale blue irises, modulating them from nearly unnoticed to unusual. Somehow, even his straight, brown hair seemed improved—seemed to have found its way out of its slightly disorganized wanderings into a pattern that actually passed for style.

Yet, his nervousness remained. It threatened to undo his new-found convictions so Avery leaned away from his hiding niche in a dead-end crook of the unbalanced alley and glared at nearby Commercial Street.

He watched the sun bid goodnight to the day, his life outbound from twilight as well. He conjured sights of city life: Imagining perfect little families, performing their perfect little rituals, enjoying their perfect little lives in the lovely, deepening dusk. His mind's eye captured children dancing to bed—snuggling under soft comfort as husbands and wives shared the intimacies of the day with friends who had dropped by to visit.

All of them . . . firmly entrenched in *contentment*.

Avery's thumb played with the safety on the pistol.

"Paradise," he sneered—happy to discover that the loathing calmed his stomach. "Someone will probably start one of those trash 'Pious' novels on an evening like this. Chock full of characters that finally see the 'light.' Each page filled with 'happy-happy' slop and one unbelievable coincidence after another. Building to a nauseously sweet ending with quick, tidy answers. Always . . . the quick, tidy answers. 'Oh, that bad man deserved to die. He was evil, stiff-necked and rebellious.'"

Absentmindedly, Avery's left hand searched his pants pocket for an antacid tablet—a familiar talisman, one he'd used for years to navigate the passages of the betwixting realms. He remembered. He had left them at home. At the time, it seemed wrong to need them for the task ahead. This night, he would choose a different life.

"*Evil, stiff-necked and rebellious,*" Avery thought, returning to his ballast. *I'm sick to death of the Pious' little "evil, stiff-necked and rebellious" line. Every time the Wind murders a person for some little infraction, a Pious twit has to chirp up the same old worn-out excuse.*

Avery shook his head in disgust.

The Pious wallow in their comfortable lives. Stuffing their faces with food that the Wind provides; sleeping in their soft beds; delighting in the lovely weather; enjoying their short-sighted peace of mind. They give up their right to live their lives for soft convenience like sheep bleating for a Shepherd. Any shepherd—even One who might feast on them for meat and let their blood for drink. Sheep bleating out excuses for the butchers they serve, defaming the memories of those who fought and died when the Wind first appeared.

Avery had lost his brother in that “Great Battle” of two decades past. Sam had been among the millions literally torn to pieces only seconds after the Great Battle began. The One—the leader of the Wind—had become a sword, drawn for the slaughter, polished to consume, flashing like lightning.

“Great Battle?” More like “Great Massacre,” Avery reminded himself, rehashing the reason he hid in the alley. And after the “Great Massacre”? Surprise! More killing. More carnage. More senseless deaths.

With characteristic efficiency, the Wind had moved out and seized the Earth, executing anyone who stood against them.

“Submit or die,” the Wind had said without pretense. They ruled with a rod of iron.

What kind of way is that to run a planet?! For twenty years, a little white lie, a small cheat in a business deal, a nothing of an infraction—a less than nothing of an infraction and if the Wind catches you . . . you're dead!

Was there a reckoning of the bloodshed?

Avery had heard whispers as high as half the population of the Earth. No human knew for sure. Like everything else, the Wind controlled all forms of news media.

But, of course . . . all the people who have died in the last twenty years? Well . . . obviously, they were ‘evil, stiff-necked and rebellious’ too.”

Avery rolled his eyes and shook his head again—appalled as much by the Wind’s behavior as by humanity’s response. The ranks of the Pious had grown over the years—humans banding together, pledging their allegiance to the Wind in spite of the carnage. Though he couldn’t condone it, Avery knew why.

It was simply easier.

Why spend your life worrying when the Wind blow over and turn you to dust? Why not just bow and smile and go placidly? And

beyond that—on a deeper level—why struggle with the questions of your own existence? Wasn't it easier to pacify that bully of awareness—he whose fist had pounded aching interrogatives deep into the human heart for countless millennia? (“Why do you exist?” “What is your place in the universe?” “How do you justify the resources you consume?” “What is the true nature of reality?”) Wasn't it simpler to point—zombie-like—toward the monolithic Judicial Center and mumble, “I exist to serve the Wind. I live to obey the One. He is all in all.”?

Comfort for the body, calm for the soul, balm for the conscience. What better rewards could there be for handing your life over to tyranny?

Not that Avery believed the Pious actually considered the mysteries of their existence or pondered the role the Wind played in the fulfillment they felt. He had never considered the Pious particularly bright or thoughtful. But whether the Pious realized it or not, Avery had no doubt the Wind gave the Pious something beyond mere surface comforts, it gave the Pious the moral high ground from which to condescend and justified every atrocity they saw. (“Beware the man who feels the hand of God on his shoulder.”)

Avery had heard it all his adult life—the religious whitewash that the Pious smeared over every act of violence to legitimize the actions of the Wind.

“Oh, don't you know? The coming of the One and the Wind is a fulfillment of the prophecies of the Bible. The Wind used to be humans just like us. Then the One gave them new and ‘glorified’ bodies. It was foretold in the Scriptures: ‘When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.”’”

“And the One? Why . . . He's none other than the resurrected Jesus Christ; Son of God, Son of Man; the One rightful ruler of the earth, the One defining purpose of existence, the only One who is ‘just and holy in all His ways.’”

“*Just and holy*”? Avery grumbled, feeling the weight of his arguments, sensing their strength. *Just and holy? That's supposed to make it all better? People are lying dead in the streets with their guts sliding into the sewer but it's okay because the Beings who murdered them are led by One who wears the label “just”? “Just” according to*

whom? What kind of justice slaughters millions simply because they desire self rule? Why kind of justice fears freedom so much that it must obliterate anyone who would dare challenge its claims?

Avery couldn't understand why the Pious never considered the irrationality of what they believed. They just kept bleating like sheep—cranking out the same set of excuses.

He heard them the first time at age seven, twenty years ago.

His father and mother had just moved to Springfield with Avery—each of them reeling from the events of the Coming in general and the loss of Sam in particular. They had come only three-quarters whole, stumbling into the city with the out-of-balance gait of a prima-donna struggling to perform again after loosing an arm.

As Benjamin Foster hunted for work, Avery's mother, Rebecca, had taken him to the nearest elementary school and enrolled him in second grade. Barely two months later, the indoctrination began—the repainting of the events by the Victor.

With child-like sincerity, young Miss Bertrand—in her very first year of teaching full time—stood in front of her brightly-rimmed whiteboard and explained away the gore of the Great Battle.

“The soldiers of the Earth had aligned themselves as the enemies of the One,” she had said sweetly. “They took their stand against the Leader's rightful place as the supreme potentate of this world. ‘The nations raged. The people plotted in vain. The kings of the earth took their stand and the rulers gathered together against the Lord and against his Anointed One.’ They were an evil, rebellious, stiff-necked lot who had earned the consequences of their actions.”

Miss Bertrand had never excelled in math. Her background in language arts left her unprepared for an important probability.

The United States of America alone had lost over 500,000 military personnel. With a population of over 250 million—using an average of four individuals per family—America had approximately 62 million families. Five hundred thousand of them had been directly affected by death during the Great Battle: a ratio of one in 124. Factoring the families of grandparents and aunts and uncles would bring the affected ratio down to one in thirty-one. Adding two close families as friends of the deceased: one in 7.25.

Miss Bertrand had twenty-two children—seven and eight year-olds—in her class at Fairview Elementary. There was virtually *no* chance that all her students had escaped the Great Battle without a loss.

Innocently confused, young Avery Foster—still trying to remember his new last name—had raised his hand and asked, “But why did the Wind kill *my* brother?”

The words slapped a shiver through Miss Bertrand. Her eyes fogged. She blinked. The clock ticked. Uneasily, some children stared at Avery—some at their teacher. Miss Bertrand had swallowed once, then twice and then dismissed her class early for recess.

It had seemed so simple, so clear when the principal had explained it—so “right” when she joined the Pious the week before. She had discovered that it wasn’t as easy to apply the quick and tidy, comforting explanation to a real life example who stared at her with wounded eyes. But—in time—she learned.

My brother wasn't evil or stick-necked or rebellious. He just valued his freedom. He wanted the right to choose for himself the books he read, the videos he watched and the women he lusted for. He wanted the right to be whatever he wanted to be, to do whatever he wanted to do, whenever he wanted to do it. Why is that so wrong?

Yet even with the Wind’s continued severity—even with the Pious’ continued nauseating justification—everyone Avery knew seemed content to go along. Everyone . . . even his father. The man Avery barely remembered from his early childhood—a military man, a powerful man, a proud man—that man no longer existed. Something had happened to Benjamin Foster twenty years ago. Now, he plodded. He went to work. He came home. He went to bed. He got up. He went to work. He came home. (“Like father, like son.”)

He would hear nothing of questioning the Wind and forbade his only-living son even to mention the topic. Neither would he hear anything of his wife joining the Pious. He lived between the competing demands of allegiance. He too was a boundary dweller.

Just like I used to be. Just like I'd probably still be if it hadn't been for you, Shana. But we had that accidental moment. That moment when you had to trust me. Had to admit—with your glorious eyes darting and your lovely lips quivering—that you were a member of the Resistance.

Had to believe that I wouldn't turn you in. I will remember that moment forever because something took hold in my soul. Some determination I never knew I had. It gave me something to believe in. A place to live. Your words became an anchor in my soul and made me feel human—truly human—for the first time in my life.

So tonight, I join the Resistance, Avery congratulated himself, symbolically grinding his black tennis shoes into the asphalt for a sure footing as he fondled the weapon he held—a .45 caliber semi-automatic pistol equipped with laser-sight and silencer.

Tonight, I make my stand against the Wind. Tonight, I take another step in humanity's long journey to expel the aliens from the Earth. It does not matter if I live or die. I will no longer cower between obedience and rebellion. Tonight, in this alley, I make a Pious pay for his crimes against humanity—for his duplicity with the murderers of millions, for his moral condescension and foul justifications.

With one fluid, well practiced motion, Avery snapped the gun into a double-handed firing position—his right eye directly in line with the sights.

Moments from now, a Pious man dies.

2

Prepared, grounded, Avery took a calm, centering breath. He grinned, casually letting the weapon drop to his side. Musing over the coming dark, he leaned out of his niche just far enough to glance north to Commercial Street once again.

As its name implied, the east-west avenue was one of two original commercial districts for the city of Springfield. The first—the “city square” area—lay twenty blocks south down Boonville Avenue. Oddly enough, the railroad had brought Avery here instead of there tonight.

The year was 1868—in the pre-Coming way of reckoning the years. As the Atlantic and Pacific Railroad worked its way toward Greene County in Missouri, the citizens of Springfield unhappily learned that the line wouldn't run into the city as they first assumed. Instead, it would pass one mile north directly through a stony, brush-filled, 500 acre patch of land owned by one of Springfield's most known and well-loved citizens, E. T. Robberson.

Though history is vague on the actual sequence of events, at some point, Robberson had sold a two-third interest in the land to C. E. Harwood and S. H. Boyd and the three had formed a land partnership. This partnership made the railroad an impressive offer. They were willing to give the railroad a 200 foot right-of-way, along with forty acres for a depot and half interest in 200 of the remaining 460 acres.

Whether this offer actually influenced the railroad's decision to bypass Springfield is impossible to say. But, many of the leading business men of the city found the situation intolerable, adamantly claiming that the railroad's charter *compelled* the Southern Pacific Railroad Company—the builders of the new line—to bring the line to Springfield.

To settle the dispute, the railroad sent two commissioners, Andrew Pierce and Thomas McKissik. Pierce brought an offer. If Springfield would pay \$25,000.00 to offset certain costs, Southern Pacific Railroad would draw the line south to meet the city. Civic leaders met this suggestion with such vehement scorn that Pierce stormed from the meeting, shouting that he had the authority to place the depot whenever he chose. It stayed one mile north of town.

Seemingly overnight, North Springfield and its Commercial Street sprang into existence. In the first six months, the railroad land office, headed by none other than C.E. Harwood, sold \$9000.00 worth of town lots. In time, this office would transfer a million dollars worth of real estate—proving, once again, charter or no charter, the Golden Rule of business: “He who has the gold, makes the rules.” The split between the two cities remained until 1887 when the citizenry voted to merge.

Through the years—as usual for original business districts—Commercial Street had gradually succumbed to its own form of entropy with businesses moving on to better parts. As usual for original business districts, Commercial Street had—over the years—staged several minor, short-lived “come-backs.” Each ended with the area falling back into disuse and disarray. By the Coming, most of its historical brick buildings were boarded up. Those few still open competed for customers with the homeless shelters and cheap beer halls that blossomed to fill the void. Yet, since Judge Stone's

arrival twenty years ago, both Commercial Street and the old center-city had enjoyed a full-fledged resurrection.

The Wind had blown Springfield clean of the fear of vagrants and danger of muggers. Couples with an eye for history and a distaste for steel and glass or vinyl siding and shingles had begun renovating the old buildings, patiently restoring them, scrubbing away at painted bricks, replacing broken panes in double-hung wooden windows, turning the upper stories into loft apartments that overlooked artsy, ground level shops and street vendors. They even kept the allies swept clean.

Now, Commercial Street had plenty of visitors. Plenty of residents. Plenty of people coming and going.

Plenty of targets for Shana Dunham's initiate to the Resistance.

As the moments wore on, Avery drummed the fingers of his left hand against his pant leg. The music of a street guitarist performing the Rondeau by Elizabeth-Claude Jacquet de la Guerre calmed its way into the alley—its pleasantness “tsking” over Avery's intentions; its beauty fueling his fluster.

Once more unconvinced, Avery's left hand instinctively fished into his pocket for antacids. None had appeared.

The gun beckoned him: its cold steel rigid; its mechanisms completely dedicated to destruction. Avery felt its weight. He remembered its power. Thumbing the activation button for the laser sight with his right hand, he stretched his arms forward and stepped out of his hiding niche. With a snarl, he ripped the red targeting dot across the wall of the alley—counting the number of bricks from his starting point to the corner—tracking an imagined prey.

Seventeen, he thought with a calming satisfaction as the dot skipped off the last half-brick on the edge of the old Missouri Hotel. *That's good.*

He had just begun another swipe when footsteps surprised him from behind. Dousing the laser sight, Avery scrambled back into the alley's shadows.

Did they see you?

The rough surface of the bricks dug into Avery's back as he drove himself into the dark. He thought about the black ski mask

and black gloves in his back pocket. The street lights on Commerce Street barely made it into the alley. With his all-black attire and the black makeup around his eyes he could slip on the mask and gloves, close his eyes and disappear in his shadowed niche.

No time. The footsteps were too close, coming too quick. If only Shana hadn't ordered him to stay bare faced until he had *completed* the kill. If only . . .

You shouldn't have been playing with the laser sight!

The footsteps rushed his location with the staccato clicking of a woman's heels. Not strident, though. Not commanding like Shana's gait. More hurried, almost harried with an irregular, swaying rhythm. Avery stopped breathing. His hand tensed around the pistol.

A thirty-ish woman with big hair and freshly manicured nails clattered past—head bowed in concentration. She wore a short jeans skirt and a cropped, forest-green sweater. Her right hand held a bag filled with presents. Her sizable purse lay pinned between her right elbow and the right side of her waist as her left hand rifled through it—looking for her Wireless Fund Transfer card. Commercial street had several street vendors who sold flowers. She wanted a dozen roses—one for each year of her marriage. It was the last item on her list of anniversary gifts for her husband. (She needed her WFT card to buy them. Legitimate businesses didn't take “old-age” cash.)

As Avery watched, frustration deflated the woman's shoulders. She slowed to a stop and growled through an exhale.

“Neletta, honey, you gotta get this purse cleaned out,” she grumbled with a Tennessee curl. Dropping the gift bag, Neletta shifted the purse forward into her left hand. She rocked it outward on her stomach—trying to make the most of the light straggling in from Commercial. It never occurred to her to walk forward another twenty feet and find a street lamp.

(Neletta's mind worked with geometric simplicity. For her, the quickest way to any goal was the shortest distance between two points. The purse was resting on her belly button. Her right hand was approaching. What could be faster?)

Plunging into the uncooperative mass of belongings, Neletta's hand began a vigorous interrogation. But, the purse wriggled soon

free, wearied of the questions. It tumbled, spraying its contents across the floor of the alley.

By the time Neletta caught it three seconds later, the last occupant—a naked, wintergreen breath mint—had already fled to freedom. Merrily, it bounced once off her newly prostrate tube of “Wild Rose” lipstick and rolled ten feet down the alley before hilariously flopping on its side.

“Hell fire and damnation!” Neletta shouted, slinging the empty purse to the ground, stomping her foot for emphasis. She collapsed in a disgusted heap.

Without thinking, Avery moved forward to help. Beyond submission, this was the one demand of the Wind: “Treat others as you wish to be treated.”

Courtesy was expected in the Reign. School teachers drummed it. Employers emphasized it. News stories on the television and radio constantly showed it (what was left of television and radio, that is). Courtesy was so deeply hammered into Avery that, for a moment, he forgot his *very discourteous* reason for lurking in the alley.

What are you doing? Avery’s mind snapped with a perfect imitation of Shana’s tone. Aghast, his body seized tight, his outstretched left hand bobbing less than a foot away from Neletta’s back.

If she turned and saw the gun

Swallowing hard, Avery slowly retreated into his niche. Silently, awkwardly, the weapon rose. His breath stuttered. He didn’t want this but he couldn’t let her live if she saw him.

Oblivious, Neletta ranted. “You *told* Billy you’d be home on time tonight, Neletta. You *promised* him. You crossed your heart and hoped to die if you didn’t.”

The red dot of the laser sight materialized just above and behind Neletta’s right ear. A silent prophet.

“And here you are rootin’ around in this alley with fumble-fingers when you shouldah been home half an hour ago and you *still* gotta get flowers.”

Breathless, Avery tried to keep the assassin’s mark on Neletta’s head as she scrambled to get everything back into her purse.

“Gonna be terrible cold in that house tonight if you don’t get a move on, honey. Billy’s not gonna keep his engine runnin’ forever,

you know.” Spotting her WTF card near the west wall of the alley, Neletta lunged.

“There you are, you little bugger!”

Unprepared, Avery let the red dot skip over the bricks on the other side of the alley. Neletta caught the motion in her peripheral vision. Her head swung to the left just as the dot whisked away. For an instant, she froze—uncertain of what she had seen; unaware that the little crimson fleck had returned to its nervous dance on the back of her head.

Avery finger tensed on the trigger. He stared at Neletta as she stared at the spot on the wall.

Crossed her heart and hoped to die, she'd said.

Crossed her heart and hoped to die.

Hoped to die if she was late.

Neletta was late. The trigger began drawing back.

Avery swallowed hard. He knew. At some “next” instant, the trigger would set the hammer free. The hammer would slam the firing pin into the back of the .45-caliber shell, detonating the charge, sending a slug rocketing down the barrel, directly on target for the little red dot on the back of Neletta’s head. Almost immediately after leaving the barrel, the slug would hit her skull, exploding on impact, blowing apart the entire right side of her cranium, shredding her brain with shards of bone and tiny knife blades of steel, turning millions, if not billions, of neurons into a bloody gray slush. Like a slain lamb.

Hoped to die if she was late.

“Neletta!” the woman suddenly grouched at her herself. “Don’t get distracted lookin’ at some *stupid bricks!* Billy is *waiting!* You’re gonna ruin this evening if you don’t get your little high-heeled body out this alley. Now, go get some flowers and *get home!*”

Committed to the pleasant straight-line path once again, Neletta swooped up what she could of her purse’s contents, grabbed her bag of presents and leapt to her feet.

“Mama’s comin’, Billy,” Neletta assured her unseen husband. “Mama’s comin’ home soon.”

Avery let the laser sight wander down her retreating back, sidle over her right hip and fall off her leg before it winked out on the ground. Somehow, he had kept himself from jerking the trigger when she yelled the last time.

His fingers were tingling. His mind was giddy with relief.

I was actually going to do it! One twitch and “Neletta” would have been the “late Neletta” for the last time.

There was sensuality in the moment. Control. Ownership. For a kingly instant, he had bought this woman to do with as he pleased. To kill, to let free. A supplicant before the sovereign. Mercy or death.

Avery turned back to the task at hand.

“That’s one,” he mouthed in a smug whisper. “One down, two to go. Then, the Pious man dies.”

Too bad it can’t be a member of the Gathering.

If the Pious were sheep following the Wind in this new age on Earth then—in Avery’s mind—the Gathering were the Judas goats who led them to slaughter. The Pious only submitted to the reign of the Wind. The Gathering actually *ruled* with them. They were a fifth column who had waited patiently, perhaps even unconsciously, for hundreds of years until the One spoke the word and the Wind whistled in their ears.

They came from only one race. Of all the diversity, of all the intertwining threads in the Homo sapien tapestry, the One and the Wind had picked at one—unraveling it from its proper place, tattering the unity of the whole. The Wind had set this one race askew and stamped them special, marking all others less so by default.

This too, the Pious claimed, fulfilled the ancient prophecies. “Hear the word of the Lord, O ye nations, and declare it in the isles afar off, and say, He that scattered Israel will gather him, and keep him, as a shepherd doth his flock.”

The Gathering had become the Earth’s new royalty, granted rank and privilege; pampered and deferred to by the Pious; the subject of curious admiration. Everyone wondered what it would be like to be that close to the Wind, to be privy to Their secrets.

Under “old-age” circumstances, such interest would have translated into a freshet of foaming minutiae to quench the public’s thirst. Yet, the Wind seemed careful to limit the Gathering’s exposure. An occasional news story. An infrequent interview. Beyond that, a curtain of gauzy translucence. Figures moving beyond it, familiar shapes, somehow changed.

The drought only piqued the public's interest. A few of Avery's co-workers at the Transport Center even made regular trips to the Judicial Center, visiting the Education Complex—studying not the information but the keepers. These co-workers would introduce themselves to members of the Gathering and ply them with questions before scurrying back to compare notes. Marcia Longworth, a long-time Courtesy Attendant at the Transport Center, claimed to know the name, description and filial associations of every member of the Gathering within a one hundred mile radius—even who was dating whom and for how long.

Avery found such efforts ludicrous. Years ago, he had found ways to stop listening to the prattle. If the topic came up at lunch, he would silently shake his head, excuse himself and head back to his office to read. If someone specifically asked him during coffee break what he thought about a new tidbit of information, Avery would shrug and change the subject.

Not for. Not against. Decision's refugee. Displaced somewhere in the between and not interested. At least, Avery *wanted* everyone to think he wasn't interested.

The Gathering had cheated him. It was one of the few things in life Avery truly believed. The Gathering had taken his heritage, his culture, his history and made it a thing of reproach. He belonged to their race—though only his parents knew it. Even now, he could walk the eleven blocks south on Boonville Avenue to the Judicial Center and apply to the monster who ruled there.

Unless, of course, Judge Stone isn't available because he's out killing someone.

By their collusion, the Gathering had turned Avery's own race against him. Their treachery had exiled him from his birthright—an embarrassed, disinherited prince. It was a betrayal that Avery intended to avenge.

But not tonight.

“Never touch a member of the Gathering.”

Shana Dunham had said it just after Avery's Resistance training began. On a beautiful May day, she had dropped by his apartment dressed in a black Lyrca top, biker shorts and multi-colored wind breaker. It was the first time he had seen her in anything other than

her Transport Center coveralls. After making an entrance, Shana had removed the coat in his living room. Instinctively, he had swallowed hard and flushed pink at her tall, precisely outlined form. She picked up his expression, laughed away Avery's discomfort and told him that she wanted to take him on a cycling tour through the hills north of town.

“. . . to test his endurance,” she had added with a hard-edged look that sent red flags flinging through his mind and along the edges of his ears. (The new order didn't prize sexually aggressive women. Avery had never met anyone like her.)

Two hours later, a well exercised, deeply breathing Shana had spread a picnic lunch beneath a centuries-old oak tree. Somehow, Avery managed to collapse on the blanket with one tattered piece of dignity intact. He had struggled for miles to keep pace with her pistoning thighs and calves.

Near helpless from the exhaustion rotting his chest, Avery tried to ignore how dangerous Shana looked. Her coat long ago discarded, the sweat had polished her body to a fine luster. Like a cold-oiled saber, she glinted in the sun—ready to strike, ready to take command, ready to hew any situation into submission. There was peril in her motives—hazard in her presence. For the first time in his life, Avery didn't trust himself—didn't trust what he might do for her if she asked, didn't trust what he might become if he stayed. She was iron and steel in his balance canting him from the midst.

Even after Avery found his breath, the feeling remained—that nothing was beyond her boundaries, that once she determined to do a thing, it would be done. The feeling made her defeated statement all the more jarring.

“Never touch a member of the Gathering,” she had said with resignation as she talked to him about the Resistance during their meal. Taking a long draw on the thick plastic straw that stuck out of her ever-present water bottle, she explained. “The Wind sees to their protection. Never forget that, Avery. All who have tried have failed. All who have tried . . . have died. Every one of them, Avery . . . even my father. *Never touch a member of the Gathering.*”

That's fine, Avery acquiesced, the Gathering can wait. Tonight, a member of the Pious will do. His death might not mean much in the

larger landscape of the rebellion but it will mark my rite of passage and make me a full-fledged member of the Resistance.

More footsteps approached the alley, this time from the north—from Commercial Street—interrupting Avery's thoughts. They were running, rushing his location with soft, light padding. He was ready—tucked cozy in his niche, wrapped in shadows.

3

Standing in front of Thaddius Brimley's flower stand on Commercial Street, Neletta hollered as a young man jostled her.

"Hey! Careful now."

"Sorry, ma'am," the stocky thirteen year old boy yelled back over his shoulder. Chase Hallam was after his eleven year-old brother, Shad—heading east.

Two minutes ago, Shad had waited for Chase to get good and comfortable in the upstairs bathroom of their home on North Jefferson. Once sure that Chase was seated on the throne, Shad had drum-rolled the bathroom door—knowing how much his older brother hated that.

Then, it was out of the house, nimble and wiry, like a rabbit spooked from its den and the hunt was on. No question that the larger older-looking Chase could catch Shad in a straight-away race. But, Shad figured he'd get a good fifty foot head start with Chase's pants being undone and all.

By the time the two had closed on Commercial Street, Chase had narrowed that lead to ten feet—just as Shad expected. Chase might be faster in the long stretch but Shad could corner, and Commercial Street had *plenty* of corners.

Dodging, swerving, hearing his brother's footsteps falling behind, Shad smiled at the thought of Chase running into the woman at the flower stand. Her voice sounded just like he thought it would—lilting, twisting upward in that wonderful sound of a Tennessee drawl, not really mad just playful. He had whipped around both her and her big hair just a moment back. It looked like she was buying some roses. Had a bag with lots of packages in it and a big purse.

Time for the rabbit to ditch the dog, Shad thought as he cut into an alley next to the old Missouri Hotel. If all went right, he'd lose his

brother in the buildings. Then it was straight up Benton Avenue and on for home.

Avery saw Shad hit the north end of the alley. Still, he was shocked when the sinewy boy executed an amazingly agile left hand turn and dashed south. Avery's hand tightened around the grip of the pistol as the young man passed him.

"Kill the third person that comes into the alley," Shana had said one week ago after choosing the location for Avery's initiation.

Kill the third person, Avery remembered.

More footsteps. Heavier. Uncertain.

Chase scrambled around the corner.

"Won't work, Shad," the huskier of the two boys called ahead—huffing as he stopped to take a breath, "You ain't gonna lose me in these buildings. I'm coming for ya and you're gonna cluck like a chicken all the way back to Mamaw's."

Chase pushed himself forward and started up the alley. Avery watched him pass. The gun snapped into position. He had a speech but there wasn't time. The young man would be out of the alley in seconds. Avery's muscles tightened as he flipped on the laser sight.

Two words from nowhere ripped Avery's mind with gale-like force.

He's Sam.

The thought sired a spasm. Avery could almost taste the texture of Chase's words; the mock menace laid over a brother's love; the playful brawl that could instantly turn to fierce protection.

"I'm coming after you, squirt!"

The last twenty years evaporated. Avery was seven again. Running for the "safe-zone" kitchen. Pawing at the air. Grasping for speed. Hearing Sam descend on him. Hoping to make it to his mother's solace. Hoping Sam would catch him first and torture him with tickles. Elder brother's last day home. Last time Avery saw him alive.

Shuddering, Avery came to himself. He heard the footfalls die to a whisper. The alley grew quiet.

"That's two," Avery finally said, defiantly settling for the excuse he would give Shana when she asked. He took a deep breath to steady himself. The gun fell to his side.

“There were two boys. That makes two. Two comes after one. I kill the next *man* who comes into the alley . . . no women . . . no children.”

I won't be like Them. I won't let Them make me like Them. I won't kill a boy's older bother.

The guitar music returned. The minutes drifted. Avery drummed his fingers on his pant leg and waited.

Should have brought the antacids.

His ballast began slipping away. The aversion to almost killing “Sam” remained, punching holes in his sand-bagged resolve. Each second eroded his stance. He was drawing toward center again.

They did to you first! They took Sam. They smeared him all over the desert. Someone has to avenge Sam's death. Someone has to make restitution for a life without a big brother. Someone has to pay for the theft of your father's courage and the robbery of your mother's joy. Someone needs to show the Pious what they can do with their pompous little, self righteous answers. Eye for an eye. Tooth for a tooth.

Avery's left hand slipped over the weapon—trying to draw from its power. Rocking back and forth in his niche, he made sure the silencer was tight. For a moment, he activated the laser sight. Dropping the clip, he examined the exploding-tip bullets in the faint light to make sure they were seated properly. Satisfied, Avery thrust the clip back in with a flourish and racked the slide to throw a round into the firing chamber.

A bullet clattered to the ground.

Avery rolled his eyes. He had racked the slide five minutes before Neletta entered the alley. Disgusted, Avery stepped out of the niche and quickly stooped to pick up the shell. He dropped it into his right pants pocket. The gun had an extender clip that held fourteen rounds. He would only fire three. No need to reload. Leaning back into his hiding place, Avery scanned the windows of the buildings that looked down above him.

Guess I'll have to explain that too.

Somewhere up there, Shana's team had placed three cameras equipped with night-vision lenses. They would document the “event.” Recording his exposed face with clarity. Marking it for easy identification. Insurance. Just like the fingerprints on the weapon.

The mask and gloves would only aid his escape. In the Resistance, it all came done to absolute loyalty.

“No time for traitors, Avery,” Shana had drummed. “We serve the great tradition. Freedom fighters in a just cause. We join Earth’s long line of valiants. We pledge our lives to each other in strength and honor and dignity. All for one, one for all—holding an unflinching dedication to restore each human’s right and power to choose his or her course. We are family, Avery. We will reclaim what is ours and we will make Them pay for what They’ve taken.”

Footsteps sounded from the southern end of the alley.

A confidence took root in Avery’s soul—binding together his resolve, thwarting time’s erosion. Shana’s words played again.

“We will reclaim what is our and we will make Them pay for what They’ve taken.”

That’s three, Avery thought watching a middle-aged man amble past. Avery moved quietly out of the shadows.

“Greeting, Pious One,” Avery softly growled, the decades-deep layers of his bitterness flexing.

The man turned.

“Peace,” he replied.

Perfect. He even says it like it’s sacred. Peace through blood. Peace at any cost. Peace for comfort. Peace . . . even if it blasphemous the soul. He’s gotta be Pious.

The gun rose. The words gushed out. Even Avery found surprise in their intensity.

“I condemn you for criminal acts against humanity and execute you in the name of the Resistance.”

Adrenalin flashed into Avery’s system. He hit the activation button for the laser sighting system with his right thumb. His hands tightened around the pistol. He felt the checked pattern of the grip dig into the palm of his right hand. The red dot eagerly sprang to life and found its place in the center of the Pious man’s chest.

Now!

Avery’s finger gleefully twitched three times on the trigger. The gun fired flawlessly shoving him backward each time a slug left the barrel.

Dull explosions. Muted pops. Bullets hitting their target—exploding on impact.

For an entire week, Avery had thought about this moment; had tried to imagine it; tried to prepare himself for it. Shana had said it would be *messy*. Like the lamb slain.

Something was wrong.

Each bullet had torn a hole in the man's clothing and flashed as it detonated but . . .

He's still standing.

Ice formed around the edges of the thought.

He can't be standing! Nothing can survive exploding tip bullets, at least . . . nothing human.

Fear grabbed Avery's neck, choking his breath, bulging his eyes—an elder brother to the Status Quo, set for retribution.

Avery fought back.

Of course, he's human! He's too short to be a member of the Wind. They're all eight feet tall!

The red dot of the laser sight jumped to the man's nose. Avery squeezed the trigger three more times. Again, the gun fired flawlessly. Again, the bullets flashed when they detonated.

The Pious man *still* stood.

Avery frantically emptied the gun of its remaining shells, firing at every part of the Pious man's body as anger and fear wrestled for control. To come this far, to make this commitment, to have it stopped cold, still-birthered instead . . .

The last bullet left the chamber. The slide banged back; locked open. Avery stared at the pistol for a twitching, uncertain moment—his mind locked open as well.

The Pious man waited.

The bullet in your pocket!

Tossing the gun into his left hand, Avery wrenched the shell from his right pants pocket and slammed it into the ejection slot on the top of the pistol. Somehow, it dropped in straight and level. He flipped the weapon back to his right hand and yanked on release lever for the slide with his thumb.

The slide jammed shut, devouring the bullet with a satisfying crunch. Avery put the laser dot in the center of the Pious man's left eye.

He pulled the trigger.

The gun fired.

The silencer popped.

The shell exploded.

The slide banged open.

The Pious man still stood without the slightest sign of any physical damage.

“Are you finished?” he asked, his voice oddly tranquil.

Fear slapped Avery blind. In the dark, a light breeze began to push against his face.

Strange, solitary clapping filled the night.

In time, Avery realized the sound came from his own feet, hitting the pavement in quick succession. In time, he even guessed his destination.

Watching the young initiate flee in panic, the Pious man smiled pleasantly, turned and wandered into Commercial Street.

Moments later, Neletta burst through the front door of her house with her typical, effervescent “Hi, baby!” entrance. She was late—forty-five minutes late.

Billy and his anniversary dinner had cooled.

Instantly, Neletta fell into a full doe-eyed apology—even dropping to her knees to toddle forward like a wind-up tin toy. The small smirk that tweaked the side of Billy’s mouth told Neletta she’d saved the evening—though she knew better that to let Billy know she’d spotted his melting annoyance.

Minutes later, the rickety microwave had reheated the meal—even if it wasn’t done to the same level of perfection. And Billy? Over the next two hours, Neletta reheated Billy.

Shad fared less well. Chase caught him on the open stretch, heading south down Benton Avenue. The younger of the two brothers thought he had enough lead to sprint home and slap the sugar maple on the front lawn. It was the boys’ “home-safe” marker—infused with the power to forgive all wrong.

With his lead dwindling, Shad finally resigned himself to his fate.

As promised, Chase made his younger brother cluck like a chicken all the way home—his feet barely touching the ground as Chase hoisted his underwear higher with each step.

Neletta's flower seller fared worst of all. For two days, Thaddius Brimley had secretly overcharged his customers half a credit here, a full credit there. Every night after work over the last week, he had scurried to Springfield's black market—the traveling, side-show with the avarice of a carnival and the atmosphere of a bank run. It was *the* place to satisfy appetites left unquenched by the purity of the day. *The* place to buy products now unproducible because of the rigid morality of the Wind.

Every night for hours, Thaddius had wandered the stalls; drawn back over and over to the one belonging to the girlie magazine seller; trying not to look interested; gaping at the cover on the bottom shelf, third from the left—neatly sealed in plastic as if it needed protection from the hands of commoners, too high and pure to be touched by any other than an elite clientele. (“Sanitized for your protection.”)

The magazine seller had marked Thaddius a “nuke”—a newcomer—the first night he came through the door. With every loop, the magazine seller “let slip” another titillating detail of the contents sealed inside. An infant when the Wind first arrived, Thaddius had never seen anything like it.

The cover alone sired a hunger. It twisted his gut. It knotted his throat. He wanted it more than he had ever wanted anything but the seller was absolute in his price. A “Ben Franklin,” one hundred dollars—153 credits at the current black market exchange rate.

It could have been a million. Flower-sellers didn't make that kind of money.

Then, three nights ago, the seller had offered a bargain. “Buy the mag for a franklin. Bring it back in a day in good shape and I'll buy it back for seventy-five.” A deal made many times before.

Trembling at the possibility, Thaddius had talked his mother into loaning him 125 credits. His skimming had netted another thirty—an easy thirty. No one expected him to cheat them. No one

even bother to check his figures. Everyone had trusted him just as they would wish to be trusted.

Thaddius knew he could do more. This week, he'd been timid. Next week . . . well, he'd already figured out how to make two sales for one; how to distract the buyer once he had their card and send the credits twice. No one would notice. Everyone trusted him just as they would wish to be trusted. Maybe he'd only rent the magazine tonight but in a few weeks, he'd own it. And then, he'd own others. Might even have a stall someday in the black market and rent the mags to nukes. Might even get himself a counter babe. Might even dress her like the girl on the cover. Might even take her home.

Thaddius's hands worried over the flower stand as he closed up shop—imaging the cool gloss of the magazine in his palms, feeling the quiver as he peeled it open.

Not long now, he ached, Not long.

Tonight, the black market would be in the basement of an old abandoned bank building on the corner of Cherry Street and Glenstone Avenue. Thaddius would take an alternate route to his destination. Perhaps to atone for his coming indulgence, he had paused to sell Neletta a dozen roses when he should have hopped the Commercial Street Bus. But, he would sprint east to Washington Avenue, south to Division Street; catch the Division Street Bus going east and then board the Glenstone Avenue Bus going south. A penance of ten extra minutes in his overly-rehearsed schedule.

The last latch on the flower stand flipped shut. The signs welcoming late-night buyers to help themselves and send the appropriate number of credits to “Thaddius Brimley’s Flowers” found their places on the lacquered oak siding. Then, the young man tore from the area as if fleeing for his life. Anticipation pushed him hard—urging him to make the Division Street bus in time, blinding him to his apparent desperation to get away from the Commercial Street District.

He never imagined how guilty he looked.

Two blocks from Division, the lace on Thaddius's left shoe came undone. (He didn't know his life would soon follow.) He let the lace flap for a block before slowing. Merely disgruntled, he stopped to retie it.

Straightening, he heard the hiss of a two-foot wide, double-headed medieval battle axe . . . arcing downward.

In a split-second of recognition, Thaddius saw the outline of an eight and a half foot titan, towering over him—enraged, eyes gleaming like a Norse berserker. Then, the honed edge of the axe's blade cleaved through Thaddius's left shoulder, slicing diagonally across his torso, exiting near his right hip. Blood spat, speckling the weapon with a new layer of color from its massive, pitted iron head, down the carefully-wrapped leather thongs and finally across the entire length of the red oak handle—thick as a man's fist.

Beyond the sluicing of his body fluids, Thaddius made no sound. Beyond his own, no human eye saw his demise. Beyond the next minute, no sign remained of his execution.

4

A frantic tattoo pricked the air in the 1300 block of East Loren. It rapped outward from the front door of a modest, ranch-style house that lay on the outer rim of the city's "old-money" homes.

Inside the master bedroom, Shana Dunham quickly slipped on a scant silk wrap, cinching it only tight enough to bait her finely crafted figure. Then—with her signature border-flaunting stride—she moved into the hall: toward the living room, toward the frenzied pounding at her front door, toward the expected appointment. In transit, she pulled her thick blonde mane from behind the robe's collar and tossed her head to clear her mind.

The pounding had surprised her. Not for its sudden start. Nor its urgency. It had surprised her for the unbidden shiver it sent through her belly and out her pristine knees. (She thought she had long since left behind the bulbous fearling of her youth.)

For almost twenty years, Shana had prided herself on mental stamina. On fury to do as commitment demanded. Sending Avery into the alley was but one decision in a life of decision, set headlong into the Wind. She knew the possible consequences. Harold Thompson—the leader of the Resistance—would turn apoplectic if Avery failed. And Judge Stone? Well, Stone had countless ways to express his terminal displeasure with those who rebelled against his authority. This she knew and had prepared for mentally.