

**IN THE
NAME
OF THE
FATHER**

‘McDermott’s ambitious, sprawling epic debut novel ... begins by tearing into a dystopian world like a bat out of hell. Your only option is to grab a hold of something and come along for the ride.’

— Jesse Miller (brainofj.org)

‘A masterful plot ... For much of the book I felt that the author was deliberately leaving the reader to ponder on the big questions. What place does faith and spirituality have in a modern society? What forms of government work best? What does it really mean to be free? What are the virtues and follies of our own modern society? I heard recently that great art doesn’t answer questions, it asks them.’

— Cassie

‘To me, this book is ultimately about the human experience ... this is a dark world, a dangerous place. What happens when a people in and around a place like this are told they aren’t allowed to believe in anything? The result is inspiring ... A beautiful story with a big heart.’

— Charlotte Draper

‘Be aware: this book could easily be a prediction of future societal direction ... The author gives us a dramatic view of how easily we could be led into following and voting in new ideas and fads that can lock us into a lifestyle of divisiveness and also fearful for our families and the future. This book is a must-read exciting thriller to the end.’

— Colleen Mills

‘I just wish it was less believable.’

— Jennifer Cameron-Smith

‘A very well-written book that makes you think and question. One that will leave you suspended in this world, never knowing if what you believe is real or propaganda.’

— Marlene Sanders

‘Set in a dystopian future, the novel raises interesting questions surrounding the pitfalls of democracy and the place of religion in society — without taking a distinct stance on either side of the equation.’

— Paul

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**MICHAEL FRANCIS
MCDERMOTT**



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For Mum and Dad

And for Meg, Jack, and Charlie

PART ONE

GREY ZONE SECTOR 11

13 March 2196

9.53pm

Her red hair.

It was the only thing of true colour Heath could see. Lamps along the boundary threw clouds of light against the decline and the fences down below, but they did little to rid the scene of its familiar shade. Other than her red hair, everything else was grey.

Heath handed the binoculars to Ozzie who was crouched at his side. They were perched in a broken building that was forty to fifty metres up the hill. The height gave them a good view for reconnoitring the boundary.

Ozzie lifted the binoculars to her eyes to get a better look. ‘So, she’s the only RG here?’ she said. Her brows sharpened.

Beyond the electric wires of the first fence, the Republican Guard was pacing up the middle of no-man’s land — the area between the first and second fences that formed the perimeter of the Grey Zone and the barrier to the Republic.

Ozzie’s hood was pressed tight over her scalp, hiding the brown spikes of her hair. Her eyebrows were a darker shade and seemed to add depth to her eyes. She’d always had a

boyish look.

‘Just the one Guard,’ Heath confirmed.

Like Ozzie, Heath had just hit adulthood, but sometimes he felt like he was still just a boy. Whenever they wore their suits and pulled the hoods up over their heads, there probably wasn’t much to tell him and Ozzie apart. He supposed that was fitting. They’d been best friends and inseparable almost since the day they could walk, growing up in Sector 11 of the Grey Zone.

A voice came into Heath’s earpiece. ‘Got eyes on the same Guard,’ Derrick said. ‘No other threats. I’m moving to your position.’

Hayley’s voice followed Derrick’s through the headphone. ‘Remaining up top. Ready to launch when you are.’

Derrick and Hayley had been chosen by Vincent for this mission, along with Heath and Ozzie. They were five and six years older than Heath and Ozzie, more experienced too.

Tonight, Derrick was leading their unit.

‘Remember,’ Vincent said, talking to them from their bunker back in the centre of Sector 11, ‘Aaron’s got the power cutting out at ten o’clock. He’s killing the motion and infra-red sensors at the facility at 10.25. You’ll only have ten minutes to stash as many meds as you can.’

Ozzie let go of her assault rifle and the muzzle came to rest in one of the cracks that marred the wall of the building. She adjusted her earpiece as she followed the Republican Guard with the binoculars.

Heath squinted again at the Guard down below. The RG

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

looked left and right as she walked along the boundary, surveying the terrain beyond the electric fences on both sides. Heath tightened his hold on the grip of his rifle. Already his palm was hot and slippery underneath his glove, but it found friction.

‘She’s in line with your position now,’ Ozzie said to Hayley through the mic of her earpiece.

Derrick had been hiding in the adjacent building across the stretch, surveying the northern end of the boundary from there. Hayley was perched on that rooftop. As usual, her sniper rifle would be set up on the tripod in case they ran into serious trouble, but Heath knew she would have the tranquiliser rifle in her hands, as they got ready for the electrical current to deactivate.

‘She’ll turn around when she gets to the end of her allocated course,’ Derrick said. ‘Hayley, have your maths figured out for when she’s back.’

‘They don’t call me the best shot for nothing,’ Hayley said.

‘Hey, I don’t doubt it,’ Derrick said. ‘You’re the best dart shooter I’ve seen. But all the same, don’t miss.’

‘If I miss the Guard, you’ll know it’s because I’ve chosen to shoot you instead.’

‘I’d fight the anaesthetic until I got up there to beat your ass,’ Derrick replied.

They had to wait for Aaron back at Bunker 11 to deactivate the current before Hayley could take her shot with the tranquiliser rifle. If she misjudged the distance or if the rifle malfunctioned and the dart careered into the wires

rather than over them, it would send bolts of electricity flying and spark up the fence, drawing attention to their presence and killing the mission.

Heath glanced over his left shoulder when he heard scuttling. Derrick rushed forward with his weapon hanging by his side, the strap over his shoulder. When he got to Heath and Ozzie's position at the window, he lifted the neoprene clasped over his collar to pull his cell phone out from under the suit. The map on the screen highlighted the terrain of Grey Zone Sector 11 and the stretch that dissected the buildings. A blue dot marked their live position on the map. A sheet of grey blanked out the Republican Territory beyond the boundary.

'You think we can rely on the map?' Heath said.

'Better than nothing. Besides, what else are we gonna do?'

'The map is good enough,' Vincent remarked through the earpiece. 'Just focus on doing your job.'

Heath and his partners had live maps of the Grey Zone, thanks to Aaron and his team of coders back at the bunker, but once they crossed the boundary and entered the Republic, they would lose their GPS position. From that point, they'd be working with an incomplete map of the Republican Territory that had been constructed based on intelligence gathered from former missions.

Derrick exited the live map and brought up the locally stored map of the Territory. He pinched the glass to zoom out. Several roads stretched out in different directions, some

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

of them cut off by blocks of grey — uncharted areas. A red balloon marked the location of the medical facility. ‘You sure it’s only twenty minutes on foot from here?’ Derrick said into his mic.

‘The estimate is twenty minutes,’ Vincent confirmed, ‘provided you aren’t intercepted.’

Heath swept the fences with his gaze. The lamplights tossed only dim light across no-man’s land, but it was enough to drown out the shadowy patterns of Republican buildings in the distance that otherwise might have been visible.

At 10pm, Aaron would cut the power to this section of the fences, using a software patch he had first constructed years ago. Despite defence barriers the Republic had developed over time, his most recently refined version had been foolproof for the better part of two years. Yet it still came with an unavoidable drawback.

Deactivation of the electricity only ever lasted for sixty minutes. After that, the electrical current in the fences was always reactivated, even if some of the wires had been cut in the meantime.

‘How do you feel?’ Heath said to Ozzie.

‘Lighter than you,’ Ozzie said.

Heath chuckled.

Ozzie’s backpack was empty, in preparation for the supplies they would harvest from the medical facility. His pack, on the other hand, was a cumbersome beast, filled with the usual supplies: spare magazines for his assault rifle

and the pistol holstered on his hip, smoke grenades, his tranquiliser rifle and container of darts, and a cable launcher, among other essentials. Tonight, he wasn't just carrying these things for himself, he was carrying them for Ozzie, too.

Most importantly, his pack also housed their ticket to the other side: cable cutters.

'She's turned,' Ozzie said.

'Hayley, you ready?' Vincent said through the earpiece. 'Power out in three, two, one.'

At the bottom of the hill, nothing seemed to change in the fences. The wires still bathed in the lamplights, tight and intact. They could only trust Vincent's countdown; the switch had been flicked.

'Hayley, take your shot,' Vincent said.

Ozzie fitted her goggles over her eyes and handed the binoculars back. Heath stashed them in his pack. He swung it over his shoulders as Derrick made his way back to the open cavity of the decaying building.

Ozzie snatched her AK-47 from its resting place. She clasped hands with Heath. 'Me and you,' she whispered.

'Me and you,' he said, finding familiar comfort in her eyes.

Hayley's voice floated to them through the waves, like a steady breeze. 'Eyes and rifle on target.'

10.00pm

Slinky rode in the SUV as it weaved along the avenue. Adjusting in her seat, she glanced at the residences immersed in the streetlights. The houses in this part of the Territory were architectural masterpieces of multiple storeys. Many of them boasted views of the water.

It never failed to amaze Slinky how sometimes the wealthiest citizens — and usually the most educated — were the ones who made the leap into the sea of madness. Growing up, she had always thought about things in a rational way. Rationally speaking, it would have made more sense to her if there was some kind of predictable correlation between wealth, education, and madness. But when she'd risen in the ranks and been appointed to her current role, she'd learnt more about *madness*.

Madness didn't discriminate. The wealthy and the educated were just as susceptible to it as anyone else. That fact both disturbed and angered her.

The SUV surged. Despite the sharp acceleration, the whirl of the electric engine barely breached the windows. The wheels gripped the tarmac at another turn in response to the instructions of the driverless system, and Slinky found herself a little loose in her seat, but she steadied herself easily. She was aware of their route.

Facing her in the seats opposite, Agents Abraham Jones

and Jacob Kellyway were also sitting without their seatbelts fastened. They were both strong men, large and bound by muscle. Their bulletproof vests bulged under their grey uniforms, adding extra bulk. It didn't seem to ever slow them down.

Slinky's vest was likewise wrapped around her body, pressing her breasts flat. She lifted her hand and traced the outline of it under her uniform. Though the vest was almost always unnecessary during these raids, it was protocol for all Agents to wear one in the field.

She looked up again at Jones and Kellyway. Their eyes seemed fixed on the floating air before them that filled the cabin of the SUV. There was no need to talk, no need to look. The Freedom Fighters were accustomed to their role. They'd conducted these raids and done what was necessary, countless times before.

When the SUV reached the bottom of the hill and tracked around the corner, Slinky glanced back and saw the patrol vehicle shadowing them, not far behind. She located the dark shapes of her Republican Guards sitting on the bed of the truck and caught a glimpse of the Republican logo emblazoned on the side in the glint of the streetlights before the vehicle's arc put it out of sight. The emblem could draw various feelings from her, depending on the context. She couldn't put her finger on which one swelled in her this time, but she didn't have time to muse on it. Her pack was too close to her targets.

Together, Slinky and the members of her FF unit were a

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

pack. Together, they were hunting.

Hunting.

Slinky was a hunter. For a long while now, she had been responsible for hunting the traitors. Her purpose was to find them, weed them out, and ultimately rid the world of them.

She had learnt throughout her days that, of all things, rationality and reason had to rule. To abandon rationality and to ignore reason, to disregard *evidence*, was to take the first step towards insanity. If you believed in something you couldn't explain or prove, you had jumped off the boat of sanity, you were threatening to take everyone overboard with you, and you could not be trusted.

Degrees of insanity did not exist. One was either insane or one was not. It was as simple as that.

Of all the people in the world, the insane were the most dangerous. People who didn't think rationally or listen to logic were people you couldn't negotiate or reason with. Above all, you certainly couldn't control them or the threat they posed.

Insanity had to be extinguished, utterly obliterated. Every threat had to be quashed.

Even though Slinky couldn't pinpoint why, whenever she conducted a raid, she thought of her childhood. She was sure she'd had a happy childhood, but she didn't remember much about it apart from the time she spent at the Father's Campus. There, she had learnt how the world worked and how the Republic worked.

There was a big difference between the two.

Early on, when she'd been a very young girl, she'd learnt that the world had once been a ticking time bomb. When that bomb had gone off, the explosion had brought society's costume of harmony down. Without the costume, society's flawed foundations had been shockingly exposed.

If the old world had been a garden, it had been one with bad soil. To cleanse the world, you had to start with a brand-new bed of soil. To keep it healthy, you had to weed every single abnormal growth.

Slinky wanted to hunt the insane. She wanted to do the *weeding*. It had been her vision, ever since she'd been a young girl learning these things about the world. Now it was her reality.

The truth was: the people of the old world had been *insane*. Ancient concepts that had no grounding in reality had wreaked destruction. Even as science had taken off, people had dismissed evidence that clearly rendered those concepts redundant.

One of the earliest lessons Slinky could remember from her days at the Campus was that insane people were the kind who refused to give up old beliefs in the face of evidence that overwhelmingly proved those beliefs impossible. She knew that lesson was still as true as it had been back then.

In the old world, the Religious War had pulled apart the fragile jigsaw puzzle of civilisation until it had become unrecognisable. When the worst weapons had eventually been used, one piece of the world after another had come

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

crashing down. The Last War had then destroyed nearly everything that was left.

Slinky was glad a lot of those people died. She would never have wanted to live in a world infested with insanity. The contemplation made her stomach bend.

And that was why her work was so important. If just one person was allowed to indulge in an idea unsupported by reason, unproven by evidence, however large or small that indulgence might be, the door to insanity was opening. To open the door to insanity was to open the door to a world filled with fools, with idiots.

The Republic would never allow its citizens to repeat the mistakes of the old world. Insanity had flourished back then, but it would never flourish again.

That was what drove the Freedom Fighters. That was why Slinky was a hunter.

When the SUV straightened into the road that harboured the targets, the driverless software revved the engine and the vehicle heaved forward. Agents Jones and Kellyway drew their pistols. From the pouches of their pants they fished their silencers. They clacked the silencers into place and twisted them onto the barrels.

Slinky's pistol was holstered to her hip, but she left it where it was. She was the *leader* of her FF unit. She would stay back and survey the scene as her men did what they did best.

Suddenly, their destination loomed beside them. The SUV veered sharply into the driveway and braked; the patrol

truck pulling in beside it. Jones and Kellyway opened the doors on either side and catapulted themselves out.

Two of the Republican Guards followed Jones to the front door with their AK-47s raised out in front of them. The other two Guards moved urgently with Kellyway around the side of the house. Slinky watched as they came to a gate in the gloom and snipped the lock before passing through. She alighted from the SUV and walked in the wake of Jones' men, towards the front door.

Jones raised his hand and his Guards nodded. He pointed at the door. One of the RGs dropped the pack he was carrying. He took the small explosive charge and rushed forward. He stuck the charge to the door, near the lock, before retreating a few paces to where Jones and the other Guard were hunched with their shoulders against the wall.

Jones pressed the button on the remote. The device applied to the door exploded with the dullest of pops. A brief flash preceded a smoke cloud, and a small chunk of the door fell into the house. The remainder of the door swung inward from the force.

The RGs swooped in through the cloud with their weapons raised. Jones followed.

Slinky held back for a moment, pricking her ears. The house remained quiet, so a few seconds later she trailed Jones and broke through the smoke at the threshold into the brightly illuminated hallway. When one of the RGs moved through a doorway ahead, Slinky heard a woman's scream from a distant room. It was quickly followed by a man's voice

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

— raised and panicked — coming from upstairs. She heard fast footfalls at the staircase. The RGs suddenly yelled at the back of the house, ‘Don’t move! Do NOT move!’

Instead of following Jones, Slinky headed towards the trampling at the stairs and intercepted the man as he reached the ground floor. ‘Stop there,’ she said. She raised her hand. She knew who this man was. His name was Stanley Roberts. He was an official from the science and technology department of the Republican Ministry — forty-five years old, married to Cecilia Roberts. They had one child. Stanley was shorter than he appeared in the photos on file and in the surveillance footage, but it was definitely him.

Roberts halted. Fear simmered in his eyes as he looked in the direction of the back of the house, where Cecilia’s frantic cries were bouncing off the walls. It was possible that he knew what was happening — at the very least he’d have his suspicions about who Slinky and her men were — and the crinkles of dread on his face gave away his terror. But he wouldn’t know for sure what would happen to him and his family next.

Slinky called out to Jones, her voice only slightly raised, ‘Here, near the stairs.’

Jones immediately appeared from the doorway behind her, trailed by two of the Guards. ‘Stay there,’ Jones said to Roberts, ‘hands up.’

Roberts’ eyes flitted to Jones and then snapped back to Slinky. His rapid breaths were shallow.

Slinky thought it was laughable how they all acted so

innocent. FF raids were always conducted after surveillance operations. The common façade never failed to humour *and* disgust her.

Roberts eventually raised his trembling hands. Agent Jones approached the little runt, turned him around, and handcuffed him.

The commotion had quietened at the back of the house. Clearly, Cecilia Roberts had been subdued too.

Jones shoved Stanley Roberts through the hallway, flanked by the two Guards. Slinky followed. When she got to the living room out the back, she found Cecilia Roberts handcuffed like her husband.

‘Stan!’ Cecilia said.

Slinky wished she could authorise one of the Guards to strike the bitch, but protocol forbade her from doing so in front of the minor.

Kurt Roberts was thirteen years old. In this critical moment, the boy was a lot quieter than other children Slinky had seen go through this ordeal.

As Slinky approached, Kurt put his arm around his mother’s shoulders and gave her what seemed to be a reassuring squeeze. Immediately finding the behaviour peculiar, Slinky studied the expression on his face. In almost every case she’d seen, it was the parents who consoled and reassured the minor, not the other way around.

All of a sudden the boy’s eyes drew her gaze. They were extraordinarily green, large. She expected the eyes to roll around and look at her, but they remained locked in their

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

sockets, planted on Cecilia, as if offering wordless reassurance.

Peculiar, indeed.

Agent Jones pushed Stanley towards his wife and son until the three of them were side by side. Stanley kissed Cecilia on the forehead, as though everything would be okay as long as they were together.

Slinky shook her head and scoffed.

Process dictated that they couldn't handcuff the minor unless he showed resistance, so when Kurt embraced his parents, there was nothing Slinky could do to stop it.

'Don't worry, I'm going to be all right,' the boy uttered to them quietly.

His voice was gentle, with a soft tone. Slinky could tell that he was not far into puberty, but he was tall for his age and his face bore bold features better suited to a young man.

Less interested in the parents, now, Slinky looked the boy up and down. He finally met her gaze but didn't seem to flinch or shy away. The green of his eyes drew her in again. 'Get to it,' she eventually said to the others.

Two of the RGs guarded the family, while the other two and the Agents began tearing the place apart. They started in the kitchen, ripping out the drawers, throwing the utensils around the room. They smashed glass and cracked porcelain. They pulled the microwave out of its socket and launched it. Once finished there, they moved on to the next room.

Slinky settled into the couch and allowed her eyes to wander.

It was rare for people to keep bookshelves. Most content was kept on cell phones, electronic tablets or computers, or on the Republicanet. Even more unusual in this case was that the bookshelf was mostly filled with volumes related to Stanley's field of work: science. Books on classical physics, chemistry, quantum mechanics and mathematics dominated the columns.

Slinky couldn't help but chuckle. The *irony*.

Eventually her attention shifted again to the boy, Kurt. He had moved behind Stanley and Cecilia and was now embracing both of them. Slinky anchored her gaze to him as the RGs turned the bookshelf inside out. When they headed towards the stairs to continue the search on the upper level, the boy fixed her with a sharp stare once more.

Slinky leaned forward and said, 'Your parents have done very bad things, Kurt. They have put you in a very bad place.'

He turned his head towards his mother, who held onto him even harder than before. It was a common reaction for detainees to stick together in these moments, but some minors came around eventually. They were sometimes young enough to be brought back to sanity.

'We'll look after you,' Slinky said, searching the boy's striking eyes. 'Don't fret.'

Cecilia whimpered. Her jet-black hair was streaked across her face and wet from the tears, her eyes swollen and bloodshot. Her lip was trembling.

Bang. Bang. Bang! BANG!

It was coming from the second floor. Louder, faster. As

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

the vibrations travelled down the stairwell, Cecilia's whimpers morphed into frantic wails. Stanley tried to hush his wife. Kurt pulled them closer.

Jones returned from the second floor. 'Ma'am,' he said. 'Upstairs.'

Slinky rose from the couch and followed Jones up. They headed to the master bedroom, where the Guards were standing with Kellyway. They had moved the bed away to the side of the room and stood over a crater in the floorboards. Evidently, one of them had butted away a weak part of the timber to reveal a hidden compartment.

Slinky crossed under the chandelier, which silvered the room, and crouched down to peer into the hole.

There was a book, but not just any book.

She smiled, reached down and picked the book up. She opened it to find handwritten notes on the pages, underlines and commentary among the printed text that had survived the years and still appeared faintly on the fragile paper. She closed the book. 'The Holy Bible,' she said. She looked at Kellyway and Jones. 'It seems we've found what we were looking for, boys.'

10.01pm

Heath crept out from the building's edge with his AK-47 aimed at the red-haired Republican Guard in no-man's land at the bottom of the hill. He hurried down the first part of the descent towards the charcoaled skeleton of a vehicle that waited as cover. He dropped behind what had once been the front bonnet.

A few seconds later, Ozzie arrived, crouching down behind the mangled door beside him.

Heath looked over to his left and found Derrick at the edge of the building that Hayley occupied, flat against the wall, concealed from the Republican Guard's angle of view. When Heath looked up he saw the faintest and smallest of silhouettes against the night sky — the thin barrel of Hayley's tranquiliser rifle hanging over the edge of the rooftop.

The barrel grew in length; Hayley shifting to perhaps account for a change in distance.

Heath snapped his gaze towards no-man's land again, peering over the deformed bonnet. Out to the left, the RG was strolling southwards — rightwards in his field of vision — with her attention focused on the Grey Zone side of the boundary. He ducked back down.

'Waiting for her to look east,' Hayley whispered. 'I want a clean shot into the neck.'

'If you don't get that clean shot,' Vincent replied through

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

the earpiece, 'take whatever you can get. The clock is ticking.'

'Who's the sniper here?' Hayley said sarcastically.

Heath looked out over the bonnet once more. The RG was back parallel with Hayley's position on the rooftop, aligned with the corner of the building. The Guard swung her gaze eastwards, towards the far, Republican side of the boundary, exposing the side of her neck.

Click!

The lightest of sounds accompanied the discharge of the tranquiliser rifle. A few seconds passed before the Guard recoiled, grabbing at her neck furiously. Her weapon fell from her grasp and then her shoulder. She stumbled, swayed, and fell forward like dead weight onto the dust, at the mercy of the anaesthetic.

'Target hit,' Hayley announced.

'She's out,' Derrick confirmed.

'Good job,' Vincent said through the headphone. 'No time to waste, people. Get going.'

Despite the heat trapped inside Heath's neoprene suit, the sweat at the rim of his hood was cool. He pulled the hood to the side and wiped away some of the perspiration, but he could do nothing to alleviate the hammering of his heart.

On Heath's left, Derrick moved out from behind the corner of the building with his weapon sweeping the line of the boundary.

Usually, each Republican Guard patrolling no-man's land

on foot covered a section on their own, but there was always the possibility of company, especially if the victim had called something in on the network before falling unconscious.

‘Okay, Oz, let’s go,’ Heath said. He rose from behind the skeleton of the vehicle with Ozzie flanking him.

They joined up with Derrick and descended the decline. When they emerged into the dim clouds of light spouting from the lamps, Heath felt naked, utterly exposed, as he always did so close to the boundary. He ignored the feeling and rushed forward to the first fence.

The horizontal wires reached upwards — taut silver lines. Above the highest wire, a horizontal insulating pole met rolls of barbed wire that curled into the air overhead.

Heath dropped his pack next to Derrick’s. He rummaged through the contents and located the cable cutters. His gloves found a good grip around the handles. As he heaved the heavy tool and rotated it vertically so that the pincers could clasp the first wire, the familiar thought struck him: what if the wires were still live? He sucked air, his hands trembling a little as the cable cutters closed in.

‘If the power was still on,’ Derrick said, finally fishing the cable cutters from his own backpack, ‘the electricity would have already jumped for us.’

Heath lifted his arm to his forehead and wiped the slick again. He leaned forward with the cutters and found the wire with the pincers.

The wire was dead. They had until 11pm.

Relief washed over Heath, but only briefly, because it was

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

quickly replaced by a shuddering that crackled through him in place of the electricity. It dawned on him that they were yet again about to cross into Republican Territory. The rush of fear and adrenalin never got old, no matter how many times he did it.

He squeezed on the handles, weakening the wire with every strained effort, splintering it, until eventually it snapped completely. The broken ends caressed the lower wires as they crashed to the ground. Almost at the same time, Derrick finished with the second wire as the ends followed their counterparts to the dust.

Hayley joined them. 'Still no movement behind us,' she said.

'Vincent,' Ozzie said through her mic, 'we're almost through. Two wires down, two to go.'

'Good work,' he replied. 'We'll speak to you when you're back over our side.'

Once they went beyond the first fence, the channel of the Republicanet they used to communicate through their earpieces would no longer work. Heath, Ozzie, Derrick and Hayley would be on their own, and not *just* on their own, but unable to communicate with each other via the channel either. Their earpieces and mics would be useless in the Republican Territory.

Heath and Derrick worked on the two wires below the small gap they had created, while Ozzie and Hayley covered them with their weapons. In synchronisation, the wires broke, careering to the ground.

'First fence cut,' Ozzie said.

'Good luck,' Vincent said.

Ozzie swung her pack through their makeshift passageway and then ducked through after it, brushing harmlessly against the still-intact wire above her. Hayley quickly followed. Heath and Derrick tossed their packs in and then squeezed through, keeping their cable cutters in hand.

Ozzie and Hayley scampered across no-man's land, scanning both sides with their AK-47s. Heath and Derrick went past them, hurrying ahead.

Heath glanced at the sleeping Republican Guard, who was facedown on the dirt with her pack pointing at the sky, her rifle lodged under the grey uniform hugging her torso. He was less than five paces from her, but beneath the vibrancy of her red hair he saw the paleness of her face, the freckles that spotted her cheek behind the mic of her earpiece.

Like all Republican Guards, this one had a story.

Heath scuttled past her towards the second fence, leaving her in her slumber. Derrick went to cut first. Heath joined him and they began snipping away.

'Shit.'

Their earpieces were already dead, but Hayley's voice had been sudden and clear over Heath's shoulder.

He dared to take his gaze off the wires and look up. At the top of the rise of the first Republican street that ran in a straight line between the shadows of the buildings, headlights had appeared. The vehicle was perhaps two to three hundred metres away and closing.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

Alarm pinched Heath's throat.

'What do we do?' Ozzie said. 'Is it a patrol?'

Hurriedly finishing off the last wire, Derrick said, 'Has to be. Too rare for a citizen to be driving this close to the boundary so late.'

'Should we go back?' Ozzie said.

Heath stashed the cable cutters back in his pack, swung the thing over his shoulder. Like Ozzie and Hayley, he aimed his AK-47 at the vehicle. He flicked the safety off and racked the slide to load the first round from the magazine into the chamber. He tried to swallow but his mouth was too dry. He glanced at Derrick just as the final wire broke in two and dropped.

Ozzie threw her pack through the fence, and then ducked, with Hayley close behind. Derrick kept his AK hanging from his shoulder and the cable cutters in his hands as he pushed his pack through and dived in after it.

Heath glanced up. The headlights were descending the street, heading for their position. He swung his backpack off his shoulders, through the makeshift manhole, and stepped through after it.

'Split up!' Derrick shouted, following Hayley rightwards, rushing for the sanctuary of the shadows.

Heath and Ozzie scampered forward, thirty paces or so, to find the edge of the lamplights, then the gloom. They hurried leftwards, putting the Republican structure that cornered the street between them and the vehicle that was descending. They ran for the partially unhinged door to the building.

Ozzie got there first and barged into it with her shoulder. She crossed into the building and grabbed the door as it rebounded, holding it open for Heath. He rushed through and emerged into the gloom of a huge chamber. He helped Ozzie push the door shut, but the broken hinges meant that the result was imperfect.

Though the medical facility was close to the edge of the Republican Territory, most buildings lining the actual boundary were abandoned and deteriorating, just like those at the very edge of the Grey Zone on the other side of the fences. This one appeared to be no different.

As Heath's eyes adjusted, a foul, musty odour slapped him in the face. He pinched his nose as they began navigating their way through the darkness, careful to find the steps in the floor that ascended the hill. They headed for the wall on their right, the one flanking the street. They found a window that overlooked it just as a golden shaft of light flickered through the glass and then washed over the area outside.

Heath and Ozzie ducked below the sill. The engine of the vehicle whirred eerily as it crept past, taking the headlights with it, but that major shaft was followed by smaller blue beams, which swung through the windows of the building at various angles: the tell-tale sign of Republican Guards scanning the area from the bed of the truck with the mounted flashlights of their AK-47s.

Heath's muscles stiffened as the full extent of their plight dawned on him. If the Guards noticed the broken fence and the slumped figure sleeping in the middle of no-man's land

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

before he and his comrades broke away from their entry point, the Republicans would likely have them surrounded within minutes. If that happened, and a gunfight followed, he didn't like their chances of getting away alive.

When the pointed beams of the flashlights moved on with the vehicle, Heath peered over the sill once again. On his right, a little way down the slope, two Republican Guards were riding on the bed of the truck with their AKs sweeping the street, but it was the third rider who seized his attention.

Ozzie whispered, '*What the f—*'

'I know.'

'What's a Republican *Agent* doing riding on a normal patrol?'

'You're asking me?'

Heath was fully aware that Republican Agents in the field usually commanded three to four Republican Guards each, but he'd rarely seen them ride along on standard patrols. He knew that orders could be given and received via the Republicanet; any actions taken by the Guards dictated from afar.

A Guard was one thing, but an Agent was an entirely different matter.

Heath took another look at the back of the truck.

The Agent turned full circle behind his Guards to look uphill, in Heath and Ozzie's direction. The pulsations of the flashlights flickered across the Republican logo crested to the breast of his uniform. Suddenly he shifted his head and his gaze seemed to land on the window. He lifted large goggles

MICHAEL FRANCIS MCDERMOTT

to his eyes.

'Get down!' Heath yelled.

10.20pm

‘The Agent ...’ Ozzie said. ‘Do you think the Republicans know what we’re up to?’

‘If they knew we were targeting the medical facility,’ Heath said, ‘there’d be Geese all over us right *now*.’

In the Grey Zone, people sometimes called the Republican forces ‘Geese’. Heath had never seen *actual* geese, but he’d been told they were animals that guarded their nests. For all intents and purposes, the Territories that formed the Republic were Republican ‘nests’.

Heath peered over the sill again. The truck carrying the Republican Agent made a turn at the bottom of the street, taking its various shafts of light with it, but it didn’t seem to accelerate before the building on the corner blocked Heath’s view. The lack of acceleration appeared to indicate that the occupants hadn’t noticed the damaged fences or the tranquilised Guard.

Yet.

‘We have to move,’ Heath said. ‘Now.’

They found an exit from the decrepit building further up the incline. Heath leaned gently on the battered door and peered both ways. He immediately slipped out with Ozzie at his tail and crossed the road, finding the nearest side street and turning into it. They pushed on, following a zigzagging route through the precinct.

Moving quickly down a narrow street, Heath kept the aim of his AK-47 pointed ahead at the shadows, sticking to the darker pockets. Eventually they came to a block where no lamplights lined the road, so they blended with the darkness better.

If they'd had only Republican Guards to deal with, Heath might have taken comfort in that. With a Republican Agent in the area, he didn't.

Heath couldn't remember the first time he'd found out about the goggles. He guessed he'd probably known about them and other features of Republican technology for as long as he could remember, even before he'd joined the resistance. Unlike the protective goggles the Guards wore, the Agents' goggles were equipped with infra-red and night-vision lenses. Under the glare of these goggles, blending with the darkness was useless.

Heath glanced at the buildings on either side of the street. They were three and four levels high and appeared to be abandoned, but they had no windows so it was impossible to know for sure. He looked up at the edges of the flat rooftops, searching for signs of movement. He couldn't imagine why Republicans would be perched up there, but there was always the chance that Derrick and Hayley were travelling up top, skipping across the occasional gap.

Up above, nothing moved.

Heath was acutely aware that in all likelihood the Republicans would discover their breach and the sleeping

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

Guard sooner rather than later — if they hadn't already. Either way, there would be no returning to that section. After they raided the medical facility, the contingency plan would come into play.

With their earpieces useless and the services for their cell phones dead on this side of the fence, Heath and Ozzie had no way of communicating with Derrick and Hayley, but Heath assumed that if they'd gotten away from the boundary okay, then they too would be on their way to the target. They would likewise know that any retreat via the path already travelled was no longer possible.

Approaching the intersection ahead, Heath split from Ozzie, going left as she went right. They got to the precipice and peered out at their respective sides.

The street before them was wider than the one they'd just travelled. Up the incline on Heath's side, distant rows of lamplights glowed — yellow beacons signalling their path towards the precinct surrounding the medical facility. On Ozzie's side, darkness receded down the hill.

Heath pulled his cell phone out from under the collar of his neoprene suit and loaded the locally stored map Aaron and his coders had constructed. The display was set to the lowest possible brightness, but the mild blue shine made him uneasy nonetheless. He quickly zoomed out to get his bearings. Ozzie joined him at his side.

'We're here,' Heath said, pointing at a T-junction Aaron had drawn into the map. 'This road leads up past these three side streets; then we turn right. The facility is about fifty

metres along.'

'You think there'll be Guards?'

'Possibly. We'll need to be ready to engage, but if we can take them by surprise, we'll use the tranquiliser.'

In recent months, Heath and the others in Vincent's faction had become aware that Republicans had posted RGs at some facilities they obviously believed could be targeted by the resistance. Previously, on missions such as this one, Heath and his comrades had usually only had night staffers to take care of, if there'd been any at all.

Heath glanced at the time at the top of the screen. 10.22pm. There were three minutes to go until all of the alarms at the facility would deactivate at Aaron's command: the infra-red and motion detectors, and any door alarms. Heath dropped his pack. He pulled out the tranquiliser rifle and the container that held the three darts. He slipped one of the darts into the barrel, rolling the pressure slider into position behind it.

Ozzie was no sniper like Hayley, but Heath knew she was better with the tranquiliser rifle than him and could more reliably hit a target with a dart at close range.

The resistance movement always did its absolute best to avoid taking lives, no matter the goal. Tranquiliser rifles were a key part of any mission.

'I'll cover you,' Heath said, lifting his AK-47. When Ozzie swung the strap of hers over her shoulder, he gave her the tranquiliser rifle. 'Quick,' he said, 'barely a minute left.' He swung his pack over his back.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

They set off up the incline.

When they moved into the glow of the lamplights, Heath's legs instinctively carried him faster. They went past the three side streets without incident, and then they approached the right-hand turn into the street that housed the medical facility. They stopped at the brink.

Heath peered around the corner. The street was lined with large structures preceded by boom gates and adjacent cubicles. In front of one of the boom gates, a Republican Guard was pacing towards them with their rifle at the ready, surveying both sides of the road. The RG seemed to be closer than the fifty metres predicted by Aaron's map, but they were also pacing quicker than Heath would have expected, so it was possible they'd moved slightly away from the facility in response to something they'd been told on their network.

The breach at the fence, perhaps.

'One Guard, I think,' Heath said.

'Derrick and Hayley?'

'No sign.'

'Do we wait?' Ozzie asked.

Heath drew a deep breath. It had never been the plan to get separated, but the arrival of the patrol truck at the boundary had given them no choice.

Stride by stride, the RG was closing in on them.

'Oz,' Heath whispered, 'get ready for engagement.' He aimed his AK-47 at the Guard, but kept himself concealed behind the edge. A second later he saw the barrel of the

tranquiliser rifle slide out past him.

The RG turned around and began pacing back the way they'd come.

Seizing the opportunity, Ozzie emerged into the street, shuffling forward with the tranquiliser rifle locked on. Heath followed on her shoulder, providing the cover he'd promised. As they got closer and loomed up behind the RG, Ozzie seemed to deliberately louden her footfalls.

The Guard spun, swinging the pack on their back out of the way as they turned, providing Ozzie with the better shot she'd evidently been looking for.

Thud!

The dart hit the RG's chest and submerged itself in her uniform, and she jolted from the impact. She lifted her weapon, but before the barrel of her AK got to horizontal, her boots scuttled left, taking her with them. She collapsed in a sudden heap.

Ozzie tucked the tranquiliser rifle in her underarm and lifted her AK-47 as Heath came up beside her. If any threats remained, there was no time to load another dart.

They hurried forward, scanning the street. They found the sign for the medical facility and climbed over the boom gate.

They hadn't raided this facility before, so there was no knowing what means of access they would have. Sometimes, they broke through glass windows to get access to target buildings; other times, they needed to fire several rounds from their AKs to break padlocks. Occasionally, the physical security barriers were more sophisticated.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

Ahead, at the edge of the shutter that hid the interior of the building, a solid red light indicated a fingerprint pad.

Heath and Ozzie quickly cleared the sides of the facility. There was no sign of another RG, or any staffers, but Heath's guts were filled with dread nonetheless.

Derrick and Hayley weren't here.

Ozzie tossed him the tranquiliser rifle and he repacked it in the sanctuary of the shadows close to the shutter. Then, without a word, they retreated swiftly to the unconscious Guard. They removed her backpack. Heath rolled her onto her back and looped his wrists under her underarms. Ozzie took her by the ankles. They carried her over the boom gate, to the shutter and the fingerprint pad.

Heath heaved her up vertically, leaning the side of her torso against the wall. He removed one of her gloves and took the dead weight of her hand in his. He lifted her thumb to the fingerprint pad.

The light beeped green and the shutter started to rise. They lowered her back to the ground.

Heath glanced at his cell phone. 10.31pm. 'Only four minutes to do what we gotta do!' he said.

Ozzie ducked under the shutter first. Heath hurried after her into the chamber. They flicked on the mounted flashlights of their rifles. A dozen shelves reached forward into the abyss, stacked with cardboard packs. Further along the line of shelves, refrigerated cooling units and freezers hummed softly.

As the years went by, the potency and efficiency of

medications produced by the Republic improved. The number of treatments needed to deal with conditions and illnesses was a fraction of what had once been required. In some cases, just one tablet or dose now did what a full course or ongoing doses would have done back when Heath was a child.

By filling Ozzie's pack with medications, they would be helping to treat potentially hundreds of their people back at home. Their goal was to harvest as many types as they could: antibiotics, antiviral tablets, blood pressure pills, insulin vials, vaccines — anything and everything. There would be no method to what they took. Once they returned the stash to the Grey Zone, those with the relevant knowledge could identify and categorise the items.

All of this now fell on Heath and Ozzie.

They moved forward, the two of them together, like always.

Me and you, Heath thought, as he often did when they were together, putting themselves at risk for the cause.

Ozzie lowered and opened her pack. Heath brushed boxes from the first section of the shelf into the bag, and then they moved at speed along the line. The humming grew louder as they got to the first refrigerated unit. Heath reached for the boxes and the vials in that display and dropped them into the pack. When they were done there, they turned around to the shelf behind them and Heath swung more piles of boxes in. As they ran along that row, some containers missed the pack and scattered across the floor.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

‘Time’s up!’ Ozzie said.

Heath desperately pulled his phone out from the collar of his suit again. 10.34pm.

‘*One more!*’ Heath urged. He rushed to the next shelf, willing Ozzie to follow him, and brushed more boxes into the open pack, which was now half full.

‘Heath!’ Ozzie yelled. ‘We’ve gotta go!’

With Derrick and Hayley missing, they’d only gotten half of what they’d expected to get. Thinking of this, Heath did one more sweep in a panic.

‘*NOW!*’ Ozzie screamed.

He turned away from the shelf.

Whoop, whoop! WHOOP, WHOOP!

The shock of the alarm stung his ears.

WHOOP, WHOOP!

Ozzie dropped the pack, refitted the flap, and pulled it up over her shoulders.

They then swooped their AKs towards the open shutter at the entrance and flicked their mounted flashlights off. They hurried for the exit and peered out. No one there.

The alarm was shrieking through the facility, but the RG on the street remained slumped on the ground. Alone. Beyond the boom gate: no movement.

For now.

They rushed out, hurdled the gate, swung the straps of their AKs over their shoulders so that they could move better, and ran. Before they turned the next corner, the screech of tyres and the swelling whirs of electric engines

MICHAEL FRANCIS MCDERMOTT

arrived in the maze of streets behind them, echoing through the precinct.

The Republicans were coming.

14 March 2196

12.35am

The woman has brought her two boys. They are so sweet, so innocent, and yet she has taken the risk of all risks to bring them. With all of her heart she hopes they will be safe; that their lives and their innocence will be protected, no matter what.

That is all she hopes.

Back in the Homeland, they lived off water and fish her man had caught and cooked for them on the fire; fish that the other men had caught and cooked for the tribe; fish that had been swimming but had then been caught. Fish and nothing else.

She had liked their life there. So had her boys.

But they had always lived in fear.

The other tribes had not been like theirs. She'd known deep down that one day the other tribes would come for them. And then they had.

So she has run away with her two boys. They have come far, over the sea, on a beast that rolls on water, on a beast that crashed and threw them as the rage of the water struck at them from all sides in the harsh glare of the sun.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

She'd thought she and her boys would die on that beast. But they hadn't.

And now they have arrived, in the land of all lands, in the land where people go and live among the magic. She doesn't know what to expect, just that this land is the ancient place that lives on. It is the ancient place that still has the 'magic'.

As she walks among other people, people who used to be from other tribes, but are now part of her new tribe, she holds her two boys close to her.

Big men and women covered in grey fur push the people of her new tribe somewhere. She first saw men and women with this strange-looking fur on the beast. But unlike them, *these* big people have an extra arm, and they poke her with it. She shields her two boys, making sure she alone takes the pokes.

Soon enough they walk into a big place. There are strange suns around them. They are not very strong suns; not as strong as the real sun. These suns light up just *this* place. Usually, light in the dark comes from the moon, the stars, and the fire. She has never before seen light like this when the world is dark.

The woman looks up. Surrounding them, high on all sides, are odd walls with gaps in them. Standing on high rock ledges — though she suspects the ledges are not made of rock — more of the big men look down at them. There are some women up there, too. Not as many women as men, but they look just as big. She sees, now, that the strange things she thought were extra arms are *not* arms. They are

MICHAEL FRANCIS MCDERMOTT

something else.

Her lips shiver and then her jaw trembles.

She knows what weapons are. She hopes they are not weapons.

She hopes for her boys.

5.45am

Grey Zone Sector 14 was one of the largest Sectors. Towards the south, its boundary directly lined the edge of the less-inhabited southern inland area of the Republic's Territory 1. Where it stretched north and then west, it framed the western lines of Sector 9 and then Sector 11 further up.

In this part of Territory 1 there were very few buildings. The ones that were still standing were surrounded by weakening barbed wire fences and separated by roughly one to two hundred metres of rough terrain. Regardless of whether they were outdated manufacturing plants or storage facilities, or had been something else altogether, Heath doubted the buildings were still in use.

Since fleeing the medical facility, he and Ozzie had managed to make their way here, to the boundary of T1 and G14, without encountering any Republican Guards, Agents or other interceptors. They had slipped through the partially collapsed barbed wire fence that circled the building closest to the boundary, and had taken cover behind the structure.

Heath peered into the hazy gloom ahead from behind the corner of the edifice.

The moon was playing hide and seek with the clouds. Whenever it exposed itself for a moment, it provided only dimmed and periodic illumination of the first electric fence that stood about fifty metres away from their position. The

wires seemed to be moving through the clouds of fog, tracking the moon's behaviour overhead, vanishing and reappearing like an exhaust pipe behind the chugs of a sick engine.

'Fifteen minutes until the power comes back on,' Ozzie said. 'Where *are* they?'

Heath glanced at his best friend. The tone of her voice had been calm, her demeanour composed as it so often was, but her final question had been tinged with grave concern. Looking at her, he saw the pressure points of her crinkled lips as she scanned the boundary with the binoculars.

The contingency plan was now in play. This second sixty-minute window was the safety net and had been arranged in advance to allow them to cross back over into the Grey Zone in the event that they ran into trouble and couldn't make it back to the original location during the first window. The power to this section of the electric fences would have been cut at 5.00am, as per the plan.

Derrick and Hayley were meant to be here.

'They'll already be sending patrols or worse this way,' Heath said, referring to how the Republicans would likely be aware of this new breach in the current.

'If they send a chopper or drone, we'll be as good as screwed,' Ozzie said. She bit her lip.

The defence barriers the Republic used to counter Aaron's code meant that the patch he had developed had some other limitations on top of the main drawback. Firstly, it could only work to break the system once every six hours

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

and only in one location at a time. While the master coder had always had the grand goal of creating a solution that would open more windows in more locations concurrently, he was yet to fully unwind the Republic's complex code.

Secondly, the fluid nature of the defence barriers prevented Aaron from being able to deactivate the electrical current beyond the immediate short term — the *next* twelve hours at any given point in time. Immediately before a mission, he could only ever look at options across the next two six-hour windows. Beyond that, he had no reliable way of achieving deactivation or predicting where it would occur.

The result was that there were no additional windows available to Heath and his partners in the coming hours or the days ahead. Even if Aaron cut the current again after this, they had no way of getting in touch to find out where or when it would happen.

All of this meant one thing. This backup window just before dawn was their only chance to return home.

'What if patrol units turn up and we have to engage, and we still haven't sighted them?' Ozzie said.

Heath stiffened. The possibility that Derrick and Hayley had run into trouble they hadn't been able to get out of chilled his bones under the hold of the neoprene hugging him. 'They might be perched like us, further back,' he said.

His reply didn't ease his apprehension. He felt the chill crawl his spine.

He added, 'They might be waiting to see *us* before they make their move.' He looked at the expression on Ozzie's

face in the dim moonlight and knew his comments had done nothing to quell her alarm, either. He drew in a deep breath. He motioned for Ozzie to hand him the binoculars and he brought them to his goggles.

‘Why does the contingency always have to include G14?’ Ozzie said. ‘Vincent and Aaron like sending us into a cesspit, don’t they?’

‘No Guards,’ Heath said. ‘Easier to cross.’

The gloom and the haze blocked his view of no-man’s land, the second electric fence, and the outskirts of Sector 14 beyond, yet he guessed that this far from the centre of T1, G9 and G11, it was unlikely there would be any Guards on foot patrolling the fences. He had always known that the Republicans didn’t care much for the anarchy and barbarism of G14; that instead, their perpetual focus was always on the more-developed Sectors, especially the ones that were home to coordinated resistance.

Notwithstanding this, the threats to anyone entering Sector 14 were well known on *both* sides of the boundary.

‘Easier to cross, but not easier to get out of alive,’ Ozzie remarked.

She was right about that.

G14 was notorious for its savages — murderous loners and small, violent bands of barbarian-like people who were disconnected from the communities of G9 and G11. In this particular area of G14, the slums were passageways of rubble and filled with these types. At best, the inhabitants survived mostly by stealing. At worst, by hunting each other.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

Deeper into the Sector, the slums gave way to barren and deserted plains of land, uninhabited deserts and basins.

When Heath had been a child, small gangs in G14 had begun raiding G11, stealing food and other supplies, including weapons. At one point, they'd even taken hostages and made demands of the community.

Vincent had been the one who had organised the efforts to disband the gangs. Single-handedly, he had shifted attention from the Republic to the bands of psychopaths in G14. He had led the effort to rehabilitate the young ones who had still been capable of turning their lives around, and had given them a purpose beyond murder and cannibalism. In the process, he'd recruited some of them to the cause. His role in the disbandment of the gangs had earned him the trust of the people. Because of him, they were safer. It had been an important step in his journey to becoming leader of the rebel movement in G11.

Since then, no gangs large enough to wreak havoc on G11 had reformed, but the individualistic violence and mayhem of G14 continued to some degree — the leftovers of bad seeds.

Heath lifted the seal of his neoprene hood to allow the sticky heat to escape for a moment. He wiped his forehead. It struck him how heavy his legs were. It had been almost eight hours since they'd originally crossed over into the Republican Territory by tranquilising the red-haired Guard and breaking the wires of the two fences that formed the boundary. His muscles were aching.

He swivelled with the binoculars and scanned the deserted plains of dirt separating this building from the others around it, then the distant highway behind them that ran along the horizon; a black carpet in the gloom. He lowered the binoculars and pulled his cell phone from its tucked place under his collar.

5.50am.

'We're gonna have to move,' he said reluctantly.

Ozzie shook her head. 'Shit.'

'I know.'

Heath knew the explanation he had given Ozzie for Derrick and Hayley's nonappearance was reasonable. It hadn't made him feel any better when he'd said it, but there *was* a chance they were behind one of the other buildings flanking the boundary, desperately looking for *them*, waiting for the last moment to expose themselves.

Yet they would have only missed the ten-minute window at the medical centre if they'd run into more trouble than what Heath and Ozzie had encountered. Heath couldn't shake the conviction that their apparent absence now was part of that same picture.

Heath swung his pack around and dropped his binoculars back in. He rose from his crouch. His legs were trembling. He lifted his AK-47 and looked at Ozzie.

She let out a deep pocket of air. She nodded.

Heath set off back towards the fallen section of the barbed wire fence surrounding the building. Ozzie followed close behind him, covering the opposite side. They stepped

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

over the mangled rows of barbs, which rose to their knees, and turned towards the clearing that preceded the first electric fence.

Shuffling forward together, they swept the scene with their barrels. As they closed in on the first fence, they stepped through the cloud of fog, and Heath suddenly saw *beyond*. He brushed no-man's land with his gaze, checking for signs that there might be an RG posted here unexpectedly on a patrol, but the area between the fences was naked.

'Movement behind?' he whispered.

'None,' Ozzie responded.

When Heath came within a few paces of the wires, he swung his rifle over his shoulder and dropped his pack. He seized the cable launcher and heaved the device at the fence. It bounced off two of the wires and careered to the dirt.

Heath was wary of the electricity at the best of times, but he was always more concerned returning to the Grey Zone than coming out of it. Without the benefit of a connection to the bunker through their earpieces, they could get no confirmation from Vincent or Aaron that the power was still off, or in this case — when using the backup window — that it had been cut at the planned time.

The sight of gravity doing its thing with the cable launcher gave Heath the confirmation he needed.

He rushed forward with his pack, returned the cable launcher to its place and took out the cable cutters. He

hesitated as he went for the first wire, glancing left and right once again, his heart hammering home the fact that Derrick and Hayley hadn't showed, even though he and Ozzie had now brought themselves out into the open. 'Anything?' he said.

Ozzie remained at his side with the barrel of her AK panning the area behind him. 'Nothing,' she replied.

With his mind already racing, Heath worked on the first wire, clamping and reopening the cutters, chomping away at the tenacity of the line. The heat intensified inside his suit and his hands started to slide in his gloves.

The first wire dropped.

He grunted as he brought the second down, then the third, the fourth. He pushed his pack through the gap and ducked through. Ozzie followed. They went to move quickly across no-man's land.

Whhiiiiirrrr!

They snapped back around when they heard the sound. It was faint, distant, but its unique and unmistakable tone quickly grew as the seconds passed.

Whhiiiiirrrr!

The sound of electric engines was always quieter than the grumble of the modified engines of the old world they used in the Grey Zone, but it still travelled across otherwise silent domains.

Heath peered through the wires, back towards the large buildings, the clearings, and the highway in the Republican Territory.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

A set of headlights appeared on the horizon through the fog. Seconds later, more breached the brink.

Multiple vehicles. Too many to count. Moving fast.

Somehow, despite the surge of blood through his body that seemed to suspend his senses, Heath heard the second disturbance as well.

In the foreground, closer than the sound of the engines, the hurried footfalls of someone slapped dirt.

‘Aim,’ Heath said.

He and Ozzie separated to make two targets of themselves, lifting their AKs to point them in the direction of the shadowy figure that was pounding towards them across the clearing. In the background, the headlights spun from the highway in the distance. The distant vehicles were tracking directly towards them.

Heath flicked the safety of his rifle off and knelt on one knee, putting himself side-on. His finger tensed around the trigger.

The anguished voice of the figure yelled at him.

Heath felt air in his eyes as they widened. He lowered his AK and stepped forward.

Derrick’s face came out of the fog and he stopped just short of the makeshift opening, on the other side of the fence. Even in the darkness, his face was a twisted pattern of despair and panic below the hood. ‘They’ve got her!’ he shouted.

Everything around Heath froze. If he had any words, they would’ve been caught in his throat as it closed up.

‘What!’ Ozzie said.

The headlights behind Derrick shone like suns lifting above the horizon at sunrise, bright and glary, burning viciously. The vehicles were closing the gap with startling speed.

Derrick pointed over their shoulders, towards G14. ‘Get out of here!’ he said. ‘Get back to the bunker and tell them! I’m going after her!’

Heath swallowed, tried to open his throat back up. He blinked furiously. Finally, he comprehended what Derrick was saying, and found his voice. ‘There’s no changing your mind?’ he said.

Derrick glanced over his shoulder to eye the headlights.

When he turned back around, Ozzie had taken a step towards him, shaking her head. ‘Derrick! Dude, it’s *suicide*.’

Derrick shot them a flash of his eyes. Behind the goggles, they seemed to leak sorrow, regret. His chest was moving with ferocity as his lungs worked for air. He was so hardened and experienced that the contemplation it might all end for him here was too surreal for Heath to bear. Derrick finally said, ‘They’re geese, I’m a beast. It’s a mismatch. I’ll be fine.’

The headlights swerved around one of the buildings across the plain.

Derrick spun from Heath and Ozzie. He paused for a second and then took off the way he had come, back into the Territory, running for the shadows. There was no goodbye.

Heath turned with Ozzie towards G14, blinking away the blur of his tears, and bolted through no-man’s land towards

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

the second fence.

They expected the power to reactivate at 6.00am. Heath knew that too much time had passed already; hardly a minute was left to cut through the second lot of wires. If he and Ozzie got stuck in no-man's land, they would be captured or killed by a Republican Guard, or they would die from dehydration or starvation.

'Cover me!' Heath yelled. With the cable cutters he went straight for the first wire. Adrenalin sent tremors through his fisted hands as he strained to break the tautness. One wire finally came down, two, three.

'QUICK!' Ozzie cried.

Too long.

The fourth wire split and collapsed.

Ozzie hurled herself through with her pack.

Heath tossed the cable cutters through and then went to swing his pack forward. He dropped it.

'HEATH!' Ozzie screamed.

With his heart dropping as he bent down, he grasped the pack furiously and dived through the fence. He came down painfully on top of the pack, his ribs bearing the brunt of the impact, but he was already heaving himself up and willing himself to get oxygen into his lungs.

'Heath! Come on! There!'

They rushed forward, heading for the rubble ahead of them, for cover.

Suddenly the sound of the engines behind them ceased. Everything around them seemed to quieten, and for a

MICHAEL FRANCIS MCDERMOTT

moment the only sound was their desperate footfalls against the dirt.

But such a thing was foully premature, and Heath knew that.

Pop! Pop! Pop! Pop! Pop!

Behind them, the gunshots.

6.25am

Heath and Ozzie made their way through the slums, sticking to the shadows that clung to the columns of debris and the buildings that still partially reached for the sky. Most of the time Heath held his AK at the ready but with the muzzle down as he scanned the path ahead.

Ozzie trailed him by shuffling in reverse, covering his rear.

They hadn't heard gunshots since their initial crossing into G14. Heath could only assume that whoever had arrived in the vehicles had seen Derrick and gone after him, otherwise he was sure they would've been pursued.

Derrick's decision to go back for Hayley still sent Heath's thoughts into a perilous spin. He cared about Hayley as much as anyone else, but he couldn't help thinking he should've tried harder to push his old friend to think with his brain rather than his heart and come with them. He knew a solo rescue mission was next to impossible. He was certain Hayley herself would have agreed. She would have called Derrick a fool.

Love could make people do insane things, but insanity and suicide didn't always have to go hand in hand. Heath was sure that if Derrick had come with them, they would have been able to come up with a better plan back in G11. At the very least, there was always the chance Aaron and his team of coders had picked up on intel in the network that

might make a rescue mission slightly more feasible, as difficult and grim as it undoubtedly was. While G14 was too remote for communication with Bunker 11 through the earpieces, Heath and Ozzie could make those enquiries as soon as they got closer to home.

Without comrades, without support, without a plan, Derrick was unlikely to get close enough to the Republicans to even catch a glimpse of Hayley — if she was still alive. Even if he somehow beat the odds and *did* rescue her, he had no way of communicating with Vincent, Aaron or anyone else at the bunker to coordinate a deactivation of the power at the fences so that he could return to G11 or any other Sector. Either way, with or without Hayley, he was trapped in the Republican Territory, which meant he would eventually be found by Republicans.

‘What do you think he’s going to do?’ Ozzie said.

The early morning sky was still cloaked in darkness, but it was delicate. The clouds from earlier had dispersed. Speckles of stars promised sunshine, which would come very soon.

‘He doesn’t have a plan, Oz. He’s gone in deaf, mute and alone.’

They turned the corner. The shadowy outlines of more debris columns greeted them. Silvery pieces of scrap metal protruded from the ceilings of the piles, reaching for and catching the starlight.

‘I know,’ Ozzie said, ‘but even without a plan what do you *think* he’ll do?’

‘He’ll have to fight off whoever was chasing him first.’

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

That's a tough enough ask. If he can do that, he might be able to figure out where to go next. I can't think of where that might be.' Heath's boots suddenly hit firmer ground: blacktop, the surface of an old roadway still intact.

They followed the aged road for a while with no signs of a threat before they came to a section where the bitumen had cracked open. In the middle of the road, between the columns of debris on either side, the rear wheels of a vehicle were suspended in the air. The frame of the car dived down into the crater where the front wheels were lodged.

'Obstacle,' Heath said.

Ozzie appeared beside him, still tracking backwards and covering their tail. She turned around and saw the abandoned vehicle. They parted for a few seconds as they rounded it on either side. When they came together again, they followed the bitumen to the right, around the corner, into the next stretch.

Striding on ahead, Heath heard a clatter to his left. He flicked on the mounted flashlight of his AK-47 and scanned the rubble: broken fragments of concrete, the pieces clumped together like a badly arranged puzzle.

No movement, but the rattling and the clatter continued.

Ozzie's flashlight joined his, washing over the rubble to reveal more piles of concrete, broken pipework, scrap junk.

'Show yourself!' Heath yelled.

From beyond the rubble, a creature emerged, springing itself over the top.

Heath pulled the trigger and fire flashed twice from the

muzzle of his AK, but the beast was too quick, landing at the foot of the pile unharmed. It stopped, stunned by the flashlight.

Heath held his fire. The thing stood silent and still with an air of gracefulness.

A dog. A wild mutt.

Shaking his head in relief, Heath released his pent-up breath and lowered his rifle. He looked at Ozzie. She laughed.

The mutt strode towards them, moving elegantly into the bright beacon again. It stopped only a few paces away with its eyes glowing, looking directly into the flashlight, seemingly immune to the glare. It glanced over its shoulder and then moved on, breaking into a run and leaping up the rocky face of another pile a little further up the stretch.

Heath's eyes fell back on the section of rubble from which the dog had revealed itself. He approached the mound and stepped up. With difficulty, he found faces of concrete to plant his boots on, and climbed to the peak. He shone the mounted flashlight of his AK across the valley of debris below. In the middle, two scooters and a larger motorbike lay discarded on top of the junk. 'Over here!' he yelled, carefully treading towards the vehicles.

When he got close enough, he washed his flashlight over them a second time. Like he expected, various caps and coverings had been removed, wires exposed. He flicked the mounted flashlight off and swung his AK over his shoulder. He lifted the larger motorbike up. Ozzie went for one of the

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

scooters.

They wheeled the vehicles up the incline, the tyres awkwardly climbing the jagged surfaces, to the peak of the debris, and then rolled them just as awkwardly down. They bounced them onto the blacktop at the bottom.

The tyres were firm, intact.

The savages in G14 mostly got around on foot, but sometimes they salvaged vehicles from other Sectors and brought them here. The way they got the engines firing was the same way Heath and the vast majority of other people in the Grey Zone got them going.

Heath had learnt hotwiring as a child. It had been the only way to get around, whether motorbike, scooter, or car. It still was, in many ways. Even though Vincent's faction kept a fleet secure for their operations, in reality, the vehicles in the Grey Zone had no legitimate owners and often no keys. They were remnants of the old world; the engines modified to run on oils produced in facilities constructed and maintained at different times in the Grey Zone by various groups, most recently by Vincent's faction and the support crews around it.

At once, Heath got to work on the motorbike. He switched his mounted flashlight back on and aimed the weapon at the twisty coils while Ozzie did the same with the scooter. He located the two ignition wires and twisted the ends together.

His experiences had taught him that there was roughly a fifty-fifty chance of an abandoned vehicle in the Grey Zone

still holding fuel. Sometimes, people used a vehicle until the tank was empty and dumped it, hotwiring the next one at a subsequent location. Because these vehicles had been stashed in the one spot, Heath guessed that they hadn't run out of the oils that kept them going but instead had been deliberately parked here for future use.

He found the starter wires and pressed them to one another.

The engine chugged and then grumbled. The motorbike came to brilliant, vibrant life. The scooter joined the chorus.

Heath checked the fuel gauge. The tank was a quarter full. 'You want the bike?' he said.

'You're heavier than me,' Ozzie replied. 'Besides, with you going ahead, the savages will go for you first. I'm probably a better shot than you, so I can take them out.' She grinned at him.

Heath managed a chuckle, before the reality of Derrick and Hayley's plight and the precariousness of their own situation silenced him again.

They heaved themselves up onto the seats.

When Heath dropped down, he felt his pack pulling at him, uncomfortably heavy over his back. But as he stabilised himself in the riding position, his confidence that he could ride the bike without tipping over grew. He revved the throttle and accelerated.

Suddenly a figure leapt at him from the debris; a moving shadow that moaned after him. In desperation he yanked the bike away from the side of the stretch and glanced back.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

The wheels of Ozzie's scooter were wobbling as she struggled to get momentum. When they steadied, she accelerated, leaving the figure reaching for her futilely.

Ozzie quickly rode up alongside Heath. He glanced at the road ahead to check there were no obstacles in his path and then looked over his shoulder again.

The figure had been joined by two others. The three savages were no longer reaching for Heath or Ozzie and were like statues at the foot of the rubble in the gloom, watching them ride away. Nobody gave chase.

Heath and Ozzie had found their tickets out of G14 just in time.

9.15am

Timothy Dawkins sat down at the bench in the kitchen. Mama reached into the cupboard and took out a plate. She scooped the pancakes off the pan and piled them up. She added some butter under each one and poured the syrup over the top.

Timothy sometimes pretended that if he didn't get pancakes for breakfast he wouldn't try his best in tuition, but he suspected Mama knew him better than that. She made them for him most mornings, probably not because of his bogus threat but simply because she loved him, and because he *loved* pancakes.

In any case, Mama made really good pancakes. She was good at other things too, like singing. She had a musical voice. He could still remember the way she'd sung him lullabies when he'd been a toddler. In a way he missed those calming verses before drifting off to sleep at night.

But Timothy wasn't a toddler anymore. No way. He'd turned ten in February. Double digits. It kind of scared him.

'Here they are,' Mama said, dropping the plate on the bench in front of him. 'You know, Timothy, if you keep eating the way you do, you'll end up as big as a balloon.'

'Impossible. My metabolism is faster than a balloon's.'

'You know the metabolism of a balloon now, do you?'

'Why wouldn't I?' Timothy said, unable to suppress a grin.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

‘There are a few kids who could do with a mother like you, I think. You know, one who watches their weight.’

‘I bet you wouldn’t dare say that to their faces,’ Mama said.

‘I already have. I didn’t tell them they were balloons, but I did tell them they might pop if they keep eating.’

‘One day, someone will end up hitting you.’

‘It’s possible. Actually, it could happen any day, I think. But I’m not scared.’

‘I’m not fooled by that face,’ Mama said, giving him a knowing look. ‘You’re too clever for your own good.’

‘I know.’

Timothy smiled again and cut off a big piece of his first pancake. Mama cleared the pan and then turned into the hallway.

Timothy liked teasing Mama. Watching her worry about him was funny. He didn’t know why. Sometimes he felt bad for finding it funny when he loved her so much. But he knew it was harmless, so he probably didn’t need to feel bad, anyway.

He ate his pancakes while he waited for Aurelius to arrive.

Aurelius was his Tutor. Technically, he was his ‘Father’s Tutor’. Every boy and girl had one.

Timothy preferred his one-on-one sessions with Aurelius compared to learning at the Father’s Campus. Whenever he was with Aurelius at home, it was just the two of them, and there were no boundaries to the maze they travelled together. They could get lost in history, in science and

technology, or even in maths. They willingly took wrong turns at times to find parts of the maze they hadn't yet discovered. Most importantly, there were no slowpokes to pull them back whenever they steered a discussion in a different direction.

At the Campus, on the other hand, Timothy sometimes got annoyed when the other kids were slow to pick up on things. Of course, he tried to be patient, like Mama wanted him to be. But he couldn't help getting frustrated occasionally.

In his tutorials with Aurelius, they covered all of the subjects at the Campus in one way or another. He was always eager to learn in every subject; however, if he was honest with himself, he was most fascinated by history. The subject matter was undoubtedly one reason for this, but the other reason was Tutor Aurelius himself. When Aurelius was teaching it, Timothy always felt the passion he had for it. His Tutor in full flight was something to behold.

History was also the best subject because it was so *long*. There was almost no limit to how far back you could go. The number of steps taken along the road to get to where you were now, in this time, was immeasurable.

Timothy knew he was a good four or five years ahead of his age group at the Campus. Aurelius had even told Mama that in some areas it was maybe six or seven years. Timothy supposed he should be proud of that, but what he really cared about was ensuring that his results were recorded against his name, his achievements officially noted down, so

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

he could do what he wanted to do in the future.

And what he wanted to do in the future was simple: maximise his potential. Making the Republican Agent Program when he grew up was the first step. From there, anything was possible, as long as he kept performing well. Whenever he allowed himself to dream of actually one day becoming a Minister in the General Assembly, he became a little giddy with excitement.

Timothy had already thought enough about life to know what he wanted from it. A crucial part of the journey in getting to his ultimate goal down the track was learning as much as he could *now*.

He was aware that his *condition* no doubt had something to do with this thirst for knowledge. He recognised that it was probably the reason he had identified academic performance as the most vital part of his 'plan'. But really, he didn't consciously think about his condition whenever he tried to maximise his potential. He wasn't one to dwell on the negative, at least when he was learning. And in any event, he really enjoyed learning, and probably would have tried just as hard even if he'd never had his condition.

In his heart, Timothy appreciated *life* — everything he had, everything the Republic had given him, every precious moment he shared with Mama, and every single thing he learnt from Aurelius. He knew he wasn't as healthy as other kids, so it was likely he appreciated things more than they did. He would admit that might be part of it.

Yet he also liked to think he was a bit different in other

ways, and that these other things that made him unique were also responsible for his outlook on life.

When Mama returned from the hallway, she said, 'At least I never have to worry about you not having an appetite.'

'Another one of the pluses of having me,' Timothy said.

'Go on, get out of here,' she said, 'before your head explodes.'

'As you command, ma'am.' Timothy hopped off the chair and ran into the open living room flanking the kitchen. He glanced briefly at the view through the bi-fold windows — the valley, the other houses built into the bluff, and the waterway down below. The water was calm, glassy. The sky was pure and the sun tinselled the waterway, making a mirror of the surface. The beautiful sight was a bright reminder of the splendour of Territory 1.

Timothy loved the view. He loved his home. He couldn't wait for Tutor Aurelius to arrive. He smiled wider as he ran for the study.

10.00am

Timothy looked at the questions Tutor Aurelius had set for him at the end of their last session. If it was up to him, he would have chosen to read ahead and get a head start on the next topic so he could impress Aurelius in their next discussion or embarrass the other students at the Campus.

But he knew that respect for authority was just as important as an appetite for excellence, so he had to follow Aurelius' instructions. Besides, homework was an important part of preparing for assessments. It was in his interest to tackle the questions.

Since finishing his pancakes, Timothy had logged onto the student portal of the Republicanet and revisited the chapter of the history syllabus titled: 'The Origins of the Religious War'. Now his fingers were primed over the keys.

**WHAT WERE THE MAJOR FACTORS THAT LED TO THE RELIGIOUS
WAR?**

WHAT ROLE DID *RELIGION* PLAY IN THE RELIGIOUS WAR?

Timothy could have typed all day in response, but Aurelius always implored him to keep his written answers succinct and his language simple, at least until he got older. 'Short and sweet,' Mama had said, echoing that advice. He began typing his short and sweet summary below the

questions.

Just as Timothy was putting the final touches on his responses, Aurelius' familiar voice echoed through the house, down the hallway. Timothy smiled and spun in his seat towards the closed door of the study.

The door opened. 'Good morning, Timothy.'

Aurelius seemed to string together every sentence harmoniously; a perpetual air of encouragement and patience to his voice. Whenever Timothy heard it, he knew another captivating session awaited him, and the blood pumped a little quicker around his body, even if his heart struggled at the effort. 'Good morning, Aurelius.'

Aurelius lowered his pack as he took his place at the desk next to Timothy. His silvery hair matched his grey uniform, as though he was camouflaging himself against ... well, himself. 'How are you today? Ready to talk about war?' he said.

'Better to talk about war than *be* at war.'

'That's true.' Aurelius pulled his laptop out of his pack and opened it up on the desk next to Timothy's monitor. 'The Republic has its challenges now, we all know that, but we must remind ourselves of how fortunate we are. Thanks to the Father and the Law, we are free of many of the historical burdens that plagued the old world. This doesn't mean we don't have our struggle. We do. That struggle is real and undeniable. But no matter how many rebels from the Grey Zone attempt to invade, or how much trouble they cause, we must always remember that we are much better off now compared to the people of the old world.'

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

Timothy glanced at the logo on the front of Aurelius' uniform. The logo seemed to both shield and *be* Aurelius' heart. It struck Timothy that perhaps *his* heart was the one that needed shielding, not his Tutor's.

'If we think about it deeply, though,' Aurelius said, 'war in itself is never good, but it's good to have *learnt* from it, correct?'

Timothy nodded. 'If it wasn't for war in the old world, the Republic wouldn't exist.'

'Exactly. The wars of the old world were the ultimate instigators of change here. Despite the dreadful costs, if it wasn't for war, we would not have progressed the way we have.'

Aurelius was kind enough to Timothy. He was strict though — no doubt about it — and a serious guy. Timothy had known from a very young age that Aurelius did more than believe in what he taught. He *lived* in what he taught — in history and the other subjects, in the lessons of the past and the challenges of the present, in rationality and reason, and in the existence of the Republic and of civilisation living on into the future.

'Tell me, what have you learnt about the origins of the Religious War?' Aurelius said. He logged onto the Republicanet. 'If you had to name one factor alone that was responsible for the War, what would you choose?'

'The Religious War is not meant to be a puzzling title,' Timothy said sarcastically. 'But I'll answer your question. According to the chapter: religion.'

‘What about according to *you*?’

Timothy scratched his nose. He brushed the strands of his fringe from his forehead. ‘Well ... I haven’t made my mind up yet.’

‘And why is that?’

‘There were a number of different reasons the Religious War broke out. It wasn’t just down to religion, although that *was* a factor.’ Timothy skimmed through the chapter on his monitor once again.

‘Multiple reasons. Well done, Timothy. But let’s think about this. In choosing one issue that we could call the *decisive* factor ... let’s go back to the beginning. In the early twenty-first century, how was the world divided?’

‘Three distinct groups,’ Timothy said.

‘And what were they?’

‘The Western democracies, the religious East, and rising powers,’ Timothy said, reciting the syllabus.

‘Rising *authoritarian* powers, mainly,’ Aurelius clarified. ‘When it comes to the Religious War, which two groups are we primarily concerned with?’

‘The Western democracies and the religious East,’ Timothy answered.

‘And what defined these two groups?’

‘Two different cultures.’

‘What’s a better way to describe it?’

‘Mm,’ Timothy said, scrunching his eyes.

‘Two *ideologies*,’ Aurelius said.

‘That’s right,’ Timothy said, a little frustrated with himself.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

‘I knew that word.’

‘Can you tell me what an ideology is?’

‘Yes,’ Timothy answered confidently, ‘it’s a belief system.’

‘A set of beliefs that form the bedrock of a society and the way its political systems operate to govern its people,’ Aurelius added. ‘So, Timothy, you were saying?’

‘Two different *i-de-ol-o-gies*,’ Timothy said. Sometimes, his mouth couldn’t keep up with his vocabulary. It frustrated him, a bit like the other students at the Campus sometimes frustrated him. ‘Western *sec-u-lar-is-m*, which was based on equality, democracy and the rights of the individual,’ he started.

‘And what was the other?’

‘An *i-de-ol-o-gy* based on religion.’

‘The *extremes* of religion,’ Aurelius said.

‘Sorry, I meant the extremes of religion,’ Timothy said.

‘And why would we use that term: “the extremes of religion”?’

‘I think I saw it in the chapter,’ Timothy replied. ‘Is it because any form of religion is stupid?’

‘It’s because we know now that any form of religion is extremism, in one way or another. It can only lead to regression. By the way, regression means to go backwards.’

‘I know,’ Timothy said. He noticed a bit of smugness in his tone and wondered whether Aurelius would pick up on it.

Aurelius seemed to let the pause linger a while, but he didn’t reprimand Timothy for his attitude. ‘And what about the rising authoritarian powers? Did they play any role in the

Religious War?’

‘A little bit, but they were mostly involved in the Last War. It’s confusing for some kids,’ Timothy said with a chuckle, ‘but I get it.’ He winked at his Tutor.

‘Very good,’ Aurelius said. ‘So, to understand the Religious War, we need to understand the Western democracies and the religious East. Let’s start with the democracies. What was the West based upon?’

‘Well, obviously democracy,’ Timothy answered, ‘but also freedom. Freedom of the individual as opposed to the group.’

‘*Freedom,*’ Aurelius said. ‘An interesting word.’ The Tutor shifted his attention from the monitor to Timothy. Their eyes locked.

Timothy noticed his palms were clammy. He blotted his hands on his shirt and realised he could hear his heart beating.

‘Freedom, as they called it, was their most boasted strength,’ Aurelius continued. He lifted his eyebrows. His compellingly dark eyes seemed to suggest depths of ominous knowledge, burdens hidden in layers beneath the surface. ‘Yet it was freedom, as the West defined it, that brought the world down.’

When Timothy had his breath back, he said, ‘So it was *freedom* that was the main factor responsible?’

‘Timothy,’ Aurelius said, ‘you’re a clever boy, but you missed my point. Freedom still exists *today*. We have it right here in the Republic. You enjoy it. I enjoy it. The difference

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

between *our* freedom and the freedom that the West of the old world claimed to live by, is that ours is not irresponsible, nor does it revolve entirely around the individual. Let me give you an example. What do you know about *order* and *control*?’

‘One sounds good and one sounds bad.’

‘But in reality, is one good and one bad?’

‘No. They are the same thing,’ Timothy said, smiling.

‘Think about laws,’ Aurelius said. ‘What do they do?’

‘They control behaviour.’

‘Excellent. What we need to understand here is that one of the key issues for any kind of collective society has always been the challenge of balancing freedom against control. Do you think the West got this right in the long run?’

‘No,’ Timothy said.

‘The West of the old world was preoccupied with the freedom of the individual, *obsessed* with it. The truth they couldn’t see at the time is that when the individual is put above the group, the group is in jeopardy.’

‘Hmm,’ Timothy said. He mulled over that idea and decided that it made sense.

‘The West ignored two crucial facts from history. One: the individual without the group is worth nothing. Humans are social people; they flourish in groups. And they do their best work when they are part of a united group that shares the same values.’

Timothy nodded. Again it made perfect sense to him. ‘What’s the second fact?’

‘Two: every great civilisation of the past has collapsed. This is a hard fact, but it’s one that must be acknowledged at any and every point in time. If you don’t acknowledge it, you will think you have become supremely enlightened, and you arrogantly start to think that your form of civilisation will be the last the world will see. As a result, you become fatally hostile to adaptation. At the start of the twenty-first century, the West’s glory had lasted for a mere glimmer of time compared to previous civilisations; why did they think *they’d* found the system that would last forever?’

Timothy placed his finger over his mouth, contemplating what he had learnt. ‘If freedom is based entirely on the individual,’ he said, ‘the individual will eventually think they are above the rules that keep the social orders *functioning*. They’ll think they are above control, above the laws.’

‘Good work, Timothy,’ Aurelius said. The Tutor’s smile seemed to go sideways rather than up, but Timothy could always tell when it was there. ‘Let’s look at the second question I set for you.’

Timothy glanced at the answers he’d typed.

‘When we look at religion, the first thing we should identify is that it is incompatible with secular law,’ Aurelius said. ‘Any set of rules or ideas that could be held in higher regard than a state’s laws are rules or ideas that breed disloyalty and disunity. For a group to flourish — and let’s remember that history tells us progress is achieved most significantly when groups are united — the people of that group must be bound by the same set of rules, the same set

of values.’

Timothy read from his answer, saying, ‘Religious ideas are a direct threat to any civilisation that wants its people to be bound by its own set of rules.’

Aurelius nodded. ‘Separation of religion and state is simply not enough. In the Republic, any form of religion — no matter how harmless or insignificant it might seem — is a direct threat to the sanctity of the Law, the sovereignty of the General Assembly, the authority of the Father, and the security of our citizens.’

‘It doesn’t seem harmless to me,’ Timothy said. If he was honest with himself, just *thinking* about religion and all the crazy things that went with it made him gulp.

‘Religion breeds irrationality. When you look at history, that fact becomes crystal clear. The idea of a higher power, an *invisible* and *completely undetectable* thing to which someone could hold allegiance, is just so *irrational* it beggars belief. One of the West’s greatest failures was assuming that economic progress and science would suppress the threat religion had traditionally posed to various groups throughout history, because the uncomfortable truth was that the permanence of religious conflicts in the world had never been broken.’ Aurelius paused. He lifted a finger. ‘Unfortunately, the West’s own perspective blinded it, because while religion may have been fading in Western societies at the time, religion certainly hadn’t been fading in the East. In that part of the world, it was actually as significant as ever.’

‘But it wasn’t *just* the East that had religion,’ Timothy said, picking up on what Aurelius had alluded to.

‘No, religion was a universal concept. It had played an enormous role in the history of the West, too. Ironic, isn’t it? The people of the old world strove to understand and explain their existence on Earth.’

‘They weren’t happy?’ Timothy asked. He struggled to comprehend a civilisation like the West of the old world, with all of its achievements, where the people needed some other reason to live.

‘Evolution is as confronting as it is undeniable,’ Aurelius replied. ‘People found some meaning back then through religion. Besides, they were a product of their ancestors. They were usually *born* into religion.’

‘But even if they were born into it, they still found meaning?’ Timothy checked, frowning.

‘It usually gave them a set of guidelines to live by,’ Aurelius explained. ‘The problem with these religious guidelines was that they could be bent. There are countless examples throughout history where religion was used as a weapon.’

‘It was the most damaging weapon of all,’ Timothy said, recalling what the chapter had outlined.

Aurelius nodded. ‘You see, Timothy, the secular societies of the West had essentially moved on from religious zeal, and they couldn’t quite believe that it was still powerful enough to reshape the world. The truth was that its power had been so extraordinary that it had been shaping and

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

reshaping the world for *thousands* of years; how could they have ever possibly thought their one hundred years or so of democratic prosperity would suppress this power?’

‘That’s the thing,’ Timothy said excitedly, ‘it was never going to happen while they still allowed religion to be *practised*.’

‘In the West, religion eventually became just one aspect of life, if at all. In the East, religion wasn’t just *one* aspect of life, it *was* life.’

‘I believe the word is “contrast”?’ Timothy said, grinning.

‘Do you remember your first lesson at the Campus in your very first year? The topic you first studied?’

‘Of course,’ Timothy answered.

‘What was it?’

‘The first topic: good and evil.’

‘So tell me, Timothy, what do you know about good and evil? What do you remember from your first days at the Campus?’

‘*Good* and *evil* are just words. They’re defined by other words. You can only judge what fits into one definition and what fits into the other by referring to some other source, like a set of rules, or a set of laws.’

‘So what about when you have two sets of laws — one from the state, and one from a religion?’

‘What’s good and evil depends on which set of laws you’re referring to,’ Timothy said.

‘Exactly. And what do we learn from this realisation?’

‘That neither *good* nor *evil* exists.’

‘Perfect. In the Republic, there is only what is allowed, and what is not. The Law governs us to protect us from the mistakes of the old world, to keep us united, and to ensure our civilisation continues to exist into the future.’

Timothy gazed up at Aurelius’ pale lips, and it occurred to him that they too matched the colour of the uniform and the wiry strands of his hair. ‘So,’ Timothy said, squinting at his Tutor, ‘what did democracy have to do with it then? What part of democracy was wrong?’

‘Ultimately,’ Aurelius said, his tone lifting, ‘democracy was weak. The Religious War revealed the vulnerabilities of democracy as a system.’

Timothy nodded. He had read in the chapter that most of the democracies in the old world had granted people the freedom to practise religion, even when it was clear from the history books that wherever religion had gone, violence had gone with it. He wondered if that too had been a symptom of democracy’s weaknesses.

‘The Religious War revealed a startling truth that until that time had gone largely unacknowledged by the West,’ Aurelius said, lifting another finger.

Timothy leaned forward. ‘Which truth?’

‘Democratic processes open a society up to attack by its enemies.’ Aurelius paused, which gave Timothy time to think on the point. ‘You can’t defend a democracy from catastrophic threats and at the same time stay true to *all* of the principles that define it. How would it ever be possible to force your values on others when such enforcement is

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

contrary to the democratic values of independence and autonomy?’

‘It *contradicts* itself,’ Timothy said, delighted with his contribution.

‘Very good. The fundamental flaw of a democratic society is that it can be infiltrated from within; the values that underpin it end up being exploited and used against it. Its very approach, in the way it champions the individual, in the way it empowers the individual — no, *encourages* the individual — to challenge it, leads inevitably to division within the group. Instead of having a team, a unified group, you have a group of individuals, always looking out for themselves first.’

Aurelius became silent while Timothy was thinking about the implications. One of the first principles Timothy had been taught at the Campus was that all of the students were on a learning and development journey together. Fitting into the group was just as important as your own performance. One couldn’t happen without the other.

‘There’s a lot of irony in this,’ Aurelius continued, ‘because while individualism was a trait the proponents of democracy in the old world were very proud of, they didn’t realise that humans largely *cannot* find purpose just in themselves as individuals. The desire for unity and to be a member of a group is a desire that is no less vital than anything else necessary for survival.’

‘It’s a basic need,’ Timothy added. ‘Like food, water, sleeping.’

‘Humans need a *purpose* that ties in with a group,’ Aurelius said. ‘Without one, they just get lost. The evidence in the West was plain to see in the twenty-first century; the younger generations were swept by waves of personal depression like no others that had come before. Humans without a purpose, without a tribe, are humans who are dying.’

‘They didn’t realise it, but their natural longing for unity, their wish to *belong*, was going completely unfulfilled,’ Timothy said, again remembering what was in the chapter.

‘I mentioned how religion had played an important role in the development of the West in the old world ...’

Timothy recalled how they’d touched on it. ‘Yes,’ he said.

‘Well, the younger generations turned away from the religion that had largely defined their tribe and given them purpose for two thousand years. In the end, as just individuals, what did they believe in?’

‘Hmm,’ Timothy said.

‘Individual freedom alone?’ Aurelius said with the familiar lift to his tone. ‘When it’s not linked strongly to a group, a community, a *tribe* — and let’s remember that humans by nature *long* to be part of some kind of tribe — or a grander purpose, individual freedom ends up feeling pretty meaningless.’

‘But in the Republic *we* have a purpose,’ Timothy said.

‘Indeed, we do. Here, *everyone* has a purpose and believes in it. We all live and work under the Law, for the Father, under the guidance of the General Assembly, for the

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

continuity of our civilisation. The Founding Ministers and the First Father knew how badly religion had held back science and rationality across the course of history, how it had encouraged delusions and division, but they also realised that if they were going to finally purge it from the world they needed to replace it with a belief system that overrides individual interests, to ensure everyone remains part of the same tribe.'

Timothy nodded.

'We are all united under our flag — no division, no fracture, no conflicting values; unlike the West of the old world,' Aurelius said.

Timothy looked back at his written answers. His final sentence linked in well with what Aurelius had just talked about. As he read from the screen, he caught another glimpse of the Republican logo affixed across his Tutor's heart, and a great tide of comfort rushed through him. 'In the Republic, we are all in this together.'

10.20am

The woman and her boys have been ushered into a large cave, though it isn't like the caves they knew in the Homeland. It is made of something similar to rock, yet it clearly isn't rock. It is like nothing else the woman has seen, but it *has* to be a cave, because it is capable of providing shelter like any other cave.

She looks around again. The cave is crowded with people from all sorts of tribes. She searches the faces and recognises a couple of people from her own tribe, but she stops herself from calling out to them, because she doesn't want to draw attention to herself or her boys.

She quickly glances at the big men and women, who seem to watch their every move. They are still carrying the things that may be weapons. She thinks they might be clubs. The thought makes her mouth dry and sets the red of death pumping quickly through her body. She is scared for her boys, so she decides that no matter what she will stay well away from the big furred people carrying the clubs. She pulls her boys close and keeps her head down.

This is meant to be the place of magic, where the ancient place lives on. Safety and opportunity are meant to reign here.

For this, she has taken a monumental risk for her boys, but she has already started to worry about whether they

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

have a future here at all. In this crowded place there is not much room, and they have been forced to stay here, in this exact spot, for a very long time. The big people with the clubs have stopped them from going anywhere else.

She doesn't know why.

She is thirsty, hungry. Her legs and muscles hurt. She knows her boys must feel this way too. Whatever her discomfort, it's nothing compared to the shame that swallows her whenever she acknowledges this painful reality.

Her eyes suddenly land on a couple of the men from the tribes as they try to speak to the big furred people who are watching them. A moment later, a furred man shouts at them in a language the woman doesn't understand, before other furred people push the men who are trying to speak back into the crowded group.

Trembling, the woman hugs her boys. They shiver the way she does and they bury their heads in her embrace. She knows that they are very frightened. But they don't say anything. They stay quiet, like she told them to. Her heart swells with pride that they are being so brave.

She looks over her shoulder. Now that the real sun blazes outside, dim threads of light breach the cave; however, she can't see more of what's back there, because it's too gloomy. The only opening to the outside world is at the front of the cave. The old air she and her boys are breathing is warm and stale.

She desperately wants her boys to go outside, the way

they would back in the Homeland, to feel the sun on their skin and breathe in the pure air, but she thinks that maybe they won't be allowed to do that for some time.

All of a sudden, one of the men from the tribes breaks free of the group and tries to run to the front opening of the cave. A startled murmur builds among the crowd as everyone watches the man scamper desperately towards the light.

A furred man with a club shouts at him. His voice is loud, hostile.

The woman's boys look up at her, their eyes wide with fear. A crawling chill travels her back. 'Don't worry,' she tells them in her native tongue, 'I'm here. We are all together.'

The furred man steps towards the running man and lifts the thing that may be a club.

The woman's breath catches in her throat. She's hardly able to watch what she thinks she's already figured out.

The thing comes down.

The crowd gasps.

The man falls to the ground.

Even though the din of voices in the cave morphs into fearful mutterings and then cries, the woman doesn't gasp, doesn't make any noise — she just closes her eyes and wishes it isn't true.

But it is. The things she initially thought were arms *are* weapons. More than ever now, she hopes her boys will stay silent. She starts whispering to them as quietly as she can, repeating her words. 'I'm here. We are all together.'

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

The big furred man with the club — the one who struck down the tribesman — crosses the cave and stands closer to the crowd. He shouts at everyone again. He points at the man on the ground and yells incoherent noises, or words, that the woman can't comprehend. An eerie hush falls over the group of tribespeople, the silence echoing strangely in the cave, and suddenly she realises it is too quiet for her to whisper to her boys without being heard.

More men with clubs come closer. They stand around the crowd, at the walls of the cave and at the opening, watching everyone. When the woman looks at one of them, he meets her eyes with his, and she is struck by a desperate sense of danger.

She quickly looks away.

Unexpectedly, the tribesman who was struck to the ground stumbles to his feet. He is hurt, wailing, and holds his head where the red of death has appeared. He appears distressed, confused. The waters of grief mix with the red of death on his face.

The woman is aware that in many of the tribes from the Homeland, if ever a man is struck by another, he can't ignore it. He must fight back to defend his honour.

Stumbling, off balance, the tribesman falls towards the big man with the club and lashes out at him with his fist, trying to strike him. He lands only a glancing blow.

Even before anything happens, the woman knows the contact is enough. It's *enough*.

A chorus of gasps from the crowd ring out as the

tribesman loses his balance completely and falls to the ground a second time.

The big man's face reddens, bright, like a reddened dawn — like the sky the woman often woke to with her man and her boys in the Homeland — but this time the colour isn't beautiful. The big man with the club wipes his hand on his fur, where the red of death has marked him, and then inspects the red on his hand. She can tell that he is disgusted, perhaps even insulted, by the sight.

Silence echoes once more in the cave as the big man turns towards the tribesman on the ground. In an instant, he holds his club towards him, as though he is thinking about whether or not to strike him again.

POP!

The woman sees the fire and instinctively ducks as a noise like no other she has heard before splits through the cave, from the *club*. It is so loud, so unexpected, that fleeting screams pass through the tribespeople around her. With her boys gripping her tightly, quiet, *still* quiet, she pulls them in to shelter them from the fire, from whatever has happened, from the terrible noise. She looks down at them and sees that their eyes are closed.

When she finally feels others around her lifting themselves up again, she summons the courage to raise her head. She looks back at the tribesman on the ground.

Somehow, there is now much more of the red of death. It is pooling around the man; the puddle is growing around his head.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

The woman's heart sinks and her insides churn. Somehow, even though the club never struck the tribesman, she knows that he is dead, that he has been killed.

The *sound* of death has killed him.

12.15pm

‘Do you think Derrick will come back?’ Jake said.

Heath searched his little brother’s eyes. Jake’s eyebrows were lifted above the intricate shades of hazel, his forehead knitting creases. Heath’s heart ached whenever he saw this in his brother.

Sadness.

Most of the time, Jake’s optimistic outlook dominated his interactions with people, but it was times like these that Heath couldn’t protect him from the truth.

‘If there’s anyone who can make it back, it’s Derrick,’ Heath said. ‘You know what he’s like. He’s one of our best.’

Jake hung his head.

‘Come on,’ Heath said, ‘you gotta have a little bit of faith, my man. Derrick is the best of the best! He knows how to beat those Geese.’

A thin smile appeared on Jake’s face and then quickly grew wider as he looked up and gazed at Heath again. He started clucking.

‘What would he say?’ Heath said.

Jake kept clucking, and then started flapping his arms. ‘He’d say, *those geese ain’t no match for a beast!*’

‘Exactly. They’ve got nothing on Derrick. You know that geese are no chickens, though, right?’ Heath ruffled the tangles of scrubby hair on Jake’s head. His brother grinned.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

Sunlight slanted into the stretches of Grey Zone Sector 11; swaths of misty, grey-veiled gold lined up against the shadows of the buildings. There was no wind, and the heat was radiating from the road and the structures around them.

Heath was used to the heat. He'd grown up in it.

They rounded the shoulder of the stretch, which swung to the left, and emerged into the manufacturing precinct of the Sector. As they passed the first lot of open shopfronts flanking the side of the road, Heath glanced at the vehicles that were raised off the ground and the workers who were gathered underneath — evidently halfway through the process to repair or convert the engines so they would burn the oils that made them useful. Some of the workers saw him and waved. He waved back.

It was in this area of G11 that the small factories had been constructed. The former generations had, at an early stage, rerouted electricity from the boundary fences to feed the Grey Zone with power, and had then extended and maintained the grid. The evolution of the factories over time had led to the manufacturing precinct, where the workers now designed and shaped the items and machinery utilised by the people in G11. Activity had increased tenfold since Vincent had introduced the currency system. Trade in the Sector was booming.

Eight shopfronts along the stretch, they came to Benjamin's one on the left-hand side.

Heath waved Jake in. Through a maze of tools and equipment — most salvaged from the old world, repaired

and maintained — they found a lumpy mass at the back of the shopfront hunched over a spark. The sting of a power tool pierced the enclosed space. It was Benjamin.

Heath tapped Benjamin on the shoulder and he almost jolted forward into the spark. He spun around, shaking his head. ‘One of these days, you’re going to scare the shit out of me so bad I’ll fall into a chainsaw,’ he said, dropping the power tool and lifting the goggles from his eyes.

Benjamin was a plump man, with rolls of fat stored in various parts of his body. He had a kindly face and warm, grey eyes that always made Heath feel calm.

‘I heard about Derrick and Hayley,’ Benjamin said. He placed his sooted hand on Heath’s shoulder. ‘You doing okay?’

‘No *need* to worry, man,’ Jake said. ‘Those geese ain’t no match for a beast. Derrick will get back, we all know it, and he’ll bring Hayley back, too.’

‘Well, if you say it, then I’ll *have* to believe it,’ Benjamin said. He lifted his palm and Jake gave him a high-five, sending plumes of soot into the air. He returned his solemn eyes to Heath.

‘If anyone can make it back, it’s Derrick,’ Heath said.

Benjamin nodded. After a pause, he waved Heath and Jake towards the doorway adjacent to the table he’d been working on, in the corner of the shopfront. They followed the familiar route, through a maze of corridors, into a small room at the back of the building. Benjamin lifted the trapdoor to reveal the steel staircase and they descended. They emerged

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

in the large underground working area that had been built under the shopfront.

In G11, an elaborate network of discarded bunkers lay below the ground, having been originally built by the communities of the old world during the wars that had afflicted them. Over the years, the people of Sector 11 had redesigned and modified the bunkers for various purposes. This one — Benjamin's underground facility — was connected to the atmosphere via an intricate web of pipes, air vents, and fans, allowing the smoke and fumes to escape, camouflaged in the output of work done above ground.

When the dozen workers hunched over weapons, wheels, engines and other projects saw the three of them, they upped their chins in acknowledgement. While everyday items were manufactured in the normal factories and shopfronts to be shared with the community or traded at the markets, it was Benjamin and his workers down here who provided the weapons, ammunition, and technological supplies for Vincent's faction of rebels.

Heath saw that a couple of the men were working on rifles, and he noticed something about the magazines attached to them. He knew that all AK-47s had curved magazines, but these ones were straighter. 'What are those?' he asked Benjamin.

Evidently registering what Heath had observed, Benjamin said, 'Occasionally, we come across other assault rifles. Sometimes I get my guys to look into whether any of them are useful.'

Heath watched as one of the workers held the weapon up and examined the barrel. 'Any luck so far?'

'If I'm being honest, it seems the AK-47 is just about as good as it gets. Firing speed, reliability, ease of carry, accuracy — it's all there in the one weapon. Besides, there are ten AKs for every other type of assault rifle we get our hands on. The old world had a lot of them. There was probably a reason for that. It's probably the same reason that the Guards carry them. Why fix something if it isn't broken?'

'You never know,' Heath countered.

Benjamin scratched his chin. 'We can refit an AK-47 far quicker than anything else, anyway. We know the model inside and out, and getting spare parts is easy.' He paused. 'I'm likely wasting my time. But it's more to satisfy my curiosity than anything else.'

Heath was always in awe of Benjamin's relentless drive for innovation. Under Benjamin's leadership, his team of workers not only repaired and refitted items of conflict that had survived the destruction of the old world, but they also created entirely new inventions, which Heath and his comrades used in the field. Whenever Benjamin released a new piece of equipment or weaponry, Vincent's faction shared the techniques for making it with the other factions throughout all of the Grey Zone Sectors via encrypted channels on the Republicanet, ensuring that innovations were available to everyone once designs were manufactured and tested.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

Benjamin waddled past the rows of workers and benches, towards the far corner of the work area. On the wall, a neoprene suit was hanging from a hook. 'Check it out,' Benjamin said. He lifted the suit from the hook and held it out flat for Heath to inspect. Jake dragged a stool from one of the benches and hopped up. 'Same design. The neoprene masks the heat, but this time ...'

The neoprene suits Heath and his partners wore on missions had battery-charged layers that constantly cooled the suits, ensuring they didn't heat up as they otherwise would. The trapping of the body heat and the cooling of the layers masked them somewhat under the scrutiny of an infra-red detector, but because the heat pattern of background objects was variable, a cool outer layer of a suit could stand out against some backgrounds almost as starkly as a normal human body.

'I've built sensors into the outer layer that detect the temperature of the surrounds, nearby objects,' Benjamin continued. 'Don't ask me how I came up with it, but this suit will be the best camouflage for you yet. The temperature of the outer layers will now adjust according to what's detected around you. For example, if you flatten yourself against a wall, the suit will adjust. Of course, it's still not perfect; the angle will play a big part when you're on foot, and if north is a vastly different heat pattern to south, then the chances of camouflage are diminished.'

Heath ran his hand over the material. He pinched it with his fingers. It seemed just as flexible as the other suits he'd

worn.

‘The inner layer is still charged to cool you down as best it can, to stop the heatstroke. But, as you know, we can’t get the suits to fully trap the heat without killing you, so some of it will still leak out at the openings. All the same, it will make detection more difficult, especially when it comes to the Agents with their goggles. The further away you are, the less effective infra-red goggles will be. *Any* alteration of the normal human heat pattern is helpful. As I said, this is the best suit yet for that.’ Benjamin paused and nodded at the suit. ‘I’m sure the next version will be better, but this is the best suit yet,’ he repeated, as though trying to convince himself.

Heath traced the fine stitches of the suit with his fingertips, knowing full well that Benjamin was never satisfied with his work. ‘You’re right,’ Heath said. ‘I’ll never know how you do it.’ He took the suit in both hands. It was remarkably light for its advertised capabilities. ‘Does Vincent know about this?’

‘Already sent a batch his way,’ Benjamin said. His smile seemed to lift his chin that sagged at his neck.

Heath appreciated how Benjamin had dedicated his life to *making* things. He didn’t base himself in Bunker 11 with Vincent, Aaron, Heath and the others, but he was as much a part of the team as any of them.

‘Is there any *my* size?’ Jake said, tilting his head.

‘You need to wait until you can fit into this one,’ Heath replied.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

Benjamin chuckled and gave him a look of recognition.

It was a common thing — children wanting to contribute to the cause. No matter their age, they were all eager to make a difference, usually motivated by loss, even if they didn't dwell on it.

'What's this?' Jake said, pointing to white overalls that were hanging on another hook.

'Oh,' Benjamin said, 'another little project of mine, but it's not ready yet.'

Heath raised his eyebrows at the maker.

Benjamin sighed. 'Patience is *not* your virtue, is it?'

Heath laughed. 'You know me.'

'I've got this idea,' Benjamin said, 'about the fences.'

'Go on.'

'As you know, the voltage is too high for any insulating material we have here in Eleven that you could wear.'

'Right, even though they adjust it at times.'

'So, I thought ...' The maker hesitated.

'You thought what?'

'I thought: what if you created overalls, a *suit*, if you like, that enclosed someone in conductive material?'

Heath frowned.

'*Huh?*' Jake said.

'Stay with me,' Benjamin implored.

Heath saw in Benjamin's eyes his brilliant mind racing again, begging them to come along for the ride.

'Rather than trying to come up with an insulator, you enclose someone completely in conductive material, like a

mesh of steel.'

'Wait,' Heath said, reaching out to touch the overalls. 'This is ... steel?' The material was uneven. He traced the netting of the white suit with his fingers, the way he had done with the new neoprene. He found another hook hiding next to the overalls, a steel rod hanging from it.

'If someone is completely surrounded by the conductive material, you might be able to bring them to the same voltage potential as the fence. If you can do that, the electricity will flow *around* their body, and they can touch the fence, *without* being harmed. It won't matter how high the voltage is.'

Heath lifted the rod. It seemed to sparkle in the lamplight. 'You're saying you can make someone part of the circuit?'

'Well, the cage around them, anyway,' Benjamin said.

'What are you *talking* about?' Jake said. He hopped off the stool and joined Heath at the overalls, taking the sleeve in his hand and frowning at it. 'It doesn't *feel* that special to me.'

'There are some other issues, of course,' Benjamin said. 'Isolation, for example. Just one reason why it's still a work in progress.'

Heath nodded, thinking about the practicality of the concept. 'Bringing someone to the same voltage potential as the wires would be noisy, I'm assuming.'

'You've got your darts, haven't you?' Benjamin said. 'Besides, I'm just the manufacturer. I don't do operations. It's up to you guys to figure all of that out.' He turned back to

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

the new neoprene suit, evidently done with the discussion about the unfinished project. 'You'll get to wear my new masterpiece soon, I imagine.' He began walking away and waved them forward, leading them back the way they'd come. As they climbed the staircase and navigated the corridors, arriving in the shopfront once more, he hardly looked back at them.

At any given time, Heath could hardly keep Benjamin's attention for more than a minute or two. The maker was obsessed with his work, compulsive in the way he tackled any task he'd given himself, and sometimes Heath wondered whether he even remembered their encounters once they were over.

When Heath said goodbye, Benjamin was already engrossed again in whatever he was doing with his power tool. He didn't reply.

Despite the activity in Benjamin's factory, Heath found the main part of the stretch outside quieter than what he was used to. Normally at this time of the day he would see children on a break from their tutor groups, running after each other or kicking balls. He himself had fond memories of this particular stretch flanking the factories. He had played soccer here when he was a child, and he'd taught Jake how to play on this very stretch, too.

But today, no soccer balls, no children other than his little brother.

The news about Derrick and Hayley would have spread quickly. In Heath's experience, whenever people realised

someone had been lost, they tended to round up their families. They were reminded of how fragile their community was, so they took refuge in the false sense of security that their quarters offered, and retreated to them. Sometimes, it could take a month for everyone to come out of their shells again. The people who often came out first were those who still accepted food aid from the Republic at the times of the drop-offs.

While G11 had developed to such a sophisticated level that Vincent's faction had been able to set up farm fields, planting and harvesting crops for the community, providing food to the people through the market system, not everyone in the Sector was willing to reject the food aid the Republic still provided.

Vincent was very vocal about how strongly he disapproved of aid acceptance. He said it was a victory for their oppressors, and a sign of weakness. Heath had done the math himself and knew — based on the farm fields' current output — that the people of G11 could survive without aid. But for now, to keep the broader community aligned with their cause, they couldn't forbid it. If they did, they would most likely lose the support of the weaker ones. Everyone needed to be united if they were going to have a chance at prevailing, however far into the future that chance might come. At the moment, Vincent was achieving unity, but it came with a caveat: some people would only remain supportive if they were certain their children wouldn't starve.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

Fear still had the potential to tear the people of G11 apart. Vincent, Heath and the others were well aware of this danger.

‘Remember the last time you beat me in the World Cup Final?’ Heath said. He gave his little brother a light punch on the arm. ‘What a moment that was!’

Jake took off, zigzagging from left to right, dribbling an invisible ball. ‘Jake passes to the midfielder, Jake Two, dummies, steps over the ball, flicks it through the legs of the defender to Jake Three, and Jake scores!’ He took off his shirt and waved it in the air, running along the stretch in circles, spinning it around his head. ‘What a goal to win the World Cup! *Woohoo!*’

The soccer World Cup Final had been a spectacle of the old world. Heath didn’t know much more about it. He’d been told it was the biggest match that was played.

When Heath had been in his early teens and Jake a child, Nicholas, their father’s uncle, had told them about soccer, how it had been played in the old world; a universal activity, ‘sport’, he’d called it. He’d given them their first ball before he died, handed down through the generations before him, which had then been restitched right here in the manufacturing precinct for them to play with. He’d said that the World Cup had been the pinnacle of the sport, the World Cup Final the biggest game. Heath had used the name for the recurring games in their imaginary arena.

‘That’s enough,’ Heath said, watching Jake escalate the twirls of his shirt above his head, ‘you’re scaring all the girls.’

‘They’d *love* to get a look at this,’ Jake said. ‘No one can deny it. My rig’s a babe magnet.’

‘Your “rig”? What the heck is a rig?’

‘It’s a slang word,’ Jake said. ‘You *do* know what slang is, don’t you?’ He chuckled.

‘You *do* know you’re a real smartass sometimes, don’t you?’ Heath replied.

Jake laughed a bit louder. “‘Rig” is slang for “body”,’ he clarified. ‘At least, that’s how I understand it.’

‘You think your *body* is a babe magnet?’ Heath checked.

‘Of course. My *rig* is a babe magnet. That’s exactly what I said.’

‘You’re living in a fantasy world, buddy,’ Heath said. He caught up to Jake and wrapped his fingers around Jake’s bicep. ‘I can fit my hand around this little thing.’

‘Not for much longer,’ Jake said. ‘Besides, it’s unfair for you to do that. You’re *older*.’

‘Point is, you may be a babe magnet already, but you’ve got a long way to go before it’s your *rig* that’s drawing them.’

The little man shook his head, smiling.

Jake had just turned twelve. He was small for his age, and looked perhaps a couple of years younger, but with an olive complexion and the good looks of their mother, Heath knew that he already had a small following of local ‘babes’, as he called them. It was another sign that he was growing up, and Heath couldn’t do anything to stop it.

‘Go long!’ a voice yelled.

They turned around. Ted, one of Benjamin’s workers, was

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

standing at the side of the stretch way back, outside Benjamin's shopfront. He was holding a ball, but this one wasn't perfectly round like a soccer ball.

Heath glanced at Jake as he ran backwards, lifting his hands up in the air.

'I'm open!' Jake called.

Heath pretended to tussle with his little brother as Ted lifted the oddly-shaped ball up by his chest, and then threw it powerfully. It spiralled through the air quickly, slightly upward at first but relatively flat. Despite the flat throw, Heath realised that it would be too high for Jake, so he backed up and jumped with his hands at his chest. The ball slammed into his collarbone and rebounded, but he caught it. When he was settled with the ball in his hands, he looked at Jake.

'Hey,' Jake said sheepishly.

'You can't win them all,' Heath said, lifting his eyebrows at his brother.

Jake sighed. Eventually he smiled. 'It was a pretty good catch.'

Ted clapped his hands. 'Nice one!' he shouted. 'But Jake didn't try to take you down. You should've kept running for the touchdown.'

When Ted got closer, Heath threw the ball back, but it wobbled in the air, ugly and awkward. Still, the worker caught it on his chest.

'I've told you: you gotta put *spin* on it,' Ted said when he reached them.

‘It’s harder than it looks,’ Heath admitted.

‘I could’ve caught that,’ Jake said defiantly, ‘if Heath hadn’t stolen my catch.’

‘Where’s *your* ball?’ Ted asked.

‘Not here,’ Jake said. ‘But I still scored just then to win the World Cup. Did you see?’

‘You know you’re playing the wrong game, right?’ Ted said. ‘There’s a *better* game.’

Jake frowned. ‘What do you mean?’ He crossed his arms.

‘The guy who throws,’ Heath chimed in, ‘what’s his name again?’

‘Quarterback,’ Ted reminded him.

‘That’s right,’ Heath said, remembering and nodding.

‘Quarter *what?*’ Jake asked.

Ted laughed. ‘You ever heard the term, “Super Bowl”, little man?’

Jake shook his head. ‘A super bowl? You mean, like, a bowl you eat food out of?’

Ted laughed harder. ‘Yeah. Sure. Something like that.’

Ted was in his forties. Heath could still remember his first conversation with him about ‘football’, one they’d had when Heath had started kicking the soccer ball around the stretches as a teenager. Ted’s grandfather had taught him football the way Nicholas had taught Heath and Jake soccer.

‘You know, I saw something that really irritated me the other day,’ Ted said suddenly, frowning.

‘Oh yeah?’ Heath said.

‘Yeah. I saw this guy with a football, so I introduced

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

myself, went up for some throws. But when I threw it, he started telling me I couldn't pass it forward, only *backwards*. He said that throwing it forward, the way I do, is against the rules! "Forward pass", he called it. I tell you what: by the time I gave up the argument, I was pulling my hair out. I left all wound up. But I must say ... after feeling like I've known football all my life and loving it, the whole damn conversation confused me.' Ted shook his head emphatically. 'Now I wish I never met the guy.'

Heath shrugged his shoulders. 'I'm sure he just doesn't know the rules as well as you do.'

Ted nodded. He slapped the football a couple of times with his hand. 'Anyhow, I better get down there. Benjamin will be wondering where I am.' He looked at Jake. 'Next time *you've* gotta take the catch and score the touchdown.'

'I would have done it *this* time if it wasn't for Heath stealing it.'

Ted turned and headed back the way he'd come.

'You know, you might be a bad loser,' Heath said, seeking a reaction.

'I am not! But really, it's unfair for you to do that. You're *taller*, as well as older.'

They turned the corner into a familiar stretch. It was framed by battered doorways and lanes that branched off in different directions.

Heath noticed Margie smiling at him from the broken window of her quarters. She gave him an enthusiastic wave and gestured for him to come inside.

Heath had first met Margie in his tutor groups as a child. These days she was in her late forties, but he had always found her to give off an older, wiser disposition, and her gentleness seemed to be more suited to a grandmother in the final chapter of her life. Her partner had died in a gunfight with Republicans when their two children had been infants. Since then, she'd poured her heart into raising Leon and Maria and devoted herself to protecting them and preparing them for self-sufficiency in the Grey Zone.

Heath had learnt much of what he knew about the world through her. Now, she played that same role for Jake. She'd always been a wonderful teacher. Yet their bond went much deeper than that.

Margie and her partner had been friends with Heath and Jake's parents when they were young, before they were so cruelly taken away from them all. After the tragedy, Margie had played the biggest role in looking out for them. A stand-in mother, or grandmother.

Jake ran ahead to the front door of Margie's quarters as it opened. She leaned down and greeted him with a hug. He then disappeared into the quarters, no doubt to find Leon and Maria.

'Hey, Marg,' Heath said.

She reached out to Heath and held him close, patting him on the back. 'Is it true what I've heard about Derrick and Hayley?'

He leaned back from her embrace. Her eyes were the palest shade of green, but they seemed even paler as she

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

looked into his eyes, perhaps searching for the answer before he gave it. 'They're over there,' he admitted, 'but I've got hope they'll somehow make it back. There's something different about them.'

Her eyes darted momentarily in their sockets. She nodded, but the movement appeared hesitant and unemphatic.

Maybe she was realising that neither of them could say out loud what the other was really thinking. If she didn't believe him, he couldn't blame her for it.

'Come in,' she said. 'Can I get you something? A drink?'

'We can't stay,' he said. 'With what's happened, we need to figure out our next move.'

Her eyes flitted to the floor and remained there for a moment. 'Will it ever end?'

Occasionally, Heath allowed his thoughts to wander to that everlasting question. If he was honest with himself, he knew that their struggle was perhaps impossible and a perpetual one, or at least one that would see no resolution during his lifetime. 'It will,' he eventually replied. 'I've believed it every day of my life.'

Margie placed her hand on his heart. 'Your mother never gave up hope.'

An overwhelming wave of grief rose within him, threatening to break in his eyes.

'She would be very proud of you,' Margie said. 'Both of you.' Her voice was always warm and gentle, even with its throaty edge, which seemed to match the wisdom of her

manner.

Heath refused to let the wave break. Instead, he hugged Margie once more and set off into the first sleeping room, where he found Jake sitting cross-legged on the floor with Leon and Maria. They had a deck of cards. Some of the cards were laid out facing upwards on the floor, while each of them had two cards facedown next to piles of buttons. The pictures of the jack, the two queens, and the king that were showing were almost completely faded, barely distinguishable from the crumpled cream backgrounds.

For as long as Heath could remember, cards had been popular in Sector 11. He figured it was because they were cheap and because card games had a way of bringing people together. He'd even seen Republican decks before, though he had no idea exactly how those packs had ended up in the Grey Zone, even if the standard assumption was that they'd been smuggled across decades earlier. The Republican cards he'd seen had borne the Republican logo against grey backgrounds. The lines of the pictures had been sharp and polished, like everything else manufactured in the Territories.

The condition of this deck and what was on the cards suggested that it was a relic of the old world.

Margie had some treasures in her quarters, which she kept safe. Heath presumed this deck was part of her collection, handed down to her by her ancestors. Sometimes, he thought there might be more he could learn about the old world from some of the artefacts in her quarters than from

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

anything else out in the Zone. He wished he had more time to spend in here. He wished he had *any* time to spend in here.

‘How are we, kids?’ Heath said.

Leon was twelve, the same age as Jake, and Maria was ten. They shifted their attention from the cards and smiled.

‘Can Jake stay for a bit?’ Maria asked.

Although Jake and Maria had been close growing up, at one stage almost like brother and sister, or cousins, Heath suspected Maria was one of the girls in Jake’s growing group of young female ‘fans’.

‘That’s up to him,’ Heath said.

‘I was just gonna beat his ass,’ Leon said, grinning cheekily at the layout of cards on the floor.

‘Yeah, *right*,’ Jake said. ‘I get you every time in this.’

Heath saw that they were playing poker, a game Margie had taught all of them at one stage or another. He guessed the three children were the youngest poker players in Sector 11, but that was okay when buttons were the only things being wagered.

‘Ha! I always thought you were a funny guy,’ Leon said, responding to Jake’s claim. ‘Didn’t realise *quite* how funny you were.’

‘He *does* beat you all the time,’ Maria chimed in. She flicked her ponytail back and placed her hand on Jake’s shoulder. ‘I know you’re the best.’

‘*Please!*’ Leon exclaimed. ‘We all know why you think that, Maria.’

‘Oh yeah, why?’ she said, crossing her arms. ‘Because he *beats* you all the time?’

‘Because you’ve got a *crush* on him,’ Leon said.

A blush pinked Maria’s cheeks. Her lip trembled, and she jumped up from the floor, disappearing from the room in a hurry.

Leon shrugged his shoulders. Jake giggled. They gave each other a high-five.

‘C’mon boys, she’s younger than you two. You shouldn’t tease her,’ Heath said. ‘One day, Jake, you’ll wish Maria still had a crush on you.’

‘So you *don’t* disagree with him?’ Jake said, lifting his eyebrows. ‘You agree that the magnet in me is at work, yet *again?*’

‘Very funny.’

Margie appeared at the doorway. ‘Did you say something to Maria?’

Leon nodded.

‘Okay,’ Margie said, ‘time for you to clean the counter.’

‘But Mum,’ Leon said, ‘I was just getting ready to whip Jake.’

‘It’ll have to wait. You’ve upset Maria.’

‘I just told the truth.’

‘Truth or not, you know it’s not fair,’ Margie said. ‘You can play poker with Jake another time.’

‘We’ll get out of here, let you conciliate,’ Heath said. ‘C’mon Jake.’

Leon gave Jake another high-five. ‘See you, man.’

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

‘Later,’ Jake said. He hopped up from the floor. ‘Bye Maria!’

They made their way through the main room, to the front of the quarters. Margie held Heath’s gaze and placed her hand on his cheek. ‘Be careful,’ she said.

‘I will. You and the children stay safe. We’ll see you soon.’

Margie gazed down at Jake. ‘Bye, my little man,’ she said, ‘until our next tutor group.’

‘Oh, dude, I wish I didn’t have to go to tutor groups.’

‘Not this again,’ Heath said. He rolled his eyes at Margie.

‘Like, I like you Marg, but sometimes I *forget* you’re also my tutor. Know what I mean?’ Jake said. He scrunched his nose and tipped his head to the side.

Margie laughed, put her arm around Jake and gave him a squeeze.

‘We’ll come visit you again,’ Heath said.

Just as they began to turn away, Maria appeared behind Margie, her cheeks rubescent again. She peeked at Jake from her hiding place behind her mother.

Jake strode forward and kissed the little girl on the cheek as she ducked her face into Margie’s side. She retreated further behind, clearly embarrassed, but then peeked around once more. When her eyes met Jake’s, she smiled. She blew him a kiss.

‘Catch you,’ Heath said.

He and Jake turned and set off back along the stretch.

When the door closed behind them, Heath said, ‘You’re a heartbreaker.’

MICHAEL FRANCIS MCDERMOTT

'Ladies' man,' Jake said. He patted his stomach. 'It's my rig.'

12.45pm

The highway before them was potholed, the blacktop damaged from years of use with no repair. Though the SUV was travelling according to the GPS route, it was taking no account of the poor road conditions, causing the wheels to shudder violently against the cracks.

Loose in her seat once again, bobbing up and down from the bumps, Slinky glanced at the patrol truck following them. Seeing that it too was bouncing over the cavities in the road, she wondered how loose the occupants were. She hoped they weren't too loose.

In this area of Territory 1, so close to Grey Zone Sector 14, the landscape was barren. No citizens resided anywhere nearby. It was a far cry from the luxurious structures and the greenery that flanked Stanley and Cecilia Roberts' house.

Slinky leaned forward to look at exactly where they were and realised that they were only a couple of minutes from the electric fences that served as the Territory's border with G14. With her finger, she traced the bulletproof vest that lay under her uniform — a habit of hers. Her hair was knotted into a bun, and she found herself cupping it with her other palm — another habit.

There was a specific ritual Slinky and her Freedom Fighters followed out here. She supposed her habits were a part of that, even if the others in her FF unit weren't aware

of them. She suspected that they also had their own peculiarities on top of the ones she already knew about.

Hidden habits or no hidden habits, the ritual had to play out.

What had become clear to Slinky was that Stanley Roberts was a self-glorified intellectual. He was a man with all of the privileges of the elite, but one who thought himself too good for the Law and the Republican system that had fostered his prosperity, the security of his family, and the education of his child. He was a man who had willingly jumped into the abyss of insanity and had pulled his wife, and possibly his child, down with him.

Intellectuals were not warriors. They were not heroes. They were weak creatures.

Slinky knew that intellectuals like Stanley Roberts were incapable of lifting a finger in the heat of a battle or to defend something of value. For this reason the bulletproof vest would never have been needed for her to deal with him and his wife. The only reason she continued to wear hers was because of protocol, and because maybe somewhere on a subconscious level she enjoyed her habit of tracing it with her finger.

Slinky gazed out the window again and saw the dirt track that slithered towards the inner and outer fences of the border. The software steered the SUV down the track, winding it down a gradual decline. The dust began clouding around the windows.

In front of her, Agent Kellyway was sitting in the driver's

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

seat. Agent Jones — who always seemed to enjoy getting close to the traitors on these journeys, especially the men — was behind them in the patrol truck, accompanying Stanley and Cecilia, along with Slinky's Republican Guards.

Kellyway brought the tablet in his lap to life. He tapped in the code that would deactivate the electrical current running through the gates ahead. The Agent hadn't spoken a word to her for the entire journey. As was the case whenever they conducted raids or made arrests, there was no need to talk.

Slinky, her Agents and her Guards had been together for a long time. They were a tight unit. She had built up a fierce reputation for all of them. They were already one of the most revered Freedom Fighter units that had ever been assembled.

Slinky knew both Agent Kellyway and Agent Jones very well. What motivated the Agents and excited them helped bind them to each other, to her Guards, and to her. She used their desires to control their loyalty, their utter obedience. It was a strategy she'd come to trust: incentivise, motivate, reward, control.

A leader of hunters needed to know how to control the pack.

As a result, they all knew what they were going to do. The need for comment or instruction had been made obsolete a long time ago. Instead, they were governed by their ritual.

As the SUV passed through the inner fence, into no-man's land, Slinky surveyed the scene beyond for savages. This part of G14 was so barren and the barbarians in it so unhuman

that not even the rebel groups of the Grey Zone ventured out this way. It was common knowledge that some of the sociopaths were cannibals who survived on hunting one another when there wasn't enough food to go around.

Out here, that was often the case.

Because of the savages, Slinky and her FF unit needed to remain vigilant, but the reality was that they were unlikely to be disturbed. Their weaponry was too advanced and intimidating and their group too large for lone or coupled freaks.

The SUV rolled forward and reached the open gate of the outer fence. As usual, the driverless system deactivated once they crossed into the Grey Zone. Kellyway took control of the wheel and accelerated into the land of the savages — the lawless world.

For a long while he drove in a relatively straight line over the barren earth, before eventually swinging the SUV leftwards. He brought it to a stop. The patrol vehicle moved past the SUV and swung around to face it.

Slinky looked through the window on her right. The dusty earth was spotted with occasional desert plants, drenched in harsh sunlight. The ground was burnt and damaged, the earth infertile. It was what defined this area. Very few could survive here.

A short distance away, the earth fell into a gorge, the floor of which lay at least forty metres below. Boulders waited at the bottom. Slinky didn't know what was past that. She didn't care.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

She watched as Jones and the RGs pulled Stanley and Cecilia Roberts from the truck, tossing them onto the ground. The dust billowed and then slowly settled around them. When it eventually cleared, Slinky saw Stanley's blackened eyes and the fresh blood seeping from his nose. Evidently, Jones had struck him a few times. A quick look at Cecilia confirmed she had not escaped attention either. A striking gash marred her bottom lip.

As Slinky stepped out of the SUV to join her Freedom Fighters, the heat hit her like a pan in the face. She rolled her head up and greeted the sunlight. The desperate sobs of the traitors sent flashes of prickles over her flesh. Her heart pattered against the bulletproof vest, and her breasts seemed to swell.

Slinky liked to control the hunt at all times. But she couldn't control or stop her body's reaction. She wouldn't want to, anyway.

Even as the swelling inside her reached its crescendo, she kept it camouflaged from her FF unit. No, she couldn't control what went on within her, but she could control what she revealed to others. Despite the euphoria washing through her, her exterior was as calm as the wind was dead.

She had learnt to master her environment. This, more than any other, was her environment.

She traced the bulletproof vest and cupped her hair bun again. She reached back into the SUV and retrieved the evidence that had brought Stanley and Cecilia Roberts into her custody.

Agents Kellyway and Jones stepped back to give Slinky room. Two of the RGs remained close, standing guard with them. The other two branched out slightly left and right, watching the brink of the gorge and the plain in the other direction, alert for the savages, just in case.

Slinky moved towards Stanley and Cecilia, who were on their backsides, knees raised in front of them, huddled together with their hands still cuffed behind their backs, perhaps futilely reaching for one another. The spots of blood on the dirt below them stained the earth.

Slinky drew in a great breath when she came within a few paces. 'Smells like roses,' she said, though she knew she'd said it under her breath and that it was unlikely they had heard her despite how close she was. She took another step in their direction, and Cecilia suddenly split the air with a scream.

Slinky always found the reactions fascinating. This time would be like all of the other times, yet different.

For a couple of minutes she paced about them, listening to their sobs, their wails, waiting for Cecilia's recurring scream, which came and went in almost perfectly even intervals.

Eventually, Slinky said, 'Do you know how many times I've been here?' She paused and stopped pacing. They quietened for a moment. She liked it when they listened. 'Too many, I've lost count.' But she hadn't. She knew *exactly* how many times she'd been here. Her record spoke for itself.

She glanced down at the book she was clutching — the

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

evidence. 'I don't *always* have this book with me, but sometimes, I do,' she said. 'Actually, come to think of it, the last time I was here, I had an unusual experience. Do you know what the last two traitors did when I had them here?' She gazed into Stanley's eyes, which opened wide and red. 'They weren't sobbing, they weren't screaming,' she said to him, throwing her eyes towards Cecilia, 'they weren't scared. They were calm. Smiling. *Content*.'

She didn't expect a response, but she waited. She noticed Kellyway shifting on his feet. She glanced at Jones on the other side of the circle. He seemed edgy too. Both of them had to be buzzing inside like she was, but inferior in the art of disguise.

'Incredible, isn't it?' Slinky said. 'That two people could be as aware of their imminent ends as you are ... yet relaxed, almost *comfortable*.'

Cecilia evidently took a couple of seconds to realise what Slinky had meant by the word, 'ends', because the expression on her face contorted and then seemed to dissolve entirely, before she screamed louder than all of the other times combined. By the end of it, the volume and pitch was so splitting it was surely injurious to all creatures, whether or not they had ears.

Slinky crouched down into a squat, resting her forearms on her thighs. She noticed blood was still dribbling out of the gash in Cecilia's lip. 'They hardly said anything to me, these two ... fuckers.' Slinky felt a bead of sweat drop from her brow.

In truth, she didn't like to think of the couple she was referring to, let alone talk of them. They had descended so far into the realm of insanity that she hadn't been able to drive any fear into them at all. The natural survival instinct inherent in almost all biological animals had been non-existent in them.

It had infuriated her.

'Of the few things they did say, something that the woman said, for some reason, really stuck with me.' Slinky noticed Stanley cock his head, just a little, as if awaiting the revelation. She anchored her stare to him. 'Do you want to know what she said?'

Stanley didn't respond, didn't even twitch this time, but Slinky knew she had his attention. She saw it in his eyes.

'The woman said, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me."'

Stanley's pupils jerked.

Slinky knew the scientist recognised the quotation. She allowed herself a small smile.

'I just couldn't get it out of my head,' she continued. 'I knew it had to be in this stupid book, *somewhere*, but I had no fucking clue where.' She waved her hand at them, as if to shoo something away. 'It was incredibly frustrating.' She wiped her brow. It was becoming moister by the second. She ran her hand up through the tight strands of her hair towards her bun, and cupped it yet again.

She stood up. She looked down at the Holy Bible in her

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

other hand and opened it. The text was very faint, almost unreadable, and she felt the fragility of the rotten pages as they parted. She got to the right page and ran the tips of her fingers over the script, caressing the faded font, then moved them over the handwritten word marked on the page:

ETERNITY

Once she had traced every letter of the handwritten word, she read aloud from the verse she had opened. 'Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me. Psalm twenty-three, verse four.'

A creature rushed from one of the desert shrubs nearby, startling one of the RGs, but Slinky didn't move an inch, and neither did her prisoners.

'Do you want to know how I know where to find that verse?' Slinky said to Stanley and Cecilia.

Their faces were eerily white. The wife wasn't screaming anymore. She wasn't even whimpering. She was still.

'I *read* the book,' Slinky revealed. 'I read the book until I found it.'

In the corners of her vision, she saw Kellyway and Jones turn their heads sharply towards her. She had expected this reaction, but she was trusting her judgement, and trusting that she had built enough loyalty to render these reactions temporary.

The Law allowed no indulgence whatsoever in religious

practices, no entrance into the domain of insanity, not even for someone of Slinky's stature and ranking. She knew that if her superiors ever discovered her breach, it wouldn't matter how unwaveringly ruthless she had been in carrying out her purpose or how viciously against religion she was. They would not forgive her.

Knowing what religious artefacts were was one thing. But delving into them in your own time — that was a different thing altogether.

Slinky had faith in her FF unit. They bent the rules already, in a number of ways, for their benefit and for the greater good. Her purpose was to hunt the insane. She had instilled this purpose into Kellyway, Jones and her four RGs. She didn't doubt the loyalty of her men. It was her leadership that granted them the opportunities to do the things their minds desired. She *controlled* them.

Her pack.

'When I found it, I didn't stop,' Slinky continued. 'I kept reading. I kept reading until I *memorised* it. Every phrase and every verse. I know this fucking thing inside out.'

As sharply as Jones and Kellyway had turned their attention towards her, she felt them turn back towards Stanley and Cecilia. Whatever questions her men had, they were clearly willing to wait to ask them, because their animalistic urges were taking over. She could already sense their impatience, their need for this part of the ritual to end and for the next phase to begin.

Slinky glanced from the book to her prisoners once more.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

The colour was still drained from their faces and their bodies were still trembling, the sheens of sweat drenching their bodies like oil. Evidently, Psalm 23:4 did not do for them what it had done for the fearless, utterly insane couple she had dealt with the last time she'd been here with this book.

'Do you know what I learnt from memorising this thing?' She didn't expect either Stanley or Cecilia to offer a reply, even if one formed in their minds. Nonetheless, she waited until she was certain the only response they could muster was silence. 'Nothing,' she revealed. 'Absolutely nothing.'

Slinky turned the fragile pages once again. She was amused to find a handwritten note of either Stanley's or Cecilia's making on almost every page.

'Am I enlightened?' she said. 'Have I found a deeper meaning to my existence? Am I any more curious about a higher power, about some invisible almighty force, about a *god*, as you would call it?'

When Slinky came to the phrase she wanted to read next, she heard Kellyway's exasperated breaths, his huffing. She could tell that the Agent was eager to pounce, but she knew he wouldn't dare approach the prisoners until she had finished and approved it. 'In fact, that's not quite right. I did learn one thing,' she said. 'I learnt that in a book such as this, one can find justification for just about *anything*. It's a licence to break laws; it's a ticket to insanity. It could only *ever* breed irrationality. When someone can justify anything through a creed written up by people with not even a tiny portion of the knowledge we have today, the only possible

result is madness.’

Slinky heard the buzzing of a fly as it circled her, but instead of landing, it flew on, as though it knew that to land would be to go against the natural order of things. ‘Do you know what we have on the other side of those fences back there?’ she said. ‘The Law. Order. Do you know what exists on this side? Nothing. No law, no order. *That* is why you are here.’

Stanley Roberts leaned forward slightly. His face was twisted, thoroughly mangled by dread. He looked at Slinky through his red, swollen eyes. ‘Please, it was me, Cecilia is innocent—’

Slinky raised her hand. It was all that was required. The sobs that replaced his voice continued the fitting soundtrack. She regarded the next rotten page she had opened, and read from 2 Samuel 12 to them: ‘Thus says the Lord, “Behold, I will raise up evil against you out of your own house; and I will take your wives before your eyes, and give them to your neighbour, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun.”’

Slinky closed the book. She pulled from the pocket of her uniform a small bottle of oil she had brought with her, and from the other pocket a lighter. She poured the oil on the book, let the flame catch. The book fell to the ground in a beautiful collage of bright blue and yellow, sizzling hotter than the heat surrounding it. The foulness of the charcoaling pages filled the air — a rotten odour. She inhaled the scent. The heat of the burning book filled her more than the sun.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

She sucked in the fumes a second time.

When the book was just a block of charcoal, the flames simmering, she became aware of the people around her once more. Her Agents, her Guards — her loyal FF unit. Her prisoners.

Kellyway was grunting, walking back and forth. Jones too was starting to get more agitated, knowing his turn was closer.

Slinky decided she would not keep them waiting any longer. The next part of the ritual had to begin. 'If it's good enough for "God", it's good enough for me,' she said. She looked at Kellyway and nodded.

Kellyway bounded forward towards Cecilia, snorting and groaning, his human qualities left behind. Seeing him coming, Cecilia attempted to scamper away as her husband tried to shield her, but Kellyway was a bull. The Agent flicked Stanley away with one hand, and he crashed onto the dust.

A moment later, one of the RGs approached the scientist and restrained him as he wriggled desperately against the ground, crying out, 'No! NO! NOOO! NOOOOOO!' When Stanley's hysterics grew to insane levels, no doubt replicating the insanity of his mind, the RG leaned on him with his knees, using his bodyweight to pin him facedown, squashing the resurgent resistance.

Cecilia's scampers were in vain. Cuffed, off balance, she fell over herself just as Kellyway got to her.

Slinky began circling the pair at a distance, her eyes locked on the explicit scene. As Kellyway did what she'd

permitted him to do, the seconds rolled into minutes, and the moans came.

Hearing this, Slinky sharpened her gaze and stole a look at Cecilia's face. The wife's head was raised with the chin up, as if she was trying to look away from the enormous Agent on top of her; the locks of her black hair were saturated in sweat and tears. The true nature of her moans became immediately obvious in the image and in her coiled, tortured expression — they were moans of agony.

Slinky continued circling, her heart drumming rapidly, in tune with the remarkable speed and strength of the movements before her. While she wasn't aroused and had never been interested in sexual activity herself — her intact hymen was testament to that — she found these scenes remarkably raw, uniquely stimulating on a visual level.

With Kellyway grunting his way towards the end, Jones hovered close to Stanley, who was still pinned to the dirt by the RG. Slinky knew that her second Agent wouldn't start until Kellyway's role in the ritual was over, but he was primed to pounce.

Kellyway suddenly cried out. Cecilia's heel dug into his back as she tried to kick him away, but she was unable to find the angle. The Agent cried out again, and a few seconds later it was clear that he was finished. The movements stopped amid an encore chorus of grunting and snorting. Eventually, when all was quieter, the Freedom Fighter stood up, hawked back mucus and released it on Cecilia. Anguish had her face in a raw clench. She didn't react to the gob.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

Slinky's gaze travelled to Stanley Roberts. The RG had released him. He lay on his side, making no sound — defeated.

As Kellyway turned around, the nearest RG walked towards Cecilia. Stanley suddenly appeared to see what was in the RG's hand and let out a deathly scream, one that quickly grew into a monster of a noise that rivalled his wife's earlier howl.

Cecilia saw the Guard when he reached her. She closed her eyes. The creases on her face relaxed.

Perhaps in that moment she reverted back to her religious indulgence, hoping that the god she had chosen to believe in would save her from this fate, or just as disturbingly, believing the almighty power would greet her on the other side.

Slinky was annoyed by this thought, this lingering question, but it was too late for enquiries, and she would have to live with never knowing. It was a little loss she found difficult to swallow.

Yet the ultimate outcome was already written, the overall victory hers. The RG pressed the muzzle of his 9mm pistol close to Cecilia's temple.

Crack!

Fire spurted from the muzzle, and parts of the brain flew from the skull, splattering the ground around the head. The suddenly lifeless shape moulded with the dust.

Pleased, Slinky looked at Stanley. He had his mouth open as though he was trying to scream again. Nets of saliva

poured from the opening; an expression of potent horror. He had shrunk into the dirt of the desert like his dead wife, and his face was whiter than snow, an impossible colour, as if detached from the world.

Jones rushed forward towards the second prisoner, no less aggressive than Kellyway.

Slinky had discovered long ago that her Freedom Fighters were unique with different inclinations, and she made sure that they received their due reward out here in the land of the savages: whatever it was they desired. The strategy of loyalty, control, was all-encompassing.

Of course, with Slinky's approval, they'd been bending the rules for a while. This wasn't to defy the General Assembly and the Father. But the truth was brutal: the Law of the Republic could only apply *in* the Republic. What happened out here was *her* business, *her* way. She had a team to lead. Hunting to do. She wanted her team to be as ruthless and as efficient as it could be.

As a young woman, Slinky had discovered that everyone held a monster inside of them, however far below the surface. Even if it was inactive, like a dormant virus, it often didn't take much to dig down to where it was buried and activate it. A dark desire. A lack of ramifications for actions. The absence of potential punishment. It made no difference whether someone was a man or a woman, young or old, straight or gay.

Slinky had figured a long while back that she could gain a lot by bringing the monsters in Kellyway and Jones out of

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

hiding, and feeding them. Besides, incentives were a great way to motivate. That was the simple part of it.

As long as their purpose was still at the forefront, Slinky saw no issue with their ritual. After all, the official punishment for religious dissent — deportation to Sector 14 of the Grey Zone — was the equivalent of a death sentence. Everyone knew that. If they left any prisoners alive, those prisoners would be attacked by the savages that were resident here. Therefore, it was no doubt actually *better* for the prisoners this way. Once the ritual was over, the Guards always executed them quickly.

As Jones had his turn with Stanley Roberts, Slinky watched once again. The brutality of the scene visually stimulated her a second time, mesmerising her no less than the heterosexual encounter that had preceded it. She watched the monster in Jones do what it wanted with the broken, unresponsive scientist.

When it was over, Jones spat on Stanley like Kellyway had done with Cecilia. The second RG in the circle approached. To the end, Stanley lay with his eyes closed, as still as the air around them, gone from this existence long before the Guard pulled the trigger.

When both the deportees were dead, the RGs carried the bodies to the gorge and threw them over the brink, where savages were undoubtedly waiting below to feast on the remains. Like the ones that had been tossed into the gorge before, the corpses would most likely become food. Once they'd been consumed, there would be hardly any trace of

them left.

Slinky smiled. She wanted all religious traitors obliterated — made *invisible*. Like they had never existed.

Soon enough, the citizens in the Roberts' neighbourhood would notice that the family had not returned. The neighbours would have suspicions about the crimes they had committed, and their disappearance would once again serve as a stern warning to others.

When Slinky moved back in the direction of the SUV, her attention fell again on the block of charcoal that was still sizzling and smoking in the heat. She found it completely inconceivable that anyone could put their faith in a book like this one. So outdated. The stories in it so ridiculous. The commandments and the lessons so contradictory. She was quickly reminded of how there truly was no logic when it came to the insane.

And that was the most dangerous fact of them all.

Thinking about this, her mind turned to the boy with the big green eyes.

Stanley and Cecilia's minor was in good care. Whether Kurt Roberts — thirteen years old — could be saved would be determined in due course.

Had he been a passive observer of his parents' religious activities? Or had he been more active, forming his own views and beliefs, which had become a part of who he was?

Time would tell. Slinky would get to the bottom of it. It was her job.

As the RGs approached the truck, Agent Kellyway broke

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

into a jog and came up beside her. ‘Ma’am,’ he said, ‘did you really read ... that thing?’

Slinky stopped and spun towards him. She noticed Jones in her peripheral vision casting them a glance, listening. ‘I do what I need to as part of my duty. It is not your place to question that,’ she said.

‘No, ma’am,’ Kellyway said. His eyes fell towards the ground.

Slinky quickly glanced at the truck — the patrol vehicle — and at the logo painted on the side. She knew enough to know that the Republican logo was not an original one. She had seen it on the cover of the Holy Bible on a number of occasions. She’d been taught nothing about it when she’d joined the Freedom Fighters. She didn’t know what other FF members made of the cross when they found it on religious material. In her experience, nobody had ever dared to ask or comment.

Slinky would never have known the connection if she hadn’t read the Bible. From doing so, she’d learnt that the cross, according to the Bible, had been a symbol of suffering for the good of humankind — of sacrifice, of forgiveness and redemption.

Today, it was the key feature on the Republican flag and was displayed on Republican assets, patrol vehicles included, and on the grey uniforms of Republican Agents, to serve as a reminder of the pain and destruction religion brought to the world during the Religious War and across the millenniums before it.

The cross that supposedly was meant to save humankind had almost destroyed it.

For a moment, Slinky contemplated drawing her pistol. Firing a round into Kellyway's skull would have been the most clinical way of dealing with his challenge. But she liked him and his work — she had sculpted *all* the members of her team into efficient components. That sculpting had taken time. It wasn't easy leading the most effective hunting unit of the FF. She believed she had been doing that better than ever before. The loss of Kellyway would be an enormous step backwards.

Then a disturbing thought suddenly sprang into her mind.

If Kellyway was a danger, what was to say the others weren't? They all shared the same knowledge of Slinky's breach. Just because they hadn't mentioned it, didn't mean they wouldn't report her. On that logic, she would have to kill them all. She couldn't do that. At least not right now.

But she also couldn't ignore Kellyway's probing question. She couldn't forget it. She decided that, whatever happened, she would need to keep a close eye on him.

She would need to keep a close eye on all of them.

1.15pm

‘But the West *had* a lot,’ Timothy Dawkins said. ‘For all its flaws, it seems like the old world achieved so much. Were they not *glad* for what they had?’

‘Never underestimate the importance of purpose, Timothy,’ Aurelius said. ‘Without purpose, people are in grave danger.’

The gravity of what the Tutor was saying simmered in his eyes. It struck Timothy that Aurelius’ smile wasn’t the only thing that went sideways. His frown went that way, too.

‘There’s nothing more powerful to set someone on the course of a purposeless life than living in a world that is all about the *individual*,’ Aurelius said, ‘like it was in the democracies of the old world.’

‘They abandoned their communities,’ Timothy said, knowing where his Tutor was going with the lesson.

‘Very good,’ Aurelius said. ‘The individualism mantra *destroyed* traditional communities. What’s significant to realise here is that individualistic societies divide people. The promotion of unity gives way to the principle of diversity. And what’s one of the key features of diversity?’

‘Differences,’ Timothy answered. He locked gazes with his Tutor. The dark eyes seemed buried, their position too deep to be real, like an illusion.

‘In the old world,’ Aurelius furthered, ‘suddenly to be

fearful of these differences was ignorant, backward and shameful, despite the fact that wars had been fought over such differences across *thousands* of years — and were continuing to that day. There was hardly one shred of evidence to suggest a civilisation could exist under such a framework for longer than a generation or two without some major confrontation occurring.'

'It was another weakness of democracy,' Timothy said, picking up on Aurelius' point.

'Democracy breeds what? What's the word?' Aurelius said.

'Um,' Timothy replied. Frustrated with himself for not thinking of it right away, he tapped his temples.

'Naiveté,' Aurelius said.

Timothy shook his head. It had been on the tip of his tongue.

'The worst thing of all was that there was lots of evidence to suggest democracy was faltering, and the people were stumbling gravely in disillusionment. In the desperation of the time, the first seeds of chaos were flowering. However, it wasn't actually the first occasion that something like this had happened in this kind of environment. Democracy had already failed many times before throughout history. For example, Ancient Rome was the democratic Roman Republic *before* it became the Roman Empire.' Aurelius brought up an image on the monitor of his laptop.

When Timothy realised it had to be from the old world, he leaned closer. It was a photograph of a man slipping a

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

folded sheet of paper into the slit of a box, smiling.

The Tutor continued, pointing at the photograph. 'Moreover, democracy allowed the removal of leaders when the group of individuals didn't like them.'

Timothy squinted at the picture. 'But how did they decide whether they liked them or not?'

'The theory was that voters would be educated and make informed decisions.'

'The *theory*?' Timothy questioned.

'Yes, the theory. The *reality* was that the basis of people's decisions when voting became quite superficial in comparison to the issues facing their societies. Ironically, authoritarian powers, especially absolutist states, were meant to focus on the identities and personalities of their rulers. Instead, it was in the democracies where people became obsessed with the identities and personalities of their leaders, even when such people were only ruling temporarily. Can you see the problem here?'

Timothy nodded.

'The religious East focused on adhering to their religion, strengthening their religious communities; the rising authoritarian powers geared their nations up for the future and for what they believed would be their time at the top. The declining democracies, on the other hand, bickered over and lambasted their leaders.'

'It was an *obvious* thing,' Timothy said, genuinely mystified by the whole sorry catastrophe. 'When people are out of touch with what's important, how can they expect to

choose leaders who will tackle those important things?’

‘A very worthwhile question,’ the Tutor replied. ‘Politicians used up too many resources and too much energy on their own campaigns, responding to attacks on their *personalities*, to spend any real time attending to the greater good, even if they had recognised it. Every component of democracy started to malfunction. Let’s look at the press.’

‘The nature of the free press in this environment meant their gazettes were full of only relentless criticism and sensationalist headlines,’ Timothy said. He was pretty sure he’d repeated that sentence word-for-word from what he’d read in the chapter on the Republicanet.

‘In the end, only the shallowest of motives drove votes,’ Aurelius said. ‘How can a society make important decisions to protect itself in those circumstances?’

Timothy giggled. The entire thing was kind of absurd.

‘If a leader tried to do the right thing, they were thrown out.’ Aurelius threw his hands up in the air. ‘If your mother tried to do the right thing by you, Timothy, and you didn’t like it, imagine if you could throw her out of the house!’

Now Timothy laughed wildly. He couldn’t truly picture the scene. He said between chuckles, ‘I think that even if I did that, I would probably need to let Mama back in the next day. Otherwise I’d starve!’

‘You laugh, but the unfunny thing is that in the West of the old world, in the democracies, sometimes this actually happened! After tossing their leaders out, they would vote

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

the same ones back in! How inefficient is that!’

Timothy knew that everything they were discussing was very serious, but this was enough to tip him over the edge. He almost fell off his chair in hysterics. When he calmed down, he steadied himself. ‘So,’ he said, ‘in a way, democracy *self*-destroyed.’

‘Well done, Timothy. The key thing the West didn’t acknowledge was that it wasn’t *democracy* that had brought about prosperity. It was capitalism, free markets and trade.’

‘It was their economic system,’ Timothy said. He didn’t know as much about economics as he did about history, but he was learning.

‘This became glaringly obvious in the twenty-first century as the authoritarian powers experienced economic growth at a far quicker rate than what had been achieved in the democracies in the previous decades. Why?’

This one was obvious. Again, Timothy didn’t hesitate. ‘Democracy slowed down leaders when it came to decision-making.’

‘Excellent work,’ Aurelius said.

Timothy noticed his chest puffing out a little beneath him as a sense of pride swelled within. He liked being commended.

‘There was too much participation and too many approvals that were required to get things done,’ Aurelius explained. ‘And this was why it took them so long — *too* long — to deal with a crisis.’

‘And this was why they refused to admit that one of the

crises—’

‘*Crises,*’ Aurelius said, cutting him off.

Timothy realised his mistake. ‘Sorry,’ he said, feeling his cheeks go a little hot. He had another go at it. ‘This was why they refused to admit that one of the *crises* was looking more and more like a brewing war. Terrorism started it.’

Aurelius nodded. ‘When the thing they called “terrorism” grew in frequency and impact, they didn’t have the strong leadership required to make the tough decisions. Attacks got worse — from both sides of the ledger — and the best they could do was *wish* it away, pledge to *get better*. Well, saying you are going to get better at something doesn’t mean you are actually getting better at it. You need to look at the facts. And the facts were crystal clear.’

‘Things were getting *worse*, not better,’ Timothy said. ‘Wishing wasn’t going to make one little difference.’

‘They were too frightened of the ramifications to re-examine their principles, too allergic to adaptation. They believed in *individual freedom*, Timothy. They believed in their core principles, and they actually valued these principles more than they valued the security of their people, even when the practical application of those principles became meaningless in the environment they found themselves in. They believed in their core principles more than they believed in the stability of their own civilisation. What should the first job of any government be?’

Timothy thought for a moment. He was pretty sure this one hadn’t been spelled out in the chapter. All of a sudden

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

the Grey Zone spun disturbingly into his mind. His tongue went heavy. 'The safety and security of its citizens,' he eventually said when he got control again.

'Exactly. Yet it was the West's obsession with its principles that jeopardised this very first responsibility. Even more bizarre was how they tried to force their principles on *other* parts of the world; to force *democracy* on others. And then they sat back, bewildered, whenever democracies in highly religious parts of the world voted in religious movements; movements that sometimes campaigned on principles that were in direct conflict with the West's. Should it have been a surprise that societies built on religion voted in highly religious groups when they got the chance?'

'So there were two key similarities between the West and East, but ones which proved deadly,' Timothy suggested.

'Go on,' Aurelius said, tilting his head.

'The people of the East put religion above everything else, and the people of the West put their principles above everything else. The East cried: *we can't go against our religion; what are we if we do that?* And the West cried: *we can't go against our principles; what are we if we do that?*'

Aurelius pouted his lips. 'I hadn't thought about it that way before, Timothy. Very insightful, indeed.' He nodded, clearly impressed, and Timothy's heart seemed to beat stronger.

Timothy thought of the Grey Zone again. A cold current shuddered up his spine. 'I read something in the materials,' he eventually said, 'something that scared me.'

‘What was it?’

Timothy gulped. ‘Is it true that some people in the West protested against their governments, campaigning for foreign people to come into their society to live as citizens?’

‘Yes,’ Aurelius said. His face grew solemn. ‘Protests such as this were fuelled by the West’s principles. Equality. Diversity. Opportunity for all. They remained arrogantly devoted to the so-called universality of these principles, even as other parts of the world devastatingly crushed some of them in their own societies.’ The Tutor paused and stroked his chin. ‘As we know, every civilisation and empire that came before the West of the twenty-first century had its weaknesses, things that led to its downfall. But, in reality, democracy was a suicidal machine, as you so eloquently identified earlier. How can someone say that their own system and principles are the best in the world, and at the same time welcome ideas and beliefs that are completely at odds with this assertion into their society?’

Timothy cocked his head. ‘They can’t,’ he said simply.

Aurelius nodded again. ‘If we look at the long history of democracies in the world, across thousands of years — not *just* the twenty-first century — we see that they were simply too vulnerable. Small democracies were vulnerable to attack from beyond. Large democracies suffered badly from the consequences of division and became vulnerable to attack from within. What do we remember about Ancient Rome?’

Timothy said, ‘As Ancient Rome got bigger, it did away with democracy to better deal with its territory and

population.'

'That's right. It shifted from democracy to authoritarian rule for a *reason*, not just *because*. Despite what the West of the old world would have had you believe, democracy had never been the *only* popular system of government to exist in the world. Authoritarian rule had also been popular at various times. Why?'

'It's efficient,' Timothy said confidently.

'Yes, but it also demands something ...'

'Unity!'

'Very good. And what's the key feature of unity?'

'People stick together,' Timothy said.

'So, we have to ask: what has been more valuable for most civilisations across the course of history — democracy, or unity?'

'Without unity, many democracies of the old world may have collapsed or been conquered earlier,' Timothy said, remembering what he'd learnt.

'Precisely. At the best of times, democracy without unity was inadequate. At the worst of times, it was disastrous. It provided the perfect opportunity for people to attack it from *within*.'

'Attacks from beyond and attacks from within,' Timothy said, mulling over the two types. He abruptly thought of something. 'So, we protect our borders to stop people in the Grey Zone attacking us from beyond ... But how do we stop people attacking us from within?'

'Well ...'

‘Unity,’ Timothy interrupted, answering his own question and already thinking he was a bit foolish for asking it without attempting to draw the conclusion first. ‘We stay united.’

‘Yes. But what else?’

Timothy frowned, surprised that he hadn’t nailed it. ‘Hmm. Wait! I think I’ve got it,’ he said excitedly, even though the subject matter was giving him the chills. ‘We *also* protect our borders to keep people who aren’t like us out, to stop them from getting *in*, to stop them *attacking* us from within.’

Aurelius shot a sharp gaze at him. ‘The Republic — like any civilisation — has its threats. Protecting the borders is crucial when it comes to that number one responsibility: the safety and security of the citizens. Without the borders, without the fences and the Republican Guards who are dedicated to our cause, the Republic would be at risk of repeating the mistakes made in the old world. Allowing people into our lands who don’t share and honour our values would eventually compromise the authority of the Father. The sovereignty of the General Assembly would be at risk. The sanctity of the Law would be violated. Division and disorder would inevitably result. What would we have then?’

The tiny blonde hairs on Timothy’s arms stiffened. Another chill crawled over his bones, even though it was warm in the study.

‘What would we have then?’ Aurelius repeated.

‘Chaos,’ Timothy said.

‘*Chaos*,’ the Tutor replayed, lingering on the last part.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

Timothy shivered and his stomach twisted.

‘Anarchy sickens society. Tell me, Timothy, what’s the first sign that a society is deteriorating and chaos is taking hold?’

Timothy took a deep breath. ‘There’s no order,’ he answered boldly.

‘A weakening of order and disrespect for rules and authority. What else?’

‘You don’t know what’s real and what’s not,’ Timothy said, pleased with himself for thinking on the spot.

‘There’s a better word,’ his Tutor insisted.

Timothy waited as different words revolved in his mind, confident that the right one would spin out at some point. ‘Truth!’ he cried. ‘You don’t know what’s true and what’s not.’

Aurelius smiled. ‘Contempt for and a rejection of the truth. Very good. Anything else?’

‘Hmm.’ Timothy felt himself frowning again. The fact was that the whole topic was scaring him more than a little, even if there was a part of him that was excited to discuss it. ‘Kids don’t care about learning the truth anymore.’

‘That’s correct, but even worse, younger people lose their enthusiasm for learning *in general*. This often goes hand in hand with a diminishing work ethic in older people. Children don’t want to learn and adults don’t want to work. What’s the last piece of this puzzle?’

‘Greed!’ Timothy answered. He knew that one.

‘An obsession with individual indulgence,’ Aurelius said,

confirming it. ‘What we need to understand is that all of these developments usually occur beneath the more obvious trends of rising crime waves, drug and alcohol use, and a breakdown in social cohesion.’ The Tutor held up his hand and began lifting his fingers one at a time as he spoke. ‘Division, hatred, violence, a broken chain of values, and eventually, war. Unlike the West of the old world, we must do what’s necessary to ensure we never blindly head down that broken road. We must protect ourselves from what happened to the rest of the world. If we don’t, we will end up a wasteland, like everywhere else. The Republic is the only sophisticated human society that lives on. It *must* be guarded.’

‘The Territories,’ Timothy said, nodding.

‘We’re the only civilisation that’s left,’ Aurelius said. ‘We bear the burden of maintaining this new world and learning from the old world, without destroying what’s still valuable. The old world’s discoveries. Its history. Its brilliance. Its terrible mistakes.’

‘What must we do?’ Timothy asked.

‘Preserve our way of life, protect our civilisation,’ Aurelius said. ‘The old world has perished, and we are all that’s left.’ The Tutor held his fist to the Republican logo shielding his heart. ‘It’s simple — in the name of the Father — we *must* survive.’

2.02pm

On face value this stretch was just like all of the others. Whether factories or quarters, the structures were surrounded by dirt and dust, occasional collections of rubble, waste here and there, smearing their world in grey — a hue that underlay everything and even dulled the columns of sunlight.

Heath had always speculated that the constant hue in the Grey Zone was responsible for the official name, but in truth he didn't know where or when the name had originated.

He guessed that you just grew up accepting the place you came from for what it was.

The building that housed the entrance to Bunker 11 was indistinguishable from the other quarters of G11. It was home to an elderly couple with scores to settle and nothing to lose.

In it, Geoffrey and Mary lived in their quarters above ground while Vincent's faction organised and coordinated its operations from below. The couple usually said little except to ask how missions had gone and what progress had been made against their oppressors. Heath knew that they would do anything to bring the Republic down, even if it meant sacrificing themselves. The loss of their children still burnt within them. Every time he saw them, the rage of the fire in their eyes was just as fierce as on the previous occasion.

As Heath shepherded Jake along the stretch, they didn't return to their chitchat about soccer or Jake's rig-admirers. The atmosphere was always tense around their base, but there seemed to be an extra thickness in the air after what had happened overnight. There were only a handful of people living in the quarters of this immediate precinct who weren't directly part of the rebel movement and didn't participate in operations or contribute to the resistance to some degree.

Vincent's faction had the area heavily guarded.

The buildings flanking the stretch were three levels high. The stretch itself was a little over one hundred metres long, with four crossroads branching off at various intervals on both sides. The end of it ran into a T-junction. Geoffrey and Mary's home was in the building that preceded the junction on the left-hand side, with the entrance around the corner.

A quarter of the way along, Heath looked to his right.

Diesel and Tom were dressed in their usual getup — shorts and singlets, dwarfing the chairs they often sat on, which somehow never collapsed. They were both tall, broad-shouldered, and heavily muscled from hours spent lifting in their quarters, where they'd set up various ways of lifting items of weight using different parts of the body. 'A *gym*,' they'd called it.

At a glance, there was nothing to suggest Diesel and Tom were part of the rebel movement, but they normally had their AK-47s concealed just inside the doorway behind them, and various other weapons and ammunition hidden

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

throughout the rooms. Their job was to help guard this stretch on a daily basis.

Heath had done a few sessions with Diesel and Tom in their gym in the past, but they'd made him feel inadequate, and when they'd turned down a challenge of a running race so that he could even the score and massage his self-esteem back into place, he'd sworn himself off the lifting sessions for good.

Heath nodded at them. They nodded back, but they fidgeted in their seats and appeared to be on edge, as if any reprieve in tension would break the fragile glue that held this place together.

Setbacks seemed to have that effect on everyone. Diesel and Tom's obvious unease was a reminder that despite the progress, none of them were free; none of them were immune to the power and reach of the Republic.

That reach had gotten to Derrick and Hayley.

Further along, Rose was sitting in a chair at the foot of another section of quarters on the left-hand side. She lifted the steel mug to her lips, took a sip, and seemed to sense Heath and Jake's presence. She waved and Jake waved back, even though the gesture would go unseen.

Rose was ninety-three years old, most likely the oldest person in G11. She'd been rendered blind in a violent raid conducted by the Republicans thirty years ago. Despite losing her sight, the biggest loss she'd experienced had been the loss of her partner in that same raid. Prior to that, Dennis had been with her for fifty years, from the time they'd been

teenagers. Heath had heard the stories of how their love had originally endured the tribulations and the tyranny over the decades. Like so many others in the Grey Zone, Rose's world as she'd known it had changed forever at the hands of the Republic in one day.

Living in her quarters with her, Katrina and her twin sister, Christine, attended to Rose's needs. They were Heath's age. He'd only come to know them in the last year or so. After growing up in Sector 9 without parents, the twins had migrated to Sector 11 when they'd become motivated to make more of a difference.

In G11 the rebel movement was at its strongest. And so here the sisters were.

Katrina took Rose's mug from her and kissed her on the cheek. The old lady patted her on the hand. No doubt, Katrina would retreat back into the quarters with the mug — within reach of her AK-47, which Heath knew would be stashed close.

Ahead, at the very end of the stretch, six of Vincent's men were at a table playing cards at the foot of the building that framed the top of the T-junction. Like Diesel and Tom, they lived in the precinct and provided protection, but most of them were a tad younger, and unlike the weightlifters, they took part in missions to the other side too. The six of them usually worked as a group, but their unofficial leader sometimes took it upon himself to break away and enrol for missions with other units Vincent assembled.

The veins in Jupiter's arms rippled as he threw down his

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

cards and looked up. He saw Heath, raising his eyebrows in acknowledgement.

Heath had always thought Jupiter was between thirty and forty years old, but he'd never asked him, and it was even possible he was younger or older than that bracket. His heavy, stern face was framed by the same veins that protruded all over his body, shadowed by the tattoos needled into his arms and neck. Despite his drinking habits, he was probably the fittest person in Vincent's faction — Diesel and Tom included — and had a fierce temper to boot. He had been both a comrade and a friend of Heath's for as long as Heath had been working with Vincent.

Heath was well aware of Jupiter's faults. Those faults could either be assets or liabilities in combat, depending on the situation.

The others at the table glanced at Heath and Jake, but they didn't gesture a greeting. Either the game had their full attention or the tension in the stretch was too thick for a group reception.

As Heath and Jake neared the T-junction to turn left and make for the side door of Geoffrey and Mary's quarters, a whistle pierced the air. Overhead, to the left of Jupiter's group, the long barrel of a sniper rifle protruded from the edge of the flat rooftop, pointing in the direction from which Heath and Jake had come.

Sam's face was surrounded by the hood of the neoprene suit as he peered over the edge under the cover of a blanket, looking down at them. He was sixteen years old, mischievous

and brave, but brought into conflict too young.

On the nearer side, on the roof opposite, Hugo lifted himself up from the line of his sniper rifle and gave them a quick wave as he breathed through a hand-rolled cigarette. He was Sam's older brother.

Heath made sure he and Jake had safely turned the corner, out of the main stretch, before he spoke. 'You wearing the new suits?' he called out, looking up again.

'Damn *straight*,' Sam remarked.

'Vince hooked us up this morning,' Hugo said.

'Yeah, the blanket too,' Sam said. 'He told me that as long as I stay flat against the roof, I'm almost *invisible* to the Agents, maybe even the flyovers. I told Hugo he should keep the blanket over him and the piece, the way I do, but he's an addict, man. Can't keep off that tobacco. I've told Vince they should stop growing it at the fields, but he doesn't *listen*.'

Sam and Hugo had been marksmen since they were children. They had trained themselves on the outskirts of G11 as they grew up, taught themselves to shoot targets, practised camouflage, stalking and surveillance. While their primary job was to survey the main stretch leading to the bunker and the flanking crossroads for Republican forces that could pose a threat — and take action if necessary — Hugo also occasionally travelled with units on missions to provide eyes and cover from a distance. Because his specialty was popping bullets and not darts — though he could do both from a distance with great competence — Hayley had usually been the sniper of choice on missions, due to her

superior skills with the tranquiliser rifle.

Heath wondered how Hugo had been coping with the news of Hayley's disappearance on the other side. With the end of the cigarette propped in his mouth and his face half-cloaked by smoke, it was hard to read him at all. He started speaking into the wireless earpiece that jutted out from the side of his neoprene hood, no doubt announcing their arrival to the bunker.

Below Hugo and a bit further along the alleyway, the side door to Geoffrey and Mary's quarters appeared to be no different from the others.

'Your brother's wiser than you,' Heath suggested to Hugo.

'Oh yeah?' Hugo said.

'You should go easy on the cigs.'

'You can die of anything,' Hugo said. 'I enjoy smoking. So what?'

'But it'll *kill* you, man,' Sam said.

'I'll kill you, if you don't shut up.' Hugo looked back down at Heath. 'Vincent's waiting for you.'

Heath nodded. With Jake, he headed for the side door and leaned on it, into a courtyard filled with junk and scrap metal. At the back of the courtyard, a cabin was disguised as an abandoned storage room. When they entered the cabin, a familiar whiff of rust and mould floated around the deliberately unkempt room. The sound of scurrying across the floorboards signalled the disturbance of the small colony of rats that had made the cabin home. Vincent's faction had been encouraging growth of the colony for some time by

scattering food scraps throughout the cabin and courtyard on a regular basis. It was all part of the disguise. Every little detail mattered.

Heath climbed the familiar path over the broken and discarded objects to the far left corner of the cabin with Jake following him. He knelt down and banged his fist loudly on the trapdoor.

Like many of the underground chambers throughout G11, their bunker had its roots in the underground shelter network constructed during the wars of the old world, but bore little to no resemblance to what had originally been constructed all those decades ago.

Being remotely operated, the trapdoor swung open, revealing a golden glow that pressed up the shaft, a racket of echoing voices, and the clatter of objects down deep.

‘After you, my man,’ Heath said.

Jake obliged, dropping into the manhole, descending the ladder.

Heath went after him. He always felt better climbing down than climbing up, especially with Jake by his side. Whenever he was ascending under the tight grip of neoprene, he could never be sure he would come back. Going back down was confirmation that he was still alive, his brother as well, and that the cause was still alive, too.

When they neared the bottom, the voices got louder, synthesised with the tapping of keyboards and the rattle of equipment. Jake jumped from the ladder. Heath landed with a heavier thud.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

Before them: the familiar layout of desks, rows of computer monitors, and electrical wires twisting through holes that connected their systems with the electrical network built by their ancestors to power the Grey Zone from the boundary fences.

In this chamber, five rows of desks branched out from this side of the room. Aaron's lead team were sitting at their monitors in the middle row, striking the keyboards with more intensity than usual.

Most of the time in the bunker, Gilgi, Nelly, Murphy and Anthony were writing and refining code, devising the next breach of the Republic's networks, and tweaking the all-important patch Aaron had initially designed. The fluid defence systems constructed by the Electricity Corporation, the Security and Intelligence Corporation, and other Republican organisations, meant they had little time for anything else, constantly responding to counter-code written by their Republican equivalents.

In the centre of the row, standing rather than sitting like the other four, Aaron hovered over dual monitors.

Heath had always known Aaron as 'the computer guy'. He had reportedly been such a guy since the age of six, when he'd started writing code some forty years ago. He was the group's most prolific computer technician and hacker, but was equally effective leading his team as he was writing code himself. Heath had seen him rebuild and rewire even the oldest computer models salvaged from the old world. He also had the ability to help Benjamin redesign and connect

some of the equipment Heath and his comrades used on missions, such as the cell phones and the wireless earpieces they used to communicate with each other on this side of the boundary. He was dynamic, seemed to have endless reserves of energy, and had a quirky way of dealing with people. But it was his software patch that made him who he was, and the thing that Heath most admired him for.

Aaron had been the first hacker to formulate a code that could disable the electrical current in sections of the fences that separated the Grey Zone from the Republican Territories. It had been nothing short of revolutionary. His most brilliant achievement continued to be these breaches he and his team could manipulate with impressive regularity.

But Heath and everyone else knew it was Aaron's life goal to produce code that could bring the *entire* network down; something the Republicans couldn't counter with one-off patches or other remedies any time soon. Until then or until he came up with something better, the sixty minute reprieve was all that Vincent's faction had to work with when it came to missions involving crosses to the other side.

Before heading past the technicians in the nearer rows to get to Aaron, Heath glanced at the activity in the far-left corner of the chamber.

The boxes of medicines he and Ozzie had brought back to G11 had been sorted into relevant groups on a collection of shelves. Labels signalled some of the categories: antibiotics, anaesthetics, antiviral drugs, vaccines, insulin, syringes. Three of Vincent's people were packing them into various

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

bags where they would be transported to several locations around the Sector for distribution and administration by those equipped with the relevant knowledge and who had undergone the required training.

Though the individual missions into the Republic brought supplies and much-needed relief to the people of the Grey Zone, it was the cause, the purpose, the overall end game they were all working towards that truly mattered in the long run.

Heath's parents had been the first people to talk to him about 'freedom'. It was just one of many precious memories of them he kept close, but it was one of the most vivid and important ones.

Freedom was a thing of the old world, a thing that had died with the ancient communities during the last conflicts, but it was a concept that wasn't forgotten.

Heath had never known the freedom his parents had dreamed about, and he had never been close to really understanding it the way it had once existed in the old world, but he was determined to do everything he could to believe in it, so that a generation of the future might get a taste of it, however brief.

On the far side of the desks, Vincent turned into Aaron's row, peering at the screens as he walked. He reached Aaron and appeared to speak to him firmly as they both examined something on the two monitors directly in front of them, their gazes flitting from one to the next. Vincent stroked his beard, fingering the charcoaled streaks, and frowned.

‘I need to talk to Vincent and Aaron,’ Heath said to Jake.

Jake saluted him and moved rightwards along the ends of the rows, heading towards the next chamber of the bunker, the control room. As Jake passed Nelly, who was sitting at the end of the middle row, she turned from her monitor and held her fist out. With her white-blond hair still swaying from the spin, she clamped her other fist over the mic of her earpiece and said, ‘Little dude, sup?’

‘Shit loads, dude,’ Jake said. He gave her the fist bump as Heath came up behind them.

Heath watched Jake continue on past the rows and into the control room, joining a number of boys and girls who were helping arrange equipment: firearms, ammunition, tranquiliser rifles and darts, smoke grenades — just a few of the items in the arsenal.

‘Sup, Heath?’ Nelly said, stopping him before he turned past her into the aisle. ‘Your bro is getting taller every day, dude. He’ll tower over you soon.’

Heath nodded. ‘In a way, he already does.’ Despite the obvious tension in the bunker, Nelly smiled at him. He found himself smiling back. He always enjoyed Nelly’s banter. She was quick with her words, spoke with attitude, and had a solid physique to match. The only evidence that suggested she spent the majority of her time underground was her skin colour — a sun-deprived paleness to match the glow of her hair. Days on end in a bunker would do that.

While the other coders had the pallid glow too, they were much quieter and more reserved than Nelly. They kept to

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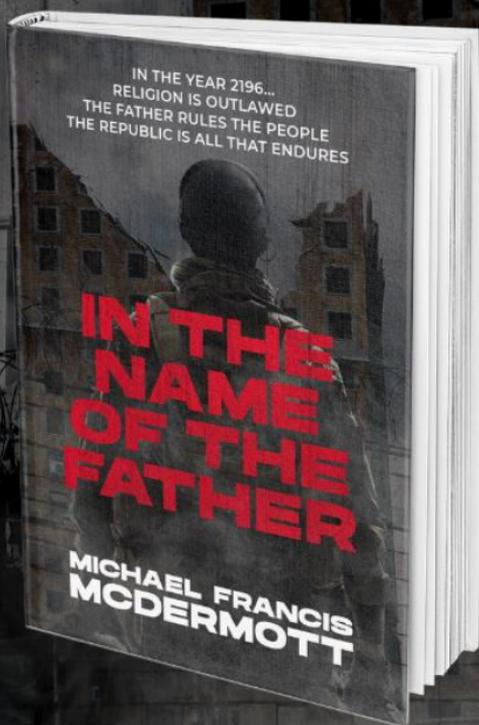
their work and no doubt found solace in it. Heath knew that didn't mean they didn't care about anyone else or the combatants of the movement, just that they liked the sanctuary of the keyboards, the monitors, and the world of the mathematical puzzles they lived in.

As Heath approached Aaron and Vincent, Gilgi nodded, and the others greeted him with nothing more than a glance. 'What've you got?' Heath said.

Vincent's leathery, weathered face was still twisted into a frown below his tangle of hair. He was in his forties, much younger than he looked. Like all battle-hardened things, he often gave the impression he was worn down. Heath suspected the harshness of the experiences he'd had across the years had taken its toll on him, but with that had undoubtedly come wisdom only those experiences could generate.

Their leader wiped the sweat off his brow, stepped aside and said, 'Take a look at this. We were expecting something like it.'

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