

*My stomach is killing me.* It's the first thing I think when I drift back into consciousness. The thought is followed by a painful clenching and a quiet rumble. There's a rustle of clothes and waking, hungry passengers. I squint through the dark, smelling unwashed bodies, and my stomach rumbles again. The Treader screeches through the rust on its tires, slowly rocking to a stop. The rustling stops. We wait. After weeks of traveling, the abrupt silence is agonizing.

The back doors open like a womb to howling wind. I cover my mouth with my scarf. Sand still manages to rub my gums raw. Even with the sun obscured by thick black clouds and dust devils, the light burns through my goggles. We step into the screaming desert one by one.

Before us squats the Mother of Mercy Church, sagging into the dunes. Tall white spires pierce the blackened sky, studded with boarded up windows and vestiges of the old world. This is what we crossed the wasteland for. Some of us fall to our knees in relief, sobbing. They crawl through the double doors, kissing the gritty stone floor.

Inside is coldly lit by green gas lamps. Behind the altar stands a man in the cleanest clothes I've ever seen. It's like the desert won't touch him.

"Welcome," he says, "my starving sons of the apocalypse." I stand back from the fervent, growing crowd. Their dirty hands reach for his black hem, a few of them begging through prayer for salvation. He quiets the congregation with a raise of his hand. "Who will be the first to take communion?"

The clamor is deafening. A fistfight breaks out in the back of the crowd. Whoever is unlucky enough to lose gets his head bashed against a pew until it cracks open with a wet crunch. Members of the crowd descend on the still warm body, ravenous and desperate.

The priest finds me in the crowd and gently beckons me toward him. Entranced, I step around a pool of blood and scraps of cloth. Instinct demands I kneel. The carpet is soft and moth-eaten. He opens his coat to reveal an ashy thigh covered in gnarled scar tissue. "Behold: the flesh of God, and the blood of God."

It takes real work to bite through a raw thigh. The skin and blood is warm, muscle gristly.

It's been so long since I've had a real meal. I can't stop myself from taking as much as I can. I rip a strip of fibrous meat away like a wild animal. To my wonder, the wound knits closed. Only the slight indentations of my teeth remain.

My stomach clenches, demanding more food. I eat, and eat, and *eat*. Weeks of going hungry, trapped in the dark. The priest brushes his tender hand over my head.

"Very good," he says, "eat your fill."

As slimy flesh slides down my throat, he brushes a bloody thumb across my mouth. The hunger does not subside.