

4,853 words

## **Enter the Kingdom**

Was it my husband's steady hand feeling for a pulse near the hollow of my throat? I think not. The touch felt younger, uncertain. He – I sensed a he – touched my limp hand with the delicacy of a connoisseur sorting the blooms of rare flowers, as though identifying the shredded orchids steaming in the ruins of my greenhouse.

Evan had pattered and pruned in the orchard despite the rumbling earth, the hourly emergency broadcast system bulletins directing people to shelter. Anxious, I took refuge in the humid gloom of the greenhouse to relax and wait for him, basking with my tomatoes in the Vivaldi pouring from my iPod dock. If I had stayed by Evan's side as I usually did, I might have enjoyed death, ascended to the light with my lifelong love, avoiding the million shards of glass that diced me, the slow bake of my blistered limbs.

“This one lives,” my rescuer mumbled, his three simple words as long as any sentence I'd hear in the muted months ahead. I couldn't see him or his gentle hand, but a brief inner satisfaction tingled through my torn palm. In another scenario, he might have flicked a thumbs-up and slapped a partner on the shoulder. But the dismay oozing from him was palpable, a melancholy salve that anointed my wounds with sorrow.

My earliest perceptions of the Catastrophe entered and faded from my mind in a swirl of agony. I recall pain so acute I could not claim it. Thirst so damning I felt cast into a hell realm. My nostrils perpetually burned with brimstone and rotting flesh, my ears

itched with garbled voices dense with dismay. The world damned me with voices that could not comfort because the world had revolved beyond comfort.

As a few more bedraggled souls trickled into our camp, a partially intact fire station cut into the side of a granite-bound hill, we began to scratch a living from whatever ruins held the promise of bottled water and preserved food – a resort hotel, a school cafeteria, a corporate chain restaurant. We lived – and died – for more than a year in a cold, dark, static world of near-starvation, retreating often into exhausted sleep. We who remain have nearly lost our voices.



After weeks of silence and the physical healing that still mocks my broken spirit, I began to ask questions, perhaps only to hear myself speak. I surprise myself for voicing questions when the answers already live inside me.

“Does our accidental survival offend these young zealots?”

I can see that Flavia, one of the Caretakers, is not our friend in spite of her accessible nature, but instinct pushes me to question her anyway.

She turns from her work and frowns. “How so?”

“The Soldiers of God treat us as if the circumstances of our bleak lives are not restrictive enough.” I dare not say this in their presence because the Law says that “silent women are the only good women.”

Flavia rolls her eyes when I ask if she understands the Law.

“Who does?” She paces about the dingy, cave-like room feigning nonchalance, fingering the heavy gold crucifix that marks her as a former Catholic.

Teen-aged Flavia always states the obvious with a wise air. I wait for her to say more. She stares at the wall for a moment.

“Things are different since the Catastrophe, Liberty. Hush, now.”

Twice her age, I should counsel her with the wisdom of my years, but there is no future for the aged. There is no future for anyone. Thus, illogically, one of the youngest among us is our leader. Made wary and cynical before her time, Flavia shows empathy by clucking softly on the rare occasions when we Companions fret and complain. We find more to gripe about since the Soldiers discovered more food. Why is it easier for us to die in abject misery, and harder to endure the conundrum of this survival when circumstances improve?

Flavia cannot or will not help anyone with their ridiculous wish to escape, physically or mentally, and we all wish to, whether by stealth or by suicide. Like a warden, she scrawls each complaint on the yellow legal pad she binds to a scratched Lucite clipboard, dusted with the inescapable volcanic ash that coats everything.

Flavia is not a Companion, but neither is she a Soldier of God. She never wears their white or blue robes, nor the wooden cross painted with flames and ocean waves that hang from a black cord around their hips. Even she bows her head when the Soldiers speak to her.

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Pulled from the wreckage, the tinkling glass, creaking aluminum frames, and smoking lumber, I am one of a handful of reluctant witnesses to the destruction of our Arizona community. There were warnings, of course, years of observation by the US

Geological Service, the geologists and volcanologists monitoring the probability of the Yellowstone dome erupting into a sea of fire. Difficult to imagine, I know, even if you had viewed the speculative portrayals of this improbable calamity on television or in videos posted online. As Earth's many ecosystems and climates became unstable, the Yellowstone Dome grew large and restless, a belly pregnant with fiery demons. Volcanoes around the world began to smoke and snort and rattle in demented harmony – Shinmoedake in Japan, Eyjafjallajokull in Iceland, Nyamuragira in the Congo, Popocatepetl in México – the many lovely, exotic place names disguising their raw, horrific power.

The first cataclysmic blowdown in Yellowstone buried North America in a mantle of volcanic ash that descended like a blizzard from hell. The immense California coastal city running from San Diego through the City of Angels and on to San Fran perished, alternately scorched and drenched in a barrage of violent quakes, fires, and rogue ocean waves. Before we survivors in Arizona began to navigate the immensity of our despair, to nurse our burns and broken limbs and battered spirits, the event triggered others hundreds and even thousands of miles away. We learned later from a jigsaw of scattered survivor transmissions that the eruptions of Mt. Rainier and Kilauea also obliterated Seattle, Portland, and Hawaii's "Big Island." Momotombo erupted spectacularly in Nicaragua, blowing its top and setting off a chain of seismic events in Central and South America, bringing major cities and steaming jungles to ruin. A 150-foot tsunami spawned by the eruption and collapse of the Cumbre Vieja volcano in the Canary Islands raked away the coastlines of Europe and swallowed the British Isles, but for a few high peaks in Wales. The tsunami also inundated the eastern North American coast, swallowing low-lying

Florida. In this modern Atlantean disaster, the West Indies completely disappeared again under churning waves. Almost overnight, dozens of new cones and calderas formed. Nine and ten-point earthquakes ripped across earth's fault lines, reshaping continents, triggering more eruptions and flank collapses. Cities disappeared into immense watery maelstroms and flood surges or volcanic upheavals and lava firestorms that licked and lashed Earth's continents into strange configurations that will take decades – maybe centuries, now – to remap.

Before government and corporate communications ceased, more than one hundred of the world's fourteen hundred active volcanoes erupted, according to scattered survivors who reach out with tenuous ham radio pleas. Earth is cocooned in a dusky, depressing volcanic winter. The Arctic and Antarctic ice caps melted and were rapidly refrozen in the wintry assault that continues to besiege us after nearly two rotations around the sun.



Augusta and Flavia are cousins, the only related souls in our new all-female camp. Augusta gains special favor from the Soldiers because of her nearly intact house and wind generated electrical system. The solar panels are useless in this unnatural winter, but the wind fingers everything with relentless fury. Flavia also gains privilege with her father's ham radio. At first, a fragile radio network replaced the gargantuan internet and media broadcast community. Flavia contacted survivors in scattered places before the Soldiers of God apprehended all verbal and material exchanges. Uncertain about our very existence, we applauded the Soldiers' early determination to forge a connection to the Divine and we acquiesced to their philosophy. Though our survival was clearly not preferable to death, we

Companions acquiesced gratefully to the network that professed to provide physical and spiritual sustenance. But prayer by prayer, the Soldiers of God crept from comfort to coercion, forcing us to comply with their crusading Christianity, their compulsory worship circles and structured life.

I suspect Augusta puts drugs in our food because she is always in the kitchen at mealtime, prodding and poking at the seasonings and ingredients in dust-shrouded jars and canisters – the precious salt, coriander, vegetable oil, pinto beans, and masa harina. I eat only when on kitchen duty, swiping food before Augusta touches it. We are all wisps, living wraiths, thinner than shadows, forever hungry.

Surely, Flavia supplements Augusta's coercion by using subliminal suggestions, for she constantly mutters at us under her breath. Or are these utterances her prayers? She monitors our movements and our rare conversations, sneaking away to write reports in her dimly lit office. Her sagging door is perpetually ajar. I've peeked through the space to see her sitting and scribbling like mad, a shrunken, narrow lump of putty on her chair of cracked black leather. She whispers to herself even when alone. "They are caught, caught," she says, a limp smile dangling from her bland face like a dead flower petal. "May Jesus forgive them."

The younger women regard Flavia and Augusta as Companions, and they curry favor with the cousins by professing how much they love Jesus. I love Jesus, but I also love other enlightened teachers: Buddha, Mohammed, the high lamas of Tibet, the indigenous spiritual guides and healers who once walked among us – where are they now?

Despite our ploys to negotiate with misery, we find little joy. We are ruin and

misfortune personified. Our ages vary between fifteen and twenty-five; at forty, I am an elder, an anomaly. The youngest and oldest victims of the Catastrophe had no will to live, dying literally of broken hearts. Mothers' breasts cooled and dried like the frozen ash that entombs our world. Infants sickened and wasted away in the first mind-numbing months after the Catastrophe. We have no birth, no creative spark, and no bliss.

The puzzle of our survival sands our minds raw. We cannot save ourselves because the outcome of our tiny lives is unreal and impossible. Our world is tenuous, uncertain, a crazy quilt of gaps, confusion, and loss, punctuated by the Soldiers' demands. We parcel our lives in a flow of meaningless tasks: excavating and insulating Augusta's house, searching for food caches in the rubble of markets and homes, collecting what little firewood still exists in the ruins of the high desert forests, burying the unburied. As the long weeks of labor unfold into months, systems develop. Flavia announces that Companions may each leave the house one at a time to Tour – to wander the shadowy and ash-filled neighborhood like tourists, to spend our time as blithely as we formerly dashed about spending pocket change, our staycation in hell. I have seen enough Out There, and I sign the mandatory form on Flavia's clipboard with trepidation.

Flavia wakes me early the following morning – I only know it is early because the dark around us is heavier, more silent than the hours when the sun tries to wash through the heavy cloud cover.

“Your request for Tour is approved.”

My stomach hardens into rock at this lie. It is a requirement, one dreamed up by the Soldiers of God. Finally, in the dim, formless afternoon, the oldest Soldier I've ever seen,

almost my age, guides me to the electric quad dedicated to Jesus in a text scrawled with house paint along the sides. The quad whirs almost silently along a trail winding from Augusta's hardscrabble adobe dome to the half-buried ruins of the Prescott Courthouse Plaza.

Three times we circle the plaza in a gray drizzle of gritty snow that matches the Soldier's dirty white robes. The silent Soldier is as much in awe of the listless ruins as I, and I'm grateful for his silence. I've heard that the Soldiers who Signify, who recite their tired dogma during Tour, are like chattering monkeys who have no respect for tragedy. I can barely see this Soldier's hand upon the steering wheel, but it seems sliced with scars and wrinkled burns identical to those that map my face and body. I fancy he is the one who found me, but I cannot know unless he speaks, and he never does.

As he pulls to the doorway of Zion Halfway House – halfway to death, halfway to hell – a smudge of barely perceptible light, the slowly descending sun, disappears from the dull, sack-like sky.



We Companions shrink from the tick of minutes, the elusive, rhythmic promise of a future. We stop asking why we survive, stop uttering the names of our loved ones, though we all had lives rich with family, plans, and purpose before the Catastrophe. I dare not let myself think about the husband, daughter, son-in-law, and expected grandchild who did not emerge from the ruins. I can barely recall my own life. Ironically, I was an environmental scientist working to restore damaged ecosystems. Among the Companions is a young law student, a nursing student, a prize-winning hairstylist, a guitarist, a library aide, a budding



tattoo artist, and a high school freshman who will never know more than that limited life. These identities are gone, our new lives as transparent as the fleeting dreams in which we revisit our old selves.

On the day after my tour, the Companions flutter about before Evening Prayerful Assembly like bright, silent birds in a forest of doom. Augusta and Flavia deliver bolts of cloth donated by the Soldiers of God, pretending good cheer. We cover ourselves from head to toe in the lengths of cloth, draping saris or biblical robes over sweaters, sweatpants, and fleece pullovers, the male clothing that keeps us warm, another paradox in our twisted lives. At least the Soldiers allow us color as they force us to mask our female anatomy. We take comfort – preen even – in the mauves and cobalts, the emeralds and russets, calicoes, paisleys, smeary batiks, and bright woolens salvaged from who knows where.

Flavia and Augusta swagger around in their colorful robes, tugging them tight over dirty street clothes, then excuse themselves from the group.

Jackie, a sallow Asian waif, comes to life and twirls around to show off her wrap. “How do I look?”

Bermuda, another corpse-like young woman who used to be heavy, pulls a pocket mirror from a crack in the floor, her chocolate skin dangling in loose folds from her neck.

Yvonne, Bermuda’s tiny bone of a friend, holds her hand out after Bermuda stands from her thin bedroll. Her golden, stick-like forearms dimple with goose bumps as she holds the little mirror at arm’s length, trying to see her entire reflection.

“Where did you get that?” the Companions chirp. “Let me see, let me see.”

Even I, the stalwart Celtic recluse, join the sorority to primp and chat, secretly

despairing at my patchy reddish hair, which is quickly turning dust gray and shorn into a spiky crew cut. My dull olive eyes stare back at me with dark circles bruising the deep eye sockets.

A chorus of soft giggles erupts in the bare-walled room as I stand in my geometric print robe, all neon lines and angles. “Ooh-la-la, mija,” lesbian Mar croons, brushing a hand through her close-cropped ebony hair, “look at Libby.”

I have not shared my birth name at Zion Halfway House because Coralie Dupré Whittington is dead, her life unreachable, and sometimes I forget to respond to my assumed name. While I rest on my haunches in a corner, the Companions rake at their shorn hair with a broken comb, pinch pink circles in their thin cheeks, priss around in their garments and take turns glancing one more time in the mirror. They talk openly for a moment in unusually brash tones about the Soldiers of God. The voices echo in the empty room, the wooden furniture gone, burned for warmth long ago. Then the Companions recoil, whispering about what they might do next, peeking outside the room to see if Flavia and Augusta are listening.

Then the gap between our vanity and our brutal life closes into silence once more.

After Receiving the Cloth, as the Soldiers describe it, we drone along, silent again for many days except for the prescribed calls and responses at our Prayerful Assemblies. *Jesus lives, we live for Him. Life is Jesus, Jesus is Life.*

During the next Sunday Assembly, an ordeal lasting hours, my name appears atop a small, neat list on Flavia’s clipboard. Augusta turns it toward us. “A group of Reporters will visit us today.” She speaks with bright, artificial cheer as though addressing a

classroom of children. “Liberty, your Ascension Day has arrived.”

My heart pounds so hard it must be visible through my ribcage. Ascension Day. The Soldiers have a way of turning lovely-sounding things upside-down.

“What happens on Ascension Day?” My voice pings through the room like sonar.

“As the Eldest Survivor, Libby, you have the great honor of being the first to Enter the Kingdom. The Reporters will take you to the Eternal Sweat Lodge,” Augusta replies.

“When you are faint with the heat, you are wrapped in golden cords, taken from the lodge and baptista – bap-tized in saltwater.” She raises her eyes to Heaven and crosses herself with a rapturous expression more typical of a holy roller than a Católica. “Then you will be burned on a cross to cleanse you of the Catastrophe and purify you like Jesús.”

Flavia crosses herself and kisses her crucifix.

I stand in the back of the group, bow my head, and clasp my scarred hands in prayer, the prescribed response when the Soldiers of God bestow an honor. Then I clench my fists behind my back and pull my face taut with a brilliant, metallic rush of adrenaline. My heart pounds so hard I fear it might burst.

The Companions kneel and clasp their hands in a semi-circle in front of me, genuflecting beside their prayer cushions. The Zion Prayerful Assembly is electric with tension, our suppressed emotions knifing through Augusta’s old formal living room toward a three-dimensional floor-to-ceiling crucifixion sprayed on a mirrored wall in gold metallic paint.

No one dares look at me, not even in the reflection.

Apparently, Ascension Day – “to Enter the Kingdom” – is a ceremony meant to

appease God, who punished mankind with the Catastrophe, a torrent of fire and water. As though it's my puny fault God destroyed the Earth "despite his rainbow promise" as the Soldiers proselytize.

What gain do they hope to make from this diabolical sacrifice? The knot of paradox in my chest tightens – I want to live yet have nothing to live for.

The Householders look away, relieved to hear that only the Reporters – the snarky Soldiers who gather information from Augusta and Flavia – are holy enough to witness the Sacred Proceedings. Neither cousins nor the Companions will have to watch me die.

Flavia and Augusta cast their eyes downward. I want to rush at them screaming, to tear out their lying eyes, but I restrain myself. I must conserve energy, consider my options. Have I not wished to die nearly every moment since that silent man saved me after the Catastrophe?

Five Reporters enter the Zion Halfway House moments later, implacable as Biblical pillars of salt. They take their places on brocade cushions in front of the Golden Cross. Their voices begin to rise and fall in the prescribed prayers that echo and then are absorbed by the thick concrete and straw bale walls of Augusta's house. *Life is Jesus, Jesus is Life.*

After Prayerful Assembly, I mingle freely with this handful of blue-robed men and women as though death is a hospitable hostess. I even show the newest Reporter around the living areas in the glare of the wind generator-operated light boxes that serve as our sun. I suppress what is left of my emotion. If they notice any agitation, the Reporters will respond with Prayerful Force.

With faux hospitality, Augusta directs all Companions not on Duty to finish

watching a DVD we started yesterday while our guests wait to share our monotonous lunch. The Soldiers of God ban all books except a few copies of “The Message” version of the Christian Bible. They destroy the more numerous copies of other Bibles and all books they deem unsuitable – everything, more or less. Yet, ironically and inexplicably, after penetrating the rubble of the Prescott Public Library and the libraries of Prescott College, Yavapai College, and Embry Riddle University with the mission of destroying the stacks, the Soldiers bring us films that scald our eyes with images of a world we can barely remember and will never experience again. The written word seems to threaten their authority, but these stories, these dream-like images of flickering light are used to further subdue us.

The seconds and minutes dissolve and reform like the screen images we watch. Neither time nor these stories have any substance. The Companions lean forward, watching this thriller film with slack jaws. It features a man on the run, an escapee evading government agents. He flees through red rock country, a moody, russet desert similar to the high desert plateau we live in. Or used to be, before ash buried the spires and steeples of “God’s country,” as many residents referred to the natural wonders of Yavapai County. The term God leaves a bitter taste in my mouth – why would a Creator destroy His or Her Creation? No wisdom being would do so, but . . . nature, karma . . . everything, after all, is impermanent . . .

The film and my date with the Kingdom awaken a fierce seed of rebellion that has lain dormant in me. While the others silently stare at the final credits and Roman date on the screen, I list aloud the natural and domestic flora that used to thrive here, ticking them

off on my fingers. I recall a world green with ponderosa pine and cottonwood, alligator juniper and piñon, foxtail and sage, mariposa lily and desert marigold. I pass over my ten digits many times over, trembling through my tears. Pulling my robe across my face, I close my eyes and imagine the wildlife, the birds, the insects, sometimes recounting items I'd almost forgotten. Javelina, pronghorn, jackrabbit, finch, stink beetle, nuthatch, roadrunner, tarantula.

Every soft tap of finger on thumb calms me until a bright, soft feeling expands in my solar plexus. I struggle to hold this nameless emotion, to make it swell inside me like a thriving fetus. I gain strength from my thoughts and courage from the sacred landscape, the memory of natural glories that vanished like a rainbow in summertime.

I close my eyes. My sense of self-preservation grows stronger. Though there is little to live for, I do not want death on the Soldiers' terms. I will not die today.

When the screen rolls back to the film menus, my Companions stare blankly at one another, a huddle of zombies. I rise and pace about the dusty room. They are either afraid to look at me, or unmotivated to disengage from the emotional residue of the film. The Reporters wait in the dining room, jotting notes on pads and in a still-operable electronic notebook. They watch us through the open entry of our Viewing Assembly, as they call the old family room.

"It is almost time," murmurs a lanky youngster, his hands moving from his robe like long twists of dirty dough. His ragged beard moves up and down as he speaks.

"Another one past grief," replies a female colleague, a soft violet scent rising from the blue headscarf that covers the shaved head all Soldiers bear.

Augusta emerges from the kitchen where the stone-like walls are never free of gray-white volcanic dust. “Prayerful Meal is served,” she says in the prescribed manner. “Break bread.”

We Companions stand, drawn toward the scent of canned stew. Our blank lives and hunger drive us to small pleasures.

Flavia moves to the head of the long oval table and motions to the stew and freshly made tortillas. “Por favor, take comida with us,” she murmurs in Spanglish, the private tongue of choice among many Companions in our cloistered community. Her cheeks redden when she realizes her lapse of protocol. The Reporters glare at her yet say nothing about the English-only rule.

I see no one looking as I shuffle behind the group entering the dining room. Big Augusta seats herself with the women at the table, already stuffing her wide mouth with an unbuttered tortilla, our daily staple. Slipping toward the double doors just past the dining room, I hold my breath. There should be no problem walking away because no one ever has. I ease outside, take a deep breath and jog down the dim, floury lane excavated by the Soldiers of God on a pockmarked asphalt cul-de-sac, a dead-end sliced into a tract of open land heaped with ash. Then I slide like a shadow between indeterminate tall and squat shapes of buried granite boulders and the toothpick remains of burned trees.

A voice, some crazy thought buzzes in my cranium. Did it say I am one of Earth’s last links? I’ve heard this small voice before, long ago, in my childhood. It wraps around me like a vine’s tendril, a living, growing thing, but my agitation is too great to recall the circumstances.

“Last link to what?” I ask aloud. My voice sounds wispy in the open air. The fine volcanic dust kicked up by my feet makes me cough. I wrap my robe tighter around my mouth and nose.

*Coralie*, the voice murmurs. It must be my own mind calling my birth name, a pretty name from an aborted life.

*By saving yourself, you will halt humanity’s habitual tendency to destroy itself. Transformation and reconciliation must begin anew*, the voice concludes.

I trudge onward, but the luxury of so many words strung together like pearls of sound overwhelms me. Surely this elaborate, lofty thought is not my own.

*Choose life*, the voice urges.

My mind is tired, almost empty, but it dredges up some random image of a twisted old apple tree in bloom, as though to illustrate the thought.

This thought I trust. I have indeed chosen life, hoping it will protect me, though it remains to be seen how long I can survive in a death-filled world.

A scrabble of footsteps echoes behind me. I step behind a twisted heap of pumice and gaze back. Augusta follows a big Reporter clutching a dog-eared Bible, she with a big shotgun poised like a saber in her chapped hands.

I change direction, plod forward, consumed by fatigue. Perhaps they will tire of following me, choose someone else to die in my place. Why not? Augusta said I am the first – that means the other Companions will Enter the Kingdom too. There was a time I felt I’d go to hell for such a thought, but all life is hell now.

I stretch my legs over another mound, brushing away the light crust of snow and



gritty ash with the hem of my wrap. Beneath the ash are boulders of golden granite and red sandstone that seem almost alive. I then see why the Soldiers of God would pursue an escapee through this death-choked desert, the reason they fool themselves with their charade of subservience to God.

I bleed. I love. I give. I am crimson to their grey-white and pastel blue. My unruly, authentic life is a brilliant contrast to their stark, rational, and lethal politics.

What do the Soldiers of God really want to annihilate? The small voice intrudes with answers and I strain to listen. *Striving for truth. Lack of ego attachment.*

After a pause, it hums through me again: *A womb is a vacuum of freedom. A space to create liberation as well as life. If you are free, it says, if you resist fearful thought, then you can free others. Your spiritual offspring will not recycle the same grasping concepts. You should not die like Jesus nor should you die for Him.*

I hold my head high with resolve. I will live for Spirit, and Spirit will live in me.

“¡Liberty, alto!” Augusta calls once. Her raspy voice echoes like a tired revelation across the dead landscape.

I glance back at the tiny cross flaming like a kitchen match in the distance, circled by figures in blue and white robes.

“Coralie,” I shout back, hurrying now to scramble up the face of a craggy, fire-scarred knoll toward the sun, the barest smudge of pink on a murky horizon.