

ROYA
PUBLICATION
No. 18

BETWEEN KENOMA AND PLEROMA



NO MARK
NO CLAIM
ENTER SLOW

Chew Z

— A ROYA PUBLICATION —

BETWEEN KENOMA AND PLEROMA

CHEW Z

Printed in the Reach

Roya Publication No. 18

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2026 Chew Z

All rights reserved.

ISBN 979-8-952790-17-9

Roya Publications

Publication No. 18

Typeset in DejaVu Serif.

Printed in the Reach



four walls.
five doors.
counted twice.

it has a door, she said. it's a small building.

SYNOPSIS

When his sister Nour vanishes into an unmarked commune called Pleroma, Aram follows her past a cattle guard and a road that simply stops being maintained, into a valley that has quietly inverted almost every norm he understands as human. Crime is treated as sickness; sickness is nursed, not punished. Marriage is chosen aloud, every year, or dissolved without shame. Children belong to the row, not the house. A sacrament called Haoma moves hand to hand at every meal, not to open visions, but to bind a table to itself. Guided deeper by Sepideh, his watchful sponsor, and evaluated by the valley's elder, Bahram, Aram is slowly weighed into a community whose kindness turns out to have a floor — and whose most patient, best-intentioned practices conceal a mechanism for deciding, collectively and almost invisibly, which people and which griefs are worth continuing to see. As the valley's yearly Vigil approaches, Aram must decide whether Pleroma is a healthier way of being human than the one he left, or simply a gentler name for the oldest machinery a culture has ever built.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

I have always been drawn to communes — not as punchlines or cautionary tales, but as honest experiments. Every counterculture settlement I have ever read about, from the real to the literary, was founded by people who looked at the norms they inherited and asked, sincerely, whether those norms were serving anyone. That is not a fringe question. It is the same question every culture is quietly answering, all the time, whether or not it admits to asking it.

What interests me most is how thin the line is between an unorthodox community and a cult — and how little that line has to do with the content of a group's beliefs. A commune and a cult can hold nearly identical convictions about marriage, property, or death, and diverge only in a single variable: how honestly the group tolerates a member's disagreement, and what happens to the people who fall outside its floor of care. Pleroma, the valley in this book, was built to be kind on purpose, by people who meant it. That is exactly what makes its failures worth sitting with. Cruelty by accident, arrived at gently, over sixty patient years, is not less cruel for being unintended — it may be harder to see, and harder still to leave.

Which brings me to the question underneath the book: is culture good for us, or a net cost we've simply stopped noticing we're paying? I don't think either answer is honest on its own. A culture — any culture, cultic or mainstream — is a machine for deciding, on our behalf, which griefs get named, which desires get permitted, which people remain visible when they become inconvenient to keep seeing. We need that machine; a life without any shared meaning-structure is not freedom, it is just isolation with extra steps. But every machine like that has a floor, and someone is always standing on the other side of it. The honest question was never whether to have a culture. It's whether we're willing to keep looking at what ours costs, and who it costs it to.

Chew Z

CONTENTS

ONE. THRESHOLD	8
TWO. WEIGHT	10
THREE. THRESHOLD	14
FOUR. WEIGHT	16
FIVE. VIGIL	18
SIX. THRESHOLD	19
SEVEN. WEIGHT	22
EIGHT. WEIGHT	24
NINE. THRESHOLD	26
TEN. WEIGHT	29
ELEVEN. VIGIL	31
TWELVE. WEIGHT	33
THIRTEEN. THRESHOLD	34
FOURTEEN. VIGIL	35
FIFTEEN	37

ONE. THRESHOLD

The gate to Pleroma was not a gate. Aram had expected iron, or at least a fence — something a man could stand in front of and feel the shape of what he was about to lose. Instead there was a cattle guard sunk into red dirt, and past it a road that simply stopped being maintained, as though the county itself had lost interest in where it led.

He parked the car where the asphalt gave out and walked the rest.

Nour had done the same, eleven months ago, according to the last text she'd sent him. Going somewhere quiet for a while. Don't call. He had not called. He had waited the appropriate amount of time for a grown woman to be tired of her brother, and then a little longer than that, and then he had gotten in the car.

A woman was waiting for him at the place where the road became a path. She did not look surprised to see him, which unsettled him more than if she had.

"You're the brother," she said.

"Aram."

"Sepideh." She did not offer a hand. She looked at him the way his mother used to look at fruit at the market — turning it slightly, checking for the soft spot. "You'll want to see her."

"I want to take her home."

"That's not what I asked."

He followed her because there was nowhere else to go that had Nour in it. The path widened into something like a village, though calling it that flattered it — there were no shopfronts, no signage, nothing that announced itself as being for sale. People moved between low adobe buildings with an unhurried purpose that reminded him, uncomfortably, of a hospital ward at the hour when the patients are stable and the staff have nothing urgent to do. Somebody was singing, somewhere behind a wall, a single voice with no instrument under it.

"How long has she been here?" he asked.

"Time works differently once you're weighed," Sepideh said, which was not an answer, and she said it the way people say things they've said many times before, to many brothers.

"Weighed."

"Everyone who stays gets weighed. It isn't money. It's — " she considered the word the way a woman considers a coat that doesn't quite fit " — witness. What you've given. What's been given to you. It evens out, over a life, if you let it."

"And if I don't stay long enough to be weighed?"

"Then you're a guest, and guests aren't weighed, and guests don't get to see very much." She stopped walking and turned to face him fully for the first time. Her eyes were doing the fruit-inspection thing again. "You could leave now and drive back and tell your mother you saw her and she looked well. That would be a kindness to everyone, including you."

"I'm not going to do that."

"No," Sepideh agreed, and something in her voice suggested she'd known that before he said it, had perhaps known it before he'd gotten out of the car. "I didn't think you would. Come on. There's a room. You'll sleep, and in the morning Bahram will want to meet you before you meet her."

"Why does an old man get to decide when I see my own sister?"

Sepideh started walking again, and this time he had to hurry to keep pace.

"Because this isn't your house, Aram," she said, not unkindly. "You're standing in someone else's sentence, and you haven't learned the grammar yet. Tomorrow you'll meet Bahram, and he'll explain the parts of it that can be explained. The rest you'll have to get weighed to understand, and I can't promise you'll like the price."

The room they gave him had a bed, a basin, and no lock on the door — which he understood, by the second hour of lying awake in it, was not an oversight. A house with no locks was a house that had

already decided what kind of trust it required of him, whether or not he'd agreed to the terms.

Somewhere outside, the singing had stopped. In its place was a low collective murmur, dozens of voices pitched too quiet to make into words, like a congregation between the parts of a service he didn't know the shape of yet. He thought of Nour's voice folded in there somewhere, indistinguishable, and did not sleep for a long time.

TWO. WEIGHT

The bell was not a bell. It was a length of pale wood struck against a stone bowl, and it rang low, more felt than heard, three times, just after first light. By the second toll, Aram could hear doors opening along the row outside his room. By the third, voices — dozens of them, unhurried, not quite in unison — answering the same two words back into the morning air.

Sraosh Naosh.

He lay still and listened to it pass down the row like wind moving through wheat, house to house, until it reached his own door, where nobody said anything, because nobody expected the guest to know the liturgy yet.

Sepideh was waiting for him outside with a cup of something that steamed and smelled faintly of bark and citrus. Not the drink. Not yet. Just tea.

"What was that," he said. Not quite a question.

"Everyone answers when the bell asks. It isn't a question, is it — the bell doesn't ask anything. It's more like tapping someone's shoulder." She handed him the cup. "You were somewhere else when you woke. Everyone is, the first few seconds. The words bring you back into your body, into the room, into the morning. Nothing else has happened yet."

"What does it mean? Sraosh — Naosh?"

"Sraosh is old. It means something close to listening — not with your ears, with the rest of you. Harkening, the old teachers called it. Attention as a kind of devotion." She considered the second word

a moment, as if she'd never quite been asked before. "Naosh doesn't mean anything. Nobody's grandparents' grandparents could tell you where it came from. It just rhymes, and it's stayed stuck to Sraosh so long that saying one without the other sounds unfinished now. Some things survive because they're true. Some things survive because they sound right in the mouth at dawn. We've stopped needing to sort out which is which."

"That's a strange thing to build a religion on."

"Is it? Or is it just what a hundred years does to any phrase that gets said enough times before breakfast." She watched him drink his tea. "You drove here thinking about your sister eleven months ago and your mother's face and what you'd say to Bahram and whether the car would start again when you left. How much of that was this morning, actually happening, in front of you?"

He didn't answer, because she wasn't wrong, and he suspected she knew that from long practice reading brothers.

They walked past the row of houses to a wider clearing where perhaps sixty people were already at work — turning soil, mending a fence rail, hauling water in paired buckets on a yoke. Nobody rushed. Nobody, as far as he could tell, was in charge, though every so often someone would glance toward an old man sitting on a stone bench at the clearing's edge, not for instruction, but the way a swimmer checks the shore without needing to swim toward it.

"Is that Bahram?"

"That's Bahram. He'll speak with you before midday. For now, you work." She handed him a hoe with a handle worn smooth by hands that weren't his. "This is how you're weighed. Not by belief. Not yet. By whether your hands are willing before your mind's decided anything."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then you're still a guest tonight, and you eat with the guests, and you sleep in the guest room again, and Bahram will be very patient about it, because patience costs him nothing and it costs you a great deal." She smiled for the first time since he'd met her, and it

was not unkind. “Most people last one morning refusing. It’s a boring way to spend a morning.”

He worked. The soil was cold going warm under the climbing sun, and his back began complaining by the second hour, and nobody spoke to him beyond the occasional nod, and somewhere in the third hour he noticed that his mind, which had not stopped moving since the last text from Nour, had gone quiet in a way he didn’t trust and didn’t want to examine too closely.

At midday the bell sounded again — three low tones — and sixty people straightened from sixty different tasks and said, unprompted, unrehearsed, entirely without irony, Sraosh Naosh, and went to eat.

The meal was communal, taken at long tables under a canopy of woven branches, and it was there that he first saw the drink — a shallow clay bowl passed hand to hand, each person taking a swallow before passing it on, the way a family might share a single cup at a funeral or a wedding, an act of trust disguised as an act of thirst.

“Haoma,” Sepideh said, when the bowl reached her. She drank without ceremony, without closing her eyes, without any of the theater he’d braced for, and passed it to him. “You don’t have to.”

“What is it, actually?”

“Depends who you ask.” She turned the empty bowl once in her hands before setting it down. “Elan will tell you it’s a root. Bright Water swears it’s bark, and they’ve argued about it for twenty years without either one bothering to look it up, because there’s nothing to look up. Bahram says the not-knowing is the whole point — a thing everyone can name and measure stops being sacred and starts being a product. You can buy a product. You can’t buy this.”

“That sounds like a very convenient answer for something you’re all drinking without asking questions.”

“We ask plenty of questions. We just don’t need the same answer every time.” She nodded at the empty bowl making its way back down the table for refilling. “What’s in your hand right now is the weak kind — daily Haoma, brewed thin, meant for a meal, not a

revelation. It won't show you anything. It just makes the meal feel like the only thing happening, instead of one thing happening underneath six others. There's a stronger preparation, kept for the Vigil. You'll hear about that eventually. This isn't that."

"And the stronger kind does what, exactly?"

Something in her face closed, gently, the way a door closes when someone doesn't want to slam it in your face but also doesn't want you walking through. "That one I'll let Bahram explain, when you've earned the explanation instead of just asking for it. It isn't a secret to punish you. It's just not a story that means anything told out of order."

He thought of the cattle guard where the road gave out, and the room with no lock, and Nour's voice folded somewhere into the murmur he hadn't been able to find. He drank.

It tasted of bitter almond and something green underneath, like a plant cut too early, brewed thin the way Sepideh had said — and it went down and sat warm in his chest, and nothing happened, no color, no falling, no revelation, except that the clearing around him, the sound of sixty people eating and talking low, the actual physical weight of the sun on his shoulders, arrived all at once with a clarity that felt less like a drug and more like a held breath finally let go.

"It's not for the self," Sepideh added, watching him set the bowl down. "That's the mistake people from outside always make about it — they hear sacred drink and think personal transcendence, some private door opening just for them. It's the opposite. It's pressed and poured for the table, not the drinker. The old word for it, before it was ever a word in this valley, meant something closer to offering between people than substance for a person. You didn't just drink something, Aram. You joined a bowl that was already moving before you sat down, and it'll keep moving after you leave."

Sraosh Naosh, he thought, and hated that it had worked, even a little, even for a moment.

Bahram found him after the meal, sitting alone at the end of the emptying table, and lowered himself onto the bench across from him without asking permission, the way old men do when they've

decided a conversation is happening regardless of what the other party wants.

"You drank," Bahram said. Not a question either.

"Sepideh said I didn't have to."

"She was right. You didn't." The old man's eyes were pale and steady, the kind that had spent a long time looking at things without flinching. "But you wanted, for one hour, to stop being a man looking for his sister and become a man sitting in the sun. That's not nothing, Aram. That's most of the way here, actually, if you're honest about it."

"I haven't agreed to anything."

"No one's asked you to." Bahram folded his hands on the table, patient as the bench itself. "Tomorrow I'll tell you why we don't want your agreement yet. Today, you worked, and you drank, and you're still here at the table instead of at your car. Whatever that adds up to, we call it Weight, and it's the only currency that's ever meant anything in this valley. Go rest. Your sister already knows you've come. She's choosing, same as you, when to be found."

THREE. THRESHOLD

Eleven months earlier.

Nour had called it quitting, though nobody in the family used that word for what she was actually leaving. She had a title — associate director of something at a company that made money by knowing what people would want six months before they wanted it — and a rented apartment with good light and a man she wasn't quite living with, and by any measure that mattered to their mother, she had arrived.

"I'm not unhappy," she told Aram, the last time they sat across a table from each other that wasn't at Pleroma. "That's the part nobody wants to hear. If I were unhappy you'd all understand this immediately."

"Then what."

She turned her water glass a quarter turn, and then another, a habit from childhood he still recognized. "You ever notice how much of a day is spent getting ready to live it? Answering things so you can get to the thing. Optimizing the route so you arrive faster at a place you're going to immediately start optimizing your way out of." She looked up. "I did the math once, for fun. Actual fun, I want that on record. More of my waking hours went to administrating my life than living inside it. Scheduling the rest, managing the anxiety about the schedule, recovering from the managing. I built an entire second life just to maintain the first one, and the first one was already fine. Was already, on paper, good."

"That's just being an adult, Nour."

"Is it? Or is it just what we've all agreed to call being an adult, because nobody's offered us a real alternative and it would be exhausting to go looking for one." She said this without heat, which was somehow worse than if she'd been angry. "I met someone last spring. Older woman, calm in a way I didn't understand yet. She talked about a place. Not a retreat, not a program — she was careful about that distinction, kept saying it wasn't for sale. A place where the entire architecture of daily life had been built around a different question than the one we build ours around."

"Which question."

"We build ours around what's next. She said they build theirs around what's now." Nour shrugged, as if she'd heard how it sounded and had made peace with that a long time ago. "I know exactly how that sentence sounds coming out of my mouth. I used to be the person who would've mocked it. That's actually most of why I believed her — she wasn't selling anything. She barely wanted to talk about it. I had to ask twice."

Aram had spent the drive home turning it over the way he turned over anything he couldn't file cleanly — half diagnosis, half dismissal, the two impulses fighting each other to a draw. It would have been easier if she'd described a collapse. Collapses had a shape he knew how to hold. What she'd described instead was closer to an indictment, delivered so gently it took him weeks to notice he'd been named in it too — the emails answered from bed,

the vacations spent half-present, the low-grade hum of later, later, later that ran under every good thing in his own life like tape hiss under a recording, so constant he'd stopped being able to hear the silence it was covering.

He thought of that conversation now, walking the clearing at Pleroma in the slow gold light after the midday bell, watching sixty people move through an ordinary Tuesday with no apparent hum under any of it at all — and could not decide, even with his sister's absence sitting in his chest like a swallowed stone, whether he'd come here to save her from something, or to ask her, finally, twice, the way she'd had to ask the older woman, what she'd actually found.

FOUR. WEIGHT

By his fourth day, Aram had stopped counting the hours by the clock in his head and started counting them by the bell, which was its own kind of surrender and which he noticed only after it had already happened.

Sepideh found him at the tool shed before the second bell and told him, without preamble, that there would be a Reweaving that evening, and that guests were permitted to watch if a household invited them, and that he had been invited.

"By whom?"

"Elan and Bright Water. You hauled water for their garden yesterday. They noticed you didn't complain, which around here counts as an act of considerable character." She almost smiled. "It's not what you think it is. Nobody's going to ask you to participate."

"What is it, then."

"You'll see it better than I can tell it to you."

The clearing that evening held more people than he'd yet seen gathered in one place — nearly the whole valley, it seemed, arranged in a loose ring around a patch of bare swept earth lit by torches driven into the ground at even intervals. At the center stood a man and a woman he didn't recognize, both perhaps fifty,

both dressed plainly, holding between them a length of undyed wool thread, slack, each end wound once around a wrist.

Bahram stood a few paces off, not officiating so much as witnessing, the way Aram had already come to understand was the old man's primary function in this place — not authority so much as attention, made into an office.

"Every year," Bahram said, to the ring at large, in the unhurried voice of a man who had said these words enough times that they'd worn smooth, "a bond is renewed or it isn't. Nobody outside the bond decides which. We only ask the two people holding the thread to say, out loud, in front of the valley, whether they're still choosing this, today. Not because they chose it once. Because choosing it once was true then and today is a different day."

The man spoke first. His voice didn't waver. "I'm choosing this."

The woman was quiet a moment longer than felt comfortable, long enough that Aram found himself holding his own breath along with, he suspected, half the ring.

"I'm choosing this," she said finally, "but I want it said that I thought about not choosing it. I want that on the thread too. I don't want next year's yes to think this year's was easy."

Nobody gasped. Nobody looked scandalized. Bahram nodded once, as if she'd passed some test that had nothing to do with the answer she'd given and everything to do with the honesty of the pause before it, and stepped forward to wind a second thread — this one dyed a deep red — around the first, binding it for another year, while the ring murmured the two words Aram now recognized in his sleep.

Sraosh Naosh.

He found Sepideh afterward, near the edge of the torchlight. "What happens if someone says no?"

"Then the thread comes off, in front of everyone, and that's that. No shame attached to it that I've ever seen — or none that's spoken aloud, anyway. People who unbind still eat at the same tables the next morning. Sometimes they rebind to someone else, later.

Sometimes not." She considered him. "Where you come from, I think unbinding is the scandal and staying bound out of habit is the virtue. Here it's reversed. The habit is the thing we distrust. A promise that's stopped being chosen and started being merely kept — that's the thing that frightens people in this valley. Not the ending of things. The pretending not to end."

"That sounds like a very convenient philosophy if you're the one who wants to leave."

Something crossed her face then, quick and gone, that he filed away without understanding yet. "It's also a very inconvenient one, Aram, if you're the one being left, and have to say so, out loud, in front of everyone you've ever known, instead of just letting a marriage quietly rot from the inside where nobody has to watch it happen." She looked back toward the ring, where the bound couple were being embraced now by a line of well-wishers. "Your sister asked me once which was crueler. I told her I didn't know. I still don't."

FIVE. VIGIL

The scream came a little after midnight, from the direction of the low stone building at the far edge of the clearing that Aram had been told, twice now, not to approach.

He was awake for it — had been awake for most nights since arriving, sleep in this place arriving late and leaving early, as if his body hadn't yet agreed to the valley's hours. It was not a scream of the kind he'd have expected from a horror film or a bad dream. It didn't rise and break. It came out low and sustained, almost a note, held far longer than he'd have thought a human chest could hold it, and then it simply stopped — not tapering, not answered, just gone, the way a held breath stops being held.

No one came running. No lanterns moved across the clearing. Somewhere closer, a dog he hadn't known the valley had lifted its head, considered the silence, and put it back down.

He found himself, without quite deciding to, at his window, looking toward the building. It sat low and square in the moonlight,

unremarkable from this distance — until he found himself counting, out of some idle habit he didn't examine, the pale rectangles of its doors against the length of its walls, and arriving, twice, at a number that didn't reconcile with how long the building actually was. He decided he'd miscounted. He told himself that with some firmness, and did not test it again that night.

He lay in the dark a long time, waiting for the sound to mean something, for a door to open, for Sepideh's voice at his window, for anything at all to acknowledge that a person — surely a person — had just made a sound like the floor of the world giving out under them.

Nothing did.

In the morning, the bell rang three times, low and felt more than heard, and sixty voices answered it without hesitation, without a single note of the night's disturbance in them.

Sraosh Naosh.

SIX. THRESHOLD

Bahram found him at the tool shed the next morning and told him, without ceremony, that there would be a hearing at midday, and that he was welcome to sit at the back of it if he could keep from speaking.

"A hearing for what?"

"You'll see it better than I can tell it to you." It was, Aram was beginning to notice, the closest thing this valley had to a house motto.

The hearing was held in the same clearing as everything else — Pleroma did not appear to believe in separate rooms for separate kinds of gravity — with the same loose ring of benches, the same unhurried gathering of whoever wasn't otherwise occupied. A woman sat alone at the center, hands folded in her lap, perhaps sixty years old, her face arranged in the particular stillness of someone who has decided that stillness is the only dignity left available to her.

"Della struck Corwin's wife with the truth of what she'd seen," Bahram said, opening the hearing the way he might open a ledger, plainly, without theater. "Three nights ago, at the well. She told her, in front of others, that her husband had been the one who broke Tomas's arm in the spring, and that she'd watched him do it and said nothing for two seasons out of fear of what saying it would cost her."

Aram leaned toward Sepideh, beside him. "That's not a confession. That's an accusation. Why is she the one on trial?"

"Because the man who broke the arm is already being cared for," Sepideh said quietly. "He was sick when he did it — everyone agrees on that, including him, now. He's spent two seasons in the sickness of his own violence, same as if he'd caught a fever, and he's mending, slowly, the way fevers mend. Della's the one who chose to make it public without warning, without care for who else it would wound on its way out. That's not sickness. That's a decision. And decisions are what we hold each other to."

"So a man breaks a child's arm and he's a patient. A woman tells the truth about it and she's on trial."

"You're describing it the way your world would describe it," Sepideh said, not unkindly. "Where you're from, I think, a man who breaks an arm goes to a cage, and comes out the same man who went in, sometimes worse, and everyone calls that justice because it feels like weight moving somewhere. Here we ask a harder question. Not who deserves punishment. Who is still dangerous, and who has stopped being dangerous, and how the second kind of person gets to keep living among us without the whole valley treating him like a wound that never closes."

"And Della."

"Della's not being punished either. Listen."

At the center of the ring, Bahram was speaking again, his voice carrying without effort. "Della. Did you consider, before you spoke at the well, whether Corwin's wife was strong enough that night to carry what you gave her?"

The woman's hands tightened once in her lap. "No," she said. "I considered whether I was strong enough to keep carrying it myself. I wasn't. I put it down where it was easiest to put down, and it landed on her instead of somewhere kinder."

"That's an honest answer."

"It's the only kind I have left."

Bahram nodded, the same slow nod Aram had seen him give at the Reweaving, the one that seemed to weigh honesty over content. "Then your sickness isn't cruelty, Della. It's exhaustion pretending to be honesty because exhaustion doesn't like the sound of its own name. You'll rest from your duties for a season. Not as punishment. Because a tired hand shouldn't keep reaching for other people's wounds to set its own down."

There was no verdict beyond that. No sentence, no cage, no mark against her that Aram could see recorded anywhere. The ring simply began to disperse, several people pausing to touch Della's shoulder on their way past, the way one might touch the shoulder of someone recovering from surgery rather than someone just accused of something.

An older man near Aram — Elan, he thought, though he wasn't certain — murmured to the woman beside him as they rose from the bench, not troubling to lower his voice much, the way old friends talk over things they've discussed before. "Same as they did with Old Rennet's mother, near enough. Woman grieved her son eleven years past what the valley judged decent, and they called the grieving itself the sickness, in the end, not the loss that started it." He said it the way a man mentions weather from a decade back — not unkind, just filed, settled, no longer requiring anyone's alarm.

Aram sat with Sepideh long after the clearing had emptied.

"Where I'm from," he said finally, "we'd say you've just let a man who broke a child's arm walk around free while a woman gets sent home for telling the truth."

"Where you're from," Sepideh said, "you'd also say a man who serves his sentence has paid his debt, and then you'd never let him

forget it anyway, would you. Not really. You'd still lock your door around him. Still tell your children a version of his name to be careful of." She looked at him, and there was no triumph in it, only the tired patience of someone repeating an argument she no longer expected to win but hadn't stopped believing. "We don't pretend the debt is ever fully paid, either. We just decide the paying happens in the open, in front of people who'll actually watch him do it, instead of behind a wall where nobody has to look at what mending even requires. You tell me which one's the illusion, Aram. I've never been sure it's ours."

He thought of what Elan had said about Old Rennet's mother, and did not ask about it, and was aware, even as he stayed silent, that his silence was its own small act of not-quite-seeing — the very thing the valley did to whoever it decided not to look at, done now by him, on a smaller scale, for the first time.

SEVEN. WEIGHT

By the second week, Aram had stopped keeping careful track of the days, which he understood, distantly, as its own kind of surrender — one more thing measured against the valley's rhythms instead of the calendar he'd arrived with.

Sepideh had taken to walking with him in the evenings, after the second bell, when the clearing emptied and the work of the day settled into the low murmur of people cooking, mending, sitting together in doorways with nothing urgent left to do. It was on one of these walks, past the garden rows gone violet in the last light, that she told him — without any particular weight in her voice, the way she told him most things — that she was bonded.

"To whom?"

"Corwin's brother. Petar." She said it plainly, watching a moth circle a lantern someone had hung on a fence post. "Six years now. We renewed last spring."

"And you're out here walking with me every evening."

"Yes." She looked at him, and there was no guilt in her face, which he found, in that moment, almost harder to sit with than guilt

would have been. "Where you're from, I think that sentence is supposed to frighten you. Here it's just a sentence. Petar knows I walk with you. If it became more than walking, he'd know that too, eventually, because I'd tell him, the way I'd expect him to tell me."

"That's not how bonds work where I'm from."

"I know how they work where you're from," Sepideh said. "The bond is the whole house, and anything outside it is a fire that has to be hidden or it burns the house down. Here the bond is the thread, not the house. What happens outside the thread doesn't burn anything, as long as it's spoken. It's the hiding that burns things, Aram. Always the hiding. We decided a long time ago that desire was going to happen regardless of what anyone promised, and the only real choice left to a person was whether to lie about it afterward."

"And Petar's never — "

"Once. Two winters ago. A woman visiting from the eastern camp. He told me the night it happened, sat right where you're standing, and I was angry for exactly as long as it took me to remember I'd rather know a true thing that hurt than live inside a comfortable one that didn't." She said this without performance, the way a person recounts weather they've made peace with. "You're allowed to think that's naive. Most people from your world do, right up until the year they find out the comfortable thing was a lie the whole time, and then they're not so sure anymore which of us was naive."

He didn't answer. The lantern moth had given up on the flame and settled instead on the fence post beside it, wings folding slow.

"I'm not telling you this to invite anything," Sepideh said, after a while, quieter now. "I'm telling you because you've been careful with me in a particular way for two weeks, the careful of a man who's decided wanting something here would be a betrayal of someone. I wanted you to know there's no one here for it to betray, in the way you mean. Just Petar, who already knows more about tonight than you do."

"That doesn't make it simple."

"No," she agreed. "It just makes it honest. Those aren't the same thing, and I've never understood why your world keeps confusing them."

He looked at her a long moment in the fence-post light, and did not move toward her, and did not move away either, and something in the not-deciding felt, for the first time since the cattle guard and the road that gave out, less like paralysis and more like an actual choice being weighed, carefully, the way the valley weighed everything — slow, unhurried, in no rush to arrive anywhere before it was ready.

"Ask me again in a week," he said finally.

Sepideh smiled, small and real. "That's the first thing you've said since you got here that sounded like this place is starting to work on you."

EIGHT. WEIGHT

The children of Pleroma ran loose through the clearing in a way that had unsettled Aram from his first morning and had only grown stranger the longer he watched it — not because they were unsupervised, but because they seemed to belong to everyone and no one with an evenness that never varied by household.

He asked Sepideh about it directly, on a morning when a boy of perhaps six had fallen and skinned his knee near the well, and three different adults from three different houses had reached him at nearly the same moment, with the same unhurried competence, none of them showing the particular urgency he'd have expected from an actual parent.

"Whose is he?" Aram asked, once the boy had been set right and sent off again, laughing already.

"Rane's, by blood, if that's what you're asking. But you're asking the wrong question." Sepideh watched the boy go. "We stopped keeping that question at the center of things two generations back. Every child here is raised by the row, not the house. Blood tells you where a child started. It doesn't tell you who they belong to, and we decided a long time ago those two things had been confused with

each other for most of human history, to nobody's benefit but the parent's pride."

"That's not how I'd want to raise a child."

"Most people from your world wouldn't. It's not really about wanting, though. It's about what the wanting costs." She said this the way she said most of the valley's harder truths, without heat, laying it down flat for him to look at rather than pushing it toward him. "A child raised by one house learns to need that house specifically, and grief, when it comes — and it always comes, Aram, a parent dies, a parent leaves — grief like that can break a small person clean through, because the whole world was one roof and the roof came off. A child raised by the row loses a roof and still has nine others standing. We didn't do this to be strange. We did it because we got tired of watching what the old way did to children when the one thread holding their world together snapped."

He thought about that for a long moment, and thought, too, about Nour, and the way her silence these eleven months had never once felt to him like grief for their mother, or worry for him, in the particular shape he'd have recognized from his own family's roof.

"Does anyone know," he asked slowly, "which children are — which pairs made which child? Actually know, not by blood record, but who was with whom, when?"

Something shifted in Sepideh's face — not evasion exactly, more like the look of someone stepping carefully around a floorboard she knew from long habit not to trust. "Some do. Some don't ask, because asking's considered a kind of hoarding — wanting to hold a claim on a child the row's already agreed to share. It isn't forbidden to know, Aram. It's just not thought well of to need to."

"That sounds like a very convenient way to make sure nobody ever has to answer for who they slept with."

"It sounds that way from outside, yes." She met his eyes, and there was something almost tired in it, an old argument worn thin from handling. "From inside, it sounds like a way of making sure no child ever has to carry a parent's shame as their own inheritance. I've

watched both versions, Aram. I grew up in the row. I still don't know, some mornings, which one is the kinder lie."

He didn't answer that either, and later, walking alone past the garden rows in the fading light, he found himself doing arithmetic he didn't want to be doing — counting backward from eleven months, trying and failing to make the numbers land anywhere that didn't frighten him, and understanding, for the first time since the cattle guard, that he had come here to find his sister and might instead be about to find something about her he had no right to ask for and no way, now, to un-ask.

NINE. THRESHOLD

They carried the body out at dawn, before the first bell, on a wooden platform borne by six men who traded the weight between them without any visible signal, the way people do a task they've rehearsed since childhood without ever calling it rehearsal.

Aram had asked, the night before, if he should stay away. Sepideh had looked at him as if the question itself was the strange part. "You'd stay away from a wedding too, if we let you, given how your face gets. This isn't different. Come."

The dead man was called Josef, and he had been, by every account Aram gathered walking to the platform site at the valley's eastern edge, unremarkable in the specific way long, well-lived lives are unremarkable — eighty-some years, a wife predeceased, children scattered into the row generations back until the word his no longer attached cleanly to any one of them. The platform stood on four stone legs at the edge of a low bluff, open to the sky, and the body was laid on it wrapped only in pale cloth, no coffin, no earth, nothing between him and the air.

"We don't bury," Sepideh said, beside him. "The ground's for growing things that are still becoming something. He's finished becoming. He goes to what unmakes things faster — sun, weather, the birds, in the end. It isn't cruelty. It's the fastest way we know to let a person stop being a shape and go back to being everything else."

There was no wailing, no black cloth, nothing in the gathered crowd's bearing that read to Aram as grief in any language he recognized. People sang instead — the same low, unhurried melody he'd heard through the wall his first night, dozens of voices threading a tune with no clear beginning, and beneath the singing, plates of food were already being passed hand to hand along the gathered rows, the way food moves at any long table.

"It looks like a party," he said, quieter than he meant to.

"It's supposed to, some. We don't think grief and celebration are opposites, the way your world does. We think they're the same feeling wearing two coats, and a person's allowed to put on whichever one fits that hour." Sepideh's voice had gone soft in a way he hadn't heard from her before. "Josef used to say dying badly was the last chance a person got to teach the row something. He wanted to teach us it didn't have to be dressed only in black."

Aram found himself, an hour later, sitting apart from the singing beside an old woman he didn't recognize, who'd settled onto the same low wall he had without asking permission, the way everyone in this valley seemed to do everything.

"You're the brother," she said. It wasn't a question either; nobody here seemed to ask things they already knew.

"Aram."

"I'm called Rennet's mother, mostly, though I had a name before that, same as everyone does before the row decides what to call you." She watched the singers a moment. "You looked at me the way people look at something they've been told about but not shown. Elan talks, I know. He means well by it. Everyone here means well, that's the trouble with the place, if you want to hear it put plainly."

"He said your grief was called a sickness."

"It was." She said this without flinching, the way Sepideh laid down hard truths flat instead of pushing them at him. "My son died at nineteen. Fell from the north ridge, doing something foolish the way boys that age do something foolish everywhere, I imagine, not just here. I grieved him the way I think any mother would — and I

kept grieving him past the season, past the year, past the second year, and somewhere in there the row decided the grieving itself had become the wound, not the loss that started it. They didn't punish me for it. They treated me for it. Excused from duties, given rest, given quiet, given Bahram's father, who kept this seat before him, sitting with me the way Bahram sits with troubled people now."

"That's not the same as calling it a sickness."

"Isn't it?" She turned to look at him fully for the first time, and her eyes were entirely without self-pity, which unsettled him more than tears would have. "You come from a place, I think, where grief that lasts too long gets a name too — they just call it by a different word, and give it a different kind of rest, and still decide, eventually, in their own quiet way, that a mother should be done with a dead son by some particular year or there's something wrong with her that needs managing. We're not so different in the deciding, Aram. We're only different in how honestly we say we're doing it."

"And were they right? That it had become something else, past the loss."

The old woman was quiet a long moment, watching the platform, where Josef's shape had gone very still and very small against the widening morning sky.

"I don't know," she said finally. "That's the part nobody tells you about being told your grief is a sickness, whether it's told kindly or cruelly. You start to lose the thread of which one it ever was. I think that not-knowing is its own kind of loss, on top of the first one. I've never decided if the row owes me an apology for that, or if I owe myself one for letting them convince me to stop asking."

He left her there and walked the long way back through the trees rather than through the singing crowd, and it was on that path, without meaning to, that he came again within sight of the low stone building at the valley's edge — the one he'd been told twice not to approach, the one whose scream had held that long unbroken note six nights before.

In daylight it looked ordinary. Squat, gray, unremarkable stone, the kind of building a valley like this would use for grain or tools. He stood at a respectful distance and counted its doors again, the way he had from his window, telling himself this time he'd be careful, he'd be exact, he'd account for the angle and the light and every reasonable explanation before he let himself be unsettled by arithmetic.

Four visible walls. Five doors.

He counted again. Still five.

Sepideh found him there, appearing the way she always seemed to appear, without the sound of her arrival preceding her.

"You shouldn't be this close," she said, but without urgency, the way one says a house rule rather than a warning.

"How many doors does that building have?"

She looked at it, genuinely, unhurriedly, the way she looked at anything he asked her to look at — and something in her gaze simply failed to catch on the question, slid past it the way his eyes might slide past a word repeated too many times to still mean anything.

"It has a door," she said. "Why would it need more than one door, Aram? It's a small building."

He looked at her, and looked back at the building, and did not say what he'd counted, because he understood, standing there in the ordinary morning light with a funeral song still drifting through the trees behind him, that he had just asked a question this valley was constitutionally unable to hear, and that the not-hearing frightened him considerably more than a true answer would have.

TEN. WEIGHT

He found her three days after the funeral, in the last hour before dusk, sitting alone on a bench behind the grain store where the valley's ordinary traffic didn't pass.

She was old, though not as old as Rennet's mother — sixty, perhaps, with the kind of stillness Aram had started to recognize as

a specific valley dialect, the stillness of someone who has stopped expecting to be spoken to and has built a life around the absence rather than the presence of it.

"You're the one," he said, and did not know how to finish the sentence, because he did not have a name for what she was the one of.

"I'm the one nobody in this valley can quite remember to look at," she said, without bitterness, as if she'd rehearsed the sentence enough times that its edges had worn smooth. "You've noticed. I saw you notice, twice now. You're the first person in three years who's finished the thought."

"What happened to you?"

"I lied, once, about something that mattered to a household that wasn't mine to lie about. Not a small lie. The kind that costs someone else something real." She folded her hands the way Della had folded hers at the hearing. "There was no trial for it. That's the part that took me longest to understand. A trial would have meant they still saw me clearly enough to be angry. What happened instead was quieter. People simply began finding it easier not to include me in the day's accounting. Not cruelly. Not all at once. Just — easier."

"That's not justice. That's just being erased."

"I've had three years to decide what to call it, and I still don't have a better word than the one you just used." She looked at him directly then, the first person in this valley, he realized, who had looked at him with something like relief at being looked at herself. "I'm fed. I'm housed. No one has ever raised a hand to me. If you asked the row whether Pleroma has ever harmed anyone, they'd tell you truthfully — truthfully, Aram — that it hasn't. And they'd be describing exactly what happened to me while believing every word of it."

He asked Sepideh about her again that night, more carefully this time, watching her face rather than her words.

"There's no one behind the grain store," Sepideh said, and it wasn't a lie in the shape he recognized lying to take — her eyes didn't flick

away, her voice didn't catch. She simply, genuinely, did not have the woman anywhere in her.

"I spoke to her. She has a name. She told me what happened."

"Aram." Sepideh's voice gentled, the way one gentles a voice for someone who might be unwell. "I've walked past that grain store every day for six years. There's nothing behind it but the drying racks."

He understood, standing there, that he had reached the one place in this valley where Sepideh's honesty and the valley's cruelty were, impossibly, the same fact wearing the same face — that she was not protecting a secret, because there was no secret left in her to protect. The row had decided, collectively, unhurriedly, the way it decided everything, to stop carrying a woman's existence, and the row had simply set the weight down and walked on, the way it had taught him to set down every heavier thing since the morning he'd learned to say Sraosh Naosh and mean it, a little, against his will.

ELEVEN. VIGIL

Bahram found him at the tool shed the next morning, and this time it was Aram who spoke first.

"Tell me what the Vigil actually is. All of it. I'm done being told I'll understand when I've earned it."

The old man studied him a long moment, and something in his face — not surprise, something closer to a decision finally being permitted to arrive — settled before he spoke.

"Sit," Bahram said, and Aram sat.

"The Vigil is Haoma taken concentrated, alone, over days, in the stone house at the valley's edge. Not the thin drink from the bowl. The full weight of it. A person goes in themselves, and something in them — I won't pretend to know exactly what, after sixty years of watching it happen — comes apart and is given the chance to reassemble differently. Some come out lighter. Some come out changed in ways the row is still learning to live beside. One, in my own lifetime, did not come out changed at all, and had to be sent to

live at the valley's far edge because whatever the Vigil was supposed to loosen in him only tightened instead."

"Who's chosen?"

"One a year. Chosen by Weight — but not, I think, the way you're imagining. Not the highest Weight as reward. Sometimes the highest, because the row trusts them to carry what the Vigil shows without breaking. Sometimes the lowest, because the row has run out of other ways to reach someone, and the Vigil is the last door left to try before the row gives up entirely on bringing them back in."

"And the woman behind the grain store. Did anyone ever offer her the Vigil?"

Bahram was quiet long enough that Aram understood the silence was itself an answer.

"No," Bahram said finally. "By the time we'd stopped seeing her clearly enough to know she needed anything, we'd also stopped being able to see that we owed her the offer. That's the failure I carry, Aram, more than any other in this valley. Not that we're cruel. We're rarely cruel on purpose. It's that our kindness has a floor to it, and once someone falls through that floor, our tools for pulling them back up stop registering that there's anyone left to pull."

"Is that what the Vigil dose depends on? Weight?"

"Yes." Bahram met his eyes without flinching, the same steadiness Aram had first found unnerving and now, strangely, trusted more than anything else in the valley. "The higher your Weight, the gentler the dose — we trust you to find your own way back through less. The lower, the harder — we believe you need the floor pulled out further before you'll grip anything on the way back down."

"And mine?"

Bahram didn't answer right away, and in the not-answering, Aram felt something settle into place that he'd been circling without naming since the cattle guard — the sense that his arrival here had never been neutral, that every day of work, every bowl of Haoma,

every walk with Sepideh had been quietly, unhurriedly, accruing toward a number he hadn't known was being kept.

"You'll know when you're chosen," Bahram said. "Not before. I've told you more today than I've told an outsider in a decade, Aram. Don't make me regret the rest of it by asking me to hand you the ending before you've earned the right to live it."

TWELVE. WEIGHT

He found Nour on a morning like any other, tending a row of beans behind a house he hadn't been shown before, and she straightened at the sound of his footsteps as though she'd been expecting him for weeks rather than months.

"Took you long enough," she said, and her voice was exactly her voice, entirely unchanged, which undid him more than any transformation could have.

They sat together in the shade of the house's eave, and for a while neither of them said anything worth saying, the way siblings sometimes need an hour of nothing before they can afford the something.

"Are you happy," he asked finally, hating how small the question sounded once it was out of him.

"I'm something," Nour said. "I'm not sure happy's the right word, but I don't think it was the right word for the life I had before either, and at least here I stopped pretending it was." She looked at him, and there was no performance in her face, no zealotry, none of the glassy conviction he'd half-braced himself for since that conversation across their old kitchen table. "I know what you've seen. Sepideh told me. The woman behind the grain store."

"You knew about her."

"I was the one who tried to change it." Nour's hands went still in her lap. "Three years ago, when it started — when the row began finding it easier not to include her. I argued for her. Loudly, the way you'd have argued. And I watched what it cost me to keep arguing — my own Weight thinning, people finding it a little easier not to include me either, for a season, as if the row was testing

whether I'd let go before it had to force the matter." She exhaled, slow. "I let go, Aram. I told myself I'd fight it more carefully, later, from inside, once I had more Weight to spend. Later never came. That's the part I live with. Not that I'm cruel. That I found out, here, exactly how much cruelty I have in me when the cost of kindness gets specific enough."

"There's a child," he said, quiet, the arithmetic finally spoken instead of merely counted.

"There was." She didn't flinch from it. "The row has her now. I see her most days, same as everyone sees every child, and I love her the way I love any of them, and I don't know which of the fathers she came from, and I've made a kind of peace with not knowing that I don't expect you to understand, because I'm not sure I understand it either, most mornings."

"Come home with me, Nour."

"This is home." She said it gently, not as a rebuke. "I know you came here to save me from something. I let you believe that longer than I should have, because it was easier than telling you the truth, which is that I'm not being kept here. I'm choosing it, the way the Reweaving asks people to choose it, out loud, even on the days the choosing costs something." She took his hand, the way she used to when they were children crossing a street their mother thought too busy. "I'm not asking you to choose it too. I'm asking you to let me have chosen it, without needing it to be a rescue for either of us."

THIRTEEN. THRESHOLD

Sepideh told him the story on the last cool evening before the season turned, sitting on the same fence-post bench where she'd first told him about Petar.

"The founders didn't come here poor," she said. "That's the part people get wrong when they imagine communes built out of failure. They came here exhausted — successful, most of them, by every measure the world outside gives that word, and hollowed out by the cost of staying successful. Sixty-some years ago. A dozen families,

walking away from lives that were, on paper, exactly what they were supposed to want.”

“And the valley was empty.”

“Mostly.” Something in her voice thinned, the way it had the day he’d first asked about the doors. “There was a smaller camp here already. Older. A handful of people who’d left the world a generation before the founders, for reasons nobody kept careful record of. The founders’ own accounts disagree about what happened between the two groups. One version says they merged, peacefully, gratefully, the older camp teaching the newer one half of what became our practices, Haoma included. Another version — the one nobody tells at the Reweaving, the one I only heard once, from Rennet’s mother, on a night she’d had more wine than she meant to — says there was a dispute about the land, and the smaller camp didn’t leave willingly, and something happened at the valley’s edge that the founders spent the next sixty years quietly declining to finish the story of.”

“Which version do you believe?”

“I believe the row chose the kinder version because the kinder version was easier to raise children on,” Sepideh said. “I believe that’s exactly the same instinct that unwitnessed the woman behind the grain store, and reclassified Rennet’s mother’s grief, and decided a man’s broken sentence was less dangerous to keep telling than an unbroken one. We didn’t build a paradise here, Aram. We built a very good, very patient machine for deciding which true things are worth the cost of remembering out loud. Most days, I think that machine is kinder than the one you grew up inside. Some days — tonight, telling you this — I’m not so sure it’s anything but the same machine, wearing softer clothes.”

FOURTEEN. VIGIL

The bell rang differently the morning they came for him — four tones instead of three, low enough that Aram felt it in his sternum before he understood what it meant, and Sepideh’s face at his door told him the rest before she spoke a single word.

"It's you," she said. "Today."

He walked to the stone house at the valley's edge with Bahram on one side and Sepideh on the other, neither speaking, the whole row falling into a loose procession behind them that felt, despite everything, less like a punishment and more like a wedding he hadn't agreed to attend.

Inside, the building was larger than its walls should have allowed — he understood this now not as an error of counting but as a simple fact of the place, the way a dream's rooms multiply without needing an architect to explain them. Doors opened onto other doors. A window looked out on a version of the clearing that wasn't, quite, the one he'd left.

Bahram pressed a clay bowl into his hands — darker than the daily drink, thick as syrup, bitter enough that his whole jaw ached at the smell of it before he'd swallowed a drop.

"Your dose is heavier than I'd have chosen for you a month ago," Bahram said, quiet, honest to the last. "The row doesn't yet trust what you'll do with what you've learned here. I won't pretend that isn't why. I only promise you I'll be outside the whole time, and I'll be honest with you after, whatever you become inside."

He drank.

What followed did not arrive as vision so much as accumulation — the woman behind the grain store, seated calmly in a doorway that hadn't existed a moment before, watching him without reproach; Della's folded hands; Rennet's mother's slow, patient not-knowing; Nour's child, faceless, beloved, unclaimed; the founders' two stories running side by side down a hallway that kept lengthening no matter how far he walked it, refusing, the way the valley itself refused, to resolve into a single true version. He understood, somewhere in the unmeasured hours that followed, that the Vigil was not going to show him whether Pleroma was a cult or a culture, because the valley itself did not know, had never known, had built sixty years of gentle, patient machinery on the not-knowing and called the not-knowing peace.

Sraosh, he thought, or tried to think, the actual word beneath the rhyme, the hearkening the whole valley had spent sixty years training itself toward and, in the same motion, training itself away from whatever hearkening might have cost them to actually hear.

He came back to himself on the third morning, Bahram's hand steady on his shoulder, the ordinary too-bright light of the clearing pouring through a door that was, this time, only a door.

"Well?" Bahram asked, and for once did not soften the question with patience.

"I don't know yet," Aram said, and understood, saying it, that this was the truest sentence the valley had taught him to say.

FIFTEEN

He told Bahram his decision on the fourth morning, in the ordinary light of the clearing, with no ring gathered to witness it and no bell yet rung to mark it.

"I'm taking Nour's answer as her own," he said. "I'm not taking her. She already told me that isn't mine to take."

Bahram nodded, unsurprised, the way he was unsurprised by most things a person eventually became honest enough to say to him.

"And yourself?"

Aram had turned this over through three sleepless nights since the stone house, through the ache still sitting behind his eyes, through everything he now knew and couldn't unknow — the woman behind the grain store, the doors that multiplied, Nour's calm unclaimed daughter, the two founding stories running side by side and refusing to resolve. He had tried, lying awake, to weigh the valley the way the valley weighed everything, and had found, each time, that the scale simply would not settle.

"I'm leaving," he said. "Not because I think you're wrong about everything. I don't. I think you've built something that costs people more honestly than the place I came from costs them, and I'm not sure honesty about a cost makes the cost smaller, but I think it might make it easier to survive. I just don't think I can live inside a

kindness with a floor in it. I've seen what happens to the people who fall through."

"That's a fair reason to go," Bahram said. "It's also, I'll tell you honestly, the same reason three people have stayed, having reasoned it exactly the other way — that a kindness with a floor, openly admitted, is still more than the world outside ever offered them in writing." He extended his hand, an outsider's gesture, one Aram hadn't seen him make to anyone else in the valley. "You're welcome at the gate whenever you want to stand at it again, Aram. Guest or brother or something we haven't got a word for yet. The row doesn't close doors the way your world does. We just stop being sure, sometimes, who's still standing in them."

Sepideh walked him to the cattle guard the following dawn, the same unmarked threshold he'd crossed a season ago expecting iron and finding none.

"Ask me again in a week, you said," she reminded him, almost gently. "That was two months ago."

"I know."

"And your answer."

He looked back once at the valley — the low adobe roofs catching first light, smoke beginning to rise from a dozen kitchens, the shape of a life that had very nearly become his — and then at her, close enough that the not-deciding from that first fence-post evening still hung, unfinished, between them.

"I think some part of me will always be sitting at that table with the bowl going around," he said. "I don't think that's the same as staying."

Sepideh accepted this without argument, the way she'd accepted most things about him, weighing it in that quiet, unhurried way that had first unsettled him and now, he understood, he would miss more than almost anything else about this place.

"Sraosh Naosh," she said, at the gate, not as ritual this time, just as herself — a woman saying goodbye the only way this valley had ever taught her to.

He drove until the cattle guard was a rumor in the mirror, until the paved road resumed beneath his tires like a language he'd half-forgotten how to speak, and did not, for a long time, turn on the radio, or check his phone, or reach for any of the thousand small machineries he'd have reached for without thinking a season ago — sat instead in the ordinary present tense of the drive, the wheel in his hands, the light on the windshield, nothing else having happened yet — and understood, with a clarity that felt less like relief than like grief wearing a coat he hadn't chosen, that Pleroma had gotten what it wanted from him after all, whether or not he ever went back through that gate again.

GLOSSARY

Haoma [HOW-muh] — Avestan. The pressed sacred drink of the Zoroastrian rite, and the divinity of the plant it is pressed from — the Avestan cousin of the Vedic soma. Which plant is genuinely unsettled: ephedra is the leading candidate and not a settled one, and the effect the rite sought is usually read as alertness rather than vision.

Kenoma [keh-NOH-ma] — Greek, *emptiness*. In Gnostic cosmology, everything outside the Pleroma — not the material world alone but the whole graded region of lack below it. The word is the title's and it is never spoken in the book, which has no name for the place Aram comes from.

Pleroma [pleh-ROH-ma] — Greek, *fullness*. The realm of the true God and the Aeons: complete, and not therefore simple — the Valentinian Pleroma is finely structured, and its own story is one of being disturbed from inside. It is what the valley named itself.

Sraosh [SRAH-osh] — Avestan, *hearkening, obedience*. From a root meaning to hear. In Zoroastrian belief Sraosha is the divine being of attentive listening, who watches over a soul for the three nights after death and conducts it onward on the fourth morning. The valley says his name every dawn and does not say who he is.

Eleven months after his sister walked into an unmarked commune called Pleroma, Aram follows her past a cattle guard and a road that simply stops being maintained.

Inside, almost everything he understands as human has been quietly turned over. Crime is treated as sickness, and sickness is nursed rather than punished. Marriage is chosen out loud once a year or dissolved without shame. Children belong to the row, not to the house. A clay bowl goes hand to hand at every meal, not to open visions but to bind a table to itself.

Nour is not being kept there. She says so, and she is telling the truth, and that is the part he did not come prepared for.

Then Aram meets a woman sitting on a bench behind the grain store, whom no one in the valley can any longer remember to look at — and who has not been harmed by anyone, in a place that has never harmed anyone, and is being erased all the same.

A kindness with a floor in it.

ROYA PUBLICATIONS

