

THE CULT

South of Tucson, AZ

I step into the cafe, have a seat on a bar stool, set my helmet on the counter, and order coffee and the breakfast that the hostess recommends. As I sit and wait, I find myself staring down at the ring finger of my right hand. A week ago I managed to give it a not-small cut while opening a beer bottle. Today, there's only one red speck where it's still healing, and a faint scratch where the rest of the already-healed wound was. I marvel at how the body heals. It seems passive, unimpressive, like something that actually should work better than it does, but it's remarkable that we do this at all, and I find myself thankful. I wonder whether it would have been more interesting to get into biology. I glance to my left hand, where the fingers are limp on account of my now-ex stabbing me across all of my tendons. I give my left hand a nod to my right. "Catch up."

The hostess comes over and slides a collection of condiments across the counter to me.

I am confused and then embarrassed. "Sorry, I was—sorry. Talking to myself."

I hear a bell ring as the door opens behind me.

"Have a seat anywhere, hon," the hostess calls over me to the new patron, and turns to grab him a menu.

The only ones eating here are one other man at the opposite end of the bar and a trio in a booth. The newcomer takes a seat right beside me and thanks the hostess as he accepts the menu.

As he's reading it, I steal a glance at him. He is dressed like Obi Wan Kenobi in the prequels but his face is pudgier and a lot more sunburned.

"I'll have an order of hash browns and toast, with no butter on the toast if it comes that way. Thank you." The hostess takes his menu and leaves.

Now that she's gone, I stare at him as conspicuously as I can.

He gives me a grin back. "Your bike outside?"

"Do I know you?"

I think it was being stabbed that made me care less about being rude to people who are imposing on my life anyways.

He reaches and I lean back wondering if I'm about to try to kill someone. But he reaches past me to my helmet, and taps the pride sticker on the side. "I took us to have the same father." He sits back upright—I notice then that his posture is impeccable—and he taps on a wooden cross that hangs from a length of twine around his neck.

I relax a little even though this should not be a sign to me that things are about to be going better. "If you're trying to say God hates fags, this is a real roundabout setup."

My plate arrives, stacked with eggs, sausage, bacon, and hash browns. I thank the hostess and start on the sausage, keeping the corner of my eye focused on this stranger.

Something seems to have made him confused. "The rainbow. I took it as..."

I'm not from around here, but I'm surprised anyone wouldn't recognize the pride flag.

"I think I've misunderstood," he admits.

I nod, and I want to thank him for admitting as much, but I also want him to go away, but I also don't. "What's your name?"

"Joshua," he tells me.

"Marc," I offer, and extend my good hand. We shake.

"What do you do, Marc?"

"Professor most of the year," I answer, between bites of hash brown. "Mathematics. Decided to actually take summer vacation off though. Call it a rare sabbatical. What do you do?"

"Farm hand," he answers, in a way that leads me to believe he's lying but that the real answer is more complicated.

We get to chatting. His meal arrives and we keep chatting. When I've finished mine, I stick around. I have learned, in the course of our conversation, that he is a member of a cult. He doesn't call it that, but. It is one. He's on a sabbatical from his work too.

"Forgive me if it's too much of an imposition, but if you'd let me—I've always wanted to drive a motorcycle."

I snicker involuntarily. "You would die," I tell him frankly. "But if you want a ride, I'm northbound out of here."

He clasps his hands together and nods. We each pay and head outside.

North of Boulder, CO

Joshua and I sit beside each other at a camp fire. Behind us a ways is his tent, which I have learned to help assemble and disassemble. Nobody else is at the campsite.

"It's similar to Rumspringa," he is telling me.

My head is occupied, tilted back to drink from my whiskey bottle, so to stop him I reach out and put a limp hand on his face. When I'm done swallowing my sip, I tell him, "That doesn't help me. Back up a step."

He takes a few seconds to consider, and then begins again. "Before marriage, each partner is encouraged to go out and seek other lovers. This is a test to see, even if informed of what other relationships could be, whether a couple truly wishes to be wed."

I had started taking another sip, but I cut myself off for fear of spitting it out. "You're on this? Are you telling me you're engaged?"

He nods. "I am."

"And... what is her name?"

"His name. Levi. And if you have any interest... I would ask if you'd be part of our journey. I like you quite a lot, Marcus."

Words failing me, I grab him by the wrist and bring us back to his tent. Halfway there I fall over, and we settle on the grass.

North of Plano, TX

"Is he also a member of your cult?"

“It isn’t a cult.”

I kiss his thigh and amend my question. “Does he also subscribe to your religious beliefs?”

“He does not.”

I nod, and get back to it.

East of Iowa City, IA

Joshua orders the tomato soup and a salad. I am not vegan, but I also don’t want to suffer his judgment during the meal, so I order the same.

“I’m going to miss you,” I tell him honestly.

“You’re welcome to join us.”

I shake my head. “Even if I did, I’m going to miss *this*.”

He nods.

“I’m happy for you though,” I tell him honestly.

“Thank you,” he says. “I’ll miss this too, I imagine. But I miss him even now.”

I nod.

“Don’t feel obligated, but it would mean a lot if you would bear witness at our wedding.”

I nod, and smile—at first politely, but then honestly. “It would mean a lot to me too, actually. Thank you.”

North of Bangor, ME

Joshua and I walk up the miles-long wilderness driveway to his cult. I left my motorcycle in a wooden shack about a quarter mile in, confident that nobody will be out this far to bother stealing it.

“Are you ready to meet him?” Joshua asks.

I tell him I am.

Joshua brings a hand to his mouth. He blows into his fingers to produce a whistle so loud that I’m surprised it can be made by a human being.

Soon, I hear the thundering of footsteps coming from up the trail ahead of us. Bounding around the corner is a dalmatian. The giant dog bounds up to Joshua and the two of them collide with each other, falling over in a blur of petting and licking.

Joshua tells the dog how much he's missed them, how happy he is to be back. Eventually the dog looks at me, still pressed to Joshua's side, wagging. I am waiting for Levi to come following after his dog.

"Go on, boy," Joshua tells the dog.

The dog comes over to me and sniffs me up and down, and I give him a few pets, but the dog pretty quickly loses interest and heads back over to Joshua.

"This is Levi," Joshua says, looking up at me while crouched beside the standing dalmatian, an arm wrapped over the elated dog's back.

"I—" Shit. Oh, shit. "Joshua, I knew you liked doggy style, but this is ridiculous."

Joshua snorts, and then falls over laughing, mainly thanks to Levi coming to assist by slobbering ticklishly all over Joshua's face. Once he's gotten the dalmatian off of him and gathered himself, I help him stand, give him a hug, and the three of us proceed onward.

I meet Joshua's parents, his siblings, his friends and neighbors, and am surprised that they are not all that different to a lot of the other people I've met on this trip.

In the afternoon, under an acacia tree, the town is gathered. Nearest the tree is Levi, Levi's mother, Levi's father, Joshua, Joshua's mother, and a priest—Joshua's father. Levi sits at attention, and Joshua kneels in front of him, hands on his canine fiancée's shoulders, looking eye to eye. Joshua promises to have and to hold, for better or worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part.

The priest speaks, "You have declared your consent before the Church. May the Lord in his goodness strengthen your consent and fill you both with his blessings. What God has joined, men must not divide. Amen."

Cheered on by the town and their visitor, Joshua and Levi kiss.