

SHEPHERD

*'I have said these things to you,
that in me you may have peace.
In the world you will have tribulation.
But take heart,
I have overcome the world.'*

John 16:33

The world lay in darkness, at least for the moment. Only seconds remained; the sun had already begun to rise. That suited him fine. Everything that had happened on the face of this earth had been for a reason. Every nail hammered into a board did not just pierce the splintered hide of the top, but wedged itself deep into the structure below to hold its charge in place. He was such a nail. In the same token, Tamworth and its regions were plotted out in the fields and hills. He was driven through the heart of that town to ensure that he and his flock would not only remain, but flourish.

He threw the doona to the side and exposed his nakedness; he stood as his morning hardness swayed about in front of him. The remnants of the passion from last night dried into a milky crust that clotted the thin hairs that shrouded his manhood. As he stretched, he looked back at the bed and the gleaming white flesh of the girl's ass. She was young and pretty, but she fucked like a corpse. At first he had been excited, too excited to enter her. Perhaps it was the softness of her breasts, or the way she squirmed under him, but that was where it ended. The tears and sobs

had started, followed by her refusal to even look at him while he drove himself deeper into her; her response hadn't fuelled his lust, but had driven an icy anger into his gut. She fucked like a corpse, alright, and if that's what she wanted to act like in his suite, then why shouldn't her wish be granted permanently?

He yawned again as he turned away from her. His manhood continuously wagged back and forth as he strolled to the free-standing mirror. The image in the failing darkness of the room was pale. He blinked and tried to free his eyes from the sleep that still shrouded them. This was the best room the Tamworth Hotel had to offer. The carpet was soft and lush under his feet; he almost felt as though he partially sunk a fraction of an inch each time he took a step on its patterned pile. The cornices were decorative and bright with the new coat of paint he had ordered applied. The smell of paint, although was mostly subsided, still lingered, which disappointed him, while the detail of the fleur-de-lis wall paper met his approval. New drapes, sourced from the windows of the wealthiest houses in town, were hung for his pleasure. Likewise, with the clamshell lounge suite that sat awkwardly to the side. However, his most prized possession was his oak desk, ornately carved from a tree that had held such splendour inside of itself. Its surface had been lacquered nearly fifty times to give the timber the impression of a floating pool of water. The leather top was the hide of an elephant, pale and wrinkled to look at. But a softer feeling leather could not be found, not even on the pale ass of the girl that stirred in his bed.

He smiled at his reflection. He studied the rows of the gleaming whites of his teeth, the small lines that formed at the corner of his eyes and the peaks of his lips. Good, but not perfect. He relaxed his face and rubbed at his cheeks with his hands. Again, he smiled, this time he looked at the eyes and the dullness in them. He needed to work on that. He had heard it said many a time before that when people smiled, they did so with their eyes. His were still asleep; that, or unwilling to hide their true nature. As the slits of light slowly illuminated the room, the old salesman sparkle glinted in his eyes at the first hint of the day. He spread his lips a

final time and felt the muscle memory kick in; his back straightened and his shoulders slid back.

‘Good morning, handsome,’ he whispered to himself. He winked and allowed himself a small moment to admire the shape of his body. Everything had been done for a reason, every stone shaped a certain way by the winds to run its course through time. He was shaped, etched and crafted to persuade. Some called it a con. In many ways, everything about him was a con, but that was the dark of the night speaking. There were times for darkness, for cons and lies. Then there were times for daylight, smiles and persuasive comments or suggestions. The moment he stepped out of his suite door, he needed to be in day mode.

As his eyes ran over each perfectly shaped line of his body, his manhood gave a new pulse of vitality. He looked down at his greatest asset, his most loyal soldier, and he smiled softly.

‘What a man does the moment he wakes is his defining character.’ He looked over to the pile of blankets, and shrugged. ‘Let’s see if a goodnight sleep has put some vigour into those bones.’ He strolled over to the bed, roughly threw the covers off, and took her from behind. She screamed anew.

At first, she was dry and gritty, the flesh grabbed as it parted way. Then her body betrayed her and the machine began to slicken. A gasp escaped his open mouth as he climaxed and panted as he felt the heat in his skin. It always took him longer in the morning, but at least it got his heart pumping. He left her without a word, and showered.

While he cleaned the sex from his loins, he whistled to himself. The sound echoed off the gleaming white tiles and resonated in the sparkling brass shower fittings. He continued while he dried himself, used the plush soft cotton towels that were once again seized from the richest households and dressed himself. Once he was dressed, he returned to the mirror. The light of the morning now fully lit the room; he practised his smile once more.

As he did, he took moments to inspect his attire. A man who wished to win the hearts and minds of his followers needed to present humble, he

thought to himself. The R.M Williams' long sleeved shirt, belt and boots combination gave the impression he worked on the farms, a shoveler of shit and a herder of stock, though his hands had never seen a day of hard labour in their life. His labour was persuasion.

The door to his suite opened behind him and he watched in the reflection as a boy carried in a tray of silver, burdened with the glimmering cloches and utensils. The smell of bacon and salt hit his nose, and his stomach growled in anticipation. He adjusted the shoestring tie around his neck while the child placed the dishes noisily on the dining table.

'Good morning, Michael!' Shepherd proclaimed. His well-practised smile radiated from his face. 'I trust you slept well.'

The boy stood in silence at the foot of the table. He stared at the silverware, a blank expression on his face. 'Yes sir, good morning, sir.'

The lines around Shepherd's face deepened as he sat. 'Now Michael, I told you that you don't need to call me sir. Shepherd is fine.' He removed the shining dome from the plate and a cloud of steam rose. Crispy bacon, golden scrambled eggs, sirloin cooked mid-rare and two plump sausages, the flesh of which trembled as the hot grease bubbled beneath. He lifted a second smaller dome to reveal four slices of deep thick golden-brown toast. He took a long, deep breath in through his nose and then closed his eyes and bowed his head and sat in silence for a few seconds. The idea of this was to give everyone the impression that he was thanking the Lord; a godly man was easier to trust. In reality, he took this time to plan his day and the labours he must undertake.

When he opened his eyes, his hands had already moved to pluck the silver utensils from their place on the cotton napkin to his right. The boy had learned quickly. He had taken it on himself to hand pick a certain number of 'newcomers' to serve in his household. Mostly, he had picked the girls. He let them settle themselves in their false dreams of maid work and cookery, then night by night he called upon each of them to serve him as he had fully intended. So far, he had not been pleased. The longest he had held a girl in his service so far was a week. She had been well spirited, the fight within her was deep and hard wired, however she

too, like the others, had become withdrawn and silent before long and that just wouldn't do.

To take the boy on had been a new idea of his. His house servants were not allowed in public sight and his guards had worked tirelessly at first to keep that so. However, the more he spent amongst the people (his people), the more he realised he needed to be seen as a type of father figure, to help persuade them that he indeed thought of them as his flock.

When he had first revealed himself to the country community, he had done so as one of them. A man in the row of chairs that filled the sports field, that spoke up against the then mayor. That fat, bumbling idiot didn't even know what was happening to him as the weeks unfolded. He kept on pledging that the town's police and the army would do nothing but protect the people of Tamworth. How easy it had been to raise the point that by protecting the town, all the town needed to do was give up their sons and young men. Say goodbye to them and send them away. From the row of chairs, he had created dissent.

Then in the church halls he had spoken his mind in the mass while he had volunteered to read the morning psalms. At first the father had been concerned, but the old smooth talking and persuasive tones, with a few bible references thrown in here and there to be sure, had won the congregation. The idea of the flock and that they should hold their strength together had been one of his greatest. He continued to spread his word, person to person, to groups when he could. Once it took hold, he had created his own domino effect. Families convinced other families, friends and neighbours. When the town officials came knocking, looking for the young men to join the ranks, they refused. Mothers stood in front of sons, fathers slammed the doors in the faces of well-dressed officials.

Then it had happened. He knew it was inevitable as he had told his small group of trusted followers back then, Lewis especially. Everything had been placed on this earth for a reason. Each man only walked the path that God had set out for him and by the righteousness of that God above, they walked their path now. The officials had arrived to take the

Murray boy from his family; he had turned eighteen and his time for glory had come. The father had another idea and had threatened the officials with an old rusted shotgun. The officials had drawn their own side arms and the Lord himself held his breath. The town's fate was sealed the moment the young constable had shot the father. Word soon spread and the plans were made.

The more he spoke about that night and the sad story of the Murray household, the better his rendition became. Masses cried out in anger, mothers wept and fire burned in the bellies of men and boys alike.

Lewis helped with the plans; he and his northerner friends had been invaluable to his ascension. As the Lord had once risen from his tomb, he had risen to power. Mobs had lined the streets, they broke down the doors of the lawmen, the mayor and the other town elite. They dragged their naked bodies out into the street.

The final fall of the old town had happened where its decline had first begun, in the southern sports field. The mayor cried and shrieked as the nails were driven through his hands and feet and the cross was raised in the grounds. All of this was to Shepherd's surprise, he hadn't even thought of crucifixion. However, once the rails of chaos had been laid down, the mob was helpless but to follow.

He stood in front of them that night, while the mayor died in agony, the stoned bodies of his family at his feet. In the burning disorder and the death of the old way, he spoke to them about peace, and how a good community should stick together and how he would take each and every one of them under his wing to protect their folk alike. They had held their hands to him and called his name, all the while he had smiled.

That had been over a month ago now, and so much had happened. He had called his flock in; towns like Kootingal, Uralla and Walcha were the first to fall. When he had sold the idea to his flock, it had been about strengthening against the Chinese oppression and they had bought it. The men from Tamworth and the farms that surrounded it, were already absorbed into the militia, the women were put to work on the fields and handled the stock mostly.

The new souls that they needed were for work forces. They needed men to build ramps. He already had men to stand on them and so, they had taken the families from these towns. Those that came willing when he had first sent out his call were treated well enough, there weren't enough houses, so some were given land to live on while hundreds dwelled in communal shelters formed out of long-standing structures, the town hall was one such example. Those that complained were dealt with before the dissent could start again.

Idle hands were the devil's work he knew, so every man in the town had a job. Doctors, teachers and engineers were rounded up. Schools continued, the sick continued to get treated and work began. Those that didn't wish to come were forcefully taken. Their possessions were absorbed and they had a choice: work or die. Most decided to work as he thought they would.

However, there were those that came into the town to spread rumours about him and his cruelty. He knew it was the case, and he continued to make public announcements in person, his smile as warm as it had always been. They continued to look to him as he spoke of holding hands and how sticks are stronger in a bundle than on their own, all the while quoting 'Revelations' or 'Psalms.' The crowds once again looked at him and decided that the rumours couldn't be true.

The one thing that had sealed his grip on the town was the defeat of the Chinese. In truth, he couldn't take the credit for that little gem; they had destroyed themselves mostly in mutiny and desertion when the fuel had dried up, that he could take credit for. By the time the soldiers had marched down the road into town, arranged in a sloppy formation behind their last running tank, Shepherd had smiled. Only a thousand men of the Western contingent had arrived to conquer them. He saw the complete collapse of morale when the tank shuddered and came to a huffing halt only three hundred feet from the first house. He saw the desperation as they walked, and hoped for supplies. The militia had allowed the small column to enter the town entirely before they fell upon them. Rifles rattled from the windows of houses. Farmers ran onto

the street with machetes and farm implements in a brilliant display of bravado and stupidity and like another Domino in his game of glory, the Chinese had fallen.

He witnessed a mutiny in their ranks, where soldiers turned on one of their own officers and dragged him to the ground. He screamed as they pummelled him with the butts of their rifles. He saw lines of men break and turn to flee, only to find waves of Australians behind them. Finally, while men died up and down Peel Street, hands were thrown into the air and they surrendered.

In total, he had been left with no more than four hundred of the Chinese to deal with. Lewis had found a translator and offered those that were left the same choice as he'd offered his new lambs from the other towns: work or die. Some he had amalgamated into his militia, others he sent to work on the farms, spread out amongst the other workers under the watchful eyes of those he could trust. The farmers loved him; they had all the hands for work they had ever needed and didn't have to pay them a dime. Some grumbled at the need to feed their workers and suggested that the township should arrange the food. Shepherd had simply reminded them of the attitude they had once rebelled against and had told them to thank the Lord for the help they now received in these troubled times. Most smiled at him, confusion rampant in their minds, then they nodded and left.

As he finished his breakfast, he looked at the boy who had continued to stare blankly at him while he ate. Here was where he found his new labour; that, or the solution to a problem.

'Tell me, Michael, how is the arena coming along?' He dabbed at the remains of the egg on his face with the napkin.

'Jonathan said to tell you they were on track,' the boy replied flatly.

Although to the rest of the town, Shepherd had pretended to have taken this child as his adopted son, in reality, he had taken him for his

page. At first, he had shown laziness and a small will to defy, but a firm hand had broken him and constant beatings at mistakes had proven him to be a fast learner.

‘I beg your pardon?’ His smile faltered.

‘He said to tell you they were on track, Shepherd.’

‘Very good.’ His smile returned to its usual brilliance. ‘How is Riley?’

Michael hadn’t blinked at any of these questions. However, their eyes met as he spoke the words, ‘He’s dead, sir.’

Shepherd held his gaze as he tried to see if there was some sort of joy beyond that blank expression. As if Riley’s death was a victory for him. ‘Now that is a crying shame.’

Riley had been there when they had brought this boy, the girl and the collapsed giant in. He had taken it upon himself to claim the giant’s rifle. Instantly, he had become withdrawn and silent, a man that had usually been loud, jovial and outspoken, they had all put it down to off days. Two nights ago, he had burst into the Tamworth Hotel, brandished his new rifle and had shot down five men in the common room.

Shepherd himself heard his rantings before he fired; he was not himself. In the last moment, through the tears and undistinguishable language, he had tried to turn the rifle on himself, but had succeeded in only severing his lower jaw. When Shepherd had come downstairs to see what had happened, Riley had just lay there, holding the rifle close to his chest and rocked back and forth. Everyone else had cleared out. Shepherd took the rifle from his hands, and the horrible feeling that had come with it unnerved him.

He looked at the mirror in the corner of the room, at the wall beyond, and shuddered.

‘You know, son,’ Shepherd said as he returned his attention to his reflection, ‘I think it’s time we paid your brother a visit and see how his treatment is coming along.’

Michael remained silent. In the five days since their arrival, Michael had not been permitted to see his brother. Shepherd had gotten most of everything out of him the first time they had sat down and ‘had a talk.’

The boy was Michael Baker, the big sick man was his brother Jack Baker who had been attacked by dogs. He knew where they had lived and that they had moved South to escape their father, who was a drunken bully. But when the questions turned to that rifle, the answers had stopped. No matter how hard he slapped the boy, or pinched his nipple, he wouldn't answer. Shepherd had finally decided that he couldn't answer and had left it.

'Doesn't that make you happy, Michael?' he asked. 'To see your brother? I hear he is healing up fine.' He met the child's gaze and forced his smile to return.

Michael no longer held his eye contact, instead he had returned his focus to the silverware and had begun to tidy up. 'Is he awake?'

Shepherd stood up to have a piss. He placed a hand on the boy's shoulder and turned his head up to look at him. 'Not yet, but maybe today.' He continued to whistle as he urinated, partially to drown out the sobs of the girl that seemed to have regained her consciousness in the bed. He wondered if there had been any more stragglers picked up on the road and whether his trip to Ryan and the prison would present any other specimens for him to view apart from the sleeping giant.

The remains of Billy's face had been a good indicator to suggest that this unique individual would indeed make for the spectacle he was looking for. Poor Billy had been brought back unconscious, along with the rest of them. Jonathan had had a hell of a time trying to lift the big son of a bitch into the back of his LandCruiser with Riley.

Not only had everyone heard that story more than once, but on eight separate occasions, he had brought up his thoughts that he deserved a special reward for bringing the big bastard down. Everyone in the Tamworth Hotel was sick of the story that changed in every retelling of how he heroically beat the crazed bastard within an inch of his life.

Although his effort was admirable, Shepherd was not impressed. The fact that his best doctor, a thin man with glasses by the name of Dyson, had worked tirelessly since his arrival just to keep Jack Baker alive and stave off the infection, had taken a lot of the danger from Jonathan's

story. No doubt, Dyson would already be in the cell tending to his patient. Shepherd fastened the zip on his jeans and left his room.

The drive from the Hotel to the prison was a short one. They kept Jack Baker in the largest cell of the police station. Having no need for a fully operational station, they had converted most of the rooms into cells. Shepherd ignored the pleas of the inmates that recognised him as he walked by. Ryan was at his heels and the small boy brought up the rear. The sound of their footfalls echoed through the concrete halls, only contested by the groans of some and the requests for forgiveness of others.

‘He stirred this morning. We all near shit thought he was coming to,’ Ryan panted as he struggled to keep up.

‘I think it’s still too early for that,’ Shepherd remarked, uninterested. ‘He was too far gone when they brought him in. Patience is a virtue and is one that I am well equipped with.’

Ryan hated the God bothering statements, he knew that. Every day he planned to visit the old station, he had made sure he thought of at least three possible proverbs that he could work into conversation. Why Lewis had decided on picking that man to run the prison was beyond him, but he trusted Lewis and had no need to question his decisions.

Jack Baker’s cell was at the end of the hallway. The tunnel-like corridor stretched forty feet into the darkness. Small light globes protruded from the concrete roof every five feet; the conduit of wire ran crooked along their path. The result was that of a poorly lit underground tunnel that he likened to those of the French catacombs. Cells only lined the left side of the hallway. To the right was a solid concrete wall where folding chairs were placed sporadically for guards to rest their fat asses as they patrolled. He could hear Dyson’s nasal voice as they neared the end. He mumbled something to one of his assistants while the fat guard at the end stood outside the cell door, and leaned on the steel bars as he looked in.

Three men stood over the body of Jack Baker, pulling the stinking white bandages from his skin. They cringed as they threw the puss-ridden gauze to the side and dabbed alcohol onto the wounds. The giant lay on

his back, his eyes closed, the deep heavy breaths rasped through the cell doors as if they belonged to that of a beast. The wound on his face had been the worst. Although he had never been a totally handsome man, they had been forced to cut away the flesh, which distorted the features on his right side. However, from what Shepherd could see under Dyson's moving hands as he lifted the gauze and dabbed more alcohol onto the flesh, he had healed faster than any of them could have thought.

'I'm going to need a hand moving him,' Dyson requested, as he struggled to lift the man's enormous head.

With the doctors' assistants busy tending to other parts of the giant's body, Shepherd looked to the fat guard by his side. 'Are you deaf, son?' The guard shot his head in his direction, a puzzled look on his face.

'No, sir?'

'Well, the good doctor asked for your help.' His smile was as bright and wide as he had ever practised. The guard looked back at the sleeping giant and then nodded his head. He fumbled with the keys and ran the shaft into the lock. There was a loud metallic clunk as the lock released and he slid the door open. As he entered the cell, Shepherd slid the door closed behind him and snapped the lock once more. The guard turned back to him. 'Safety first, young man.'

While Dyson, his two assistants and the guard worried over Jack, Shepherd turned to Michael. The boy had his hands around the cell bars and his face pressed close. The look of concern on his face was endearing; it was the first time he had seen the boy show any form of emotion apart from defiance. He placed a hand on his shoulder and felt the slight flinch. He knew that Michael wanted to pull away but he knew better than to. 'I'll leave you with your brother for a while. I need to talk to Ryan here about some business.'

He gestured toward Ryan, and they walked about twenty feet down the tunnel. 'Ryan, my good man, you haven't happened upon any newcomers?'

Ryan panted as he continued down the tunnel. He almost ran right into Shepherd as he stopped to turn and look at him. Ryan looked

bewildered, ‘Ahh no sir, we haven’t found anything that I think you would find to your liking.’

Shepherd closed a fist around the collar of Ryan’s shirt and pulled him close. ‘Well by Christ, young man, you better keep looking.’ He glanced over Ryan’s shoulder and saw Michael crouch next to the bars, he heard him say his brother’s name in a soft voice. Shepherd turned back to Ryan. ‘You can send someone to pick up the sorry soul that you left me last time. And don’t take—’

From the cell at end of the hallway he heard Dyson cry out. Someone else said, ‘Jesus Christ.’

Then a deep roar that made Shepherd’s heart skip a beat, ripped through the tunnel. Michael had stepped back to the concrete wall. He saw the arm of the guard reach through, as he tried to unlock the door, then the arm was ripped back into the cell. Shepherd ran back down the tunnel, Ryan close on his heels. He could see the keys still jutted out of the lock. Michael was frozen with his back to the wall, a look of horror on his face.

The sounds that came from within the cell were horrific. People screamed and howled over the sounds of squelches and snaps. Shepherd didn’t even look into the cell as it came into view, his vision was fixed on the keys. Without seeing anything else, he rammed the key over to lock side, to make sure it was secured and pulled the keys out. In that exact moment, he saw the blur of a faded navy uniform as the guard’s body was slammed into the bars directly in front of him. He stumbled back and felt his back press against the concrete wall. He finally looked up and saw the figure that stood in front of him.

Beside him, Ryan yammered, ‘Jesus. Fuck!’ as he pulled his pistol from his belt. Shepherd held out a hand as Ryan raised the pistol and he pushed down on the barrel. His heart hammered in his chest. On the floor of the cell lay the twisted, broken remains of what could only be Dyson and his two assistants.

Their limbs were twisted into positions that were not natural. Even as he watched, their coats became a deep red as the blood flowed from their

wounds. One of the men's heads had been crushed against the concrete wall, the blood splatter traced the roof and the three solid walls. Beneath his crushed skull, a pool of red stretched outwards.

Jack Baker stood with his nose to the bars, as tall as the door itself and seemed to take up the whole width. His bandages had unravelled in the carnage and hung loose around him, exposing the black flesh and oozing wounds. As before, his face was the worst. Black lines ran from the hole in his cheek and down his thick neck. The flesh seemed to writhe with each breath he took and each time he clenched his jaw. What gave Shepherd pause were his eyes. They were black, as if his pupil had taken up the entire surface. There was no correlation between his iris and the white globes; the whole things were as black as the dead flesh on his face.

Although he couldn't tell, he was sure that the black eyes were trained on him. It made him uncomfortable even to look at them, but he couldn't turn away. Michael stepped forward to his left, and looked up at his brother.

'Jack?' he sobbed. The dark eyes turned to him. One hand came up and grasped the bars, his palm was so large he was able to wrap his fingers around one bar and his thumb around another.

'No,' the big man said in a deep raspy croak, 'not Jack.'

'Where is he, you sick fuck?!' Michael spat at him. 'All of this was you, wasn't it? All of it!' His voice was shrill and tears had begun to form in his eyes. Inside the cell, the man began to laugh; the cackle was sickening.

Shepherd grabbed Ryan. 'I think it's time you took our young friend to get some rest. He is obviously upset.' Ryan turned to him, his face still pale. As he nodded his jowls shook and he turned. 'Ah, Ryan?' He turned back, his hand on Michael's shoulder. 'Leave me the gun, please.'

Ryan handed it over and escorted the loudly sobbing and swearing Michael out of the tunnel. The metal of the pistol's frame was cool in his hand and it sent shivers up his spine. Everything was too cold down here and the dark didn't help. The man inside the cell still boomed with laughter. He laughed louder the further Ryan led Michael down the hall.

Shepherd waited until he heard the steel door slam shut at the end of the tunnel before he turned back.

No sooner had the steel door shut had the laughter stopped. When Shepherd had turned back to the cell, the black eyes were on him once more. Jack's lip was curled into a snarl and he snorted out of his nose like a bull.

'Open this door,' he said calmly.

'Now, son, you and I both know that isn't going to happen.'

The tyrant shot his hands up and slammed them against the bars. They shook in their frame and dust listed down from the roof.

'You call me son one more time and I'll bust through these fucking bars and push your head out through your ass.' He wrapped his hands around the bars again and the metal groaned as the giant began to clench his fist. Metal flaked above his hand and sifted down to the ground.

'Okay. Okay.' Shepherd pushed the pistol down the back of his pants and held his hands up in a pacifying gesture, as he forced his smile once more. 'What do I call you then? Because apparently, I can't call you Jack.'

It was the right question; the bars fell silent as the fists relaxed. The brute pushed his face closer to the bars, a horrible sneer spread across his face. 'Are you a religious man?' He looked Shepherd up and down.

'I am a man of God-' he began.

'Horse shit!' he bellowed. 'You say that you are and they fall for your shit, the fucking sheep.'

Shepherd pulled over the folding chair and sat down. 'No. You aren't a sheep. You're right about that, and no, I'm not a pious man you're right about that too. I read people. That's my talent, and I see that you aren't a man for bullshit.' The big man snorted. 'So, if you're not a sheep, you're not Jack. Who do I have the pleasure of talking to?'

He snarled back instantly, 'Even though I'm behind these bars, don't talk to me as if you have any power over me.' He spat as he paused. His black eyes never seemed to move from Shepherd's face. 'You're the one that has me locked up here, you tell your name and I'll decide what I tell you.'

‘Shepherd.’

He laughed that horrible cackle again. Then he became serious in a snap once more and clenched the bar. With a roar, the bars groaned and screamed as they noticeably moved under his strength.

‘Liar.’ As he pushed his face close to the bars, the soft light washed over him. Shepherd saw the darkness in the eyes clearer, saw how they rolled in their sockets. ‘You ask who I am, you should ask *what*. But your kind doesn’t understand, you can’t understand. I’ll ask you a question and you better tell me the truth.’ He pushed his face into the bars. ‘Where is it?’

Shepherd paused. He looked to the ground, he needed to choose his words wisely. He thought about Riley; he thought about the new wallpaper. ‘It’s safe.’

‘Safe isn’t a place!’ he sneered.

‘But it wasn’t a lie,’ Shepherd retorted.

The body of Jack Baker spun away from the cell and paced back and forth. In another fit of rage, he raced back to the bars, and spat as he screamed. ‘Where is it?!’

‘I had to hide it.’ Shepherd came back. ‘Something—’

‘Something,’ he leered. ‘Riley.’

Shepherd’s smile wavered. ‘How do you know his name?’

The sneer was back. ‘He was weak.’ He laughed as he said this. ‘You touched it as well. I couldn’t get you though, you didn’t hold it long enough. Wasn’t it nice though? Didn’t you just want to hold it, look at it? Use it?’

Shepherd went quiet. He thought about the horrible feeling that worked through him when he took the rifle from Riley. That odd sensation that crawled through his spine each time he looked to the spot that only he knew existed behind the wallpaper, behind the mirror. He searched deep inside of himself. He was the persuader here not this ... *thing*.

‘I have it and if you want it back, you’ll need to help me with something.’ He stretched his smile out there for good measure.

‘Help you?’ it laughed. ‘I don’t need to help you. You’re so insignificant you can’t even think past yourself.’

‘That may be so, but you’ll never get it back if you don’t.’ His smile, for the first time in a long time, actually seemed genuine. He had this bastard. ‘On the other hand, I could bring it here, in pieces, ground down to nothing more than what it was when it was a piece of bar stock.’

The face darkened. ‘I’ll fucking—’

‘You’ll do what you’re asked otherwise the boy might have an accident as well.’

The giant turned away. ‘I don’t care about the boy.’

‘Ahh, but does Jack?’ The feeling that he had lost control was gone. Shepherd had him now, and they both knew it.

‘Jack doesn’t matter anymore.’ He grumbled, his back to the cell door, his head down. ‘He’s too weak.’

‘And what about his body?’ Shepherd probed.

‘I make his body strong. He didn’t even know what he had.’ It turned back to the door. ‘In Riley, I felt slow and weak. I felt like how I always do in your kind, like nothing. But in this. Even now, sick and broken, I feel strong. For the first time, I don’t even know how strong.’ Then he placed his hands around the bars again. ‘Do you want to find out?’

Shepherd leaned forward, tempting fate. ‘Why don’t we find out together?’ The fist remained relaxed. Deep breaths were the only sound the hallway. ‘You need that body. I’ll fix it for you. In return I have a—’ He paused. He needed to say it right. ‘A favour to ask.’

‘Favours?’ it snarled.

‘It doesn’t even have to be for me. All I need is something that people will remember. I need a champion. In return, you’ll get well. You’ll have the chance to,’ he gestured to the bodies behind him, ‘to do what you are good at.’

For some time, it remained silent behind the bars. It didn’t move or talk, it just stared at him. Then with a deep rushing exhale it said ‘Let me ask you something.’ As it bent down and grasped the limp guard who still lay at his feet, by the head. He lifted him with one hand and stood him on his feet.

To Shepherd’s surprise, he was still alive, their eyes locked as he

sobbed. He murmured the words, 'Please God' over and over again, but no one paid him any mind.

'Do I frighten you?' The tyrant asked as he pushed the guard's face gently into the bars.

Shepherd took a moment; the guard's sobs weren't helping his situation. He felt like he was about to lose control of the situation once more, and he didn't like it.

'Any man would be stupid not to be cautious of someone your size,' he said, hopeful that it would placate the man.

'That's not what I asked,' The tyrant snarled as he pressed the guard's face into the small space between the bars. Screams came again, as horrendous as they were short lived. The guard's skull crunched and splintered as his screams died.

Shepherd watched as the guard's head, deformed and broken as it was, squeezed through the bars toward him. His nose protruded out further than it should; his eyes bulged from their sockets, then burst from the strain. Blood and fluid ran down the dead man's face and into his mouth, where it pooled and dribbled from the corner of his lips. When the hand relaxed, the crushed head slid down the bars until the frame of its collapsing body stopped it.

'I scare the shit out of you, is the answer. I know it's true.' They stood there for some time. Neither of them spoke. 'You fix this body, keep the boy safe and it. You do that and you have your champion.'

With the smile gone from his face, Shepherd turned to leave. He walked four paces when it called out to him. He stopped. He didn't want to look back, and he didn't have to.

'Remember what you saw today. If I get my hands on you, no God will save you.'