The Ministry of After

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Introduction

They used to mark time by seasons, by festivals, by the slow drift of stars over rooftops. Now people keep their calendars by the day the gates held, by the color of the test strip, by the length of the queue at decon. In the After, even the air has a liturgy—breath measured, filtered, disciplined. And yet, under the caution tape and the sirens, the old questions still press: What does a human owe to another human? What does a soul need to endure? Who speaks for God when the microphone hums on a rationed generator?

This story follows a chaplain who has run out of easy prayers. Once, he was sent to bless clean sheets and comfort families in waiting rooms that smelled of lemon and anticipation. After the fall, he learned to preach through a mask, to grieve without touch, to memorize last rites that could be delivered from a distance. He learned the hard arithmetic of triage and the quiet tyranny of hope. The Ministry he founds is not the church he trained for; it is a threshold, a set of practices that honor life while admitting that death roams without etiquette. It is a parish with moving walls, a congregation called by siren and radio, an altar scorched clean each night.

In these pages, faith is not a sideline ornament but a contested resource. Rituals soothe, unite, and sometimes blind. Prophecy inspires resistance and, at times, manufactures destiny. In the vacuum where the state wavers and science cannot promise certainty, charism and competence wrestle. The Ministry of After seeks to braid three strands—pastoral care, biosecurity, and political stewardship—knowing that any two without the third will strangle a people or leave them undefended. Its benedictions come with handwashing songs; its councils meet under the eyes of both elders and epidemiologists; its scriptures are read beside case counts and maps.

The undead are a condition of the world here, not a spectacle. They force the living to consider contamination and communion in the same breath. Barriers are necessary, and yet walls always breed new liturgies—passwords, pilgrimages, penances. Communities improvise sacraments from what they have: a ring of lanterns becomes a sanctuary, a shared canteen a chalice, a siren a call to prayer. Some will form cults that offer certainty at a terrible price. Others will refuse any story at all, clinging to a sterile nihilism that starves the heart. Between those cliffs, the Ministry tries to chart a middle channel, where reverence does not become superstition and prudence does not calcify into cruelty.

This is also a novel about leadership when every decision leaves a fingerprint. Power, in the After, is never neutral. The chaplain-leader will learn how authority splinters and coheres: how a blessing can quiet a riot, how a curfew can masquerade as a covenant,

how a prophecy can become a policy because someone needed it to. He will meet rivals who promise miracles cheap and allies whose faith is a discipline rather than a mood. He will ask whether healing means stitching bodies, mending trust, or both—and what to do when those aims diverge.

You will find, across these chapters, the grammar of a new sacred: call-and-response that doubles as a roll call, anointing oil cut with disinfectant, funerals that keep the living alive without betraying the dead. You will watch as doctrine is drafted in pencil and then in ink, as a creed is tested against hunger and fear, as the word “neighbor” expands and contracts with each perimeter shift. You will hear prayers that dare to be specific, and orders that dare to be tender. You will recognize, perhaps, in the After’s riddles, faint echoes from the Before.

The Ministry of After is not a manual, and it is not an argument disguised as a story. It is a witness to the human choreography that begins whenever calamity meets conscience. If you have wondered how people keep their souls without losing their lives—or their lives without losing their souls—this book offers one imagined set of answers, sketched in ash and light. Step into the yard where the bells rarely ring, where prophecy is tested by practice, and where, against the ruin and the relentless, a community learns to say amen and again.

CHAPTER ONE: The Ash and the Altar

The morning bell was a siren, and it came at oh-five-hundred because that was when the perimeter guards finished their shift rotation and somebody still remembered that people needed to eat. Thomas Eamon Morrow—Chaplain Morrow to the few who still used titles, Tom to fewer, and nothing to most—stood at the stainless-steel sink in the old hospital's scrub room and watched the grey light creep across the courtyard through a window barred with rebar and zip ties. He ran water that was warmer than it had any right to be, given the state of the world, and worked the soap into a lather that the dispensary had scented with something meant to approximate lavender but only managed to approximate chemicals. He counted to thirty. That was the rule now. Thirty seconds of handwashing before you touched anything sacred or anything dangerous, which, in the After, turned out to be the same list.

By the time he had dried his hands on the paper towel that crackled like old parchment, his cassock was already damp at the collar. He had taken to wearing the blacks again—not the full vestments, not yet, but the shirt and the trousers and the black socks that someone had donated from a funeral home six miles east. They fit poorly. The shirt buttons pulled at the midsection, and the trousers were a half-step too long, pooling over boots that were not clerical in any sense of the word but were at least black. He looked like a man who was halfway between a pastor and a suspect, and on most mornings he could not decide which description troubled him more.

The courtyard below was stirring. A woman he knew only as Petra was running the morning perimeter check, walking the south wall with a clipboard and a thermal scope that she held the way other people held coffee cups—close, intimate, slightly defensive. Two younger men were stacking sandbags near the east gate, a task that had no end because the wall had no architect and the threat had no schedule. Someone had hung a banner over the entrance to the ward building. It read WELCOME TO THE MIDDLETON COMMUNITY HEALTH AND SANCTUARY COMPLEX in letters that someone had printed on a bedsheet with what appeared to be a marker stolen from a second-grade classroom. The banner flapped in the early wind, and Morrow thought, not for the first time, that if anyone from his seminary could see him now, they would either pray for him or disown him, and he was no longer sure which would be worse.

He had not set out to found anything. That was important to remember, because later, when the historians came—with their tape recorders and their questions about vision and calling—he would need to be honest. The Ministry, as people had taken to calling it, grew the way mold grows: in the damp places, in the forgotten corners, by accident and by appetite at once. Morrow had arrived at the old Middleton Hospital three weeks after the fall, which was what everyone now called the first month, though nobody

agreed on which week the falling had actually stopped. He had come with a backpack, a half-bottle of water, and the vague notion that hospitals were places where people needed blessing, which was not wrong but turned out to be insufficient.

On his first night, he had slept in the chapel. It was not a real chapel—just a storage room that someone had cleared of boxes of expired gauze and stacked with folding chairs—but it had a cross taped to the wall and a hymnal that was missing most of its pages. He sat in the dark and listened to the sounds of a hospital that had become a fortress, and he tried to remember the prayers that had once come easily. Grace before meals. The Lord's Prayer. The Twenty-third Psalm. They were still in there somewhere, but they felt like clothes that had been packed too long, creased and faintly musty, and he was not sure they fit the occasion.

By the second week, people had started coming to him. Not crowds—never crowds—but individuals, drifting in at odd hours, sometimes during the day but more often at dusk, when the light went amber and the shadows made everything look provisional. A nurse named Calloway came first. She had burn marks on her forearms from a decon shower that had malfunctioned, and she sat in one of the folding chairs and wept without speaking for eleven minutes. Morrow sat across from her and said nothing for eleven minutes, and when she was finished, he said, "You're safe here," which was partly true and partly the most important kind of lie.

Then came the others. A teenager with a bite wound that was not from a walker but from a dog—he was almost proud of it, as if it proved the old world still existed somewhere. A man who said his name was Delroy and who kept muttering a phrase that turned out to be not a prayer but a shipping manifest. A woman with two children who had not spoken since she had found her husband gone and the door open and the street full of smoke. Morrow did not know what to do with any of them, so he did what he had been trained to do, which was to sit, to listen, and to wait for the Spirit to provide. The Spirit, for its part, seemed to be taking its time.

He began holding services on Thursday evenings, partly because Thursday was the night when the guards changed shifts early and the medical staff got a longer rest, and partly because no one had suggested a better day. The room could hold thirty, tightly, and on the first Thursday only seven people came. By the second week, there were fifteen. By the third, the room was full, and people were sitting on the floor, and Morrow was preaching without notes because he had lost his notes during the second week, when he had used them to start a fire.

His sermons were not good, by his old standards. They were too short, too specific, and too honest. He talked about fear. He talked about the guilt of surviving. He talked about the strange, sharp grief of knowing someone was dead but not knowing where the body was. He did not talk about the rapture, or about divine punishment, or about the zombies as a scourge sent by a wrathful God, because he had read enough

theology to know that those explanations had a shelf life, and because he had looked into the eyes of too many newly bereaved people to believe that they needed a reason. They needed presence. They needed a voice that did not waver, even when the voice inside it did.

One evening after the service, a man named Osei approached him in the hallway. Osei was the chief of the perimeter guards—or chief, at least, in the way that mattered, which was that people listened to him. He was broad and quiet, with a scar that ran from his left ear to his jaw, and he carried a rifle that he cleaned every night with the focus of a man performing a sacrament. Morrow had spoken with him only a few times, but something in the way Osei watched the Thursday services told him that the man was not there for the singing.

"You're building something," Osei said. It was not a question.

"I'm holding a room open," Morrow replied. "People come."

"I know. That's the problem." Osei leaned against the wall, and for a moment Morrow thought he might be about to threaten him, which was not an unreasonable expectation, given the way authority worked in the compound. There were no elections. There were no committees. There were people who had resources—water access, weaponry, the ability to read a map—and people who did not, and the distances between those two groups were maintained with a quiet, habitual precision that Morrow had come to think of as governance.

"What kind of problem?" Morrow asked.

"The kind where people start to believe you can fix what's broken." Osei said this without cruelty, but also without apology. "Not souls. I don't care about souls. I'm talking about the rest of it. Hope. Trust. The idea that there's a plan."

Morrow considered this. He thought about the prayers he had said that week—over a child's fever, over a supply run that had gone wrong, over a man who had simply stopped getting out of bed. Each one had been a small act of theatre, and each one had worked, in the way that theatre works: not by changing the facts, but by giving people a shared shape for their fear.

"I don't have a plan," he said.

"But you'll need one." Osei pushed off the wall and walked away, leaving Morrow in the hallway with the sound of muffled singing still coming through the walls and the sharp, antiseptic smell of the compound's decon solution hanging in the air like a second atmosphere.

That night, Morrow sat in the chapel and looked at the cross on the wall. It was crooked—the tape was giving way on one side—and the figure of Christ was printed on a piece of cardboard that someone had cut from a cereal box. It was absurd. It was, by any standard of sacred art, terrible. And it was the first thing anyone had built in this place that was not strictly necessary for survival, and for that reason alone, Morrow felt something shift in him, like a bone settling after a long walk.

He pulled out a notebook—not his old one, which was gone, but a new one, a composition book with a marbled cover that he had taken from a supply closet. On the first page, he wrote:

MINISTRY OF THE AFTER PRINCIPLES (DRAFT)

He stared at the blank lines beneath the title for a long time. Then he wrote the first principle, which was not a principle at all but a memory, from his first parish, from a vestry meeting where the church mice had eaten the Easter flowers and the treasurer had wept about it and Morrow had said, to no one in particular, "We begin again."

1. We do not pretend the world is not broken.

He paused. He chewed the end of the pen. Then:

2. We do not stop pretending to mend it.

Somewhere in the building, a generator coughed and settled into its rhythm. The siren that served as a morning bell would sound in a few hours. In the courtyard, Petra would begin her rounds, and the sandbaggers would return to their impossible wall, and the sick would lie in their cots and listen to the coughs of their neighbors and wonder whether the fever meant infection or transformation, a distinction that no one had yet found a way to make clean.

Morrow closed the notebook. He was tired. His cassock itched. His coffee had gone cold hours ago, and the chapel smelled of dust and tape adhesive and something faintly sweet that might have been old flowers or might have been rot. He thought about Osei's warning, and he thought about the woman with the two silent children, and he thought about the fact that the decon showers ran on a schedule posted on a dry-erase board in the hallway and that the schedule was updated by consensus, which was a word he had never expected to find in an emergency operations plan.

He stood, and he went to the sink, and he washed his hands for thirty seconds, and he dried them on the paper towel, and he walked into the hallway to begin whatever it was he had begun.

The next morning, a girl arrived at the south gate with a fever and a story about a settlement twelve miles north that had organized around a man who claimed to receive radio transmissions from God. The guards let her in because her fever was below the threshold and because she was seventeen and alone and because, in the After, the threshold for entry was set not by hope but by the absence of obvious danger, which was a lower bar than anyone would have admitted.

She was placed in the west ward, which was the quarantine ward, and which was also where the Thursday services were held, on alternate weeks, a scheduling conflict that Morrow had resolved by consulting a printed calendar and a coin flip. He visited her on the second day, bringing water and a blanket and the small, embarrassed offering of his presence.

"Are you a priest?" she asked.

"I'm a chaplain," he said.

"What's the difference?"

"A priest has a church. A chaplain has people who didn't ask for one."

She laughed at this—it was a rough laugh, edged with a cough—and pulled the blanket higher. Morrow sat on the edge of the cot and asked her name, and she told him it was Lila, and he asked where she was from, and she told him a town whose name meant nothing to him but which he would remember for the rest of his life, because it was the first place he had heard described, in such plain terms, as gone.

"Is it real, what that man says?" she asked, meaning the prophet of the north. "About the transmissions."

Morrow considered the question with a seriousness that it probably did not deserve from a seventeen-year-old with a fever and nowhere to go. "People hear what they need to," he said. "That doesn't make it God, and it doesn't make it nothing."

She studied him for a moment, the way only young people can study someone older, with a mixture of hunger and impatience, as if the answer were a door and she was deciding whether to open it or break it down.

"I don't need another mystery," she said. "I need antibiotics."

"Yes," Morrow said. "Yes, you do."

He went to find Calloway, who was now running the dispensary with the efficiency of a woman who had decided that grief was a luxury she could afford on her own time. The

antibiotics existed—barely, in quantities that made every prescription a negotiation with arithmetic and conscience—but they would need Petra's signature, and the perimeter report, and a form that someone had designed on the back of a supply manifest, and all of it was a reminder that even mercy, in the After, required infrastructure.

As he walked the corridor, Morrow passed the dry-erase board where the decon schedule was written. Below it, someone had added a line in different handwriting, small and slanted: GOD IS NOT THE VIRUS. Morrow read it twice, then moved on, because there was work to do and because the line was both true and insufficient, and because the ministry he was building, whatever it was, would have to hold both of those facts at once or it would hold nothing.

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