

A person's silhouette stands on a hill, looking out over a landscape at sunset. The sky is a mix of orange, red, and green, with glowing blue lines and stars. The title 'SEASON OF WAITING' is written in large white letters across the top.

SEASON OF WAITING

JIM CHRISTOPHER

SEASON
OF
WAITING

Book One of the
Utopian Testament

JIM CHRISTOPHER

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

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Chapter 1

EMERSON

“I wouldn’t do this if I didn’t have to, Em,” Mom said. “You know that.”

Emerson turned to face the passenger door of the car. This was their neighbor’s car. It was full of old-people smells, and Emerson didn’t like it. He didn’t want it to be today. The only thing he wanted was to keep his dog. He loved his dog. And he didn’t want to say good-bye to her.

The car slowed to a stop at a red light as the sign for Tarpley, Texas, rolled into view. Emerson counted three bullet holes in it. From behind him, Barfly poked her wet snout into the tight space between the window and the seat, trying to get closer to Emerson’s face. He nuzzled up to the dog’s snout, letting her tongue lap out against his salty cheeks and her kibble breath stink up his nose.

“It’s not fair,” he said into the dog’s loose and dusty curls. He pulled away, turning to face his mother. “Barfly didn’t do anything wrong.”

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Mom sighed, releasing another wave of cigarette smoke against the car's windshield before it drifted out of the cracked window. "I know, Em. None of this is fair." She placed the cigarette back between her thin lips and tucked a lock of her bright red hair behind her ear. "Barfly is a good dog, but we can't take care of her anymore."

The traffic light changed. As the car eased forward, Emerson turned back toward his window and Barfly's searching tongue. Emerson knew that Mom didn't want to do this. He could see it on her face. He could see it in the way her halo wavered from its normal Scarlet, flickered to Desert Sand and back again.

"Hey," Mom said, her hand stroking his head, "there's Mac & Ernie's, we ain't been there in a stretch. Maybe on the way home, we can stop there for lunch. You can get the 'Mac-n-Ernie and cheese.'"

The restaurant's sign scrolled by against the pale, empty sky. He thought about how delicious not-from-the-box mac and cheese would be, and then his colors became dark. He didn't want to eat macaroni and cheese. He wanted to keep his dog. He sat up straight in the seat, the bargain reaching his tongue before his mind could stop it. "If we skip lunch, can we keep Barfly for another day?"

He knew he had upset her, even before her eyes glanced away from the road to find his. Her voice was stone as she said, "I'm not gonna coat it in honey for you." Emerson swallowed his hope, wishing he could swallow his words with it. Mom pressed him, "I know you understand. So you tell me, why do we have to sell Barfly?"

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His heart quickened. Emerson didn't want to talk about this again. Every time his father came up, Mom would get madder. And madder. Until she lashed out. But Emerson knew better than to stay quiet. That would send her into a rage. "Because we don't have money to buy her food," he whimpered.

"And why is that?" Mom asked.

An ugly, sickening feeling bloomed in Emerson's tummy. "Because Daddy took it all when he left. And you don't make enough at the Silverleaf." He pushed the rising feelings back down his gullet. "And I'm not old enough to work yet." Mom had pulled those words out of him so many times. Each time, Emerson wanted to feel like they were just words, instead of the tingling panic and shame they wrung from him.

Mom sucked on her cigarette. She released the smoke with a tight nod, adding, "And a dog like Barfly is very expensive to take care of. Your daddy bought her back when we were a family. And well, that's over now." Flares of Maroon in Mom's halo marked the last few words as she pelted the cigarette out of the car window.

Emerson sat silent and still, watching the rage build in his mother. The pulses from Mom's light were patternless. All willy-nilly and outside the lines, like the drawings the younger kids made at school. Emerson could hear the creaking tension as she tightened her grip on the steering wheel. Her lips lost their color. The car sped up. She would lash her tongue soon. Yell at him. About Dad's new family. Their delightful house. Our borrowed trailer. Their new car. Our empty wallets. Their full bellies. Our

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stomachs rumbling around a few scraps and leftovers from the diner. Dad's lover and her tight body. The ruins Emerson had left behind as his mother carried him to term. Emerson unbuckled himself. He reached across the bench seat with his hand, placing it on her stomach, in the center of her erratic halo. He laid his head on her shoulder. "It's okay, Mommy," he whispered, smoothing the light back into a silky shade of deep Red. After a few quiet moments, it was where it needed to be. Emerson could hear his mom's breathing getting calm again. Her heartbeat became regular. She slowed the car to a reasonable speed.

She lifted her arm and hugged Emerson to her chest. "You always know how to calm me down," she said, kissing his head and sucking in a deep sniff of his hair. Not to be left out, Barfly craned her head over the bench seat. She nosed her way between them, slapping sloppy kisses on each of their faces.

Mom laughed. Emerson loved that sound. He loved the way the Yellow exploded out of her with each joyful gasp. He loved it, and it was so rare since Dad disappeared. He felt a smile break across his face, and Barfly licked his exposed teeth.

"All right, girl, get back down there," Mom said as she gave the dog a firm shove into the backseat with her elbow. "And you buckle yourself back up, kiddo." Emerson slid back to his seat, pulled the seat belt over his shoulder, and clicked it into the buckle. Then he went to work cleaning the dog slobber from his lips with his T-shirt.

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The sound of the turn signal shifted Emerson's joy to panic. Mom confirmed his fears as she sang, "Here we are at Uncle Terry's." Cracks and pops replaced the hum of the tires on the road as the car moved onto a gravel drive. They passed a wide field dotted with large rolls of straw, recently baled.

Tears welled in his eyes. His chest tightened. Maybe he could jump out of the car with Barfly. They could run into the field and disappear into one of those bales. Mom wouldn't find them. Then they could live together for the rest of their lives.

He lost his chance as the car passed through a line of trees. Uncle Terry's kennels rimmed the edges of the property, filled with the dark, shifting forms of dogs. At the first bark, Barfly rose to attention—ears up, tail slapping, and eyes searching. Emerson sat up straight, watching the enclosures. Some dogs barreled against the chicken wire, yelping at the intruders. Others stood tense, shaking in whatever shadow they could find from the roasting sun.

Past the kennels, a single thick black dog watched their arrival with a lazy interest. It lay in a bald patch in the middle of the scrub yard, chained to a flagpole that carried a limp and faded Texas flag.

Barfly's excitement grew with the volume of the barking canines, the backseat barely containing her as she hopped from window to window. Emerson knew she did not understand they would leave her here. Forever.

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Mom pulled up to the trailer on the other side of the property. Barfly's anticipation burst out of her in leaps, twirls, and *ruffs*. Mom slammed the car into park as she asked, "Can you hand me her leash, Em?"

This was it. It would happen. Emerson's vision blurred as the tears came. He found the leash on the floor by his feet. As he turned to hand the leash to his mother, he found Mom looking at him. Her halo faded to Copper as she reached for his face, gently brushing away the tears. "I know you love her, Em. And I am sorry we have to do this. I really am. If there was another road, I would take it in a heartbeat."

Emerson felt the leash leave his hands. The dog's excitement shook Emerson in his seat. Wiping away tears with one hand, his other found the door handle and pulled.

"Oh sweetie," Mom pressed, her voice tense, "wait until I get her on the leash!"

The click of the opening door was all the permission Barfly needed. She squeezed over the bench seat and across his lap, and she was out the car door before Emerson knew it was happening.

For a moment, he hoped that Barfly would keep running. She would run away and then come find him again when they had money to take care of her. But as Emerson left the car, he saw Barfly had no such plan. She lopped across the yard in uncoordinated bounds toward the first dog she saw. As Barfly got near, the large rottie stood up. Its chain rattled against the flagpole, then snapped tight as the dog pulled forward. Her back and neck bristled with raised fur and Violet light.

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Barfly landed in front of the rottie with a flop. Her Cerulean halo was welcoming and bright, and her tush raised above her head and swaying with each crooked wag of her tail. It was a pose that Mom called her “play-now bow.” But the rottie wasn’t play-now bowing back. The enormous dog pulled its chain as far as it could, light spewing out in splotches of Purple and Fern.

“No!” Mom screamed. The breeze swiped Emerson’s face as she ran past him, shouting “Barfly! Come to Mama! Barfly!”

The bang of the trailer door whipped Emerson’s head around. Shirtless Uncle Terry bolted from the trailer, screaming something about “not letting her near Lucy.” Emerson’s gaze followed Terry as he ran past, his naked belly jiggling. Emerson’s eyes stretched from Terry to Mom. From Mom to his dog.

Just in time to see the rottie clamp its jaws around Barfly’s throat.

Chapter 2

BLAIR

Blair's scream tore at her chest and ears. Yet she could still hear the yelps of the goddamned dog as it thrashed on the ground.

That dumb dog was her last chance to pull some money together. Her husband had paid thousands of dollars for Barfly. The dog even had papers for Christ's sake. It was the one valuable thing her whore of a husband left for them when he walked out. And now Barfly's life—and her hope of a livelihood—was disappearing in ragged spurts into the parched ground.

The weight of it was too much. Blair's legs wobbled, and she fell to her knees in the dirt. Selling Barfly would have gotten them out of the hole. Given her a month or two to figure things out. What the hell was she going to do now?

Lucy's bloodied maw broke into a wide grin as Terry ran up to her. Her gaze fell to her violent handiwork, then back to her human. Pride brightened her eyes until Terry slapped her snout. The dog's stare remained

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lowered, her nub of a tail pointed at the ground as Terry dragged her away by the chain.

Barfly stopped moving, except for her frantic panting. Someone was talking to Blair. She looked over. It was her son. She sucked in a breath, filling the void left behind by her scream.

“I’m sorry, Mama,” Emerson whispered.

Blair turned back to the dog. She’d never seen so much blood. How could there be that much blood in a dog?

“I’m sorry, Mama,” her son echoed. Blair’s eyes found his face. His skin glittered with tears and sweat. A lick of his dark hair stuck to his forehead, the same way his father’s would after he’d been working outside. “I didn’t know it would happen.”

A spark of anger shoved Blair into the moment, and she felt her fingernails dig into her palms. That phrase—“I didn’t know it would happen.” The same fucking thing Emerson’s father would say. Whenever she caught him wrapped up in some young pussy. That was his excuse. He didn’t plan it. He didn’t know it would happen. And yet, it kept happening. Again and again. For years, in their home. In their bed.

Her fingernails pierced the flesh of her fisted hands. Her jaw joint twinged as her teeth ground together. She looked into the eyes of her son. In the deep brown, she saw the eyes of his father. Pleading. Lying. Flames of hate licked out from her tongue. “Get the fuck away from me, you shit!”

Emerson broke. His form shrank from her, like Lucy had cowered from Terry’s hand. His head pulled into his shoulders, eyes wide and

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mouth gaped in shame. The sight of her crushed son broke Blair too. She screamed again, the terror of the moment giving way to regret. She fell back on her haunches, raised her fists over her head, and slammed them into the ground at her knees.

The sting of her knuckles splitting gave her something to focus on. Her eyes opened on the ground beneath her. Her breath rippled across the dusty earth. She stayed prone for a minute, letting her breath come back to her. Finding her calm. Blair strained to ignore the yapping dogs as she collected her thoughts and boxed her feelings.

Sitting up, she examined her busted knuckles. The cuts were deep. They needed stitches. She could wait long enough to apologize to Em. To hold him for a moment. Smell his honeysuckle hair. They would reset, move forward from this moment fresh, like they always did.

Blair glanced up to find Emerson kneeling over his dog, his back to her. His head bowed over the animal. The dog had gone silent during her outburst. Its tail lay still in the dirt, the rest of its body hidden behind Emerson's sulking form.

"Emerson," Blair warbled.

His head pivoted. Her voice had reached him, but he wouldn't acknowledge her. She had hurt him this time. Her words had been excessively harsh. She needed patience to bring him back around.

Emerson leaned closer to Barfly's carcass. Blair's brow furrowed as she tried to make sense of what she was seeing. Was Emerson hugging the

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“Emerson, don’t do that, honey.”

He leaned farther over Barfly, his hands moving in front of him in ways Blair couldn’t make out. What the hell was he doing?

“Emerson?” Blair shifted to sitting on her hip, the pain of her cuts increasing with each throb of her pulse. “Emerson, please, just come here, sweetness.”

He didn’t move. A bead of sweat fell into Blair’s eyebrow. She went to wipe it away, but her bleeding hands stopped her. The air was stale and still, and the sun burned close. But she would wait here until Emerson finished saying good-bye to his dog.

The goddamned dog. Barfly’s tail rose and hit the ground with a dull thud. Blair’s brow scrunched. Then a second, more deliberate wag sent up a puff of dust. Blair was still processing this as Emerson sat back on his shoes and held his hands up by his head. They were wet with blood.

Shock clamped on Blair’s throat. “Emerson!” she screeched. “What the hell are you doing?”

From behind her boy, Barfly rose to all four feet. Mud from the Texas dirt and her own blood mottled her fur. The dog tried to shake it off in a clumsy rattle across her body. She walked around the boy, sniffing his face and hands. After she gave Emerson’s fingers a few licks, Barfly’s eyes found Blair. The dog’s mouth fell open in a smile. Her eyes brightened as she pounced over to Blair and licked her stunned face, bringing a wave of metallic and dusty odors.

“Wh-what?”

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“I’m sorry, Mama. I didn’t know Barfly would get hurt.”

Emerson’s voice shrank. Her boy was scared.

“What the hell just happened?” she mumbled. The dog wandered over toward the ground stained with its blood and sniffed. Barfly scratched the spot with a gentle paw, then squatted and pissed on Lucy’s napping spot under the flagpole.

Emerson sat down in front of Blair, pulling her gaze away from the dog. He looked down at the ground. Em asked, “Are you mad?”

Blair had no response. She lifted her son’s chin with her fingertips until their eyes met. “What did you just do?” The words barely made it out of her mouth as Blair’s breath caught in her chest.

Emerson pursed his lips in thought. “To Barfly, you mean?”

Blair nodded.

Emerson heaved his shoulders and replied, “I fixed her light. It was all bent, but I made it pretty again.” His voice was tentative, like it was when he was afraid of telling Blair the truth.

Blair kept nodding, even though she didn’t understand what Emerson meant. “What do you mean, Em? What light?”

Her son looked down at her knuckles. Steady flows of blood merged between her fingers. Raising an uncertain glance at his mother, Emerson said, “Hold still, Mama.”

He leaned close and held his blood-caked hand close to her abdomen. Blair shut her eyes as a wave of calm reached out from her belly, then moved up her torso. It fell through her legs and arms and finally

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tickled across her face and scalp. The sense of serenity pushed away the worries about money and the anger toward her husband. When the rush ebbed, a chill rattled her body. Her skin tightened to gooseflesh despite the warm Texas afternoon. She opened her eyes to find Emerson looking at her. Blair blinked away her haze. She pulled in a lazy breath that, regardless of the barren paddock around them, carried a deep floral scent.

Emerson smiled at her. She grinned back on instinct, disoriented as if she had just sneezed. She followed his face as it fell to her hands. They remained dirty and bloody. Emerson's thin fingers wiped away the crust on her skin, and Blair's mind cleared.

She found no sign of her lacerations.

"How?" she asked.

Emerson squeezed her hand tight. "I fixed your light too, Mama."

Blair swallowed. Her throat felt cool, hydrated. Her jaw muscles were slack. She opened and closed her hands a few times, checking for injury. Even her palms were fresh and pink, without a mark from her fingernails.

Blair's attention shot over to the kennels, captured by Terry's voice. "Jesus Christ, Blair!" he hollered across the yard. He had found a stained white T-shirt to cover his beer belly. "I'm sorry, but also-too-is, you should've known better than to let that dog run up to Lucifer like—"

Terry's mouth and feet stopped moving when he saw the dog. Barfly pranced up to him and sniffed his crotch. He pulled her head up, going over her face and neck. Not finding a wound, he checked over the

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rest of the dog's body. Terry stood erect, mouth hung open in dismay, and he pulled his clinging shirt away from his sweaty gut. He murmured, "Where the hell did all this blood come from, then?"

He looked up at Blair and Emerson. "You two all right? You ain't hurt?"

Blair shook her head—they were fine. She felt fine. In fact, she felt wonderful. Hell, when was the last time she'd been hurt? Or sick? She couldn't remember so much as a runny nose since the time Emerson could walk. She shifted onto her knees in front of her son, lowering her face to his.

"Emerson? You ever ... um ... fix Mama's light before?" she asked.

He blushed, but didn't look away. He nodded once, his lip curling around a worry. "Sometimes, when you're asleep. Are you mad?" he asked.

Blair shook her head, holding his gaze as her lips tightened into a thin smile. "Of course not, sweetness."

Blair nuzzled him into her bosom, squeezing him close. She rocked him for a moment before gently asking, "Can you do that ... to anybody you want?"

Her heart leaped as she felt Emerson nod against her breast. She pivoted back onto her hip and clutched him tighter. They held each other for a few seconds in the merciless sun. Barfly trotted over to them. Blair turned her face away to avoid the dog's disgusting fur as Barfly tried to pry the mother and son apart with her nose. Blair nudged the dog away with her elbow.

"Mama?"

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“What is it, Em?”

Emerson said nothing for a few moments. Blair felt his breath expand and release in her arms. She relaxed and looked at his face. He finally whispered, “Can we please keep Barfly?”

The goddamned dog. The perky, bloody beast parked herself a dozen feet away. Barfly lifted a hind leg, and started licking herself in a slow, sloppy cadence as she tipped over onto her side.

Blair laughed and kissed the top of her son’s head, inhaling the bouquet that radiated from him. “Yeah, honey,” she whispered, “I think I can work with this.”