

**THE PRE-
PILGRIM'S
REGRESS**

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The Pre-Pilgrim's Regress

By NiKO SekoYa

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1 *The Awakening of Static*

CHAPTER 2 *Enter the Seeker*

CHAPTER 3 *Homeland of the Programmed*

CHAPTER 4 *The Algorithmic Crossroads*

CHAPTER 5 *The Chapel of Plastic Saints*

CHAPTER 6 *Disso Grace and the Mirror Pool*

CHAPTER 7 *The Highway of Convenience*

CHAPTER 8 *Screens of the Forgotten*

CHAPTER 9 *Influenzah & the Followers*

CHAPTER 10 *Memory Glitches (Edmund's Turkish Trap)*

CHAPTER 11 *The Detention of Doubt*

CHAPTER 12 *Reepicheep at the Outskirts*

CHAPTER 13 *The Cathedral of Noise*

CHAPTER 14 *Market of Redemptions™*

CHAPTER 15 *The Valley of Almost*

CHAPTER 16 *The Unnamed Gate*

CHAPTER 17 *The Banquet Beyond the River*

— Epilogue: To the Reader, Who Is Also a Seeker

— Appendix: Resistance Notes, Lost Footnotes & Sacred Satire

Dedication:

To the one reader ready to transform.

To the reader who will be changed by the time they flip the last page.

I know exactly what that feels like too.

Welcome. You've found your home's porch.

CHAPTER 1:

The Awakening of Static

Before there was a journey, there was static.

Not the soft hiss of analog emptiness, but the kind that lives in the bones. The hum of screens always on, notifications never ceasing, eyes never blinking.

In the Homeland, silence was treason. Stillness, criminal.

The Seeker did not yet know they were seeking. That was the danger. In the Homeland, awareness was the first heresy.

Each morning began with the Ritual of Alignment™. Citizens opened their eyes to the Holy Feed, where curated truth replaced wild scripture, and all emotion was pre-labeled for easier digestion.

A daily dosage of affirmation, guilt-proof wisdom, and certified spiritual content—sponsored by Verified Voices™ and the Coalition of Correctness.

The Seeker, then unnamed, performed the rituals like everyone else:

- Blink twice to agree.
- Swipe upward to praise.
- Skip ads only after internal repentance.

They were obedient. They were liked.

But one day—exactly three minutes into the morning scroll—the Feed **glitched**.

For less than a second, a flicker.

A Lion.

No metadata. No “like” option.

Just eyes.

Eyes that knew.

Then static.

The Seeker blinked. The image was gone.

And something uncurated woke up inside them.

A kind of ache.

A kind of ache that didn't fit into any of the Homeland's Nine Approved Categories of Emotional Expression.

They shut their device.

Gasped.

The air tasted different.

It had begun.

CHAPTER 2:

Enter the Seeker

The Homeland's surveillance AI detected the anomaly before the Seeker did.

A Subject had hesitated. Closed the Feed early.

That alone triggered three silent flags.

Category: Noncompliance.

Subcategory: Sentient Disruption.

Risk Level: *Mild Curiosity.*

Dangerous in seed form.

The Seeker did not know their name. No one did. The System had erased all birth names at age five and replaced them with Functional Titles.

The Seeker's legal designation was "User 1426-V," though in school they were sometimes called Ghost or That-One-That-Asks.

They'd learned to shut up after third suspension.

But now, since the Glitch, Ghost felt...unquiet.

Like something sharp was knocking from the inside.

They found themselves asking questions silently again.

Why did the Feed only show people smiling?

Why did the Holy Protocol ban physical books?

Why did the Ritual of Alignment make their skin crawl?

They tried to re-sync.

They fasted from doubt. Took digital communion. Watched five episodes of Preacher-Preneur™ until the nausea returned.

It didn't help.

Late that night, as the screens dimmed into curated sleep mode, Ghost snuck into the unfiltered archives. They'd heard whispers that in the early 2000s, before the Great Algorithmic Correction, people wrote ideas *without* pre-approved hashtags.

It was there, in a forbidden forum full of corrupted texts, that Ghost read a banned word:

“Repent.”

There was no link. No citation. Just the word.

They didn't know what it meant. But it made their spine stand up like it remembered something they had never learned.

Outside, surveillance drones blinked red.

The System had found a Seeker.

CHAPTER 3:

Homeland of the Programmed

The Homeland did not call itself an Empire.

It didn't need to. Empires rarely do when they've convinced everyone they're *free*.

Here, everything had been optimized:

Worship without silence.

Faith without questions.

Love without cost.

The Seeker walked through the programmed streets. Giant screens whispered affirmations. Drones played devotional slogans overhead:

“*You are seen. You are safe. You are central.*”

“*Trust the Pattern. Trust the Providers.*”

“*Obedience is wellness. Belief is branding.*”

The Homeland had no idols. Just curated values.

In the center of town stood the Cathedral of Compatibility—a structure shaped like a giant mirror, polished to reflect the desires of whoever approached.

Its liturgy was algorithmic.

Its doctrine shifted hourly.

Its high priest was *Feedback*.

The Seeker paused outside it, hand trembling. Not from fear, but from *recognition*.

Somewhere deep in the static—beneath the scroll, beneath the metrics, beneath the carefully tailored comfort—they remembered something unquantified.

A voice. A call.

Not audible. Not marketable.

A hunger.

They tried to shake it.

Tried to log back in.

The screen flickered. Static again.

A different flicker this time: a sword. A paw. A *whisper*:

“Further up and further in.”

The Seeker looked around.

No one noticed. No one ever did.

They kept walking.

Somewhere between the screen and the silence, they were beginning to wake up.

Citations

“For they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God.”
—John 12:43

Theological note: The Greek *doxa* used here means both glory and reputation. This passage critiques religious leaders who preferred social status over divine alignment—a distortion echoed in the Cathedral of Compatibility.

“This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.”
—Matthew 15:8

Footnote from the Underground: The mirror-shaped cathedral satirizes the modern megachurch model and “affirmation gospel” trends. These are not inventions of 3025—they’re extrapolations of today.

“Further up and further in.”
—Aslan, *The Last Battle*, C.S. Lewis

“Nothing is real.”
—The Beatles, *Strawberry Fields Forever*

CHAPTER 4:

The Algorithmic Crossroads

At the edge of the Homeland, where the surveillance signal began to flicker, the Seeker found a junction.

Three roads.

Each labeled. Each beautiful.

Each crawling with curated seduction.

The first road, wide and shimmering, was marked **Wellness Way**. Neon signs pulsed affirmations:

“You are enough.”

“Your truth is sacred.”

“Every journey is valid.”

Pilgrims here wore white robes and expensive headphones. They drank from golden cups labeled *Self-Care*.

Many carried mirrors, held up constantly—not to reflect the world, but to confirm their worth.

The second road, tighter but popular, was labeled **Activist Ascent™**. This path was charged, angry, holy. Marchers shouted justice slogans that had once meant something. They carried heavy books and lighter empathy. Their gods changed weekly, but always looked familiar.

Beneath their feet was a banner that read:

“Be louder than your enemies and purer than your friends.”

The third road was crumbling. Uneven. Smelled faintly of blood. Lined with broken screens and handwritten signs. Its name had been scratched out, but in the dust below someone had written:

“If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself.”

No affirmations. No followers. No filters.

Just echoes.

A voice in the Seeker's mind whispered:

“One road feeds you.
One road uses you.
One road breaks you to rebuild you.”

They stood trembling.

Behind them, the Homeland's drones began to rise.

Citations

“Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction...”

—Matthew 7:13-14

Theological Note: This is the Greek *stenēs hē hodos* (στενὴ ἡ ὁδός), meaning a pressed, constricted way—used by Jesus to describe the path of true discipleship. The image of the crumbling road is a direct reimagining.

“They have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge.”

—Romans 10:2

Alternate Interpretation: The “Activist Ascent™” road reflects a form of self-righteousness cloaked in justice rhetoric. The error isn’t passion—it’s idolatry of cause without communion.

“You say you want a revolution...”

—The Beatles, *Revolution*

“The great thing, if one can, is to stop regarding all the unpleasant things as interruptions of one’s ‘own’ life... The truth is of course that what one calls the interruptions *are* precisely one’s life.”

—C.S. Lewis, Letter to Sheldon Vanauken, 1950

CHAPTER 5:

The Chapel of Plastic Saints

The Seeker chose the crumbling path.

It did not reward them.

There were no signs. No followers. The silence was unbearable.

Every few steps, the road cracked beneath their feet, as if the ground itself resented being walked on.

Then, around a bend, they found it: a structure twisted from recycled devotionals and neon halos—**The Chapel of Plastic Saints**.

Inside, hollow statues lined the pews. Each one perfect. Each one smiling. Each one holding a product:

- Saint Hashtagia with her prayer-ring light.
- Saint Influenzah of Perpetual Contentment™.
- Saint Clarity, Guardian of Personal Boundaries.

Above the altar hung a crucifix—only it wasn’t the Messiah, but a selfie.

Backlit. Filtered. Captioned:

“Blessed and booked.”

The Seeker stepped in. The air smelled like burnt sage and expired incense.

A voice greeted them from the pulpit.

He wore robes made of hashtags and teeth-whitened robes. His eyes were impossibly bright. His voice: smooth as oat milk liturgy.

“Welcome, Pilgrim,” he said. “We honor your journey. Here, we offer sanctuary from judgment, depth, and inconvenience.”

The Seeker asked, “Is this the narrow path?”

The preacher laughed softly.

“This is the updated version. No shame. No burden. Just identity curation with spiritual flair.”

A choir of holograms began to sing a song that sounded suspiciously like a Spotify ad for meditation playlists.

The Seeker turned toward the door. But the usher blocked it with a mirror.

“You’re free to go,” she said, “once you like what you see.”

The Seeker stared at their reflection. It didn’t blink.

They ran.

Citations

“Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof.”
—2 Timothy 3:5

Theological Note: *Morphōsin eusebeias* (μορφωσιν ευσεβείας) translates as an outward shape of holiness, but empty inside—this verse directly critiques religious performance *disconnected from transformation*.

“Woe to you, teachers of the law... you are like whitewashed tombs...”
—Matthew 23:27

Cultural Footnote: The Chapel blends social media spirituality with prosperity branding. This is not an attack on aesthetics—but on idolatry of image.

“You become naked when you become honest.”
—John Lennon

“I have seen hell, and it is a place where everyone is always smiling.”
—Unattributed, Resistance Scroll, 2067

