

HEARTS OF STEEL



Sequel to HELLBREAK



Dark clouds are massing on the horizon as the forces of the one-world government are gathering ... regrouping ... preparing for their next strike. The day of reckoning has come. To every person it will come in a different way, and some will need to pay the ultimate price. But each of our heroes who lives will live in conviction and each one who dies will die in glory. And through the witness of these few, many will be touched and changed forever, and the government stronghold, ripped apart by the power of God, will never be the same.

It is time for the final chapter.

HEARTS OF STEEL

SEQUEL TO HELLBREAK

Recommended age: 14 years and up.
(May be read by younger children at parents' discretion.)

Cover by Kristen

Copyright © 2000 by The Family. DFO.
Printed by Than Printing Company, Ltd., Thailand. Not for resale.

CONTENTS

<i>Meet the Players</i>	v
Road Rush	1
At Kate's	17
A Straight Path	33
Journey through the Underworld	49
For the Sake of the Child	67
Treasure Hunt	83
Search Rewarded	101
Lists, Plans, and Proceedings	115
Black Clouds Coming	131
The Ninth Member	149
The Call of the Wild	163
Messengers of Doom	179
In the Chamber	195
Before the Rampage	209
Show Time	223
Day of Destruction	239
Tanks and Ladders	253
The Remnant and the Wrath	267
A Time for Comfort	279
Confrontation in the Desert	299
Prey	311
For Destiny	325

MEET THE PLAYERS

Alana: Dark-haired, wild-spirited rebel in her early twenties, she was a member of the Family as a child but left with her parents at age 6. A few weeks after joining up with the team in *Blood and Freedom*, Alana had the extraordinary experience of dying as a martyr, and then being miraculously raised to life again.

Angelica: This cheerful and matronly girl was a member of the original team, before the first persecution outlined in *Blood and Freedom*. She moved on to another field with other team members from the Refuge in *Hellbreak*.

Ashton: A long-time king and live-out Family member, Ashton is an older British man who runs a profitable business and moonlights as an undercover support staff to Family members in any way he can. The team spent most of *Hellbreak* living with him, and just recently departed.

Cal: Former soldier, Cal dropped out and joined the team at the end of *Blood and Freedom*. He and Alana have established quite some friendship over the months since that time.

Dylan: Five-year-old wonder, son of Stuart and Kim.

Jay: Dark-skinned, curly-haired twenty-something Family member, with an easygoing, charming personality. Jay was imprisoned and shipped to the Middle East in *Hellbreak*, where he miraculously survived harrowing experiences, finding in a small village a place of refuge as well as a spiritually hungry flock.

Julian: Tall, lanky man in his early thirties. The former head of a group of anti-government rebels, Julian and his camper came to the rescue when the team was cornered by government soldiers in *Hellbreak*, and he has stuck with them ever since.

Kate: Former newspaper reporter in her mid-twenties, who shared adventures with Family members in *Blood and Freedom*, but decided not to join full-time—until she was constrained to do so by pressure of the Spirit and her love for Jay, both of which resulted in her being a partner to his Middle East adventures in *Hellbreak*.

Kim: Platinum blonde, Australian-born wife of Stuart and mother of their two children. An active and dedicated mother and teacher, Kim also dabbles in computer hacking on the side.

Marty: Family member in his early thirties, part of the original team. In close pursuit by Antichrist forces in *Hellbreak*, he and two newly dropped-out soldiers made their way across the border and joined up with another team in an adjoining country.

Maya: Three-year-old precocious daughter of Stuart and Kim.

Rashid: Father of twelve and dedicated Christian, Rashid welcomed Jay and his friends into his Middle Eastern village and gave them employment. Being sort of a community father in the area, Rashid introduced them to others and helped to establish their witnessing ministry.

Ringo: Bald, shifty-eyed former convict, who teamed up with Jay and Kate after their deliverance from death upon arrival in the Middle East. A zealous convert, he remained with them ever since.

Stuart: Tall, muscular man, husband to Kim and father of two. In *Hellbreak*, Stuart joined up again with his wife and children after a two-year separation where they had remained in a sheltered hideaway for their protection. They have determined to never be apart again if they can help it.

Susannah (Su): Sixteen-year-old copper-haired beauty who went through all kinds of adventures in *Blood and Freedom*. Together with Patrick, a new dropout devoted to her care, she is currently on another team perfecting her recovery process.

Warner: Long-time army buddy of Cal's. Cal met up with and witnessed to him in *Hellbreak*, and Warner subsequently let him escape.

ROAD RUSH

“I can’t believe you still have your feet on the dashboard, Alana,” Julian said disapprovingly. “It’s my camper, you know.”

“Yep,” Alana nodded, having obviously thought the whole thing through. “But you’re driving, therefore you can’t actually physically stop me. And since I’m not gonna do any harm to your blessed dashboard, I figure the clogs are there to stay.”

“Aw, Al!” Stuart’s voice drifted up from the back of the camper. “What are you exercising your convictions about now?”

“Stu, I’ve gotta do this,” Alana pleaded. “All my life I’ve had to keep my feet off the dashboard. It was one of my family’s unbreakable rules. In light of my new iconoclastic lifestyle ... well, you know, if it stretches into other places, what am I supposed to do, huh?”

The vehicle suddenly lurched as Julian turned it sharply to the right, then pulled off the country road onto the shoulder. Alana defiantly dug her heels into the dashboard. But instead of going for the physical attack method, Julian simply turned off the motor, plucked out the key and threw it at Alana.

“All right then,” he said. “You win. Do what you

like. Just you do it while you drive. I'm tired of driving.—Your turn.”

Alana opened her mouth, then closed it again. “Fine,” she said. She scrambled over the little divide between the front seats, while Julian walked around to get in on the passenger side.

As she started up the motor, Julian fiddled with the seat and tipped it back a few degrees. Then he kicked up both his feet and put them on the dashboard.

“Oh, you are horrible,” Alana said. “I'm going to have to think of something very wicked to do to you in return. Yes,” she mumbled, intently conniving future punishments.

“Um, Alana—are we going anywhere?” Cal inquired from the back.

“Oh yes,” she said matter-of-factly. “That's right—I'm driving.” Looking carefully in both directions—the early-morning road was all but empty—she started to pull back onto the highway.

“Hey, Alana! Wait a sec,” Kim called.

Alana stepped on the brake and twisted herself around to face the back. “What now?”

“I was just thinking,” Kim said, scratching her nose pensively and looking around at the others, “maybe we should, you know, decide just where we're going and what we're doing.”

“I thought the last word from the Big-Up-There was the big proclaim to turn and head north again, the whole ‘not knowing wither we go’ deal,” Alana said.

“I know,” Kim replied, “but that was yesterday, and I just thought maybe we should check in again. We've been heading that way and making good progress, taking these back roads to hopefully slip around all the scanners that are bound to be installed on the main roads around the capital. But now that we're close, I wonder if maybe there's

something He wants us to do *in* the city before we split the scene entirely. Like some reason why He had us come back all this way. There must be, right?"

"Such as checking the mail," Stuart pointed out. "We haven't checked our Esmeralda box in ages. Of course, now that the second three-and-a-half has obviously started, I'd almost bet they won't be sending out the paper-mail copies anymore, but you never know. There just might be something still waiting for us."

"Another interesting news bulletin," Cal interjected. "We are down to zero on food. We've cleaned out nearly every bit of all Ashton stocked us with before we left. Those kids of yours eat a shameful lot, Stuart!"

Stuart laughed. "Speaking of the little munchkins, they'll be waking up any time now. So I guess if we want to have some serious prayer, now's a good time."

"All right, I get the picture." Alana backed the camper up against an embankment, then climbed into the back.

"Give me a sec," Julian said quickly. He hopped out and lifted up a panel on the side of the camper, then took out a small red glowing triangle and placed it out behind the vehicle. He nodded at Stuart as he got into the back with the others. "Hopefully anyone driving by will think we just overheated and stopped to let off some steam. It's not a very busy road, but I'd suggest we do what we need to and be on our way. Less chance of drawing attention."

"Sounds good by me," Cal said with a nod.

"Well," Alana said, looking around brightly, "who is the wise one who is leading us on this great spiritual expedition?"

"Alana," Stuart said, "why don't you do the honors. After all, you went to H—"

“Oh no,” Alana said. “Don’t even go any further. Fine, I’ll do it. You’ll see—I’ll have you begging for mercy in seconds. Last time you’ll ever ask me to do...”

“Good, let’s pray then,” Kim said quickly, with a wink for Alana.

The others closed their eyes dutifully, except for Cal, who decided to keep his open so that he could better observe Alana. He had been living with these rather strange characters for a little more than a month now, and from what he’d heard, Alana had only been on board for some weeks before him. In some ways, though, she seemed to have found her niche among these people much faster than he had.

Of course, there was no denying the fact that Alana was Alana. She was, and always would be, her own special brand of individual. She was brash, impertinent, and found her greatest source of personal energy was providing those around her with a constant flow of vocal entertainment, including saying whatever seemed to be the most outrageous or unexpected thing at any given time. This fact had first caused Cal to perceive Alana as rather shallow—not that he had thought much of it, but subconsciously he tended to classify people according to personality types. Once he had someone figured out, he found they seldom jumped boxes.

He had soon realized, however, that underneath Alana’s wild exterior was surprising depth. She seemed to have adapted well to the ways of these wild renegades, and her own unique gifts complemented Stuart’s and Kim’s in a surprising way. There was no denying that the team would not be the same without Alana.

Cal had mentally given Stuart three thumbs up for how he had adapted back into the whole fatherhood role. After nearly two years off the job,

Stuart now seemed intent on making up for lost time in every way possible. And somehow he managed to do this without suffering any loss to his winsome personality or gregarious charm. He and Kim were inseparable, yet—which Cal thought rather curious—for all their cuddle-in-the-corner antics, they seemed equally as interested in drawing others into their own close circle.

Having always felt rather awkward around married women, Cal found this quite refreshing, and rather different as well. It had taken some adjustment for him to come to feel natural around Kim, despite her casual everyday affection. She seemed to be able to make each person she talked with feel special and important, while at the same time managing to make it understood that it was an importance in a certain way that was ... Cal's analysis faltered as he grasped for the right word but could not find it. Kim was a hard one to classify. She was fully dedicated to her husband and two children, yet at the same time loving her own freewheeling lifestyle and allowing herself as much time as she could to pursue her own interests.

"It keeps me fresher when I'm on the job," she had once laughingly told him, with a nod towards her little charges. "Doing other stuff—you know? They are my real life, but I've gotta get my head out of that sometimes to keep it screwed on straight when I need it to be."

Cal found that explanation to be quite reasonable, and judged that it was probably a fairly good principle in any occupation.

Julian had enjoyed his adventures with his four new friends so much that he had finally sent off his official resignation to his clan of anti-government activists. He had been somewhat dismayed to hear in return that young Natalie Mitchell had been elected as leader in his place,

and that she had been rather steamed that he had taken off with what was the official leadership camper that should have come to her. But Julian had replied with a scorching missive saying (in somewhat less pleasant terms) that if he and his camper had not gone upon this foray she would not be the big boss anyway, so she had better be happy and keep her mouth shut lest he change his mind and decide to return.

Natalie had apparently bitten the bullet on that one, for they had not heard from her since, nor from the rest of the rebel band. Cal had noted Stuart and Julian having a bit of one-on-one discussion some time after this event, and Alana had darkly hinted that Stuart's great spiritual authority was coming out, and that Julian had better beware lest he be found to fight against the Almighty God (a phrase Alana loved, and had appropriated as her own the moment she'd first heard it).

Cal had laughed at the idea of Stuart reprimanding Julian for ticking off his former buddies, but when probed about it Julian didn't seem too keen on discussing details, so Cal finally figured that maybe Alana had been right. After all, Julian's old rebel group was a sizable force, and the technology they had gathered was some of the boldest and bravest. Any risk of turning the group into anything less than cozy pals did seem to go a bit against the ideal. But apparently the thought of Natalie as successor had deeply disturbed Julian's sensibility in that regard, and so the others had rapidly scripted this at the very start of their Top Ten Taboo Topics list.

While at Ashton's, the team had tried to get in contact with any other Family members in the area, but though they had received a few potential leads, their efforts to join up had thus far proved unsuccessful. They were very cautious as to what

sources they tried and the methods they used, since even the highest security communication frequencies were dubious in their reliability, and protecting Ashton's security was of paramount importance. So finally they had contented themselves in using their time in his hideaway to devour every scrap of spiritual nutrition that they had on hand.

This was not entirely paltry, thanks to Ashton. Having installed a top-of-the-line computer in his underground basement early on, he had spent many nights compiling every bit and byte of Word that he could—downloading almost the entire Family Web site (which unfortunately had been taken down as the one-world government stepped up its campaign against “religionist cults”), and then adding various Bible programs and other letters and quotes those ministering to him had sent via e-mail. Ashton had painstakingly organized any and all quotes, messages from beyond, or remotely spiritual one-liners he had ever been sent, and had categorized and filed them meticulously according to type and author.

“Who would have thought I'd be getting fed myself by the letters I originally sent to feed him,” Kim had said laughingly. She was especially tickled to find a fair number of original, Spirit-filled quotes attributed to Jeremiah, and she showed them to Stuart with no less than a bashful giggle at her former mailing list pen name.

So the team spent the better part of their waiting time in Ashton's basement reveling in the treasure trove of Word, as well as copying great portions of it onto their own laptops for future perusal. Aside from this electronic matter, the only printed Word the team had on hand were Kim's small pocket Bible, a small cream-colored book of Words from Heaven, and two or three of the children's spiritual comic

books. Cal had yet to get into these, as the children seemed intent on learning to quote them by heart, so often were they seen reading them.

From a few little things they had heard, it seemed that Marty and Cal's two former soldier-buddies-turned-dropouts and Marty had made it safely across the border, and an anonymous letter sent to Ashton one day had brought them all to laughter. It ran as follows:

Dear Ashton,

My cast is off, and my sores are all healed up. I am thoroughly enjoying the new semester. Thanks for all the trivia. Do share the same answers with our friends, I'm sure they will be as delighted as I. I guess we all won't be seeing much of one another, but as I always say—in our own New World Order, anything is possible. Be well,

S.

So very clever—so very Su. At least that had been Stuart's pronouncement, and as he was the only one who knew her well, the others had all taken his word for it. It was rather a matter of perplexity how Su had known to send the letter to Ashton, but then again, given their collective hotline ... to put it in Su's own words, anything was possible.

Cal shook himself back to reality with a jump, and looked around the circle knowledgeably. His eyes opened in a certain amount of consternation when he realized that everyone was staring at him.

"Well?" Alana asked, raising her eyebrows suspiciously, as if she had some inkling that he had been several light years away until that precise millisecond.

Cal pulled himself together, and let out a rather businesslike nod. "I guess that's how it is," he said.

"It seems to me that's the best way to go."

Stuart nodded and looked pleased with that answer, and Cal heaved an inward sigh of relief.

"Great then, let's get a move on," Julian said, as he hopped back up into the front.

"So, you're sure you're gonna be okay with this, Cal?" Kim asked, looking at him. There was something about his demeanor that puzzled her, but she couldn't place what.

Cal, desperate as he was to know what was going on, was in no mood to help out. "Yep," he said. "Right as rain—as the old saying goes." He laughed a little giddily, and Alana smirked. Quite obviously no one was pulling the wool over *her* eyes. Completely forgetting her designated position behind the steering wheel—or the fact that Julian was now occupying it—she stood up and strode across the little floor space to where Cal was sitting on the edge of the bed. On her way she grabbed a spatula that lay handily on the little countertop by the gas burners.

She whipped the spatula up and stuck the tip of it under Cal's chin. Easing the pressure forward little by little, she lay him back on the bed and climbed on top of him. The others looked on in amusement, and Dylan and Maya (who were just waking up on the upper bunk bed) nearly tumbled off in their excitement to observe the proceedings.

"So," Alana said, twirling the spatula a little, "tell us more about what the plan is, Cal."

Cal grinned, and pulled his hands up from his sides.

Alana tensed herself for an attack, but he just tucked them comfortably behind his head.

"This is great," he said. "You know, if you go a little more to the left, I've got a spot that's really itching."

Alana studied him for a second, and then

apparently judged his inscrutable gaze to be completely bluff-less. She tossed the spatula to the side and threw herself down next to him. "Okay, soldier guy," she said. "You are absolved of all accusations. But you really had me going there for a minute, I could have sworn you were off in La-la Land while I was beseeching the Almighty. I was all set to stand you up for the dunce you surely would have been."

At this Cal was genuinely embarrassed, but as he considered opening his mouth to make his confession, Julian slammed on the brakes and everyone went flying forward. Instantly Kim leaped up and threw her back hard against the opening of the bunk bed, colliding with the two kids at the moment they would have otherwise done an inglorious nosedive. She winced at the pain, but just wedged her toes firmly between the cupboard doors on either side of the aisle.

"Kim!" Stuart said when they had all picked themselves up off the ground. "Are you all right?"

Kim unscrunched her face a little and nodded. "I think I'll need a hand getting down from here, though."

Stuart put his hands around her waist and lifted her down, setting her on the bed below. "I'm okay," she said. "Just a couple of vertebrae smashed. I'll survive." She laughed, and Stuart smiled. Everything was okay.

"You guys all right up there?" Cal asked, climbing up to see the two whimpering youngsters who were now clinging to each other on the bunk. He lifted them both in his arms and deposited them on the lower bunk where they gleefully started climbing all over their mother, to her shrieks and Stuart's loud protests, mingled with apologies and admonitions to stick to safer quarters for future driving.

“Julian!” Alana fumed, poking her head through to the front seat. “What in the world is—” The words froze on her lips.

“Down!” Julian hissed. “And spread the word.”

Alana dove backward, landing with her full weight on Cal. She would have liked to have sent him crashing to the ground by the sheer force of her flying momentum, but instead barely caused him to lose his balance. Seizing her advantage, though, she grabbed his arm and yanked him down hard onto the floor.

“Hey,” she whispered, with a note of urgency in her voice that everyone gave attention to instantly, “it’s a roadblock! A ‘stop and check’ sort of deal. We’re going to have to lay low and do some *serious* praying.”

Kim’s eyes widened, and she instantly clamped her arms around the two kids and swung them over to the far corner of the bed. “Listen, team,” she began, lowering her voice and drawing their round little faces in just inches from her own. “Remember our ‘Endtime Whispering Vision’ practices? Well, this is the time that we’ve got to use them! It’s *very* important that nobody makes any noise, or even moves around. Can you do that?”

Dylan nodded with all of his five-year-old wisdom, and Maya, who at three already felt herself to be infinitely grown up, did her best to show she quite understood also. Then they wrapped their arms around their mother and nestled in very close to her.

The other three were already deep in their prayer session. After a few moments, Stuart slid off the bed and crawled along the floor till he got to the box-like area that joined the front and back of the camper. “How is it looking, Ju?” he whispered, keeping low to the ground.

Julian spoke out of the corner of his mouth. “Not

good, Stu. I've got a good ten cars in front of me, but up ahead it looks like the real deal. I don't know what they're fishing for, but they seem to be doing a full search on every vehicle that's going past here."

"There's no way we can turn around," Stuart said. "We've got both lanes packed out behind us. We're not in the right lane to take the shoulder, even if we could."

"We're screwed, man," Julian said succinctly.

"I wouldn't put it that way, Ju ol' buddy," Stuart said. "Don't forget—we've got the Force, no?"

"If you say so," Julian said. "He better kick in soon, though, 'cause we're getting mighty close."

"Where are we?"

"We're right on the outskirts of the city. There's a gas station just around the corner. See up there? It's just after the patrol. I guess they want to make sure they can shake and bake when they need to. They're in for the long haul, that's for sure." Julian shook his head wryly.

"I'll be right back, Ju," Stuart said, and slipped into the back. "So, what did He say?" he asked the others.

Cal looked helplessly at Stuart.

Alana sighed. "I don't know, Big Stu. I'm getting an awful lot of silence on my end of the line. Just a little less instruction than I'd like to be hearing right now."

"Kim?" Stuart asked.

"I don't know, Stu," she said, tucking her hair behind her ear thoughtfully. "I wasn't getting anything specific either, except something like, 'If you go, go all the way.'"

"And when you gotta go—you gotta go," Dylan said, in a very wise voice.

Alana stared at him. "And how exactly do you see *that* relating to our little predicament?"

Cal jabbed her in the ribs, and she shrugged.

And then it happened. “Mommy, *I gotta go!*” It was Maya.

“You what?” Stuart asked, his voice trembling a little.

“Six cars to go,” called Julian’s voice from the front. “We’re splitting into two lanes. We’ve got two minutes, tops.—Less till we’re in clear sight.”

“I’ve gotta go *pee!*” Maya said, her voice ringing shrilly through the silent camper. “I’ve gotta go *really* bad, Mommy! I can’t wait!”

“Maya, look at me!” Kim said intently, grabbing the little girl’s face in both her hands. “You have to hold it. Okay? You’ve got to hold it for just a few minutes!”

“I can’t!” she wailed.

“Why don’t you just ... not hold it then,” Alana suggested. “Better than getting us discovered, right?”

“Hello?” Cal said suddenly. “Am I missing something here? They’re going to *search* this joint anyway—why on earth can’t the kid use the bathroom?”

“Well, maybe they won’t search it,” Stuart said. “But they sure as heck will if they see a bunch of activity flying around back here.”

“We’re heading up,” Julian said.

“Oh!” Kim gasped suddenly. “When you’ve gotta go—you’ve gotta go!”

“Yes?” Stuart said.

“If you go, go all the way!” she said jubilantly, grabbing Maya and tossing her into the front seat next to Julian. “Julian,” she said. “Pray and improvise!”

Julian stared at Maya as though he had never seen her before.

Maya saw his look and her eyes widened in horror. She immediately burst out into noisy tears. “I’ve gotta go *pee!*” she wailed.

“Kim!” Julian shouted. “What are you doing?”

Kim’s red face surfaced out of the back of the camper again, and she reached over Maya to grab her seatbelt and fasten it in place. The little girl was hysterical by this time, and was shouting at the top of her voice.

At this precise moment, they pulled up in front of the bearded security guard, who took in the spectacle in shocked silence.

Julian’s face was red and his eyes were wide. “Hey look, buddy, I’d love to chat, but—is there any way you can wave me through? I’m afraid this kid’s gonna pull a muscle in her throat if we don’t get her to some facilities! She just refuses to use the built-in—you know how that can be.”

The gray-haired man chuckled understandingly. “I’ve had my share of these times,” he said. “Brings back a truckload of memories, seeing yer little one like that!” He laughed pleasantly. “Move on out—there’s a restroom right around the corner up there, you can’t miss it.” He shoved a leaflet through the window. “Here, keep a look out for these guys.—They’re trouble for sure.”

Julian took the paper and smiled, then pulled away. His heart was pounding but he forced his hands to relax their grip on the steering wheel. As he was rolling up his window, he heard the man mumbling to his partner. “We’ve gotta get this scanner looked at!—Look, it’s giving us the blink again. Draws a complete blank on that vehicle, no life signs at all.”

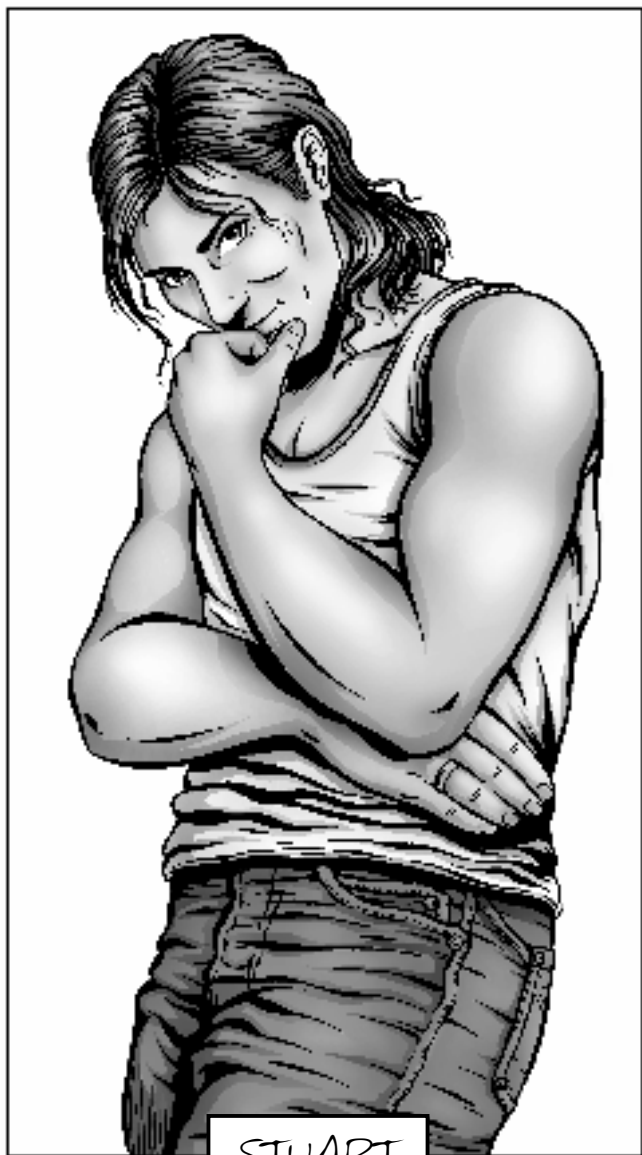
“Yeah, well, I don’t blame it for wanting to miss at least one of ’m!” The two men burst out into roars of laughter, and Julian nearly screamed his relief.

As soon as they were around the corner, Kim snatched Maya out of the front seat and delivered her to the little toilet stall in the back.

“Oh my God,” Alana said, shaking her head. “The

things He uses!”

Kim spontaneously burst into a whispered praise session. Their Lover and Protector had come through for them again.



STUART

- 2 -
AT KATE'S

"How far are we from Kate's?" Stuart called up to the front.

Cal's ears perked up at this morsel of knowledge. He was still trying to piece together the apparent plan for his future.

"Not long," Julian responded. "Maybe a ten-minute drive."

"We'd better be careful, though," Kim said. "Remember what the Lord said—'be discreet and intrepid.'" She smiled a little at the unusual wording.

"I've got it!" Alana exclaimed. "There's this dingy little alley just a couple blocks over from her place. It's pretty overgrown. You could pull the camper right in there and it would just blend in. That way we don't all pile up to the driveway till the time is right."

"Good," Julian said. "Point the way.—I'm on it."

"Hey Julian," Kim said. "What was the leaflet the guy at the checkpoint gave you?"

"I tossed it over there," Julian waved vaguely around the gearshift.

Alana reached down and picked up the brightly colored pamphlet. "Ew," she said. "Lavish get-up. No expenses spared, apparently. And what would

it be but..." She stopped speaking, and her silence reeked of shock and alarm.

Julian manfully kept his eyes on the road, but the others mobbed Alana in an attempt to get their hands on the paper.

"Hold up, all!" Alana fumed. "Give me a sec." With that she scrambled into the back so they could all look it over at once.

The cover was a splashy, eye-catching rendition of the new one-world government logo and insignia, with some nonsensical what-can-you-do-for-your-country type of catchphrase. The inside, however, digressed quickly into a felons-on-the-loose spiel. Nobody bothered to read it, because all eyes were riveted on the center spread. Largest of all, and by far the most eye-catching, was a very bad picture of none other than their own Su, with bedraggled hair and a very morose countenance. Under her photo were the words: "May be armed and dangerous. Convicted of double homicide involving government officials. Do not attempt to cajole or reason with. Report any sightings or leads to hotline number below."

"Stu!" Kim exclaimed.

Stuart's photograph was right below Su's, slightly smaller and much more grainy. Alana's was next, with the text: "Wanted in connection with the murder of eight soldiers. Suspects may be heavily armed and should not be underestimated."

The text underneath carried on to the tune of rewards and other perks that would benefit the informed snitch, but that was all that the group needed to read.

"Whoa!" Alana said exultantly, shaking her head wildly till her hair resembled a small black hurricane. "This is so classy! Who would have thought I'd be wanted for murder—and 'armed and dangerous,' too? I love it!"

"Well, aside from all the obvious thrill points, I think this is gonna mean our need for security measures goes way up," Stuart said, shaking his head a little.

"That explains the checkpoint," Kim said quietly. "I guess it's all the more reason to hole up at Kate's for a while."

"Yes, I can see the Lord's wisdom in that now. At least we can give the felon frenzy a few days to die down."

"Wait a minute—Kate's?" Cal said, trying to act as though he was just now getting reservations on the aforementioned plan, as opposed to just catching on to the plan. "Aren't they gonna be on that like yesterday? I mean, Kate's a fairly heavy felon herself to them, isn't she?"

"Well, apparently she's been shipped off to parts unknown—if we've got all our facts right," Kim reminded him. "They have no reason to keep watching her place. She's been gone for ages now—at least a month. Anyway—that's what you're for!" She beamed at him.

"Oh, yeah," Cal said with a shrug. "Right—of course." Inwardly he scowled fiercely and tried to read Alana's mind. Of all people, he surely ought to be able to read hers. It wasn't like she'd spent all of her life calling down spirits or anything. Surely a highly trained former commando such as himself could do a little mental breaking and entering.

"Directions!" Julian called from the front.

Alana dashed back to her seat, unwittingly shattering Cal's concentration before it had time to fully come into focus. He sighed.

The camper lurched, and a few minutes later they pulled into a quiet lane.

"There," Alana said, "under the trellis. We'll barely be seen parked like that."

Julian pulled in and turned off the engine. He

let out a deep sigh of relief. Then he said. "Now pass me that darn pamphlet and be quick about it. Why do I always end up as the designated driver?"

"So, Cal—you all set?" Kim asked. She studied him carefully. Something was not quite right, but she couldn't make out what. "Is everything okay? You missing anything?"

Cal looked her straight in the eyes. He hesitated. He opened his mouth, but then looked over at Stuart and Alana who were both giving him their full attention. He shook his head determinedly. "All set," he said, though all the while inside he was screaming, *What am I doing?!*

"Here," Julian said, tossing him a dark blue faded baseball cap. "Pull it down real good."

"We'll be with you all the way," Kim said.

"Yeah," Alana said. "Just holler if you need some *real* assistance."

Cal scanned their faces, hoping to pry out any further instructions that might clue him in as to what he was supposed to be doing. But the good-byes seemed to be over. Apparently now he was either going to have to bend down real low and take his well-deserved kick in the pants, or ... he would have to wing it as he went. Being who he was, Cal chose the latter.

Shoving the cap down over his forehead he stepped out of the camper and walked briskly down the road in the direction Stuart had pointed him. He recognized the house right away—the only one that fit the description. The houses in this area seemed to be quite far apart, with wide lawns and wild vegetation running between them.

Turning at last in desperation to the tactic that seemed to work so well for the others, Cal aimed his thoughts heavenward. "Oh Lord," he whispered to himself as he walked along, "I know I'm a moron. I mean, who can't say they blinked and missed their

instructions? I guess I got one too many cussing outs from smack-happy drill sergeants. Anyway, whatever the cause, I'm stuck and what's more—I'm clueless. Could You just fill me in on what I'm supposed to be doing here?"

Cal noticed his shoe was untied, and stooped down to tend to it. "Please," he whispered again, "I'm begging now, God. Just give me a little one-two and I'll be in Your debt for life. You say, I'll do. No questions asked." He paused again. "I'll even ... yeah, I'll even tell the others, if You like—tell them I missed it and muffed it and all. The whole deal. Just help me out now."

The business on the shoelace was finished, but Cal stayed hunched over, waiting. Then he heard it: *Get up, Cal.*

Cal jumped, and looked around. It took a minute before he realized the voice was in his head.

Start walking up the driveway.

Cal obeyed.

Stick your hands in your pockets. Act like you know what you're doing. Now stop at the doorstep. Move the second potted plant and lift the tile that is loose underneath it. There you will find the key to open the door.

Cal's face was drenched in sweat. "I don't mind saying this to You, Jesus, but this all is giving me the willies," he whispered hoarsely. Lifting up the potted plant, he steeled himself to keep his fingers from trembling. Sure enough, the tile underneath was loose, and below that was a small rusty key.

Another minute later Cal had unlocked the door and shut it behind him. He shoved his back up against it, and stood there for a few minutes, breathing heavily. He took off his baseball cap and wiped the sweat off his face. "I guess that's it then, huh?" he whispered, looking up towards the ceiling. On that thought he turned back to go out the door

he'd come when the voice stopped him in his tracks again.

No! it thundered. Take the back door. It leads out to the same back street. Leave the back door unlocked and lead them all in that way.

"Back door—right," Cal said, nodding. He walked through the kitchen, where he saw the door at once. "Good thinking," he muttered.

He unlatched the door and stepped back out into the sunlight. Just around the corner he could see a flash of color, nearly hidden behind the thick covered trellis.

"Can they see me?" he asked softly. "Do I go to them or just signal from here?"

They are watching, came the reply. Motion that all is well, and they will understand.

Cal looked down and saw an old red apron lying near his feet. He picked it up and waved his arms enthusiastically in the air for a few moments. Then he put up his hands in a "thumbs up" gesture. Still seeing nothing he beckoned as enthusiastically as he could, then finally turned and slipped back into the house.

He was none too relieved when the first of the procession began filing in. "Stuart!" he exclaimed. "You got the message! I wasn't sure you could see me."

"Crystal clear," Kim said with a smile. "You were a pro!"

"Totally tops," Stuart said. "Couldn't have done it better myself.—Well, I don't think so, anyway!" He laughed.

Cal made a little embarrassed smirk, then figured he might as well get his confession out of the way before Alana arrived. "Actually, I was meaning to tell you, but I didn't have a clue what to do."

"What?" Kim asked.

Cal turned red. "I must have been thinking about something else during the whole prayer and check-in time earlier. I missed everything I was supposed to do."

"Then how did you know what to do?" Stuart asked.

"I couldn't bring myself to admit it at the time, but once I started up the driveway I realized what an idiot I was being, so I tried one of your little tactics—what do you call them—'new weapons'? Yeah, I just put in a real big plea Upstairs, and—well, as you saw ... He came through for me. In a very big way."

"No kidding, loser," Alana said, grinning, the screen door banging shut behind her. "I knew you were a big fraud, right from the start. Didn't I catch onto you?"

"Did not," Cal countered. "You were taken in, just like all the rest of them."

Alana laughed out loud. "So, tell us what it was like!—The great 'first time'! It was, wasn't it?"

"Yeah," Cal said, turning even redder. "I guess it was." Then he looked up at the others. His eyes were bright and glowing. "It was the most amazing thing that's ever happened to me! I actually *heard* a voice! Well, not *heard* it, like out loud—but right in my head. It was like there was a little insect in there or something, Jiminy Cricket or an alien being that just made itself right at home and started talking to me. I'd ask questions and He'd answer ... it was just unreal."

"That's what it is, all right," Stuart said. "And thank God for it!"

"Yep," Alana said, "'cause without it we'd all be screwed."

Julian came in just then, holding Dylan's hand, and shut the door behind him.

"We're all here," Kim said.

“Great,” said Alana. “Now for some lunch!”



“So what happens now?” The words slipped out through the still atmosphere, and no one really knew who they’d come from. It didn’t seem to matter. Everyone knew that there was really no answer to the question.

They had discovered to their surprise that Kate’s house was still quite well stocked with food, and that the utilities were still working. “As long as those companies can keep siphoning money out of your account, they’ll keep you connected,” Julian had explained, and Kate’s account evidently had enough credit to keep her place going for some time. After helping themselves to whatever food from Kate’s cupboards that was still edible, the team of renegades found themselves facing their next challenge: boredom.

Kim sighed. “This whole ‘lying low’ thing is highly overrated, in my opinion. Just finding something to do all day...”

“You guys have been spoiled,” Cal said with a laugh. “You’ve spent the last few months fighting razzmatazz battles with evil sorcerers and demons and such—no wonder it’s killing you to stay put for a while.” He looked over at Alana, who seemed to be beyond words, and had scrunched herself into a corner where she was studying the pattern of the tile floor.

Kim looked wistfully off towards the closed bedroom door, where a dull roar was all that could be heard of Stuart putting the two little roustabouts down for their well-deserved bedtime.

“Takes some getting used to, huh?” Alana laughed, seeing her look.

“Yeah,” Kim said. “I don’t know what to do with myself sometimes.”

“Hey, Kate must have had a computer,” Julian

said, perking up suddenly.

Alana thought. "I think her bedroom's up that little staircase there," she said. "I only ever came here once, but I pretty much covered the downstairs and there's no sign of one. So the up is my best guess."

Julian bounded off up the stairs, anxious to break the silicone fast that had resulted from him doing much of the driving for the past few days.

"So why do you guys think we're here?" Kim asked conversationally.

"Well, it's obvious, isn't it?" Alana stated. "The big bad guys are doing the Sherlock thing for us—so we just tuck ourselves out of sight here for a while."

"It sure seems the first place they'd look though," Cal mused.

"And that's just the beauty of it," Kim said, bringing her hands together suddenly. "They'd have *already* looked here, wouldn't they? They've probably been staking this place out since Kate took off. Apparently by this time they've given up. They probably figured if we had any sense we'd be a long ways away from here."

"I'll say," Alana said glumly.

"Still, He sent us here specifically, so there must be some purpose," Kim said, standing up and stretching a little. "He's not the type to slop His soup around in His dish. But till we find out, I'm all set to trust and rest." She walked over and slipped through the bedroom door into the now-quiet room.

"Yeah," Cal said. "May as well catch a few solid Zs while we can." He stretched out his full, lanky frame across the couch, and Alana leaned a little further back in her chair. Then, noticing the remote control near her armrest, she picked it up and flicked on the TV. The huge, flat screen slowly came to life, and two figures could be seen running madly

across the screen.

Cal opened one eye. "You're a real 1920s girl, huh?" he teased. "You like watching silent movies?"

Alana scowled at him and flicked on the sound system. The resulting boom nearly knocked them both off of their seats, as the words tore out at the highest volume: "I've gotta get away! I've sold my soul but I've gotta get out!"

Pint-sized shrieks of terror could be heard from the adjoining room, and Cal and Alana both fell over each other trying to lower the volume. Finally it settled down to something closer to normal, just as Kim and Stuart's heads poked curiously around the side of the door.

Julian's voice floated down from the upper level. "Everything okay down there? If Sheba's soul is still for sale, I'm game."

"That guy!" Alana said suddenly, focusing back in on the screen. "How can he know what movie is on just from hearing that one line?"

"What is it?" Kim asked, as Stuart disappeared back into the room to begin his arduous task all over again.

"Don't tell me—you didn't get cable up in the mountains?"

Kim shook her head. "I'm afraid not. Would have made us even more of a beacon than we already were. We could download quite a few digital flicks off the Net, but what with the downloading time it took and the effort to dig 'em out—well, let's just say movies weren't our most frequent activity."

"It's last summer's big hit," Cal said. "*Vengeance in Red*—another Sheba vehicle. That girl makes me sick, she's so cheap and Hollywood."

Alana shrugged. "Aren't they all! Just a bunch of glamour hogs."

"I wouldn't say that," Kim said. "It's kind of crass to generalize about a whole group of people. What if

I said that about the 'Antichrist soldiers'?"

Cal laughed. "You wouldn't be far wrong, Aussie-girl."

Just then Julian came down the stairs. "Hi, guys," he said with a grin. "I hate to take a break from my beloved track ball, but in this next scene coming up she actually gets down to the bare flesh, and it's been a while since I've seen it."

"Oh, yeah!" Cal said, turning his attention quickly back to the movie. "I'd forgotten about that part."

"How quickly the tune changes," Alana said sarcastically.

Kim picked up her laptop and turned towards the stairs. "I guess the search for quietness moves elsewhere," she said, laughing quietly to herself and resolving to make up the movie another time. "I wonder if any messages have come in lately."



"This is unusual," Kim said thoughtfully, coming down the stairs again to find Alana and the boys still deeply engrossed in the movie.

"Huh?" Julian said, jumping and turning to look at her. "What—is the color off?"

"No," Kim said, rolling her eyes. "I'm not talking about the movie. I just got an e-mail from the Professor."

"Ashton?" Alana asked.

"Yeah," Kim mused. "He wants to meet—but why would he, since we only just left him a couple days ago? He says that there's something urgent and important that he has to tell us."

"Well, we'd better go see what he wants," Cal said.

"We just got finished driving all the way here," Julian said stubbornly. "I think he should come to see us—if it's that important, anyway."

"What if it's a trap, and it's someone else writing in his place? What if they found out we just left,

and sent us this message hoping that we'd tell them where we'd gone next?"

"I guess we'll have to pray about this one," Kim said, twirling her hair thoughtfully. "Maybe there's something we could tell him that only he would know..."

"Well, I say let's do the whole deal tomorrow morning," Julian said with a yawn. "It's past twelve and I'm in no mood to think. I just need to relax with a mouse in one hand and keyboard in the other and forget all about the big bad world."

"Yeah, I guess so," Kim said. "I'm sure it can wait till tomorrow."

"Sounds good," Alana said. "I was hoping to catch the end of this. I've only seen it once."

Kim turned and walked over to the bedroom. Peering quietly inside, she smiled to see the three dark forms, all tangled up together on the bed and fast asleep. Ever so quietly, she slipped inside and shut the door behind her.



The night passed quickly, in a blur of quiet darkness, and the following morning found Stuart and Kim and two very wide-awake little firecrackers gathered around the little table in the kitchen. Kim was focusing her full efforts into materializing herself into a walking, breathing blanket of silence, with which she would descend upon whichever of the hapless little creatures saw fit to go off the loudest at any given moment. Cal and Julian were sleeping in the nearby adjoining dining room, and Kim didn't want to disturb their sleep any sooner than she had to.

As fate would have it, the honor of hosting morning reveille would not be theirs after all.

"You want some coffee?" Stuart asked, as he pushed his chair back from the table and stood sleepily up.

"No!" Kim stifled her shout.

Stuart looked rather puzzled at Kim's over-enthusiastic response to such a trivial question, then followed her eyes and turned just in time to watch the heavy chair tip back and crash headlong into a tall lamp that was standing near the kitchen counter. The lamp in turn smashed into the coffee machine, obliterating both devices in a pile of shattered glass.

"Great galloping archangels!" came Julian's voice from the other room. "What was that?"

"The Martians have landed!" Alana called from the upstairs bedroom. "Time for general inspection, all!"

Kim had collapsed on the table, helpless with laughter at poor Stuart's plight, and the two kids sat with their spoons frozen in midair, their eyes as round as flying saucers, and looking every bit as horrified as they were speechless.

Stuart himself seemed to be still waking up, and stood staring at the mangled mess as though he wasn't quite sure what had happened.

"Not much chance of your finding out, either," Kim giggled from her side of the table. "Since your coffee was lost under there, taking with it any hope of wakefulness." She burst out into a fresh round of laughter.

"Why are you laughing, Mommy?" Maya asked seriously.

Kim stopped and considered the question. "I'm not sure," she finally said. "I guess it's just so unlike something you'd expect from a big strong guy first thing in the morning. And the look on his face..."

"Daddy, you really blew it," Dylan said observantly.

Stuart looked at the little boy. "Thank you, son," he said gravely. "I appreciate your perspective on the situation."

Kim finally got ahold of herself and jumped up to start looking for rags and a broom and dustpan. “Kids, make sure you don’t move from the table, whatever you do,” she called over her shoulder. Then, after a little silence, “Can I hear an echo on that?”

“Yes, ma’am,” they both chorused.

It was now officially wakeup time, and about twenty minutes later the morning repast had begun all over again, this time with a full house. Over the smacking of lips and the unmannerly slurping of drinks, the team returned to the previous night’s discussion of the Professor’s request.

“At least we should e-mail him back and acknowledge that we got it,” Alana said.

Stuart inclined his head a little. “Sounds risky to me,” he said.

“We don’t really have a choice, though, do we?” Kim asked. “I think the very least we owe the Professor is to find out what he wants—he says it’s urgent.”

“I agree with Kim,” Cal said.

Alana nodded, and after a moment, Stuart reluctantly gave his consent as well. “Anyway,” he said, “when we do our check-in we can be sure to ask for the extra-triple security heavenly protocol installation.”

“Not to mention an early warning system just in case this will be one of those fluke chances, so we’re not caught unawares,” Kim added.

“Okay then,” Cal said, still eager from his experience of the former day and anxious to see if he still had the touch, “let’s do it!”

“I’ll pray,” Dylan offered, in his most grown-up voice.

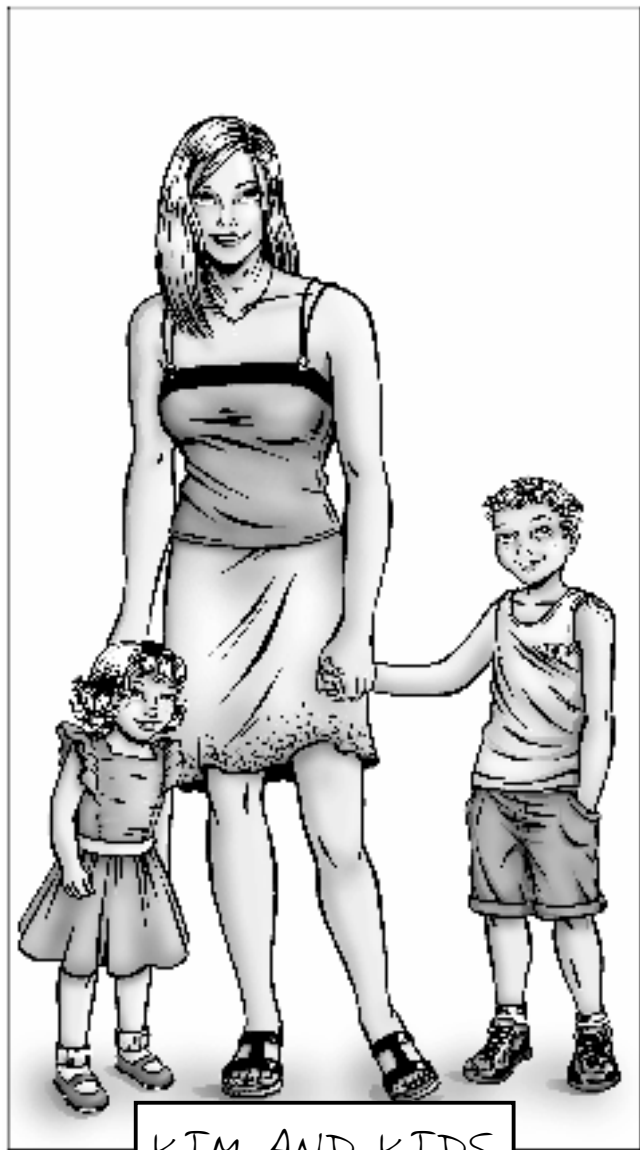
“All right then, Dill,” Kim said. “You lead out. You have the recorder, Alana?”

“Harriet the spy, ready at your service,” Alana

AT KATE'S

croaked, and primed the buttons on her recorder watch so it would be ready on notice.

Everyone closed their eyes, and began to earnestly seek for direction.



KIM AND KIDS

- 3 -

A STRAIGHT PATH

Having confirmed that it was right up the heavenly alleyway for them to answer Ashton's urgent query, Kim surprised them all—herself included—by receiving a word-for-word message of what they were supposed to tell Ashton. It ran as follows:

Professor:

Thank you for your kind offer, and your inquiries as to our health. Unfortunately, the way the flu is traveling these parts, I'm afraid we're not up for much travel ourselves. But should your business bring you to this area, surely your friend Al would be happy to put you up. We ourselves look forward to your communication as to your plans, hoping it be sooner than later.

Always,

Jer

"That is rather clever," Alana mused, as they now sat looking over the sheet of yellow lined notepaper where Kim had transcribed the message.

"Yeah," Cal said. "The whole traveling thing—I'm sure he'll get that."

“And we just have to hope that he’ll get the hint about us waiting for him at Alana’s place. You think he will?”

“Well, Alana is the only person whose full name he knows and could connect with an address,” Stuart said.

“Ashton’s a smart man,” Kim said. “We’ve been corresponding like this for ages—he’s used to reading between the lines. I’m sure he’ll get it.”

“Anyway we can pray he does,” Dylan offered, and the others grinned at how he seemed anxious to worm his way into the conversation at any possible opportunity.

“Yes,” Maya said quickly and very loudly, seizing her chance for a little spotlight of her own, “and prayer is so powerful!”

That set everyone laughing, and on that thought Kim and Julian departed for the upstairs to work out the messaging.

Cal had claimed the upstairs shower and the others knew better than to expect to see him around for the next while. Looking around at the kitchen (which could have been photographed as a picture of wartime destruction), Alana determined to beat a hasty retreat, but no sooner had she turned towards the door than Stuart caught onto her thought pattern and jumped in the way, wielding a wicked-looking wooden spoon.

“Oh no, Cinderella dear,” he cooed. “You have not yet finished your chores!”

Alana rolled her eyes. “Please,” she said. “Those little monsters are really getting to you.”

“Not as much as you’d wish,” Stuart said with a laugh, placing his hands on her shoulders and turning her back around to face the disaster area. He guided her back towards the sink, where he turned on the water and shoved an empty dish basin under it. “You’re not getting off that easy,” he said.

"You wash—I'll clear."

"Yes, wicked stepmother," Alana muttered under her breath.



A half-hour or so later, the team straggled together in the living room to plan out their day. The under-three-footers were comfortably settled in the adjoining bedroom, where Dylan was helping Maya with her memory review and reading her some stories from the well-worn MLK books that followed them everywhere they went.

Kim was the last one down the stairs, and she had a big smile on her face. "He answered," she said. "I think he got the picture."

"What did he say?" Stuart asked.

"He basically said, 'No problem, I'll be there tomorrow night.'"

"Tomorrow night?" Julian echoed. "Whoa, the guy's driven!"

"Must be some serious information he's got to offer," Cal said. "Well, we'll know soon enough."

"So what are we gonna do till then?" Alana asked. "Please, don't say more R&R! I don't think I could stand much more of this!"

"I don't know," Stuart said, "I'm rather enjoying the change of pace."

"It won't last forever, you know," Julian said.

"Isn't there *something* we could do?" Alana asked desperately.

Kim frowned thoughtfully. "Didn't you mention something about checking your post box a while back?" she asked.

Stuart nodded. "Yes, you're right. That's something we could do. I've been wondering what might be in it, if anything."

"Great," Alana said, "I'm your gal. Ah, a purpose at last!"

"Then I guess you're with me," Stuart said.

"What?" Alana retorted. "I can handle a trip to town without a babysitter. I've picked up mail before."

"I'm sure you have," Stuart answered. "But never *Esmeralda* mail. Remember the keypad, secret codes, and all that stuff? Well, the magnetic key to this box can only be activated by a recognized thumbprint on the keypad, and I'm the last *Esmeralda* thumb it'll recognize around here."

"Wait a second here," Cal said suddenly. "What is all this *Esmeralda* business? I feel like I'm missing something semi-significant here."

Stuart grinned. "Now there is a long and interesting story. We'll have to give you the full rundown another time, but let's just say it was a former ministry that met with a sudden and unexpected end a couple of months back."

Cal looked even more perplexed, but agreed to defer his curiosity to the matter at hand.

"Okay, well that sounds good, but let's be sure to get an extra confirmation on it before we go into action," Kim said.

"Yes," Stuart said seriously. "We can't be too careful—we've got to know everything: how to go, what route to take, when exactly to leave—"

"What speed to drive at," Alana said, cutting in in mock helpfulness.

Stuart smiled, and nodded. "Exactly. I forgot that one. Are you writing these down, Al?"

Alana rolled her eyes. "Look, don't get me wrong, Stu, but sometimes it just seems a bit intense to handle. I mean, okay, you guys are the big cheeses on white horses, right? You're like the saviors of the world, rescuing all the little damsels from the ravaging wolves. For the last X-number of years you've been doing all this heavy-duty meditation and practicing your telekinetic powers and so on. But that's not me. I'm just little old motorcycle-rebel-

turned-wannabe-prophet, and just because I've seen some signs and wonders doesn't make me Mother Theresa Junior all of a sudden." She was breathing heavily. "It's been a switch, and I won't say it's not tough sometimes. So just ... just ... just bear with me, okay?"

"Sure, Al," Cal said patronizingly. "Whatever you say."

Alana was sitting next to Cal, and—that apparently being the very last inch on her currently very short fuse—the girl instantly lunged over and hit him squarely in the jaw with her fist, sending his entire armchair sprawling over to the side.

The other three cringed at the spectacle before them. Stuart and Kim looked at each other. Cal picked himself up off the floor and Alana stood looking at him, a little surprised now that her fit of anger had passed.

Stuart hesitated a moment, noticing that everyone was looking at him. "I guess it's time for devotions," he finally said, not knowing what else to say.

Everyone's eyes shut automatically. They knew that some invisible line had been crossed in the spirit. Something was very wrong, but no one really knew what. They sat for several moments in silence. No one even knew what to pray. The air was too thick with questions, and an incredible amount of tangible confusion.

Then Stuart's deep voice cut through all the static like a hot knife. It was as the very voice of God Himself: "Come out from among them and be separate, and touch not the unclean thing! You are called and chosen to come out, to be apart, and so long as you defile yourself with these things that are around you, you are not pure. Three spirits have been loosed upon you this day, and I set them before your eyes: the spirit of sleep, the spirit of anger, the

spirit of confusion. Some have been felt by few, some by all. But you all touch each other and all have an effect upon another.”

Stuart paused. The message seemed to have ceased in mid-flow.

Then from the other side of the room, Cal took up the torch: “I say unto you...”—only a few words into his first public message, Cal suddenly started coughing and spluttering—“I say unto you...” He croaked again.

There was a silence.

“I say unto you, strip yourselves naked and be loosed of your bondage. There is something very important that I want you to do, and you must be ready to do it.”

Nobody blinked an eye. Nobody moved an inch.

Cal continued: “There must be nothing that holds you back from following where I would lead, from going all the way with Me. I will lead you on a treasure hunt, for there is an important mission that you must accomplish for Me. And the treasure shall be two-fold, for you shall find treasures of earth and treasures of Heaven. The one shall last and the other shall be taken away, but both of them I give unto your hand that they might be a blessing to you and unto the world.

“So get yourselves up from this place and be gone. I will go with you and I will guide you, and you shall not come to harm as long as you follow Me.”

There was another pause. Then Stuart said, “Where do You want us to go, Lord? What should we do first? You are our Husband and our Lover, and we need You so much! We don’t want to make a move without You!”

After a silence, the instruction came: “Go to the mailbox. There shall the hunt begin.”

With those words, the Spirit and anointing

retreated into the heavenlies, and the five looked at each other in awe.

Alana cleared her throat, anxious to be the first one to speak. "Look, guys, I'm sorry. I was an absolute beast. I don't know what came over me! I guess I haven't been doing all those things I'm supposed to be doing." She looked down at the ground. "He told me this, you know. When I was in Heaven for that time—He told me that I had my weaknesses and I had my strengths, and that my greatest weakness was my own strength. He said I would fall a lot, but as long as I kept getting up, I'd be okay."

"Seems like I did the major part of the falling today," Cal said gently.

Everybody laughed.

"I'm sorry, man," Alana said again, then added, "And you'd better take this apology and run with it 'cause you might not hear another one for a long time."

"That thing about the three spirits was something!" Julian said. "What were they? Sleep..."

"I suppose that would be the coffee machine incident," Stuart said, with an embarrassed laugh.

"He said it was all of us," Kim said. "It's not just you."

"And anger and confusion."

"I sure felt the confusion," Cal said.

"Me too," Kim added.

"So, what now? We all strip for each other?" Alana questioned. "You really had a hard time chucking that part out, didn't you, soldier buddy?"

Cal looked embarrassed. "Well, I won't say it didn't freak me out—the whole thing did! God, I've never felt like that before! It was like I wasn't me—and I wasn't talking. I could hear myself, but I didn't have anything to do with it. I was just listening."

"You were a yielded channel, that's what," Kim

said.

“Some of the time, I guess. That one part really weirded me out. I thought I couldn’t say it. And right then I was back in my body, struggling and not knowing what to say. It was me again. But then once I gave in and said it, it flowed again. And then I understood exactly what He meant, and it made sense: It’s not like some big orgy thing we’re supposed to have, but I guess He meant to leave all our trips out or something.”

“Aw, you’re breaking my heart,” Alana said with a laugh.

“Well, I’d say we could sure use some really good Word before we set out,” Stuart said. “It seems like we’re going to have a big couple of days ahead of us.”



It was nearly noon by the time the group had finished their morning feeding and started slipping out in small groups to the camper. By the time the last of them were inside, Julian had the engine warmed up, and after a hefty prayer he backed cautiously out onto the street. Pulling the long vehicle around with a lurch, they were back on the road again.

“Feels nice to be on wheels again, huh Ju?” Alana asked, stretching her feet out comfortably on the dashboard in front of her.

Julian fumed silently, and ignored her comment. At last he said, “You’d use your cheeky wit better in trying to intercept enemy broadcasts and make sure we’re staying in the right time frame. Remember our instructions this morning?”

Alana nodded. “So far so good,” she said. “I’ve been doing just that—I’ve got my position down. I’m the ‘check-in pilot’—is that what He called me?”

“Something like that,” Julian said.

They drove on in silence for a ways further. After

a while, Kim's voice floated up to the front. "Before we get to the bottom of this hill and head into the city, can we pull over for a few minutes?"

Julian found a convenient spot and did so. The others were gathered around in as much of a semi-circle as three people could be, and looked up at the newcomers.

"So," Alana asked, "what's all the excitement we've been missing being up front?"

"The basic idea was this," Stuart said. "The thought struck us as we were elephanting our way down this winding mountain road—what in God's good name are we doing, so many of us packed into this vehicle and gallivanting around the city? This camper does not exactly lend itself to quietly blending."

Alana sat down on the floor. Apparently this was going to take a while.

"So what happened?" Julian asked, frowning. "Seems like something we should have thought of before we all took off, no?"

"I don't think so," Kim said decisively. "The Lord seemed pretty definite that He wanted us all out of Kate's."

"Sometimes you've just gotta take things one step at a time," Stuart added.

"So what happened?" Julian asked again. "Do we need to check in about it?"

"We did," Cal said.

"I hope you guys don't mind," Kim added quickly. "We figured that we could save time and keep driving as we went."

Julian bowed his head deferentially and Alana made no comment.

"Basically the Lord said that it was fine for now. He's leading us. But we're gonna have to split up soon, He said. We will become somewhat of a sore thumb, and we're gonna have to find somewhere

safe to stash the kids in a bit.”

“Wow,” Julian said, rubbing his hands together. “So maybe we have some action coming up, huh?”

“I would count on that,” Stuart said, his eyes twinkling.

“Well, I for one can’t wait,” Alana said, then she smirked. “It’s been a while since I kicked some Antichrist butt. I’m getting itchy feet.”

Maya giggled at her choice of words and Alana looked uncomfortable, having forgotten the little ears that were always listening.

“You know,” she continued lamely, “it’s the heat. Makes your feet itch sometimes.”

The others laughed a little, and then Stuart continued. “So anyway, if we keep driving towards the mailbox, He said to just keep checking in and He would direct us. He’ll show us where to stop and park, and then we can do the mailbox business from there on foot.”

“Sounds good,” Julian said. “So we’re on the road again then.”



“Man, it’s hot in here,” Alana groaned. “What went and died in your aircon?”

“I don’t know,” Julian said, “but I can’t fiddle with it now. It was working the other day. Maybe something burned out.”

“Well I can’t take the heat anymore,” Alana said, rolling down the window. She closed her eyes as the light breeze whipped through her hair. “That’s better,” she said with a sigh. “Though even that’s about the temperature of baby mush. But it’s better than roasting.”

“Just make sure to roll it up before we near the city center,” Julian said, turning a sudden sharp left. “Sorry,” he said, as Alana crashed into the door next to her. “Hey, why don’t you have your seatbelt on?”

Alana quickly put it on. “Why roll it up? The city’s when I’ll want it down most.”

“Not on your life, you won’t,” Julian said. “It’ll totally upset the registration shield I’ve got around this camper. Their probes will be able to beam right in through the open window. I mean, we practically scream ‘fugitives from justice’ as it is. We don’t need any help!”

Alana shrugged. “Just tell me when, man. In the meantime, I’ll soak it up every second I’ve got it.”

They had only driven for another ten minutes or so when Julian spoke quickly and urgently. “Get it up, Al! Quick! If that’s not a registration probe, I’ll be damned.”

Alana jammed her finger down on the button. The window lurched at the suddenly applied pressure, then slid obediently up. The last-minute crack sealed itself just as they slipped past the beacon.

“I didn’t expect they’d have them so far on the outskirts,” Julian said, shaking his head dismally.

His words were halted mid-flow with the sudden piercing sound of a siren.

Alana and Kim recognized it instantly from their past close encounter, and both screamed at the top of their lungs. “Oh my God!”

“What happened?” Julian called frantically. “Go check, Al! Is that us? Did we set off the perimeter block? What the hell is going on?”

Alana dove into the back and looked up in dismay. The top skylight was cracked open. The others looked at her. “What’s going on?” Cal asked.

“Close that thing!” she screamed above the sound of the siren, then dove back into the front seat. “They had the skylight open,” she panted. “You forgot to clue in the rest of the dorm, apparently. What are we going to do now?”

“We’re going to pray—pray like hell! Get down

on your knees, woman!" Julian barked.

Alana disappeared back into the back again, where she found the others already down on their knees. In situations such as these, it was strange how even though one knew that the position of the body didn't matter in the slightest, when any little effort could potentially serve to bring you even one nanosecond closer to the great Spirit on High, it was certainly worth the effort. Despite the frenzied air and the horrible screeching of the siren, their faces were calm and peaceful. Alana slipped down on the floor next to Cal and laid her head on his shoulder. He opened one eye, surprised.

"Drive!" Stuart's voice boomed out suddenly. It was horrendously loud, but it had to be, to be heard above the siren. It came straight through to Julian in the front, and he willingly complied. "Go straight, and turn not to the right hand neither to the left. Stand fast in the way, for I will bring you to a good place. Turn not, I say, and I shall in no wise fail you!"

Julian slammed his foot down full on the gas.

Kim was by now holding both the children on her lap, and was busily whispering motherly explanations in their ears. The children looked perfectly calm, which Alana found astonishing considering the circumstances. They both wore looks of perfect trust and peace such as Alana herself could not even quite fathom. In that moment Alana realized that this was not some isolated moment of grace that had descended upon their shoulders, but it was the results of months and years of patient, loving preparation and tending. Their little spirits apparently had been watered with the right material, and now, when it came to the test, they were found to be up to the challenge that was required of them.

Julian's foot was still pressing down hard on the

gas as they barreled down the astoundingly empty road. The speedometer slowly ate up the lower numbers, climbing higher and higher. "I don't know how much longer this road is going to go straight for!" Julian called. "I need some help up here!"

Stuart pushed past Alana and jumped into the front seat, quickly buckling his seat belt. All of a sudden a thought struck him. "Guys," he yelled to the back, "get down—hold on—try and get safe somewhere! It might be a bumpy ride!"

Cal was at the back window. "We've got maybe a dozen squad cars tailing us," he bellowed. "But they're still a couple blocks back. We've got the lead—for now!"

"Get the kids, Kim!" Stuart yelled again.

Kim looked wildly around. Without a word she yanked the sheet off the bed, and with a burst of the kind of strength that you only get in dire emergencies—screaming sirens and speeds of over 100 mph help too—she ripped the entire thing straight down the middle. Using the resulting long strip she settled the kids comfortably on the bed, sandwiched between pillows, and fastened them securely into place with the strip. Then she lay down right next to them. Alana could faintly hear their voices chorusing below the din: "The Lord is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble..."

"Oh my God!" Julian cried hoarsely. "Stuart, what do we do?"

They were coming up to a T-junction; the road turned off to the right and left, but did not go straight. Stuart looked blankly at the approaching wall of greenery.

"Which way, Stuart?" Julian yelled again. "I'll barely make the turn anyway if I start now; I'm gonna have to slow down and fast!"

Stuart's insides screamed for guidance. *My God,*

this is suicide! he thought. *At the speed we're going there's no way we'd survive a head-on crash—even into a mattress!* And again he heard the words ring in his mind, as clearly as though they were spoken out loud: “Turn not to the right hand nor to the left...”

“Just drive,” he said weakly.

“What?” Julian shouted. “Speak up, man, I can't hear you!”

“DRIVE!” Stuart roared at the top of his voice. “Keep going—He's got a plan, though I'm stumped as to what it might be!”

The two watched in dismay as the end of the road came closer and closer.

“Hold on!” Stuart yelled.

Seconds later they were upon it. The camper tore off the road and dove into a web of foliage, skidding and slipping through vines and bushes. Julian managed to swerve a couple times to avoid a few trees. Then, seconds later, they broke through the foliage again.

Julian screamed. He couldn't help it. There, directly in the path of their raging camper, was a quiet little camping area.

Then, suddenly and quite without warning, they stopped. There was silence.

No one spoke. No one moved. Stuart turned his head at last and looked at Julian. “What happened?” he croaked.

They looked around them at the neatly parked trailers and campers of various sizes and colors. And there they were, parked right alongside as though they had always been there. There had been no sudden stops, no whiplash—Julian couldn't even remember turning off the motor. They were just *there*, suddenly.

Julian opened his door and looked down at the ground. “We're perfectly parked,” he said, his knees

trembling a little. It was a lot to take in all at once.

"I can't believe it!" Stuart exclaimed. "You did it for us, Jesus. We love you."

Alana stuck her head up into the front. "Guess who got knocked off their pursuit?" she asked gleefully.

They all piled out of the camper and looked at the steep hill they'd just come down. There was a barely noticeable trail where the camper had crushed some bushes and greenery, but on the whole the wildlife seemed to have sprung back remarkably well. From behind this green curtain, the city street could not even be seen. The roaring siren was just a little mosquito, whipping in the wind behind them.

"What if they call up their local satellite?" Kim mused. "They could get our location pretty easily. They'll be able to see where we dove into the bushes."

"I'm not so sure of that," Julian said, with a shake of his head.

"I agree with Julian," Stuart cut in. "Look at it this way—if the Lord goes to all the trouble to send us plowing down a forested hill and then speed-park us perfectly inside a vacant lot, without so much as one of our neighbors even noticing—doesn't it seem that blipping out that satellite somehow is going to be the least of His worries?"

The others had to admit that that did seem to be the case.

"Well, I say let's get some different colored paint as soon as possible and give the old gal a good hose-down with it," Alana said. "At least we should try and avoid detection by sight. You know they're gonna be searching the area."

"Good idea," Stuart said.

Julian winced but did not disagree.

"We're safe!" Kim screamed, throwing her hands

HEARTS OF STEEL

up in praise as a sudden wave of realization swept over her. "We're safe! Jesus, You saved us! You did it!"

A set of loud hollers suddenly reverted their attention to the inside of the camper. "The kids!" Kim gasped, and dashed inside to free them from their bonds.

- 4 -

JOURNEY THROUGH THE UNDERWORLD

After prayerful deliberation, it was determined that Stuart and Alana would check the mailbox, and Cal and Julian would go in search of paint. Kim would stay back with the kids. “They’re in desperate need of some school time,” she explained, at which the newcomers to the world of preschool learning widened their eyes a little, then quietly chuckled to themselves at the “doting silliness” of mothers.

As if on cue, Dylan (who was sitting a little off to the side and busily driving a small toy car through a newly designed dirt trail), began to mutter quietly to himself in a singsong voice: “Hydrogen, helium, lithium, beryllium, boron, carbon, nitrogen, oxygen...”

Alana choked unbecomingly on her breath mint. “Is that little scoundrel quoting the Periodic Table?” she asked.

“I believe so,” Stuart said, “though I don’t know it all myself so I’m not quite sure if he got it right that far.”

Kim giggled. “Well, you’re all prayed up—you’d best be on your way before it gets too late. We’ll be expecting you back here by sunset!”

The four slowly moved their way through the narrow campground paths, still shaking their heads in wonder at the genius that stood in their midst. Meanwhile, Dylan jumped up from the dirt and ran gleefully towards his mother, hand outstretched. She reached her own hand out and slapped his heartily. "We showed them," she said, throwing herself onto the grass and rolling around with him. "You were perfect."

"Thanks," Dylan said with a toothy grin. Then, "Mom, what does 'hydrogen' mean?"

Kim laughed. "You won't need to learn that for *real* for another five or six years. Don't worry about it. I was just trying to make a point. But now let's get in the camper—we've got reading and 'riting and 'rithmetic to do!"

She caught her two small charges by the hand and traipsed on into the camper.



Stuart and Alana found themselves with a long walk ahead of them. Two hours into their trek, they felt they were no closer than when they'd started. "Whew," Stuart said, stopping to mop his brow by the side of a building. "We shouldn't be out at this time of day. It's downright suicidal."

"We're almost there, aren't we?" Alana asked.

"Don't think so," Stuart said, shaking his head. "At this rate, I bet we've got another hour-and-a-half."

"Good gadz!" Alana snorted. "Nope, there's gotta be a better way. I've got it—let's just ask for a shortcut. Or at least a way out of this heat."

"Run that by me again?" Stuart said.

"Why should I? You heard me just fine. Look, you're the Dalai Lama here—don't play dumb bunny with me. Isn't there an 'ask anything ye will' clause somewhere?"

Stuart considered. "I do believe you're right," he

said. "I guess if you're getting tired..."

"I never said I was tired," Alana persisted. "I just said if there's a way I could shave an hour off my trip, and an hour back, I wouldn't kick it out of bed. Would you?"

"No," Stuart said. "But what if there isn't? It's not like He can just materialize shortcuts."

"Tell you what," Alana said, fishing around in her back pocket and pulling out a mashed, silver-wrapped item. "I'll bet you my last breath mint that the Big AO's got a classy way to slip us some beef."

Stuart eyed the well-back-pocketed item carefully, then finally said. "I don't know about the actual conditions of winning the bet, but I'm willing to take you up on it. Let's keep walking, though. We'll have to get off the main ways soon—we're getting close to the center and there's bound to be probes galore."

"Just another reason to find a shortcut," Alana said glibly.

They turned off onto a smaller side street, still in the same general direction where they were headed, and walked casually along. Alana whispered out a very casual-sounding prayer. Being the unpretentious person that she was, she found it impossible to pray a desperately fervent prayer while feigning an air of nonchalantness in an attempt to avoid sending off alarm bells to potential observers. Any public prayers were therefore extremely casual. Nevertheless, she would have hastened to add, they were no less heartfelt.

After a few minutes of silent walking, Stuart stopped and squeezed Alana's elbow. "I'm sorry," he said, though he didn't look it in the slightest. "I think you'll have to hand over that sweaty little prize that is now rightfully mine."

"Oh, no you don't, buddy boy," Alana said crossly. "We didn't put a time cap on it, did we? How do you

know He's not just waiting for the right time to answer my prayer? Anything could be a shortcut. You know what? I bet *you're* the problem. I know how this Guy works—He's thinking to Himself right now: 'Alana—now there's one classy she. But I already gave her such a marvelous revelation in showing her that I had a shortcut lined up for them, that it would be too hard on her pride if I should also show her the *location* of said shortcut.'

Stuart laughed quietly, as he stopped walking and leaned up against a dusty, dilapidated wall. "So His hands are tied because I've got my spiritual sensors blocked out of lust for that breath mint?" he asked.

"Precisely," Alana said. "Now quit being biased and plug in, will you?"

"What's AO?" Stuart said, suddenly.

"Huh?"

"Earlier—you called Jesus the AO."

"Oh, that!—What, just sunk in? Did anyone ever tell you you should get a check-out of your upper quadrant?" She smiled. "You know—Alpha and Omega. Gotta have some codename to say Him by, no? Can't go setting off any word-triggers that maybe bug our street talk."

Stuart couldn't help an appreciative nod at that statement. "Alana," he said, "every so often I am forced to admit that you are not nearly as dumb or as stubborn as I would much rather prefer to believe you were."

Alana beamed. "So while we're feeling all hand-in-glove about this, can you please just pick up your vibes?"

"Hello, what's this?" Stuart said suddenly. He quickly lifted his hands and brushed off several decades of encrusted neglect, then read the inscription he had been leaning on: *Storm Water Tunnels, 1973.*

Stuart and Alana's eyes met, and without further hesitation, Alana dug into her pocket, zealously removed the silver wrapping and popped the breath mint into her mouth.

Stuart frowned. "That's entirely unfair. We have not yet found the shortcut."

"Why, you great blubbering Easter egg," she said patronizingly, "of *course* we have! Come on!"

They both looked down at the ground. The surface they were standing on was of the same paving as the rest of the narrow little side street, but apparently it had merely been a patch-over job on what had formerly been an opening of some sort, because all around the four corners of a fairly large square segment, the cement overlay had partially crumbled away.

"It's the opening—this used to be the opening!" Stuart said, shaking his head in disbelief.

"How are we going to lift it up?" Alana mused, looking around herself. "There's no place to put our hands in the cracks."

Stuart thought. "Jump up and down real hard?" he suggested.

Alana looked at him, and they both burst into laughter.

"There must be something," Stuart said, turning serious again. "I won't say I wasn't doing the whole Doubting Thomas thing for you, Al..."

"And a beautiful job you did, too, Stuart dear."

"But I'll confess it straight up—you've put me to shame! I'm a convert! I'm won over. This is *way* more than just coincidence. But *how* in the name of our own dear AO are we going to get this blasted thing open?"

Alana was stumped. "At least this street is deserted as a Siberian skinny-dipping club." She sat down on the ground and leaned up against the side of the building.

Stuart was not ready to admit defeat. Spying a large stone on the other side of the narrow street, he went and lugged it over.

Alana raised her eyebrows at him. "You're going to smash stone with stone? Oh, intelligence!"

"Silence, woman," Stuart said. "It's worth a try. Got a better idea?"

Alana did not, so Stuart slowly hoisted the great rock above his head. Alana watched in appreciation as every muscle along his bare arms rippled through the effort. Then with a great loud crash, he brought the rock squarely down on the far right corner. It did not even make a dent.

Stuart looked disappointed, and even Alana withheld whatever Battle-of-Waterloo-related comment might have sprung to her mind.

Then suddenly he screwed his eyes tightly shut. *Please, Jesus!* he prayed silently. *Is this what You want us to do? For some reason You've led us to this entrance. I doubt if I can bring this rock down many more times without someone hearing and getting suspicious. You're going to have to show me exactly where to drop it. Please do it, Lord!*

Stuart opened his eyes again, and all of a sudden he could see what looked like a white chalk circle drawn near one end of the square. Moving slowly with the heavy rock, Stuart shifted his position then hoisted the stone up again, never taking his eyes off the chalk mark.

Alana held her breath.

Once again the heavy stone crashed to the ground, except this time something happened.

"You did it!" Alana shrieked, leaping onto Stuart's back and pummeling his head with her fists.

It wasn't quite clear how it had happened, but the rock seemed to have shattered the entire outer layer of tarmac and, after laboriously rolling the stone away, the two were able to pry the chunks off

of the entire end portion of the square, to reveal the original iron hatch.

In the center of the hatch—and in the precise spot where Stuart had dropped the stone—there was a huge iron ring of the sort that would be used for lifting up the opening.

“Alana,” Stuart said, his voice still a little choked up from the exertion. “There wasn’t a chalk-marked circle anywhere on the pavement, was there?”

“Nope,” Alana said. She smiled understandingly. “He’s tops, isn’t He?”

“Oh boy,” Stuart said. Then, with a great heave, he lifted up the lid and slid it aside.

Peering in, they could see little besides a black hole, with narrow iron rungs on its side following it down into the darkness.

“I’ll check it out,” Stuart said, lowering himself into the hole.

He carefully clambered down several steps, until he felt a solid metal grating beneath his feet.

“Come on down,” he called up. “It’s not as deep as it looks.”

At that, Alana slid into the opening above him. Then supporting herself on the rungs, she reached out and, with a loud and rather theatrical groan, managed to pull the metal cover back over the hole’s opening.

She grimaced. “It’s been too long since I’ve had such a rush,” she said, flexing the biceps of her free arm in a forced gesture of manly pride.

Stuart laughed but unfortunately missed the demonstration. They were in complete, utter blackness.

“Stu?” Alana whispered. “Did we forget something?”

“How many times do I have to tell you, I don’t mind if we skip lubricant sometimes,” Stuart said.

Alana let out an obscene exclamation and

stomped her foot on its rung as hard as she could. Just then she found a beam of light pointing right up at her face. Her heart leaped into her throat and she nearly screamed.

“Always be prepared,” Stuart said with a laugh. “It’s my trusty flee-knife. Never leave home without it—it’s got all the basics.”

“Flee-knife?”

“A cross between a pocket knife and a flee bag,” Stuart said, as Alana started down the ladder, the small but astonishingly powerful beam lighting up the shaft around her. “I’ll admit the name was my own concoction. Not a bad idea, though, huh?”

Alana conceded him that point, though choosing to keep silent on the matter of the name.

At the bottom of the ladder they found themselves in a circular concrete passageway. A single piece of metal grating where they stood provided a floor of sorts over the curved bottom of the tunnel itself, evidently to keep whoever stood on it dry from the water that would ordinarily have been running through a tunnel like this. Only now, due the abnormally warm weather that had beset this area, the bottom was hardly damp, with only moist remnants of moss-like growths along the lower sides to show where the water once had steadily run.

“I’m not so sure this is going to be much of a shortcut, Al,” Stuart observed. “How will we have any idea where we’re going in a place like this? And even if we did, it could easily take us just as long, if not longer, to find our way anywhere in these tunnels.”

“But we were led here, right?”

Stuart hesitated.

“Well, weren’t we?” Alana persisted.

“Okay,” Stuart relented. “Yes, we were.”

“So there’s gotta be something to this place that’s gonna help us. At least we won’t be bumping into

any scanners along the way.”

“You have a point,” Stuart admitted. “Okay well, let’s look around and see what we can see.”

The concrete tunnel seemed to lead in only one direction, from behind them to in front of them. They walked along a ways until they came to another section of metal grating such as they had landed on earlier. Above it was another shaft like the one they had earlier come down. Stepping onto the grate, they discovered a plaque on the wall beside them, though its glass frame was caked with dirt.

“What’s this?” Alana whispered.

“I’m not sure,” Stuart replied, also in a whisper.

It was not clear why they were whispering, but something about the combination of darkness and eerie stillness seemed to lend itself to that.

Stuart reached down and grabbed ahold of a small bit of wood that had entangled itself in the metal grating below them, and began scraping the dirt from the encrusted frame.

“I’m surprised we can breathe in here,” Stuart said. “Sealed off like that you’d think there’d be no oxygen. I suppose they had air vents installed all the way throughout—must have not been shut down.”

“Lucky for us, too—we would have found out a little too late for usefulness,” Alana said with a laugh. “So what is this place?”

“This place,” Stuart said, letting out a sudden Indian-like war whoop that made Alana cover her ears in protest, “is exactly what we were looking for.” He pointed his flashlight directly at the scraped plaque. There was a heavily outdated but clearly understandable map of the city, and where each opening emerged. “Al,” Stuart said. “I’ve gotta hand it to you, you are really the ace today. I mean, really way up there.” He shook his head again as he pored enthusiastically over the map.

“Aw, shucks,” Alana said with a grin. “But don’t forget, you’re the he-man who got us down here.”

Stuart paused to consider that. “You’re right,” he said, with a smile. “So I guess we’re both geniuses—” He gulped suddenly. “Or should I say ... geniusly in-tune! Yes! Thank You Jesus for Your revelations. We need You so much, our powerful Protector and wonderful Lover! Thank You for leading and guiding us in this unbelievably impossible way!”



It was no small task for them to figure out where the current post office was in relation to what appeared to be a map of the city in the mid-1970s, and then to pinpoint the best route to reach that general area. It seemed that an exit would put them out within two or three blocks of the street they needed to go to. What they would do once they arrived there—how they would even get out—was a fact they had to forcibly dismiss from their minds more than once. More and more they were discovering that living the life of faith required a level of daring and audacious presumption such as they would have never dreamed of having—or would even have considered prudent—in years past. Now they were forced to stake their very life upon this blind faith and step-by-step obedience, and they found that every time it more than held up to scrutiny.

The various routes through the tunnels were mapped out by appropriately colored stripes at the base of each shaft. Having determined that they were to follow the yellow stripes, and attempting to get as close to a mental photograph of the map as they could, the two set off back through the dusty, concrete corridor. They found their way along surprisingly quickly, although they had to do a fair amount of dropping and dusting in order to be able

to make out the color of the stripes, to make sure they were still on the right path. Stuart finally gave up on his T-shirt altogether, having relegated it to the higher calling of permanent dusting rag.

At last even that garment was becoming odious to the touch, but right at that moment they reached their destination.

“This should be it,” Alana said, bending over and scrutinizing the small iron label at the bottom of another shaft. “Service Hatch 472. That’s our stop! And it hasn’t been more than forty minutes since we tunneled down. Looks like I rightfully deserved that mint.”

Stuart panned the small beam of light around them, and soon made out the narrow iron rungs leading upward. “Bingo!” he exclaimed.

They were somewhat anxious to get back out into the daylight by this time, as the moist clamminess of the underworld was seeping through their clothing and into their pores—especially Stuart, who was now shirtless. The unspoken realization had also dawned on them that while they had diligently memorized the yellow path to the mail box, they had not seen fit to learn what would be the path to take them back to where they’d come from. Although there was another plaque at the base of this iron ladder, not remembering the precise location of the only outlet that they knew for sure was already broken in would surely complicate matters. Still, each not wanting to worry the other—at least until the time came for the trip home—they kept silent as Stuart made his hopeful way up the shaft’s ladder.

Reaching the top, Stuart took a deep breath, then rammed his back with some force against the iron trapdoor. He winced and let out a little groan. “It’s stuck fast all right,” he called down to Alana, then shone the light all around. “It seems to be

fastened with some kind of heavy-duty bolts, and you never know what could be covering it from the top as well. It's sure not going anywhere."

"I wonder what we're meant to do now then?" Alana said thoughtfully. "He must have a plan..."

"Please, help us, Jesus!" Stuart whispered. "You've led us this far—surely You've got something miraculous in store. We're just waiting for it, Jesus. We're helpless without You and we desperately need Your guidance. Please show us what to do."

A few moments of silence followed.

"Well, I guess we could check the plaque again," Alana said at last.

"I was thinking the same thing," Stuart said with a smile. Neither of them mentioned that it was really the only option available.

"Hey, what's this?" Alana said, grabbing the little flee-knife before Stuart had quite finished scraping the coat of dried grime from the glass. "Looks like a little office or something just up ahead."

Stuart looked over to the visible part of the map Alana was pointing to.

"Come on!" Alana said, charging ahead. "Fresh air, here we come!"

Sure enough, just a short ways further down the tunnel, they came to a high-roofed junction, with a metal-grated staircase leading up to a sealed door that stood at what they guessed to be about ground level.

"This certainly looks a little more promising," Stuart exclaimed.

"I'm not so sure." Now it was Alana's turn to doubt. She had already made her way up the staircase, and was inspecting the door. "This door looks like it hasn't been used in decades. These bolts and latches are practically rusted shut."

By this time Stuart had joined her. "No, this is the place. I know it!" Stuart persisted. "I just don't

know how we're gonna get through."

"Hey Stu," Alana said, "anything we can do with two fire extinguishers?" She pointed the flashlight towards some tanks resting in a small hollow next to the doorway, and then cleared some rubble away with her foot. "Oh—never mind. They're not."

"Wait, let me see," Stuart said, coming over. "Why, bless the high heavens! It's an oxy-acetylene torch—though I don't know that I've ever seen one quite like this before. It must be some ancient prototype or something."

"Oxy-what?"

But Stuart was already inspecting the strange combination of tanks and hoses at his feet. "It's a metal-cutting device," he said with a grin. "I did my fair share of metalwork in my youth. But this baby looks like she's been deserted about as long as this doorway."

Stuart fiddled with some knobs and dials.

"Hand me my flee-knife, would you?"

Alana quickly handed over the object, and Stuart turned it over to uncover a lighter cap, complete with its own sparking flint. "You can just never know what type of gadgets will come in handy."

He flipped a switch on the cumbersome device, while holding his lighter cap ready. There was a short hiss, a pop, and then nothing. The torch remained dead.

"Must need something else," Alana offered helpfully.

"Yeah—try acetylene!" Stuart responded with a hopeless laugh. "These tanks must be empty."

He fiddled with the dials and knobs again, and then grabbed Alana's hand. "Put it there," he said.

"What, we gonna take them somewhere?" Alana asked.

"No—lay hands on it. Hand power. It helps, you know."

Alana nodded. With all the eloquence they had ever mustered they beseeched the One Who had brought them and trapped them in this underground dungeon, and Who surely had a plan for their release, to open this decades-old contraption and to empower it with a heavenly flow and make it work for them.

As soon as Alana removed her hand, Stuart flipped the switch again. He nearly dropped the torch in shock when the thing suddenly sputtered. He instinctively tightened his grip, and soon a steady hiss was sounding from the torch's nozzle. Not wasting another moment, he lit the spark, and a glowing flame burst to life.

"Oh Jesus," Alana whispered reverently, "You did it!"

Not wanting to turn the thing off for fear the Heaven juice that was powering it might not restart the second time, Stuart tossed the flashlight back to Alana and held the nozzle with both his hands, adjusting the flame until it formed a sharp, bright point.

"Turn around!" Stuart ordered as he moved the nozzle towards the door. "You shouldn't look directly at the flame."

"So what exactly are you gonna do?" Alana asked.

"I'm gonna cut my way through these latches. Then I bet we can shove the door hard enough to break through to whatever might be on the other side."

"This is sure as hell not the time to start doubting," Alana said with a grin, "but I hope He's got the placing down right. I'd hate to open up in the middle of a scanner-infested supermarket."

"Or AC headquarters," Stuart returned. They laughed at the thought, although it wasn't really very funny. The laughter was more a gesture of dismissal. Wherever they were going to end up, they

knew it would not be in AC headquarters. If nothing else in their lives was certain, this much was: Every event was planned, and everything was under the Lord's perfect control. When something happened, it was because it was meant to.

Doing his best to avoid looking at the flame, Stuart moved the point as close as he could to the metal latches that were jamming the door. Slowly but surely, he began cutting through them, until the last of the bolts and latches were loose. Then the torch fizzled out, and Stuart and Alana found themselves back in relative darkness.

Alana quickly pointed the flashlight back at the door, as Stuart gave a few heaves in its direction. The door squeaked and moaned, but it was clear that it would not give way easily.

"The hinges on the other end must be rusted just the same. There's no way we're gonna get through without some serious shoving."

Alana now held Stuart's flashlight over her watch and grimaced. "Three o'clock," she said. "I guess it wasn't much of a short cut after all."

"It was The Way," Stuart said, breathing heavily from the exertion. "There's no doubt of that. Maybe it's not faster this time, but think about it—now we'll have safe passage through the city whenever we need. If that's not even better than a shortcut, I don't know what is. Just let me catch my breath a second, and I'll try shoving at it again."

Alana nodded. "Hey, let me have a go at the shoving," she said. "You're bushed from all the cutting. You'll need more than a second, I'm sure."

Stuart tried hard to look offended, but was too tired to pull it off well. He sat down a short ways from the door and said, "All right then. I'll come to your rescue in a few minutes, but go ahead, knock yourself out."

Alana laughed. She handed the flashlight back

to Stuart, and descended the staircase until she stood several steps from the top. Gritting her teeth and focusing full on pulling down all available Heavenly strength, she grasped a hand on each side of the railing and dashed up the stairs as fast as she could.

Stuart, holding the flashlight, held silent vigil in prayer a safe distance from Alana's fearless charge.

Just before she hit the door—and still traveling 50 mph—Alana spun around and hunched herself into a ball. Stuart winced at Alana's faith. Should it be disappointed, she would in all likelihood smash the better part of her vertebrae and be thrown back down the stairs for her trouble. Yet once again, this was faith that could not be disappointed.

"When there is no other way to go, no other hand to catch you but the Almighty, He will never fail to do His part," Stuart whispered, with all the reverence of a desperate prayer.

And He did no less this time.

Stuart's mouth dropped open as Alana's steely back collided perfectly with the center portion of the steel door. The force of the impact threw open the door with a reverberating clang, as Alana disappeared through the opening, sending a cloud of dust and white powder puffing out in her wake.

Without another thought, Stuart jumped up to find what had become of her. All was dark and quiet. Their grand exit had not landed them in the great outdoors after all.

"Alana!" Stuart whispered. "Alana, are you all right?"

"Over here," she said, in a voice that was weak but triumphant. "Coming to my rescue, tough guy?"

Stuart shone the light in the direction her voice had come from. The place they had broken out into seemed to be nearly as dark as the place they'd

just come from, but the air was noticeably fresher. Alana was lying nearby in a pile of white powder.

“What is this place?” Stuart asked, pointing his beam around. The ceiling was so high above them that the flashlight could not begin to aim that far, but they seemed to be enclosed on all sides by towering stacks of boxes and heavy cloth bags of some sort. Stuart reached his hand down and felt the crunchy, irregular white matter that coated Alana like an ill-made snowperson. After sniffing it, he brought his fingers to his lips.

“Milk powder?” he said, stifling a laugh.

Alana nodded.

Stuart’s heart began to beat faster as an idea dawned on him. He jumped up and pointed his flashlight at the stack of boxes nearest them. “Peanut butter!” he read the label exultantly. He moved over to the other side. “Chili con carne!”

“We’ve surfaced in a doggone food warehouse, haven’t we, Stu?” Alana said, throwing her head back and rubbing it thoroughly in the milk powder.

“Jesus, You are the best! We could never think up this stuff even if we tried,” Stuart said, shaking his head in wonder.

It was soon determined that Alana was in no physically presentable condition to make an appearance at the small mailbox service where they were to pick up their mail. Stuart was not a terribly impressive sight himself, but the fact that he was at least not covered in milk powder seemed to make everything okay. Alana deftly maneuvered her thin tank top out from under the T-shirt she was wearing. The gray cotton undergarment was amazingly unscathed from the layer of dairy product that Alana was coated in.

“You’ll need to have something covering that manly chest when you go out,” she said with a grin.

Stuart looked rather scornfully at the offering.

“Go on,” Alana said. “It’s a guy’s, don’t worry. Extra large, too.”

Stuart slipped the garment over his head and brushed off his jeans one last time. “You really think this’ll do?” he asked uncertainly.

Alana nodded. “Look, no one’s gonna give you a second glance, not in this city. Just gotta keep out of sight of any scanners.”

“Yeah—don’t want to get anywhere near any of those. It’ll still be a miracle if I can pick the stuff up undetected. We’re not all *that* far from the city center here—and then there are the patrol cars with their mobile scanners that have to be avoided.”

“Well, you know I’ll be backing you right up,” Alana offered.

“I know,” Stuart said. “It’s probably just as well you’re staying back, so you can be on duty the whole time. I shouldn’t be longer than twenty minutes—probably more like ten. If I’m not back in half-an-hour, you can assume the worst and head back to the others.”

Alana nodded.

Stuart looked around. “I wonder how we can get out of this place without knocking over any edible skyscrapers!”

“Here,” Alana said. She pointed down the thin space in between the two rows of aisles. “Follow through there. You’re sure to find a gap sooner or later.”

“If I can fit,” Stuart muttered. He looked back at Alana and touched his hand to his forehead. “See you soon, partner.”

Alana grinned and waved him off.

FOR THE SAKE OF THE CHILD

Back at the campground, Kim and the kids had found plenty to keep themselves busy. After their school time, the kids had stopped for a mid-afternoon rowdy hour, while Kim lay in the shade nearby, spending a moment in prayer for the “away” teams.

After some time of prayer and meditation, she was intrigued by a peculiar thought that kept coming to her. She frowned a little as she tried to concentrate again, but just then a voice right next to her nearly made her jump.

“Sorry to disturb, ma’am,” said the burly voice again.

Kim sat up, instantly alert.

The man was obviously some sort of campground patrol guard, and he seemed to be a bit slow-witted. “Just making my rounds, ma’am,” he said cheerfully. “Gotta let everyone know things as they are. Them visitor inspectors be making the rounds, looking for runaways they are, yes sir. Just thought everyone should know. Come trespassin’ and invadin’ privacy and so on.” The man shook his head a little. Obviously some toes had been stepped on.

Kim’s lower lip trembled a little at what she hoped

she hadn't understood correctly.

"Some inspectors?" she said, a little too casually.

"Yep, yes sirree, ma'am. Started at the other end of the camp, they did. Looking for some camper, an' renegades to boot." The man laughed and then snorted. "They're looking for campers, ma'am, they've come to the right place, no? I reckon so. Well then, I'll just be movin' on through like the wind, just passin' out the word. Durned trespassers..." The big man moved on to the next encampment.

Kim's heart was pounding as she looked around her. She could see no sign of anyone approaching her way yet. Kim peered at her watch. It was four thirty. Probably still another two to three hours before Stuart and Alana would be back. As for the other two, there was no way to tell when they'd be back with the paint—and even if it was soon, there would be no way to disguise the camper in time.

Kim desperately weighed up her choices. Either she could leave immediately with the kids, and risk not being able to find the others again, or stay and wait, hoping that the bad guys weren't too close and that they could all make it out together. *Oh, Jesus!* she thought. *What do I do?*

She looked up again, and then relief washed over her like a wave. There was Julian, squinting in the afternoon glow and getting closer with every step. "Julian!" she exclaimed, jumping up delightedly.

Julian did not smile. "Easy," he said, keeping his voice low until he was close enough to speak in a whisper. "We've gotta beat it, and fast."

"I know, I heard too," Kim said. "But what about the others?"

"We can't risk waiting," Julian said, shaking his head vigorously. "We'll have to think of something as we go. Grab the kids' bags—we've gotta split."

Kim needed no further prodding and dashed

inside the camper. Julian followed close behind. He grabbed his laptop and shoved it inside his carry bag. Kim scrambled around, grabbing her fleebag—still packed with all the essentials, including her trusty laptop—and the kids' little backpacks.

"So this is it for your camper, huh Ju?" Kim said, noticing the rather depressed look on the other's face.

"Guess so," Julian muttered. "For now, anyway."

He didn't seem too intent on discussing it further, so Kim quickly changed the subject. "Where's Cal?" she said, suddenly remembering that the two had been together.

"He's waiting for us just outside the grounds. We were stashing the paint in a little dump just outside the place when we saw the whole troop rolling in. They tried to be real discreet but we must have just surfaced at the right time, and we got the full view. They're not messing around."

"Do they have the place surrounded?" Kim asked anxiously.

"They can't quite surround it," Julian said. "It's a huge place—at least so far as I could tell walking through it this morning. But they're spreading themselves through pretty quickly, and they've got guards at all the exits. We're going to have to find a better way out than the door if we want to make it out alive, that's for sure."

"Come on, we'd better get moving," Kim said, stuffing the last stray item into her bag and zipping it shut. She stepped quickly out the door and down the steps. "Maya!" she called, seeing the little girl running her way, with a rather red, flushed face.

"What's wrong, Mommy?" Maya said, her voice rising in a mournful wail.

"Everything's gonna be okay, honey," Kim said. "Where's your brother?"

"What's wrong with Dylan, Mommy?" Maya said.

Kim's head suddenly started spinning. *Where was Dylan?* She turned wildly around. "Julian!" she shouted. "Julian, where's Dylan?"

"Dylan's over there, talking to that man," Maya said, pointing a chubby finger.

Julian scrambled down the camper door and grabbed Kim by the back of the arms. Two or three plots over from them, they could clearly see Dylan—talking with a couple of uniformed men. The uniform was dark blue and entirely different from the one worn by the camp guard who had come around earlier.

Kim could barely make out his face, and she could tell instantly that he was scared stiff. He was shrugging and gesturing like he was lost or didn't know the answer to something.

"He's bluffing," Julian muttered. "The kid's bluffing. He wants us to get out of here."

Sure enough, Dylan suddenly nodded miserably, waving his hands in the opposite direction from where the camper was.

"Damn!" Julian said. "Kim, what do we do now?"

Kim stood rooted where she stood. She felt like her whole world was caving in. Here, now, in this moment, all of her nightmares and every last possible fear had come tumbling down upon her head. And in this moment when she was thrown full into the grip of fear, she suddenly felt a torrent of peace gushing down over her. In that split second that stretched out for an eternity or longer, she felt her spirit being thrown up into the sky, where she was enveloped in the warmth and love of Heaven. *It will be all right*, the reassuring Words sounded in her heart. *Not a hair of his head shall be harmed. It is all part of My plan. Trust Me that I will perfect that which concerneth thee.*

Kim snapped back to life. Bending over quickly, she grabbed Maya by the arms and lifted her up,

cradling her close to her chest. "Maya," she whispered urgently. "I don't have time to explain. I want you to go with Julian and do whatever he says. I'll see you soon. Will you promise me that?"

Maya's lips started to tremble, and she nodded but looked frightened. "Where are you going?" she whimpered.

"I have to go get Dylan," Kim replied. "You don't worry. Jesus will take care of you, and He'll take care of Mommy and Dylan too. I'll see you soon. I promise."

With that, Kim spun around and shoved the little girl into Julian's arms, along with the three fleebags. "Get out of here, Julian," Kim said, with tears forming in her eyes. "Get out of here as quick as you can. Find Cal. Find Stu and Alana and tell them to pray like mad. I've gotta go after my kid."

Before Julian could reply or make any move to stop her, Kim was off, running down the dirt trail in the direction where Dylan had led the soldiers.

She could see them easily, not too far in front of her, and she quickly slipped through the camping plots in hopes of getting a little in front of them. She didn't want to come up from behind, or it would make it clear that Dylan had led them the wrong way. *What is Your plan in all this, Jesus?* Kim thought desperately as she dodged a laundry line and jumped over a stray tricycle. *Are You going to do a miracle and let us both walk, or is it Your will that we be taken in, for some reason? Jesus, we have shared so many intimate times together and that's what gives me the strength now to know that You really do know best. So I know You are more than able to protect us, even though I don't know what Your will is. I can only tell You, "Not my will but Thine be done."* *Have Your way, Jesus!*

At that moment Kim came back into the clear, and in full sight of the now larger group of soldiers

who were walking along next to Dylan. Dylan saw her too, and he froze, with his eyes wide as saucers. He tried to turn the other way, but Kim shook her head ever so slightly. And then his five-year-old resolve broke down, and as Kim came rushing towards him he started to run too.

One of the soldiers saw him start moving and reached out a hand to stop him, but the officer shook his head. He had seen Kim and had pieced together what was happening. Their little captive was not going far.

Dylan jumped up into his mother's arms and she held him tight. His face was already wet with tears. "I saw them coming, Mommy!" he wailed. "They were looking right at our camper and I knew they were coming for us. I had to go and try and take them away. I didn't want everyone to get caught! I'm sorry, Mommy! I didn't want you to die!"

"Darling," Kim whispered quickly, oblivious to the approaching soldiers. "I'm not going to die, and you aren't either." Then she raised her voice, firmly taking ahold of Dylan's chin and holding it up towards her. "Jesus is with us, remember? He is more powerful than anything that is against us. Nothing bad will happen to us."

"If you could just come with us now, ma'am," the officer in charge said, his polite tone laced with a hard edge of underlying hate and fear. If it had not been for the crowds of curious campers who were gathering in the doors of their tents and caravans to gawk at the spectacle, Kim knew they would not have been nearly so obliging.

Seeing no other option at this point, Kim nodded and—with Dylan still squeezed tightly to her chest—fell into place between two grim-faced soldiers. Another couple of guards situated themselves right in front and behind them. Kim had never felt so small and alone in her entire life. A momentary

wave of panic started to wash over her.

Just then, a little voice sounded in her ear. Dylan was singing. "We are not afraid to die, for the Lord will take us high and bring us to His bosom warm. On wings of love He'll take us Home..."

Kim shuddered as she remembered the drama story they had heard so many times. *Is that the fate You have in store for us, Jesus?* she asked. *You know that I'm willing if that's Your plan, for us to go out as martyrs and testimonies to Your message. But if You would free us, I think there's still a lot of good we can do.*

And just as surely as ever, the still, quiet voice spoke in her heart: *"Be still and know that I am God. I will perfect that which concerns thee. Stand back and see Me work."*

They had now reached the far end of the campground, and the soldiers paused at the front gate while the officer stepped inside the small office building at the entrance to pay his respects to the management and thank them for their cooperation. Then he stepped back out and nodded at the squadron leader. "Let's move 'er on out," he said.

Just then another eight or ten soldiers came jogging up from the path that led from the opposite end of the camp. "Nothing," panted the soldier at the front, slightly breathless. "We scanned the whole grounds—there's no one unregistered here. The others must have run."

"Well, we expected that," the officer said. "But no thought to that now—we've got part of the group. As long as we're getting them—I don't care how slowly—I'm happy." Then he turned to Kim, and for the first time she had the benefit of seeing his face as it truly was—seething with hate and rage. "We've been on your tail for over a month, you know," he hissed. "Got a hot lead this morning and I knew it was you. I had my whole squad flown down express-

pronto.”

Kim turned Dylan’s face away from the maniacal soldier, but steeled her eyes steadily into his. She was determined not to show any sign of weakness—even though every ounce of resolve was coming straight from her own heavenly power source. She herself felt no strength or boldness whatsoever.

“We lost your trail for a while after the accident on the cliff, and the scene in the woods. We only got one of you then—the dark fellow, and then later his little girlfriend. She came in after him, apparently.” The man laughed sardonically. “Did you ever hear about what happened to them? Did your little boy hear what happened to his friends?”

Kim jammed her palms against Dylan’s ears, bracing herself for the worst.

“Did you hear how they were blown to bits by land mines? Gave their lives for their government they did—and none too soon, either. I saw them shipped off with my very own eyes. Good riddance! And it’ll be your turn before long.”

The man suddenly grew tired of talking with this heretic and shouted to the man at the front of the line of soldiers, “All right men, let’s move on out.”

They started walking briskly through the campground gate, with Kim stumbling along in the midst of them, praying with every ounce of her spirit. As they came through the gate, Kim looked desperately around, wondering if the Lord had some escape planned that she was supposed to catch wind of. She didn’t see anything out of the ordinary. Suddenly, something caught her eye. They had walked a few hundred yards away from the main entrance to the campground, and she now noticed a small wooded glade on the opposite side of the road from where the government vehicles were parked. And there, strategically placed to where it just stuck out of the bushes enough to be noticed,

was a large box of spray-paint cans.

Kim quickly jerked her head back away from looking at the hollow, but her heart was beating faster. She thought she had seen a blur of motion in the bushes, and she prayed desperately that Cal—for he would surely still be there—would lie low and not attempt anything rash without praying it through first.

The small group of soldiers stopped abruptly. Kim squeezed Dylan tighter. The men stepped aside as the officer elbowed his way through and right up to Kim. "All right then," he said, nodding to the man nearest her. "You put the girl in the back of the truck. Shackle her well—hand and foot. We don't want any runaway stunts."

The soldier nodded and moved off in the direction of the truck.

The officer turned his leering face on Kim. "I will have the pleasure of taking charge of the little boy's welfare myself."

Kim's eyes widened with horror. She was trembling from head to toe, and her knees felt like they would give way at any moment. She felt completely and utterly helpless, like putty in the hands of this Frankenstein creation. Kim tore her eyes away from his. Something about the tangible hate reflected in them was fighting for control of her being, and it seemed to send out tentacles of fear and subservience which she did not care to indulge.

As she did so, though, she suddenly noticed a little bead of sweat forming on the side of his face, by his hairline. As she followed the slimy drop down his face, something inside her clicked. This beast standing in front of her was nothing more than a man—a mere mortal, puny, disgusting, rebellious little man. He was nothing before the power of God, and she did not have to listen to him.

"No," Kim said firmly and decidedly, jutting her chin out in the officer's face. "My son will stay with me and that's final. He's not going with anyone else."

The officer took a step backwards, clearly caught off guard. Then his eyes clouded over again. "You insolent bitch!" he screamed out, lifting his hand and slapping her across the face with all of his might. The force of the blow threw her to the ground, but she did not let go of Dylan.

The officer nodded to the men. "Take the boy," he said curtly. "He will ride with me."

Two of the soldiers moved towards Kim, but when they saw the look on her face, they froze in their tracks. Sitting up, she let go of Dylan, and he slid out of her arms and scurried around behind her. He buried his head in her back as she slowly, but very determinedly, laid her two hands on the dusty ground. She laboriously drew herself into a squat, then slowly into a standing position. Her eyes flashed.

Even Cal, watching cautiously from the other side of the street, nearly fell over backwards in shock. This was not the Kim they knew. Something—or Someone—had clearly taken control of her, and would not stop until justice had been served.

Kim was fully standing now, and she lifted her face until she was looking the officer straight in the eye. "The boy will stay with me," she repeated again deliberately.

The man sneered a little. He could not suppress the slight tickle in the pit of his stomach that told him that something about this whole scene was not quite right, but his senses were dull and he did not see the huge wave of destruction that was about to crash on top of his head. He just hurried blindly along towards the pit of hell that was being prepared

for him. "Take the boy, I say!" he shouted again at the soldiers. "Take him! She's only a woman, damn you!"

Kim suddenly lifted up her two hands and held them up, palms pointing outward towards the half-circle of soldiers, many of whom had started to shift nervously in their places. "No!" she cried at the top of her voice. "In the name of Jesus, Son of Almighty God, I say stop! You will not touch a hair on the head of this boy, and you will not touch me. We are servants of the living Christ, and all who oppose Him or His Own shall find their end in *flames!*"

As the last word tore from her lips, two searing bursts of flame jutted out from her palms and exploded in a great thunderclap across the semicircle of uniformed men. Dylan buried his face in Kim's legs as she kept her hands steady until the last bit of flame had passed through them.

Her eyes had been steadfastly fixed upwards, and only now did she look around her. As she did, she let out a horrified gasp and quickly spun around to grab Dylan before he could do the same. Smashing his face into her chest so that he could not see what had happened, she looked around wildly. "Cal!" she screamed. "Cal, come and help us!"

Cal ventured slowly out from his hiding place across the street. He—himself a hardened soldier with years of battlefield training—could not believe his eyes. The two dozen or so men that had been standing in front of them not two minutes before had been completely liquefied by the power of God. The searing heat of the heavenly death-ray had reduced them to little more than a sea of melted wax.

Kim was trembling from head to toe. All of a sudden a noise got their attention, a whimpering sound off to the right. From their opposite sides of

the street they looked and saw a man, crouched down on the ground, cowering and nearly naked. Then they noticed behind the car there were another two men, and they also seemed to have no clothing on.

“Stand up!” Kim ordered. “Come over here.”

The three men made their way gingerly through the remains of their fellow soldiers and came to stand in front of Kim. Their army boots were intact, as were their briefs, but in all other ways they were entirely bare.

Cal came over to stand by Kim, and as he did he let out an audible gasp. “Warner!” he said. “Is that you, man?”

“Cal!” Warner said. “Man, this lady’s part of your outfit? Shit, man, I should have known!”

“What’s your name?” Kim asked one of the others.

“Dan Tooley, ma’am,” he replied.

Kim looked at the third.

“Lawrence,” he said. “Lawrence Wright.”

“And you’re Warner,” she said. “Well, apparently there’s some reason why you three were spared from meeting the fate of your companions. I don’t know how much you know about us. We’re believers in the one true God, and His Son Jesus Christ. We’ve rejected the demonic maniac who likes to call himself the god of this world—him and his stupid credit system. That makes us outlaws, and we live on the run.

“You were spared today, and I believe it’s because you were considered worthy to have a second chance. If you want to come along with us, we’re glad to have you. If not, I’m sure you can make your way back to your commanding officer and he will give you a new suit of clothes.”

There was a moment of silence.

“You don’t have any time to decide, because we’re

leaving this second,” Kim said. “If you want to come, you can follow along.” With that, she turned and started walking around the great slimy mass that was already starting to stink in the late afternoon heat.

“Mommy,” Dylan whispered in her ear, but Kim pushed his head down again. “Not yet, baby,” she said. “I’ll explain it all to you later.”

Cal quickened his pace and caught up with her just as she entered the wooded glade across the street. “We need to get out of here, and fast,” Kim said.

“Are you all right?” Cal asked, studying the girl closely. “What you did out there...” He shook his head, in an apparent lack of descriptive adjectives. “I’ve seen lots of wartime crap in my time, but I’d say this takes the cake.”

“That wasn’t me,” Kim said, looking him squarely in the eye. “And don’t you forget it. People who mess with God get God’s wrath. That’s all there is to it. We’re just tools in His hand, that’s all.”

They walked quickly through the glade.

“So how do you know what to do?” Cal asked. “What if you’d stand up one day and give your little destruction speech and hold out your hands and nothing comes?”

“That’s the first time that’s ever happened to me,” Kim said quietly. “And I hope I never have to do that again. But it’s not something I planned or even thought of. All I wanted to do was get the scam out of there as fast as I could.” She paused and thought for a moment. “I guess it’s like prophesying,” she finally said. “The Spirit just starts flowing and takes control of you, and then suddenly it’s not you anymore. It’s almost like you don’t know what you’re saying or doing, it’s just coming through you like the raw power of God. You know?”

“I guess so,” Cal said, with a little shrug and a

smile. "It's all pretty new to me, but I'm just glad I'm on your side."

Kim laughed.

"Hey, wait on up there!" a breathless voice sounded from behind them.

Cal spun around. "Warner!" he crowed loudly. "Man, am I glad to see you!"

"Shit, man, same here!" Warner said.

"The others?" Kim asked.

"Damned chicken livers, they ran off fast as they could." Warner laughed. "You scared 'em shitless, you're damn right about that."

Kim pursed her lips a little. "Warner," she said, "it's great to have you, don't get me wrong. But we've got a child with us, so if you want to stick around you're gonna to have to soap up your vocab a bit—if you don't mind."

Warner clapped his hand over his mouth. "Was I swearing?" he asked, looking quickly at Cal.

Cal grinned.

"Did I? Did I say anything bad? Shit, man, I didn't even notice it."

"You did it again there," Kim said, with a little laugh.

Warner stopped and replayed his sentence in his mind. "Damn, so I did!"

Kim smiled. "Keep trying," she said.

"Ma'am!" Warner said, then grinned at the accomplishment of having said perhaps the first sentence he had ever spoken without a swear word in it.

"So where are we going, Kim?" Cal asked. "How are we going to find the others?"

"I think the first thing we need to do is find somewhere quiet and do some heavy-duty praying," Kim said.

"Amen!" Dylan cried.

"Hey, big guy, wanna ride on my shoulders

again?” Cal asked. “Your momma looks pretty tired.”

Dylan nodded enthusiastically, and Kim smiled her thanks as she passed her heavy load over.

“We’re back into city area just over that little hill,” Cal said, pointing. “We’re a good little ways from the scene of the crime, so I’d say this is as good a place to stop as any, especially since we don’t know what direction we’re supposed to head in. May as well not make too much forward progress if we don’t know which way to go.”

“Sounds good,” Kim said, dropping wearily onto the grassy ground. “We’ll have to make it fast though. I want to get where we’re all going before too much longer—before I collapse altogether.”



CAL

- 6 -

TREASURE HUNT

Against all carnal reasoning, Cal and Kim had both heard clearly that they needed to return to Kate's house. Cal had passed on to Warner one of his two T-shirts, to at least try to lend him the illusion of being somewhat dressed, just in case they should run into any casual observers on their way. The question of what to do about Warner's registration implant had also come up, but he (to the others' shocked surprise) quickly took care of it by finding a pin and digging his implant right out of his hand without so much as a wince.

"Something they taught us just the other day," he said with a careless laugh, seeing their expressions. "Got reports that some soldiers got caught by rebels and such, and the specs on their implants were used against them. With the hand-implant, it's like picking out a splinter."

Kim doubted that greatly, but without further ado, the team steeled their nerves to set about the agonizingly long walk to Kate's. They would also have to take the back roads to get there, and neither of them was very familiar with the way, although Warner knew the city fairly well. Between them all they managed to make their way, but it was nearly eleven o'clock by the time they stumbled

around the last corner and the house came into view.

“Look!” Dylan squeaked excitedly, waking up suddenly from his perch on Warner’s shoulders. “There’s lights on!”

Sure enough, one or two small lights could be seen in the living room window.

“That could be good news or bad news,” Cal muttered.

“No,” Kim said, shaking her head. “If it was the bad guys they would be keeping a lower profile to not scare us away.” She grimaced. “Not that we shouldn’t be doing the same ourselves. But that’s gotta be Stu.”

“And Alana,” Cal said, with a wistful smile.

Kim lifted her eyebrows and jabbed him playfully. “Oh, it’s like that, is it?” she teased.

“Is not!” Cal said quickly. “I just miss her wit, that’s all.”

Kim laughed but was too tired for any further bantering. They made the rest of the trip in silence, finally coming around the back and rapping quietly on the door. There were some excited scurrying noises heard inside, then a flurry of excitement as the door was opened. Stuart instantly appeared behind Alana and clapped his hand over her mouth, which was exuberantly wide open.

The troop piled inside and shut the door, and then Alana burst out. “You made it! We’ve been absolutely holding our breath for you guys!”

“Is—” Kim’s voice quivered a little. “Did Julian...?”

“Mommy!” a little squeaky voice sounded as the bedroom door was flung open. The little curly-headed girl stood in the doorway, bathed in yellow lamplight and stumbling over the long T-shirt-turned-nightdress that fit her like a first communion gown. Kim flew across the room and threw

herself into Maya's arms. "You're safe!" she exclaimed, over and over.

"Course I'm safe," Maya said, in perfect three-year-old faith. "Jesus kept me, and He kept you too. I told Him to."

Kim laughed and cried. Dylan came running over to join the happy hugathon as they praised and thanked the Lord for reuniting them again.

"Hey, who's Mr. Bikini Briefs?" Alana asked suddenly, looking over at Warner, who was still standing by the door looking very uncomfortable, still being partially undressed.

Cal snickered.

"Oh boy," Kim said. "It's a long story, but he's with us now. Is that okay if he tags along? Don't worry," she said, nodding towards his hand, where a small patch of dried blood showed where the implant had once been. "His implant was deactivated—quite literally."

"I know him from way back," Cal said quickly. "He's one of the guys I went back to talk to after we skipped out on the Lab. Warner."

"Nice to meet you, Warner," Alana said. "Nice briefs."

Warner grinned, but still looked thoroughly embarrassed.

Julian cleared his throat. "It just so happens that I grabbed my overnight bag before I split the camper. I think I have pair of jeans you can borrow. Might be a little tight on you, but it's better than nothing."

"Thanks," Warner said.

"What's up, man?" Cal asked quietly, sidling over to Warner. "Cat got your tongue? You haven't said more than two words since you got in here. You never stop talking for a second, what's up?"

"Shit man! That girl told me not to swear!" Warner whispered. "I don't know what to do with myself,

man. I can't say shit without swearing. So I figure it's better to just keep my trap buckled when I'm around nice Christian folks like yourselves."

"Oh no," Alana said, overhearing the last part of their conversation. "Let's not get mistaken for 'nice Christian folks' here!"

"Definitely not," Stuart said. "I think what you need is a little more background on the operation you've gotten yourself messed up in, Warner. There's a lot of perks to this lifestyle, but there's also a fair bit of ... shall we say, 'guidelines.' If you're game for it all, we're happy to have you. But you'll need to go through the whole confirmation—on our side and on yours."

"We learned about doing that," Julian added wryly.

"Now is great," Warner said, nodding.

Stuart looked mildly surprised and looked at his watch, but then shrugged. "Sure, why not?" he said. "It's not too late. It would be nice to get an early start on our day all together tomorrow, if we get this out of the way tonight."

"Can I come along?" Cal asked. "We're buddies from way back, he might need a hand—you know, an interpreter."

Stuart laughed. "Sure, come along. Let's gather in the living room in ten. I've gotta pay my respects to the wife."

"And damn, does the wife have some tales to tell you!" Warner said, shaking his head.



A couple of hours later, everyone had gravitated to the kitchen for a wee hours buffet. Warner had passed his initiation rites with flying colors, and seemed eager to do anything he could to shed the vestiges of his former self and integrate himself into this new fringe lifestyle. After his prayer for salvation and cleansing, Warner had amazed

himself by speaking two full sentences without using a single curse word, and that feat had so encouraged him that he had pledged himself right then and there to never curse again. Cal had choked back a laugh at the thought, but Warner was determined and so it was.

It was now nearly one o'clock, and they were all standing around in various stages of nighttime decomposure.

"So what brought you guys all back here, anyway?" Kim asked.

"I guess the same thing that brought you," Stuart said with a smile. "Thank God for check-in power."

"We didn't even get back to the campground," Alana said, shaking her head. "I thought it was a little batty myself, but Stu was sure and we prayed about it again and it did seem to be the thing that was going around. So we came here and the place is quiet as a mousetrap and I'm like, 'Stu?' But he held out, he was like, 'Let's give it an hour, maybe they're still on their way.'"

"And nearly an hour later, Julian and Maya show up," Stuart said with a grin. "Then we knew it was just a matter of waiting for the rest of you—and now here you are."

"We knew you'd come," Julian said, smiling.

Stuart looked down at the ground. He *hadn't* known for sure that he would ever see Kim and Dylan again, and he had spent some agonizing moments on his face after hearing the situation as Julian had left it. But having at last resigned himself to accepting the Lord's will, whatever it was to be, they had continued to wait. If Cal had come alone, they would have known that all had not gone well with Kim. But until Cal made his appearance, they still held to their hope. And to see them all coming through that back door—together, safe, and with an underwear-clad new disciple to boot ... it was

more than they'd dared dream.

"So what's on the menu for tomorrow?" Cal asked.

"Aha!" Stuart said, reaching his hands behind his back to the counter and bringing them out with a flourish. "I know what's for breakfast!—Main course: the manila envelope!"

Kim's eyes lit up. "You got our mailings!" she exclaimed. "I can't believe they're still coming through!"

"Well, we haven't picked up in two months or more, and there was just this single baby, so I don't know how heavy a flow we're going to keep getting. Mail is so screwy these days anyway. But at least we have this, and so let's savor it to the full."

"So what's inside?" Warner asked curiously.

"This is one of our lifelines to the Source," Kim explained. "We get periodic shipments of new Letters and other stuff—used to be every 2-3 weeks or month, but not always that regular these days. We get most stuff by e-mail now—at least *we* did, at the Refuge, though I didn't manage to get any of the latest stuff on my laptop before we split. But some folks still get them through the regular mail."

"We didn't open it yet," Stuart said, still holding the thick manila envelope. "We figured that should be done so all could partake of the moment." He paused and looked around. "I guess we should wait till the morning, huh?"

The others booed him loudly and Stuart gave a mischievous smile. Then he took a deep breath, while Alana provided a homemade drum roll to further heighten the effect, and ripped open the flap. The contents poured out onto the kitchen table. There were two GNs, and three other mags. The yellow mailing slip and a red piece of paper also fell out. Everyone burst out in a spontaneous round of applause.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we have devotions!” Kim exclaimed. She was delighted to see two new MLKs, which she quickly swiped to set aside for the little guys’ next-morning treat—an ideal bribe that looked very much like an extra hour of morning sleep for the grown-ups.

“What’s this?” Alana asked curiously, picking up the red sheet. “Does this mean anything to you?” She handed the paper to Stuart, who read it aloud:

From the Office to Home #053

With world conditions being the way they are, the Lord has shown us that it is time to open the floodgates and pour out the stockpiles in your area. If your team would like to take on this mission, the Lord has shown us that you would be worthy and able. We cannot spell out the directions to the site in this note, for obvious reasons, but if you will pray and follow the clues, we know the Lord will lead you to it in His own way.

Love and prayers,

John for the Office team

Stuart turned the paper over. The only thing on the reverse side was a simple handwritten poem:

Travel near and travel far, S2K from where you are.

Follow yellow, never red—go each step as you are led.

Kneel and bow and watch and pray; lowliness is the only way.

Mama’s Memos current world shows us how to live unfurled.

Alana looked blankly around the room. “Whoa!” she exclaimed. “Maybe I missed something really

zappy, but what in life's name is going on here?"

Stuart lowered the paper thoughtfully. "I think we've just found our treasure hunt," he said.

"Wow!" Kim exclaimed. "That was what the prophecy said, didn't it? Weren't we supposed to get a treasure hunt?"

Cal nodded. "That's right. So this is it then? I can hardly believe it!—I mean, not that I can't believe it, but it's just so ... *literal!*"

Warner blinked a couple of times, and Cal leaned over to fill him in on the situation.

"So what happens now?" Julian asked.

"I say we should get our bearings first before we hit the sack," Kim said. "We're probably gonna want to skip out on this place sooner than later, I'd say. But it would be nice to know when we're supposed to do that."

"Do we want to wait around here at all?" Cal asked. "There's at least two guys on the loose that know exactly what happened—and for sure they've got backup and are going to do anything to get back in cozy with their higher-ups. They'll know we couldn't get far without that camper, with the scanning devices all over the main roads, and sooner or later they'll make the connection and come looking here."

Alana nodded. "If those guys have really been tailing us since the Refuge, we don't know how much they know. We could easily wake up in maximum security and be none the wiser for it."

The others looked silently at each other; Cal and Alana were right.

"With the camper gone, we don't have anywhere else to go," Kim said, spreading her arms out helplessly. "We've got two little kids—we can't just camp out *al fresco!*"

"What about this treasure hunt thing?" Julian said suddenly. "Isn't that something we'd be better

off doing by cover of darkness?”

“What are you thinking, Julian?” Stuart asked.

“Well, if this treasure hunt leads to a certain place, and from the scarlet letter there I’m guessing that it’s going to be some type of storage facility—well then, if we find it tonight, maybe we could all stash ourselves there to sleep it out during the day.”

Alana made a face. “Ew!” she said. “That is one helluva tightrope with no net underneath! We’re gallivanting ourselves all the way down to the city, two hours’ walk minimum. It’s gonna be sunrise by the time we find this place—if we find it. Then we’re setting ourselves up to come face to face with a one-foot square locker and a crowd of guys with handcuffs taking up our rears.”

“And on the other side we have waiting here and risking getting shot in the back before we wake up,” Cal said quietly.

“We’re slapped up either way, it seems,” Warner contributed cheerfully.

“Well, there’s just one way to find out,” Stuart said.

The others nodded. It was amazing how the very thought of their divine Life-link was enough to bring an instant hush over the otherwise rowdy, self-assured crowd. No matter how strong their opinions, no matter how tough their outer covering, they all knew without a doubt that without this divine flow they were like shivering weeds, at the complete mercy of the elements. When it came to prophecy, they could not get enough.

It did not take long, either. After no more than ten minutes it was determined beyond all doubt: They were to break camp immediately and set off back the way they’d come, towards the mailbox, where the hunt would begin. They were to go the back way, through the woods and the side roads—much the same path that Kim and Cal had come not many hours before.

Kim quaked inwardly at the thought, as it was a much longer route than the one Stuart and Alana had taken, but the instruction was clear and definite. As a larger group, they would have to avoid any threat of the inner-city scanners.

In a sudden moment of brilliant ingenuity, Warner's eyes lit up. "Do you have a couple of sheets I could use?" he asked Kim.

Kim raised her eyebrow rather doubtfully, but pulled a couple sheets out of a nearby cupboard. Past exploration of the house had certainly paid off well.

"A little trick I learned in my wilderness survival classes," Warner said, smiling at Kim. "Had a bit of an unorthodox teacher. He liked to bring out all his sh—stuff and strut it for us." He wrestled with the sheet a little longer until he had securely arranged it around his back. A hefty knot tied at his chest, leaving a great wide sack of sorts in the back. "See?" he beamed. "A perfect carry-place. The kids don't even need to be woken up."

"What's the chance of that?" Alana said with a laugh.

But Kim looked impressed. "That's excellent!" she said. "I was wondering what we were going to do with the little guys."

Stuart burst back into the room. He was holding two bulging plastic bags in his hands. "I've gathered up some food—just about cleaned out Kate's pantry. Are you guys ready? We're moving out in two minutes."

Kim leaped up. "Almost!" she said, motioning to Warner. "Cal!" she called. "Come over here, you've just been drafted by the baby brigade!"

While Warner fixed up the other sheet around Cal's shoulders, Kim gathered Maya up and, when Warner was ready, tucked the little girl comfortably inside the sheet. She blinked a couple of times, then

curled up against the man's back and snored on.

Cal shook his head. "Never seen the likes," he said. "I bet she'd sleep through anything!"

"Family trait," Kim said with a grin. "Turn around, beast of burden." Then, hesitating a moment, she asked, "Do you mind? I'd carry him myself, but..."

"Hell no!" Cal exclaimed. "Lay him on me. That's what these are for!" He flexed his biceps proudly.

Kim laughed, and hoisted the heavy five-year-old up. Dylan opened his eyes to look around for a few moments, but Kim kissed his cheek and stroked his head. "Everything's okay, baby," she said. "We're going to do a little walking tonight."

Dylan nodded and closed his eyes again.

Kim quickly dashed over to the bed and gathered up the kids' backpacks and other stuff that was strewn around the room, which she tucked carefully in the remaining spaces of the slings. Then she picked up her own fleebag and hastily popped her laptop inside, along with her bra that had been lying on the floor, and zipped the whole thing up.

As they came back out into the living room, they found the others all ready to go. Stuart had the food and had also gathered up some water bottles from the kitchen, and Alana had pilfered a few changes of clothes from Kate's ample supply. "I'm sure she won't mind," she said rather shamefacedly when Kim peeked suspiciously inside her bag. "It's not like she's gonna use them. We might appreciate a few changes."

"We've gotta kick on out," Stuart said, already at the door and rather irked at hearing talk of clothing at this time-pressed moment.

After another desperate prayer for guidance and safekeeping, the team slunk out the back door, shutting it quietly behind them. And thus ended another chapter in their great drama.



"Gee, I never knew this road was so busy," Cal muttered as they trudged their weary way through the brambly back road that ran nearly parallel to the main street, and on which they had been walking for the past half-hour.

"It's not," Alana said casually.

Cal scowled at her and didn't answer.

Alana laughed out loud. "I didn't mean what you think I meant," she said. "For once in my life I wasn't being argumentative. There's a beastly lot more traffic up there than I've ever seen in my life—and I've lived around here for all of it."

Stuart stopped walking. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

Alana's brain was bombarded with so many snappy one-liners that it went on temporary overload and she couldn't think of the right one to say, consequently having to pass up her shining opportunity and say nothing at all.

Kim seized the moment for her. "No, you think? That they're already after us? How could they be onto us so quickly?"

Julian dropped his bags and dove into the underbrush.

"Julian!" Kim shrieked in a half-whisper. "Oh Lord, he's nuts!" Then, "I've gotta go with him." She dropped her fleebag at Stuart's feet and grinned at him. "Gotta keep an eye on that guy," she said laughingly, then dove into the bushes after him.

The main road just above them curved up the hill back where Kate's house was located. At the place where they were right then, about halfway down the slope, the roadway was about twenty feet up a bushy hill, and Julian and Kim cleared it in three or four minutes.

Kim scrambled up a few seconds after Julian, and wriggled along the ground next to him. Their faces were down at sidewalk level, and peering

through the guardrail at the side of the road, they could see an assortment of vehicles whizzing by.

"There's no mistaking *that*," Julian said grimly, shaking his head. "They're onto us all right."

They watched in silence as vehicle after vehicle careened up the narrow mountain road. Then all was quiet.

"We'd better get back down," Kim said suddenly. "I don't know about you, but I'm anxious to put as much distance in as I can!"

Julian nodded and they started back down the way they'd come.

"Is it?" Stuart asked the thistle-covered returnees.

They both nodded at the same time.

"Somebody must have gotten smart and started monitoring Kate's utilities," Julian offered.

"Those damned bas—" Warner suddenly swallowed his words. "Bass fishing," he said glibly. "I love it! Used to do it all the time with my gramps in the summer when I'd visit him."

"Come on, we'd best keep moving," Stuart said, tossing Kim her bag again.

They quickened their pace.

"Do you think they'll follow us back here and find us?" Kim wondered aloud.

"Not very likely," Cal replied. "They wouldn't have a clue which way we went, or if we're on foot or not. We could be anywhere at all."

"Anyhow we have a long way to go," Stuart said. "I say we crank up the speed."

The others looked mildly surprised, but no one could think of a suitable reason to avoid the punishment, so they all stepped up their pace. And so the hours passed on by.



They arrived at the little mailbox just after they heard the big church tower bell chime four times.

Kim shivered a little, and wrapped her arms around herself. "I'd almost forgotten what it's like to feel cold," she said with a little laugh. "This is about the only time of day global warming allows us such a luxury."

"Yeah, it's all right," Alana said, tipping her head forward and shaking her hair around wildly.

"So we're here," Cal said, anxious to focus on the task at hand. "What happens now? Where's that little red thing?"

Stuart produced the paper and read the whole thing through again. They were standing on a little side street behind their mail service.

"Okay, it can't be too hard, right?" Kim said. "The Lord must know we can crack it if He gave it to us. Read the first part again, Stu."

Stu cleared his throat wearily, and began again: "Travel near and travel far—"

"Holy Mo!" Warner exclaimed, then he stopped, and laughed. "I guess that's a pretty OK expression to say, isn't it? That wouldn't be classed as swearing, would it?"

"Holy Mo what, Warner?" Cal asked.

"Oh," Warner said. "There—look at that!" He pointed across the street and down the road a little ways. There, a bright neon light was flashing off and on despite the hour: *Miracolo Travel*.

"A travel agency?" Alana said. Then she said again, "A *travel* agency?!"

Without another word, the six young people dashed recklessly out onto the street and careened across it. Fortunately for them the city was deserted at this hour. They came to the well-padlocked front entrance, the display window dimly lit and flashing with exaggerated drawings of fancifully idealized holiday resorts.

Alana grabbed ahold of the metal grating with both hands and shook it with all her might.

Stuart grabbed her shoulder. “Ease up, girl! Are you trying to wake up the city, or just this block?”

Alana scowled and kicked the sidewalk, but she was smiling. “Sorry,” she said. “I didn’t have my caffeine shot. I’m gonna need some mouth-to-mouth soon if I don’t get my booster.”

“S2K from where you are,” Julian was saying thoughtfully. “Now that is a crypto if ever I heard one. I mean, is that a play on the ol’ Y2K or something?”

“Sort of,” Kim and Stuart both said at the same time, then laughed. Kim smiled and Stuart nodded at her to continue. “It was a big revolution/purge thing we had at the turn of the century. ‘Shakeup 2000’—hence the abbreviation. I have a feeling 2000’s got something to do with it from here—a measurement ... distance or something.”

“Two thousand inches? Paces? Meters?” Cal asked, then shrugged helplessly. “Feet?”

Kim shrugged and shook her head.

“Okay, what’s the next part?” Julian asked.

“Follow yellow, never red,” Stuart recited from memory.

Kim had her eyes scrunched shut, and Stuart turned to look at her. “Okay,” she said. “This way.” She turned and started walking.

“What are you getting, Kim?” Julian asked.

“It’s just a feeling,” Kim said with a sigh. “But the S2K—it was about making the right choices—get it? *Right?* So I figure, first thing we go right. Now it couldn’t mean any kind of screwy yards and feet measurement, because there’s no way we’re gonna count out 2000 of those. So it must be something to do with a ‘2.’ So I say we look out for anything that’s second—traffic lights, streets, blocks ... you know.”

Stuart nodded, looking impressed and obviously pleased at being connected to such a mega-brain.

"There!" Alana said in a raised whisper. "Look at that!"

They had reached the first street turn-off, and there on the side of the wall was a huge red skull and crossbones.

"That's odd, isn't it?" Warner mused.

"Never red," Alana said.

They walked on.

"It must be the next street," Kim said, her excitement mounting as they moved on. "And I hope it is too, because we've gotta get off this main one. It's a miracle no cars have gone by till now—quite the sight we are too, kiddie-packs and all."

The sound of a roaring engine at the end of the road filled the street just as they saw the next turn-off. "Yes!" Kim whispered, as they all saw the advertising billboard with a picture of a great yellow sun wearing sunglasses and frowning at a bottle of suntan lotion.

They reached the street and all dove around the corner. As the sound of the approaching vehicle drew nearer, a narrow flight of stone steps that disappeared below street level looked the perfect place to quickly duck into. Just as they disappeared from sight, the car roared past.

Julian, intrepid as ever, moved up a few steps to look around the corner, and came back crowing with excitement. "That was a police car," he said after they all had come to rest in the concrete enclosure at the bottom of the stairway. "Routine sweep, no doubt, but we got off just in time."

"We'd better wait in here a few more minutes," Stuart said, "just to make sure they're not coming right back."

"Well, let's think about our next move," Cal said.

Stuart flicked out his small light and began again: "Follow yellow, never red'—okay, we did that. Then 'go each step as you are led.' You think that

means anything?"

"Sounds like it was just put in there to rhyme with the other," Kim said. "You know, sort of a little spiritual principle insert. What's after that?"

"Kneel and bow and watch and pray; lowliness is the only way." Stuart paused and examined their surroundings.

"More spiritual inserts?" Cal offered.

Kim shook her head. "They wouldn't take a whole one-and-a-half lines for that." She frowned.

"Unless..." Warner looked up, hesitant to contribute to a conversation about which he was so obviously inexperienced. But, encouraged by the others' blank stares and clueless expressions, he continued, "Unless it means like, you know, going down."

"We just went down," Alana observed.

"You don't think this is place we were meant to go, do you?" Cal asked incredulously, looking at the basement-level doorway that led into the building beside them.

"You just might be onto something there—both of you," Stuart said excitedly. He put his bag down. "Julian—come with me. We'll go check this alley—there can't be more than ten other doors on it. We'll go see if there's any other thing that goes down. You guys look around here. And stay quiet! It doesn't look like any kind of residential place, but you never know."

"Looks like a roach motel to me," Alana muttered.

Julian and Stuart quietly climbed the steps and slipped out onto the street, while the others opened the lobby door and looked around. The hallway was small and dingy, and had a distinct musty smell that indicated that the landlady did not live on the premises. There were two clear glass doors with the names of various seedy firms blazoned on them, and then a staircase that wound down and another

that went up.

“More steps going down,” Warner said with a smile.

Then Kim clapped her hands onto her mouth. “Take each step as you are led,” she quoted. “Steps! Maybe it wasn’t a spiritual commercial after all!”

Just then Stuart and Julian came back in, shaking their heads. There were no other downward steps at all on this street.

“We must be on the right track then,” Kim said.

“This is unbelievable,” Cal said, shaking his head. “This is just way, way beyond unbelievable.”

“I’m with you, man,” Warner said.

SEARCH REWARDED

The stairway seemed much longer than a normal lower floor descent, and obviously did not lead to plush living quarters. The further down they went, the clearer it was that they were heading towards some deep basement level. The musty smell of decaying cobwebs only served to confirm that fact.

Kim pulled her big flashlight out of her fleebag and handed it to Cal, who was at the front.

"This is interesting," Warner said softly, squatting down on the ground next to Cal.

"What?" Cal asked, turning to look at him. The others stopped as well.

"Look at the ground," Warner said. "It's covered so thick with dust you can see our footprints. No one's been walking this way for a very long time."

"I wonder if that's good news or bad," Alana said.

"Well, I'd say good," Stuart replied. "It means it's not a traveled path."

"So how could this be our great treasure-place then?" she asked.

"Well, obviously the stuff's been here for ages," Kim said. "They wouldn't have just put it here now! I mean, they probably made up the clues now—goodness knows how they did that. I guess they live around here!" She stopped to giggle as her mind

spun off several intriguing possibilities from that topic. “But they probably wouldn’t want to be seen walking in these parts if they’re trying to be selah.”

“Say-what?” Alana said.

“007,” Stuart translated. “‘Mission Impossible.’ It’s a Bible term we use to cover that subject.”

“Oh,” Alana said. “Well, lookie here, all—we have a door.”

They had come to the end of the staircase, and the path ended in an impressive-looking door. It was all metal—somewhat surprising for such a dilapidated-looking building—and had a fancy locking device on the door. It appeared to be some sort of numeric keypad, along with a digital display.

“Oh, we’re in the wrong place,” Julian said, looking at the lock. “This is a *scanner*, for crying out loud!”

“Check this out!” Warner said, ever the Daniel Boone.

They all bent down to the ground—which it seemed Warner was never far from—and saw that barely peeking out from under the door was a tiny speck of red. It looked suspiciously like the corner of a sheet of scarlet notepaper.

“A twin,” Alana said approvingly. “Excellent. Neat and tidy. Just the way we like it.”

“Okay, that was thoughtful—a confirmation. Now what?” Julian said. “There’s still this scanner-device here that’s giving me the creeps.”

Kim had bent down and was examining the device. “It looks like we’ll need some sort of password or code to get in here.”

Cal shook his head. “This is all sounding very, very risky. What if it’s a trap? What if it sets off heavy-duty alarm bells or something? You just never know.”

“Look, everybody,” Stuart said. “We’ve come this far by faith, right?”

"That's right," Warner said, in a sudden burst of communicativeness. The self-imposed silence that he had endured much of the day had taken its toll upon his normally talkative nature, and now he felt quite on the verge of bursting out. "Anyone who can melt down a squad of soldiers—and all their weapons—has got more than my respect any day."

"Thank you, Warner," Stuart said dryly. "But what I'm trying to say is this: We prayed, right? We prayed and we listened. So if you get instructions, you've gotta follow them, right?"

This was met with silence.

"Does anyone feel like we're off the track? Anyone?"

Silence again.

"No, man, we're hot," Alana said at last. "Just all this techno-metal is a bit spooky, no? I say let's go for it."

"How?" Julian asked.

"Let's start with the password," Kim said brightly. She bent over her bag and pulled out her laptop, hitting the power button in the same smooth movement.

"What's that for?" Cal asked.

Stuart pulled out the red paper again and read the last line of the clue: "'Mama's Memos current world shows us how to live unfurled.'"

"What could be plainer?" Kim asked, as she clacked away. "We need a number, and we get a clue in the very first part—'Mama's Memos!'"

"It's a series of Letters that have been coming out over the years," Stuart said quickly, for the benefit of everyone else. "We're up to ... oh, what? Forty now, Kim?"

"Forty-two, I think," Kim said. "That's what I was going to check."

"So how does that make a number password?" Cal asked.

"I don't know," Kim said. "But obviously it's got something to do with that.—Maybe '42,' or..."

"Maybe the Letter number of the last Mama's Memos," Stuart suggested. Then he looked down at the paper again. "Hey, look at this?—'Current world.' What does that sound like?"

"World currents!" Kim exclaimed.

"Let me guess—another ongoing series," Alana said.

Stuart nodded.

"Okay," Kim said exultantly. "The last 'Mama's Memos' GN came out four months ago; it was number 42." She poked around a bit more. "'World Currents' got up to ... 165. I remember that series really took off in the first three-and-a-half years!" She laughed a little. "So much to print—so little space!"

"Well, no way it's gonna be a five-digit number," Julian said, looking at the keypad. "I'll be surprised if it's just numbers at all—there's a pile of symbols here too. But maybe they were trying to make it possible for us to actually crack the thing, so I guess it's worth a try."

The others nodded their consent.

Julian typed in the five numbers, and then pressed what looked like an enter key. The display went blank, and nothing happened.

"Do you think it did anything?" Julian asked.

"I somehow don't think so," Stuart answered, giving a short heave against the handleless door, which didn't budge.

"Well, at least it didn't set off any alarms or anything—I hope," Alana said.

"Why don't we try the actual Letter numbers, Kim, and see what happens," Stuart suggested.

"Okay, I'll read them off to you, Julian," Kim said.

Julian typed the numbers in as she read them, and then pressed the enter sign at the end again.

The small group held their breath. Almost unbelievably, there was a loud buzzing sound, and a mechanical voice said, "Confirm Data Esmeralda."

Stuart looked around. "I guess we're in!" he said. "It's asking for the Esmeralda phone code—good thing I'm still around," he said with a laugh. He then entered the coded sequence he seemed to know the computer was expecting.

"Confirm Stuart F." The mechanical voice echoed a completion of the data that had been entered. "Enter full date of birth."

Again Stuart typed in a sequence of keys. "I'll be jiggered if I know how they came up with this type of technology. WS really can keep us guessing!"

As he finished, the machine beeped loudly. The voice resumed its mechanized drawl: "Data incomplete. Resume error."

Stuart typed in the last set of numbers all over again.

As soon as he finished, there was a loud clang from inside the wall nearby the door, and a heavy whirring sound took over from there. After ten or fifteen seconds, the door swung open with a loud buzz.

"Whew!" Kim exclaimed, her eyes wide with wonder. "We're in!"

Warner was visibly shaken by all he had just experienced, and his eyes were very round. "So this is the mysterious treasure house, huh?" he asked, walking reverently down the carpeted hallway.

It seemed to be some sort of converted storage room. They had entered a long, dark hallway. Cal found a light switch by the door, but the single naked bulb that hung just barely above their heads quickly got over the shock of being turned on, and started blushing an unbecoming shade of orange.

"Isn't there another light?" Alana asked.

Cal quickly took stock of the long hallway. "Looks

like there's one in here," he said.

He flicked it on just as the first overhead bulb died out. Warner and Cal thankfully put down their still sleeping burdens, which Kim tucked lovingly one against the other near the front door while the rest explored their surroundings further.

A short ways down the hallway they encountered their first door, which opened into a grimy storage room. The entire back wall of the room was lined with pipes and wires, but there didn't seem to be anything else in the room at all.

Cal was already pressing onward. "There're two more doors up ahead," he said, shoving one of them open. It jammed a little, but a hearty kick took care of that.

Inside, the room was no different than the first they had looked in, except there were no wires and twice as many pipes, plus a large stack of empty, nondescript envelopes.

"So where's this treasure?" Warner asked suspiciously. "I hope someone didn't beat us to it."

"Don't worry," Kim said. "It will be here."

The third door proved equally fruitless, opening into a small bedroom equipped with modest toilet facilities and a small, dirty sink. The six were left puzzled and scratching their heads.

"What's going on here?" Julian asked. Then he suddenly narrowed his eyes. "Hey, wait a minute!" he said. He ran quickly back and stuck his head into the first room, then the second, then the third. "I thought so," he said exultantly. "There's a room missing!"

"My dear Watson," Alana said mockingly, "you've outdone yourself."

Julian threw her a scathing glance then turned to the others, continuing, "Look—the size of the rooms doesn't measure up. The first room—it ends almost two-thirds of the way down this hallway. And

the end room here doesn't go over the side at all. So there must be *another* door here somewhere, that's covered or something."

Alana looked convincingly contrite.

"Did you notice anything unusual when you first walked in?" Warner asked suddenly.

"Tell us, Warner," Kim said. Whatever Warner had noticed, undoubtedly no one else had and undoubtedly it was something important.

"Well—check out the pad. It's old, dingy, dusty, dilapidated. That about sum it up?"

The others nodded.

"But then..." Warner walked over to the wall, tapping it knowingly with his finger. "Look at this papering!"

They looked. It was a plaid blue pattern with small white specks in the background.

Then Kim jumped a little. "It's new!" she squealed.

"Well, I'll be!" Cal exclaimed. "So it is!"

"See?" Warner continued excitedly. "Some parts have been smudged with dirt to try to make it blend more, but it's obviously a totally different decade. This papering here is a cover-up. I bet if we feel around a while, we'll find our buried door right underneath the surface."

At those words everyone jumped into action, although they just as quickly realized that there was only so much space along the small stretch of wall. So while Warner diligently tapped the upper portion of the wall with his knuckles, Cal was feeling his way along the bottom for any irregularities in the wall's surface.

It didn't take long for Warner's intuition to bear fruit. "Yes!" Warner called out, as his fingers hit a hollow-sounding spot along the wall. "We have a door—there's no doubt about it."

Stuart jumped up and popped out the blade of

his knife. "Where does it start?" he asked.

Cal had now also found the spot. "There—feel that? It's a door frame, no question."

Stuart nodded. "You're right." He felt down a bit further. "I think I can feel a hole or something ... the paper goes all soft. Must be where the handle was—I guess they had to take it off to make the surface look basically smooth. Interesting."

Stuart jabbed his knife through the hole, then grabbed at the torn bits of wallpaper. Kim started to help him out, but just then Maya started whimpering and Julian took over the de-papering, while Kim ran to comfort the disoriented little girl.

By the time Kim came back with a now-awake Maya in her arms, the whole of the door had been uncovered. "Unbelievable!" she breathed in awe. "So who's going to open it?"

It should have been a ceremonial event, but unfortunately Alana had not been paying attention to the reverence of the moment, and at the very same time as Kim had asked her question, Alana had proceeded to kick the door roughly with her foot. It swung open easily, and for a few moments, all eight viewers stood with their mouths agape.

Then Maya jumped into action. "Viddies!" she screamed at the top of her strident voice. "Viddie Kiddies! A whole room of them!" She wriggled straight out of her mother's arms and went dashing headlong into the room.

The others followed quickly behind her. The room was not overly large, but every inch of it had been made good use of. Almost every bit of floor space was covered, except for a small entry passage that wound through tall stacks, and the walls themselves could hardly be seen. All that *could* be seen were videos, tapes, posters, tracts, books, and a whole assortment of digital media.

Maya had by now dove headfirst into a box of

Treasure Attic DVDs, and all that could be seen were her bobby socks and her two pink tennis shoes, kicking wildly in the air. Kim ran quickly to fish her out.

“So what is all this stuff?” Warner asked suddenly.

Stuart’s chest swelled with pride. “Remember I told you about all the ways that the Lord’s led us to preach the Gospel and get out the message over the past 30 plus years? Well, this is them!”

“The ‘tools,’” Alana quipped, with a grin.

“That’s right,” Kim said.

“So what are we gonna do with it all?” Julian said, dropping wearily to the floor.

“I guess that’s the next step of the treasure hunt,” Kim said. “But boy, whatever it is—I’ll bet it’s gonna be a blast!”

“I know!” Alana said suddenly. “Let’s rent a helicopter and drop them over the city!—Just flood down a host of little papers—drown the nations in the Word of God. Whaddaya say?”

The others laughed.

“I say we get to bed,” Cal said.

“Gadz, it’s past five!” Alana exclaimed.

“Wait a minute, what are we going to do about later today?” Kim asked. “We have to meet Ashton.”

“He won’t be expecting us till night,” Julian said. “We should wake up at just about the right time.”

“I guess let’s keep our fingers crossed for the munchkins,” Stuart said wearily, looking at Maya’s bright-eyed countenance. “If we just had a video machine, we’d be all set.”

“You know, that third room had a pile of stuff in the corner,” Warner said. “There was a large brown tarp way at the back. We should see what’s in there.”

They entered the third room, and Stuart and Cal swung the heavy tarp off a great pile in the back, just as Warner had so observantly noticed.

“Wow!” Kim said.

It was a huge pile of mattresses, blankets, quilts and pillows. At the front was a large box, and when Kim started rifling through it, she let out another squeal of excitement. “Boy, this is unbelievable! Was someone expecting us or what? We’ve got all kinds of stuff here—matches, candles, flashlights ... even a little gas burner and a frying pan!”

“No video machine?” Maya asked sadly.

Kim looked at the little girl. “It doesn’t seem like it. I’m sorry! But I’m sure there’s other stuff you can do.”

“Weren’t there DVDs in there?” Julian asked suddenly.

“Yeah!” Maya exclaimed suddenly, her eyes lighting up.

“My laptop is all set up for them. No problem.”

Without another word Maya had dashed out of the room and back towards the treasure pile. Her loud voice could be heard resonating down the hall. “Dylan! Dylan, wake up! It’s video time!”

Kim sighed and groaned, burying her face in her hands.

As she was about to run to the rescue, Stuart put his hand on her arm. “Don’t worry,” he said. “Let them have their fun. If they watch the shows, we can get some rest.”

Kim nodded.

Cal had started pulling the mattresses off the pile. “Okay,” he said. “This room will be the honeymoon suite. First room from the front door—the big one—will be reserved for the male gender. Single white female will occupy the middle room.” He tossed a huge polka-dot comforter on Alana’s head.

Having come face to face with such a tangible reality of soft bedding, no one seemed to have the strength to speak any more. Julian had dis-

appeared into the treasure room to set up his laptop for the kids, Kim having assured him that Dylan was very experienced with computers and would follow his instructions implicitly.

As the familiar jingle sounded from the laptop speakers, and after a few more mutters and mumbles, the sweet gift of sleep was wrenched from the hands of the morning, and six exhausted Endtime warriors collapsed into a deep trance.



There were no windows to give any indication of time, and the only sound that could be heard was the cheerful hum that emanated from the half-open door, where the two pixel-hungry video addicts were gobbling down enough fix to make up for the last month. Not one of the over-five's heard so much as one word that came out of Uncle Jim's mouth. They were all fast asleep even before they had gotten around to spreading the word and bringing their friends. It had been that kind of a day—and night.

At some unspecified hour, though, Alana suddenly began to feel as though someone was hitting her on the head with a large hammer. She tossed her head from side to side for a while, and as the feeling didn't stop, she finally rolled over and blinked her eyes a few times.

"Cal?!" she exclaimed, seeing the muscular form sprawled out beside her. "What are you hitting me for?"

"I'm only scratching your hand," he whispered.

"Yeah, and I'm sleeping," she said curtly, still half-asleep. "So beat it."

"What's eating you, honey-lips?" he said with a laugh.

"What do you mean what's eating me? The sleep molecules, of course!—At least they would be if you had enough sense to let me be." She rolled over and groaned. "What do you want, anyway?"

"Take a look at your watch," he replied.

"Save me the trip."

"It's nearly five o'clock."

"What? You mean in the afternoon?"

"The very same," Cal said.

"So where are the others?" Alana sat up now, rubbed her hands through her hair and groaned. "Is everyone else up?"

"No one's up. The kids are sleeping too, with their arms wrapped around Julian's laptop. They'll probably be up anytime now though."

"So why the special treatment?" Alana looked sideways at him. "Oh no ... I know why you're here. It's *that*, isn't it?"

"What?"

"You're here for sex, aren't you? You're thinking it's been a while since you've had your fix and the symptoms are killing you."

Cal laughed. "You think you're so smart," he said. "Why on earth would I want to have sex with you? It's not like I like you or anything ... anyway, it's not like you like me or anything, so why should I like you? I mean, you haven't given me the time of day since we left Ashton's." He paused for a second, and then added, "Is everything okay? You mad at me?"

"Of course I'm not mad, you lunatic," Alana said with a sigh. "I guess things have just been so gaga-wild, you know. Well, it's too bad you're not after sex. I could have used a good pumping myself. We'd better go wake up the others. We'll have to be on our way before too long." With that she jumped up and started walking casually towards the door.

She hadn't gone more than two steps when she felt Cal's full weight land on her back. She screeched and dropped to the ground. Cal brought his hand down hard on her mouth. "Shush, woman! You in advertising or something?"

Alana laughed and reached for his belt buckle. "Got you guessing that time, soldier-pal," she giggled. "Admit it—you want me bad."

Cal pondered that thought. "I guess you could put it that way," he conceded.

"You guess?" Alana said cockily. Catching him off guard she heaved with all her might and flipped him over onto his back, then came to sit astride him. "Let's play a little game," she said. She wiggled herself back a little further until she felt Cal groan inaudibly, then she smiled with satisfaction, and pulled her T-shirt over her head. She held both arms up for a moment, to heighten the effect. "It's called, 'look, don't touch.' What do you think? It'll be fun." Then she pulled the T-shirt off, holding it tauntingly in front of herself.

For a minute Cal just looked at her, taking in every inch of her form that he could make out in the semi-darkness. Her pale skin shone like a moonbeam against the blackness of the surroundings, and her short black hair was bustled around her face invitingly. She looked tempting, and very touchable.

Cal finally decided against answering her at all, and instead reached up to grab away her T-shirt, tossing it halfway across the room in his zeal. Then he sat up and wrapped his lean, muscular arms around her back, bringing her so close to his chest that she gasped for breath. "Come here," he whispered.

Despite herself, Alana felt every molecule in her body bleeding away her toughness and reserve. She let out a nervous giggle.

With an understanding smile, Cal rolled over on top of her and kissed her.

Alana sighed contentedly. This was the way things were supposed to be.

HEARTS OF STEEL

LISTS, PLANS, AND PROCEEDINGS

By the time everyone was gathered in what they had dubbed ‘the blanket room’—the only room that seemed to have working lights, if the puny little neon strip in the far corner could even be referred to as that—it was well past six o’clock. Kim had arranged an assortment of candles in the center of the room, and had set out some of the food they had brought with them from Kate’s house. That was consumed in under three minutes, so she reluctantly emptied the rest of it onto the little mat that had been appropriated as kitchen table/serving dish.

After all had eaten to their satisfaction, Stuart sighed and groaned. “I guess we need to decide what happens now,” he said.

“How far is your place from here?” Cal asked Alana.

Alana frowned contemplatively. “I would say no more than a half-hour walk, maybe an hour. I guess it depends how we go.”

“It’s pretty early to be above-ground,” Julian said. “Might need to stick to those underground tunnels you told us about, Stu.”

“What time are we meeting Ashton?” Alana asked.

"He didn't say," Kim said ruefully. "That's one biggish detail that slipped right past the lookout. He said night, though, so I guess anytime from eight or nine on will be considered fair game."

"I guess not everyone needs go to, huh?" Cal said.

"I'll say," Julian retorted.

Alana slapped her leg with glee at Cal's delightfully Pooh Bear comment, but on account of the tingling that she could still feel in the pit of her stomach due to events only recently expired, she decided not to put her allegations into words. Instead, she just grinned and contorted her face at him in a sort of wordless label that he understood perfectly and kicked her playfully back for.

"This is too confusing," Stuart said suddenly, groaning and shaking his head around till his hair bushed out wildly on every side and the others laughed aloud. "Let's just pray it out and take care of it that way."

"Okay," Kim said. "You mean pull a lister?"

"That's what I was thinking of."

The others looked on, interested. They had by now realized that no matter how much they seemed to learn of this strangely remote control way of life, there was always something new to discover. It kept their lives interesting—if indeed life could have been anything but, at this particular time in world history. Their vocabularies seemed to grow by the hour, and Julian had threatened more than once to compile a Family-lingo dictionary, insisting that it would be an instant bestseller amongst the one-world government forces trying to understand the strange gibberish muttered by their captives.

Stuart caught the pen that Kim had tossed him, and turned a fresh leaf on the little square notepad. "A list is the first—and only—requirement," he said instructively.

The students nodded.

“May we call you Professor?” Alana asked, raising her hand eagerly. “I hope to get at least a B+ this semester.”

Stuart laughed. “Okay, so, what are the questions we want to know the answers to—whatever we don’t know that we’re remotely stuck on?”

“When to meet Ashton,” Kim started.

“Who goes,” Alana said.

“Okay, go easy on me,” Stuart said, scribbling furiously. After a minute he looked up again. “That’s two. What else?”

“What should the rest be doing who stay back,” Kim said.

“Where should we stay?” Julian said thoughtfully. “I mean, there’s here, I guess, but we’re already out of food. We’re going to need a better supply line, that’s for sure.”

Stuart nodded, and wrote down the fourth question. “Anything else?”

There was a minute or two of silence while everyone pondered. Nothing further ensued.

“Okay, that’s good for starters,” Stuart said, capping his pen. “That’ll get us going on the day anyway.”

“Wait a minute,” Warner said suddenly. “Do we have time for all this jazz? I mean, don’t get me wrong—I respect all your little rituals and traditions, but that guy we’re meeting could be already there waiting for us, couldn’t he? There’s time for all this stuff, but it seems like if we’ve got an appointment set up and we don’t even know how to get there, or even where it is...” His voice faded in a confused warble.

“Hey Warner, man, hang around a while and watch before asking too many questions,” Alana said. “If there’s one thing I think I’ve gotten rammed

into my head at last it's that this whole checking-in deal is the straight flush, ace in a hole. You can't do without that—never skip it, ever. Like a commando unit has to check in with headquarters, you know?"

"Oh, okay," Warner said with a shrug. "Just thought it might save some time."

"We don't even know where we're going," Cal commented. "So I guess finding out first kinda helps in the long run."

Warner nodded, and decided not to try to say anything else, since he seemed to be on a slightly different wavelength than the rest of them. He didn't understand, but he figured some things he just had to keep going with, and understanding would come in the process.

And so they did. Kim was appointed the notekeeper, and she quickly opened her laptop, called up her text editor and typed in a quick heading. Stuart placed one arm around Dylan and the other around Maya, having been convinced by Kim's reassurances that they were no strangers to prophecy sessions, and fully capable of respecting the Spirit and keeping quiet.

Stuart then started down the list, reading out the first question and then pausing for the replies that did not delay in coming. Kim typed as fast as she could, trying desperately to keep up with the flow that was streaming alternately from all sides of the room.

At last, the final question was read and answered, and Kim clacked out the last phrases on her keyboard. "Wow!" she sighed, resting her fingers now that the prayer was fully over. "Am I ever out of practice. Something tells me it would be easier to use Alana's spy-watch next time, if I transcribe whatever ten-minutes' worth of stuff is filling it up now."

"I'm sure you did great, Kim," Stuart said, tweaking her shoulders. "Boy, the Lord sure did great, didn't He?" He looked over at Warner. "See what we mean now?"

Warner was sitting back on his haunches with a very impressed look on his face. "That was downright galactic, all," he said, shaking his head slowly back and forth. "Downright galactic."

"Read us what you've got, Kim," Stuart said.

Kim turned red. "I told you it's not much," she said. "I basically just got the main points. I hope it'll do."

"No fears," Julian said, with a cheesy grin. "It's sure a darn sight better than we would have done in your place."

Kim sighed and smiled, then turned her attention back to the screen. "Okay, so let's go down the list of questions. Question number one: When do we need to go and meet Ashton? And that one was not the clearest answer of all—it was first stay a while, then go right away, and then it said something like, 'Make sure to keep your eyes open as you go, walk circumspectly, be sober be vigilant,' all that jazz." She frowned. "I guess we'll need a little clarification on that one. Next question was: Who should go? That was clear: Alana should go, since it's her place and in case anything happens she knows the area and is used to living on the lam. And Stuart will be her partner since..."—Kim faltered a bit and gave a little giggle—"since they make such good partners, and since he's such a stable, wise person—which is what Alana needs to keep her reined in."

Alana slapped the ground and laughed loudly.

Kim grinned. Everyone knew she had added that last part in herself. "Questions three and four: What should the rest do and where should they do it? So I'm supposed to stay back here for the time being,

with Julian and the kids, and Cal and Warner are supposed to do something else. But it didn't say what they were supposed to do."

"Okay well, that was a pretty good start," Stuart said. "Kim, you did great. Don't worry about what you missed—you got the beef. I'm afraid we'll have to have another go at it, though."

Kim sighed. "I know. Don't worry—I'll manage. Just leave me your watch when you go, Alana. I'm clearing that memory bank out tonight if it's the last thing I do."

Then they all got quiet and Stuart brought their petitions to the fore again. "Jesus, thank You for speaking so tremendously. We love Your Words and Your kisses and the love that we feel from You when we hear You speak so powerfully and beautifully. We have a few more questions and clarifications that we need sorted out now, and we know that You are more willing to give than we are to receive. So please speak to us about these things. Number one, we need You to clarify this seeming contradiction in the first messages you gave. You said the team leaving should go right away, and then you also said that they should wait a while. Which is right, Jesus? What should we do?"

There was a moment of silence, then Alana took a deep breath and launched out: "I spoke that way because there are two teams going. Those who are meeting Ashton should leave at once—immediately, for the time is right and you must not delay another minute. The second team out should not go until the night is fully set, until the midnight hour is passed."

A few minutes of silence confirmed that there was nothing more on that, so Stuart began again. "Thank You, Jesus, for your clear answers. We need You so much! Please tell us now, Jesus, the answer to our last question: What are Cal and Warner

supposed to do?"

"You need supplies and provisions." Cal stumbled a little over his words, though more from the general squeaky feeling he couldn't suppress in the pit of his stomach than from not knowing what to say. The flow was clear and strong, and all he had to do was keep up with it. "I have a place prepared for you, a good place, granaries of wheat overflowing with stuff. You've just gotta go out and get it. But you'll have to also pray together as you go, because it's dangerous out there. Stop and pray as you go, and follow My leading. I've got everything all set up for you out there, just go get it."

Kim's fingers were clacking furiously away on the keyboard.

Then a small voice on the far side of Stuart piped up. It was Dylan. "Watch and pray, for there are things that must happen and that you cannot miss. Tonight is desperately important, so watch and pray. Don't miss out on My plan for you."

Silence took over again, and the eyes slowly began to open.

Alana was the first to speak. "We'd better scram it, man," she said. "A minute's well past already."

"Hold up there just a sec," Warner said. "So where is this great granary of wheat that we're supposed to head to? Sounds like we're off to the farmyard or something!"

"I was just getting something about that," Stuart said slowly. He looked across the room at Alana. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" he asked her.

Alana looked blank, then suddenly gasped. "Oh my God!" she said. "Oh yeah—for sure! The milk powder place!" She clapped her hands together loudly. "It's the greatest, you guys! It's like the Promised Land in boxes. Milk and honey and peanut butter—everything."

"It's some sort of food storage warehouse," Stuart

said. "We took this whole underground route when we had to go to pick up the mail, and the end popped us out right smack in the middle of it. Then, to top it all off, the Lord led us to this incredible little back-ventilation type of exit where you can easily crawl in and out without passing any kind of gates, locks or detectors!"

"We took it as a definite sign," Alana said with a laugh. "Just we forgot all about it till now."

"Wait a second," Kim said quietly. "I mean, I know we're already outlawed criminals and all, but I'm not sure I want to add 'breaking and entering' to my list—or is it just me?"

"Is that a problem?" Warner asked. "Doesn't the stuff belong to the bad guys anyway?"

"Well, yeah, it does," Stuart said, "but still, you can't use the ends to justify the means—you know."

Warner shrugged. "If it's a choice between God's children starving..."

"Um," Alana said, clearing her throat suddenly. The others turned and looked at her.

She looked only slightly abashed. "I wasn't really going to bring this up, as it's rather incriminating towards my curious nature. But be that as it may, it's really too much of a doggone coincidence to be purely coincidental—if you know what I mean."

"We don't, Alana," Stuart said. "What *do* you mean?"

"Okay, so when you left me in the place and went to do your mail pickup, I did all my praying real fast, right—like I was supposed to. So then I had all this time on my hands and I figured I'd do a little exploring." She looked defensively around the circle. "No? Isn't that the thing to do in situations such as that?" Without waiting for an answer she continued breathlessly along. "So I'm looking around at all these boxes and bags, and suddenly realize the whole place is basically filled with

nothing but ... damaged goods!"

"Huh?" Stuart said.

"Well, you know, there was all that milk powder on the floor, right? The bag was broken. Then I looked at the boxes, and they all had some kind of dent in them, like they'd fallen off of trucks or forklifts or shelves or I don't know what—but all damaged. I don't think those goods are on their way anywhere except maybe some trash dump or something. I'll bet you anything they're not inventoried either."

"So nobody would miss them," Cal summed up.

"Like in 'Henry and the Container,'" Dylan piped up, prompting several puzzled looks in his direction.

"An old Letter by Father David, our group's founder," Kim explained. "It was a dream he'd had about stumbling across damaged goods from a supermarket while on the run."

"This prophetic stuff runs pretty deep in your group, doesn't it?" Julian asked with a grin.

"I suppose you could say that," Stuart answered.

"So where is this place?" Cal asked.

"It's not far," Stuart said. "Not more than three blocks away. I'll draw you a map," Stuart said quickly, flipping to a fresh page in the notepad. "You'll have to watch out for sensors, but I doubt there's all that many this far from the center."

"Come on, Stu!" Alana said impatiently. "The minutes! Remember the minutes!"

"Yeah, yeah," he said. He finished the map and ran over to kiss his two anxious little dumplings on the cheeks. "Kim, you'll have to do the whole reassurance deal with them," he said. "Sorry, guys! I'll be back soon, okay?"

The two nodded in perfect unison.

Alana ran up behind the other three guys and shoved them out the door. "Give them a bit of privacy, onlookers," she said.

Stuart held Kim's face for a moment and stroked it tenderly. "I hate leaving you like this," he whispered.

"I know," she said. "But everything's going to be okay. I'll have Julian here to protect me. And I'll have the kids, of course. And I know the Lord is with you." She laughed a little. "But take care, okay?"

"I will," he said, then he leaned over and kissed her tenderly.

The moment was interrupted by Alana pounding loudly on the door. "Sorry, lovers, time's up!" she called cheerfully.

"I've gotta go," Stuart said.

"Bye, Daddy!" Maya said, running over and jumping vigorously up and down on his shoe.

"Bye," Dylan said quietly.

Stuart kissed them one last time then ran out the door.



The kids were wide awake on account of their long nap, so the four remainders in the little underground living place didn't get much peace or quiet. Finally, Julian got inspired to take matters into his own hands, resolving that if everyone couldn't have some peace, at least some of them could. So he cleverly lured the children into the farthest room and launched out in his repertoire of every exhaustive game that he could imagine. At last he resorted to seeing how many times they could run back and forth, from one end of the long room to the other. Having successfully made it through the first five or six laps himself, he dubbed himself timekeeper and the game took on a whole new challenge.

Meanwhile, Kim busied herself reading from the *New Wine* with Cal and Warner. They didn't make very quick progress, because if Cal was grappling

around the foundation of the building blocks of spirituality, Warner was floundering somewhere in the basement, looking for his flashlight. Every sentence or two, Warner would pipe up with some highly astute and profoundly theological question, at which Cal would groan and bury his head in his hands and Kim would smile and start explaining.

A lot of the time they just stopped and prayed. Kim was quick to admit that she didn't know all the answers, and somehow that was even more impressive to the two guys. Her blank pre-prayer stares contrasted so heavily with her quiet smile of understanding and determination that inevitably was in place after they opened their eyes that it never ceased to amaze them. This might have been one of the reasons that Warner kept asking questions, for Cal had never known him to be a particularly inquisitive fellow—argumentative, yes, but this was not an argument. Rather, they had come face to face with a clear example of the power of God in action, and they were eager to partake of it in any way they could.

The hours passed quickly by, and before long Cal's watch chimed midnight. He jumped up quickly. "I guess we'd better head on out then," he said.

Warner nodded.

"You two guys gonna be okay out there on your own?" Kim said, and laughed at how silly that sounded coming from her.

But Cal didn't laugh. He looked at her seriously. "Kim, I know what we're getting ourselves into here," he said. "It's just me and Warner—it's our first time off 'on our own,' so to speak. I know what we are in your outfit—we're 'babes,' isn't that right?"

Kim paused a moment, then smiled broadly. "Yes, Cal," she replied. "I suppose you are. But you're more than that—you're *disciples*, and don't you forget it. You have all the power of God in you, just

as much as me or Stuart or”—she faltered and burst out laughing—“or Alana.”

That was enough to bring a smile to Cal’s face, but he quickly grew sober again. “I just know how serious this whole thing is, the whole life-and-death struggle of Heaven and Hell and all, and I don’t want to muff it for you guys.”

“It’s not in your hands, Cal,” Kim said quietly, placing a hand on his arm. “It’s not you, it’s not Warner, it’s not me, it’s not Stuart—it’s not any of us. All you’ve gotta do is follow Jesus. You keep checking in; you’ll be okay. The only thing you have to worry about is not making one single decision, not taking one step without confirming it Upstairs. You do that and everything will go like clockwork.” She smiled. “I know you’ll do just great. Both of you.”

Cal sighed and smiled. “Okay then—I guess we’ve got the big words backing us up, so what could go wrong, right?”

“Let’s hit on it then, bud,” Warner said.

“I’ll be praying for you both,” Kim said, clasping her hands together. She walked with them to the door, waved to them as they started quietly up the steps, then shut and locked it firmly behind them.

A sense of overwhelming quietness instantly hit her. For the first time she realized that it had been a while since she had heard the dull-roar-on-legs that she had become so accustomed to hearing in the background of her consciousness for the past five years or so. She walked quickly down the hall and pushed open the door of the first room.

The room was dark, and completely quiet. She opened the door and stepped inside, took two steps and immediately tripped over something long and firm, and went sprawling across the floor. The stumbling block jumped up with a start and reached out to break her fall.

“Julian!” Kim whispered, laughing. “What are you

guys doing in here?"

Julian rubbed his eyes, embarrassed at having been caught napping. "I guess they wore me out," he said with a yawn. "But I won."

"I see that," Kim said with a smile. Her eyes having now adjusted to the dim lighting, she could see the little twined body blend that was draped over a pile of blankets in the center of the room.

"I just kept them running, and finally they dropped." Julian laughed, and stood up.

They tiptoed out of the room and shut the door carefully behind them.

"I'm sorry to wake you," Kim said as they walked down the hallway. "I didn't realize you were asleep—or that you were right in the doorway." She laughed.

"It's all right," he said. "I'm not really tired. I must have just blinked one too many times. You tired? I can watch up for the kids if you like."

"No, I was just going to read some, get a little Word time. Do you want to?"

Julian nodded eagerly.

They came into the blanket room and Kim pulled out a GN from her bag. "Have you seen this one yet?"

Julian glanced at the title and shook his head. "I'd like to read it," he said.

Kim plopped down on her stomach onto the floor and patted the ground next to her.

Julian came and sat awkwardly down beside her. Then he laughed nervously. "Aren't you afraid at being left all alone with a strange man?" he asked.

Kim lifted her eyebrows in surprise and propped herself up on one elbow to look at him. "Why do you say that?" she asked.

Julian turned red. "I was just joking around," he mumbled. "Let's read."

Kim looked thoughtfully at the ground. "How much do you know about our group's internal

beliefs?" she asked.

Julian looked at her questioningly.

"I guess it's been a pretty lonely time for you lately, huh?" she continued. "Did you have a girlfriend back with your gang?"

"Not really," Julian said. "One of the girls ... we were good friends and all. She'd come around and see me sometimes ... you know. But nothing real serious or anything. That's good, I suppose. Less to miss!" He laughed.

Kim smiled. "You know, Stuart and I were talking last night." She paused, trying to scrape together her resolve. Finally she continued, spurred on by the sheer force of obedience to the strong nudging she felt in her heart, "We were talking about you."

"Me?" Julian echoed.

"Yeah," Kim said. "Just that you seemed kind of lonely and all. He told me ... well, he said that if ever things worked out like this ... you know, us being alone and all..." Kim's face was bright crimson. She stopped.

Julian's face had gone completely white and he seemed quite at a loss for words.

Kim could see that he was not going to help her out, so she struggled to continue. "You know, he said we could sort of 'follow the Spirit.'" Kim forced out a little laugh, then dropped her head on the ground and piled her arms on top of it. "I'm so embarrassed!" she moaned. "That is the single most humiliating thing I have ever said in my life!"

That last remark seemed to make little effect on Julian, who was still stuck back with her last statement. Then he started a little. "I think I just dozed off," he said suddenly. "I was having this really weird dream. Have we just been reading all this time?"

Kim laughed quietly. There was a struggle going on in her mind, but she knew that she needed to

get it over with quickly. *Sure as heck I should have gotten this over with long before I got to this stage*, she thought to herself. She peered out of the sides of her arms at Julian, who had also lowered his head to the ground in the moment of quietness. He was almost ten years older than she was, but his face had quite a youthful appearance. His reddish-brown hair that had been fairly close-cut when they had first met was now starting to show a bit of its natural wave in the absence of much good hairdressing help over recent weeks. His features were thin and gaunt, but his brown eyes held a tender sweetness and a sort of nostalgic longing that was very endearing.

Kim sighed. She was not naturally shy, but neither was she tremendously bold or outgoing. She liked to picture herself as an average, middle-of-the-road type of person, who could easily adapt to whatever situation she found herself in. With bright, outgoing people she could be noisy and attention-getting; with quiet, thoughtful people she could be meek and observant. But now that she needed to take the lead and initiate something that was clearly a need and the call of the Lord for her, there was such a great blockage that she felt she couldn't lift her head up from her hands.

Please, Jesus! she finally prayed. *Oh, please!* Those were the only words that she could actually consciously form in her mind. She knew that if she started to formulate her thoughts more fully there would be no end to them, and she didn't want to just lie there forever like a decaying mummy. All of a sudden she jumped up and gave a little shriek.

Julian jumped up too. "What happened?" he said.

"I-I felt a really sharp pinch on my butt," Kim said, then suddenly burst out laughing. "Okay, okay," she said. "That was my kick in the pants. I

think Jesus wants us to get going.”

“Going where?” Julian asked, a little bewildered still, and desperately trying to figure out what was happening and why.

“Going here,” Kim said, as she came over and knelt down on his lap, facing him. She took his face in her hands and kissed his cheek softly.

Julian’s eyes were very wide and he started stammering uncontrollably, but seemed unable to say anything concrete.

Kim put her finger on his lips. “It’s okay,” she said. “I’ll explain all the doctrine and theology to you later. Now you just need to sit back and enjoy. Close your eyes.”

Julian obeyed.

Kim gently pushed him backwards and softly kissed his lips, then his neck. As she did, she suddenly felt a strange sensation inside. She suddenly felt possessed with a strange, supernatural love for him. She was thrilled to find that as she kept going, the more she did, the more she felt like doing. *This must be the blessing of obedience*, she thought exultantly. *The seeing that is the reward of believing and acting*. And as her fingers moved deftly along his body, she thanked the Lord for the joys and the rewards of yieldedness, and all the pleasure it brought along with it.

BLACK CLOUDS COMING

Traveling through the tunnels, it took Stuart and Alana almost an hour to make it to the exit near Alana's home. As they surfaced out into the dark night air on a quiet, deserted back street, Alana smiled. "It's always a relief to crawl out of one of these holes and find that you're not in the middle of Grand Central Station or under the dripping oilpan of a truck."

"Yeah," Stuart said. "And this one wasn't even sealed. Now that is rather amazing."

"Rather," Alana agreed.

"So how far are we from your place?"

"It's just up the street there. I wonder where Ashton is going to be waiting for us."

"I have a feeling we're going to get there first, and that we'll see him coming," Stuart said thoughtfully. "At least that's the feeling I keep getting as I've been praying as we walk along."

"You pray as you walk?" Alana said, turning to look at him.

"Yes, of course—don't you?"

"I don't know," she said, pausing to consider. "I guess I never really thought about it. Seems sacrilegious somehow though, doesn't it? Doing something else while you're communing with God

in the heavens?"

"Not at all," Stuart said. "It's just a way of doing two things at once. If we had to stop every time before we prayed we'd never get anything done—not with the amount we're supposed to pray."

Alana let out a gasp of understanding. "Good gadz," she finally quipped. "Well, hail Mary and no wonder. I was trying to figure out how you guys got so much time to be so spiritual. Now I know! You're sneaking it in while the rest of us are just sort of going about our day. You cheaters!"

Stuart laughed. "We'd better hush it up now. We're getting into a residential area."

"Turn here," Alana said quickly. "This little lane will take us the same way and keep us off the main street. We should end up right behind my building."

They walked in silence a while longer.

"Here," Alana whispered. Just ahead of them several apartment complexes loomed tall and foreboding. The alley was pitch black.

"Okay, so where do we go?" Alana asked. "Have you been doing the cheat thing?"

"Let's just walk real slowly around this side of the building," Stuart said. They did so, moving as softly as they could and avoiding the little patches of gravel that were strewn across the paved sidewalk.

"There's a clump of bushes up there, off to the front," Alana said. "Wanna hole up in there for a while?"

"That sounds good," Stuart said. "I was hoping there'd be something like that."

There was a little stretch of clear ground they had to cross before they reached the bush, and a bright streetlight shone right on the path. "We'll need to make a dash for it," Alana whispered. "Let's go one at a time—you first."

"No, go ahead," Stuart said, giving her a little

shove. "I'll take up the rear."

"Sorry," Alana said determinedly. "I did a little cheating of my own—you're the candidate of choice."

Stuart acquiesced. With a quick prayer for protection, he made a quick dash across the exposed area and dove inside the huge clump of bushes. A second or two later he stuck his head out and beckoned to Alana. She nodded from her vantage point around the corner of the building, closed her eyes and opened them again, took a deep breath, and ran.

The second she started to move, Stuart's heart suddenly froze. His attention turned to the apartment door, which was directly to the side of the little path. A short, blob-shaped woman was walking listlessly down the lighted corridor. At the very second that Alana began to run, the woman swung the door wide to walk out, and lifted her head up as she did. She met Alana's gaze full on.

It was her mother.

Alana instantly skidded to a stop, coming to a standstill just inches from the bush, swerving around it and uttering an expression to indicate that she had been so careless as to nearly crash into the durned thing. "Hey, Ma, what's up?" she said casually, and headed on down the apartment walkway towards the street.

"Alana Williams, you come here right now!" the woman barked in a shrill voice.

Oh, Jesus! Stuart's mind raced as he desperately tried to form his thoughts into prayers. *Help her to run! She can easily get ahead if she would just beat it. Why is she just standing there?*

Alana herself did not know why she felt suddenly rooted to the spot. She looked back at her mother—such a pitiful specimen of humanity. Her hair was in curlers and was covered by a red and purple flowered kerchief, which clashed hopelessly with

her turquoise-blue housedress. She propped her meaty hands up on her hips.

"I have some words to say to you, girl," the woman continued. "I want you to come here right now. And don't you think you can go scrambling on me, either. You're not going to run away again—I've seen to that."

"What do you mean, Ma?" Alana asked nervously, taking a step away from her.

"I knew you'd come back, I did. I have a squad car on alert for you. They're parked just around the corner. See this?" She held up a little black beeper. "All I gotta do is *press*, and that's the signal that I've found you. They'll come screaming out. You're a wanted gal, you know that? I told you it was foolish to postpone your registration, and now it's too late."

"So go on then!" Alana said furiously. "Press your little black button! Turn in your own flesh and blood!—See if I care!"

"Not just yet," the woman replied smugly. "I want you to answer a few questions for me. So get your little butt in the house right now or you'll wish you had."

Alana opened her mouth to retort further, but something suddenly caught her attention. Way down at the far end of the road she could see two headlights turn onto the street, as a vehicle began silently moving in their direction. Something about the slowness and quietness of it all sent a chill through her entire body. Ashton had arrived! Suddenly, nothing was more important than getting her mother—and her little remote control policemen—out of the way.

"Let's go then!" she snapped, and strode briskly across the path, pushing the apartment door and holding it open for her mother, who scurried in after her, surprise showing all over her face like a fresh

paint job.

Letting the door swing shut, Alana moved quickly over to the elevator and pushed the button. The doors opened immediately and she stepped inside, finger on the controls. "You coming in or what?" she called back.

Her mother was standing outside the elevator in shock. "What's come over you?" she asked suspiciously.

"What can I say?" Alana said indifferently. She clenched her fists and held them out in front of her, prisoner-style. "You've got me! I surrender! So let's get upstairs and get on with it."

Her mother shrugged and stepped inside. Alana pressed a button and the doors slid shut. The sigh of relief that threatened to sweep through her body was entirely suppressed by the wave of fear and dread that came next. She looked at her mother's short, squat frame. Surely she was more than a match for her—she could take her out in one blow.

For a moment she allowed herself the fantasy of sending her mother reeling to the floor with one glorious knockout punch. But then she steeled her mind. If Alana was anything, she was not a bully. And she would not raise her hand against her own mother, no matter how evil the old hag would turn out to be. No, whatever was ahead she would bear it bravely, and hopefully without having to resort to bad language.

"At least I've learned how to 'cheat' now," she muttered to herself, with a wry half-smile.



The sleek black limousine pulled quietly up to the front of the building in the same second that the elevator doors closed. Stuart instantly dove out of the bushes and went running down the steps at the front of the apartment complex. Ashton saw him coming and swung the back door open. As he

jumped inside, the door shut behind him and the car purred on, almost without coming to a stop at all.

“You made it!” Stuart gasped. “Thank God for that.”

“You’re alone?” Ashton said, surprised.

Stuart shook his head. “Not until just a few minutes ago. Alana—” He shook his head miserably. “Of all things she came face to face with her mom, who seems to have a personal vendetta against her. She had to go with her, I think she saw you coming and knew we’d all have been caught if she’d stayed any longer.” Stuart groaned and buried his face in his hands. “I can’t believe I let that happen to her!”

“It wasn’t you,” Ashton said soothingly. He pulled a slim remote control out of his pocket and clicked it towards the front of the car. The airtight black divider slowly rolled and sealed itself up into place. “It’s soundproof,” Ashton explained. Then he clicked another button and some quiet instrumental music filled the vehicle in perfect surround sound. “But just in case—my backup,” he added with a laugh. “Tell me more about Alana,” he said, growing serious again. “Is there anything we can do for her?”

“I don’t think so,” Stuart said, “not now anyway. She’s a wanted felon, and I don’t think she’s going to be walking out of that building anytime soon—at least not without a sizable government escort. But Al’s a big girl. If there’s any way out of her situation, she’ll know it, and take it without our help. I just pray that there is an escape clause built in.” He looked up searchingly at Ashton. “There isn’t always, you know.”

“I know,” Ashton replied quietly.

“I think we’ve all gotten a little spoiled of late,” Stuart continued. “We’ve had it so good—hardly any captures, and no one getting martyred or anything. But this time isn’t called the ‘Great Tribulation’ for

nothing. I've had this feeling we were just waiting our turn, that our time would come."

"Don't talk like that, Stuart," Ashton said firmly, placing his hand on the young man's shoulder. "Whatever happens will be the Lord's will, and will be planned by His hand. Nothing more, nothing less. Knowing that, we can rest in peace."

"The Lord did tell us exactly when to go, and who should go," Stuart said hopefully. "Maybe it was part of His plan."

"I'm sure it was," Ashton said. "Now we'd better decide what happens next. I don't have a lot of time."

"I understand," Stuart said. "Do you want to come to our hideout and tell us all your news, or are you *really* in a hurry?"

"I'm afraid I've got a bona fide business meeting in less than forty minutes," Ashton said. "I'm so sorry! I tried to arrange things differently, but by the time I flew in, there was an unholy amount of traffic on the roads—at this time of night, of all things!"

"Must have been the Lord," Stuart said. "We just got here a few minutes ago."

"Well, be that as it may, it makes us a little pressed for time. But no matter. It's nothing very long that I have to tell you, but it is tremendously important."

"I gathered that, from the way you flew down to tell us about it."

"Yes, indeed." Ashton scratched his chin and plucked at his mustache thoughtfully. "Well, I guess I'd best just lay it out for you. It has to do with your friends over in the Middle East."

"Friends?"

"Yes—what are their names? Kate and Jay, I believe. You remember, we saw that little clip on the news that one time?"

"Oh, yes!" Stuart said. "The big air strike that

was foiled. But how do you know that Jay was there too? Do you know for sure it was Kate that we saw?"

Ashton smiled. "I have my sources," he said. "I'm afraid I can't say more than that. But I can guarantee you that my information is quite reliable. And this is where the news gets bad. Ever since they've recovered from that virus your team planted, they've been gearing up for another hit on the region—and this time I believe it won't be quite so easy to thwart."

"What do you know about it?" Stuart asked, instantly on alert.

"Well, I got this information from Tow, who himself just caught wind of it the day before yesterday. But apparently it's been brewing a while. It's terribly hush-hush. I'm sure you can imagine why!"

Stuart nodded, and smiled.

"This is the story the way I've understood it. The whole area has gotten a lot more shaky in recent days, with our 'supreme lord' taking over the temple and all. As you know, this little triad off at the edge of the desert has been one of many little thorns in his side, and touted as the headquarters of a terrorist organization of extremists, subversionists, and fanatics intent on disrupting the Middle East peace that the blessed New World Order has worked so hard to achieve." Ashton shook his head grimly, then frowned at Stuart. "In reality, much of the region, which is predominantly Muslim, has done little but refuse to accept the one-world registration, and try to protect themselves from the government troops that have been doing all they can to get at them. These comparatively remote villages in their midst are actually a cluster of Christian towns, and they've dug in for the long haul, joining the resistance of their Muslim neighbors."

"And you're saying that's where Jay and Kate

have ended up?"

"Exactly. But I'm afraid they've done little but jump from the frying pan into the fire."

Stuart's mind was spinning. "What do you mean? What are they going to do? Get to the bottom line, man!"

"I'm getting there," Ashton said, nodding his head and continuing on his rambling way. "Like I said, the region is become more volatile by the day, so a large-scale assault is out of the question. These easterners can be fiercely patriotic, and any large influx of troops into that region at this point is likely to bring the whole Arab world down on their heads. That's why they haven't tried to continue their minesweeper offensive as soon as they could have. But this little triad, perhaps because it is remote, perhaps because it is small, has now found itself at the top of a list of targets for a covert operation to quietly and unobtrusively eliminate the more obscure, but nonetheless undesirable and potentially dangerous elements of resistance."

"So what are they going to *do*?" Stuart asked, exasperated.

"Young men!" Ashton exclaimed. "You're all alike, aren't you? You just want the bottom line. You want to get to the point right away. Forget the background and the peripherals." He laughed heartily, but almost as quickly his eyes grew serious. "All right then, I'll put it to you plain. They're sending a biological strike team in."

"What?"

"I don't know too much more than that," Ashton said. "I got the full nine yards on the background info, but the present status is a little more sketchy. But I do know that they're mobilizing an aircraft carrier for 'military exercises' in the region—with its real purpose being to get in closer to the target zone. The strike is planned for sometime this week

or next.”

“How are they going to pull it off?”

“I suppose they’ll wait for favorable weather conditions and fly over with a small ‘training’ squadron armed with some sort of airborne virus that can be released noiselessly. Tremendously risky if you count general loss of life, but all that is of no concern to them. They just want their targets taken care of as quickly and quietly as possible.”

Stuart brought his hands up to his face and brushed back the hair from his eyes. “This is horrible, Ashton!”

“Indeed—and it’s going to hit a heaven of a lot of God’s children in that desert.”

Stuart nodded. “So what are we going to do?”

“I’m afraid that’s where you come in—you and your fellow outlaws. I can’t get any more involved than I already have. But I have full confidence in you. I’m sure as you tap in and check up, you’ll get a great battle plan.”

“Battle plan, huh?”

Ashton shrugged. “I don’t know. But I’ve got to get going. I have to get halfway across the city and I’m running late as it is. Will you be all right if I leave this one in your lap?”

“Sure, Ashton,” Stuart said helplessly. “What can I say? But I’m glad to know—really. It’s a bit of a monster on the overload cells, but I guess we’d rather know now than later. Maybe there is still something we can do. Lord,” he began to pray, “please have Your way and lead and guide us. We are nothing, but we know that with You, we are more than a match for the enemy.”

“He will lead you as to what to do. That much I’m assured of,” Ashton said with a smile. Then he pressed another button on the remote, and the driver pulled the car to the side of the road. “Where do you want to be dropped?”

Stuart looked out the window. "This is fine. We're not far from the place where we're staying. I can make it the rest of the way. Thank you, Ashton. Thanks for everything—the time, trouble, all of it."

"Don't mention it," Ashton replied. "And I do have one more thing for you." He held out his hand to Stuart and pressed a stiff white envelope into it. "Just in case you should desire a way to get to your friends. It's small—won't fit more than four people comfortably—five or six if you're cramming, so not much good for an evacuation attempt. But you're welcome to it if it can be of any help."

Stuart opened his mouth to question but a pair of headlights at the opposite end of the street changed his mind. He closed his mouth abruptly and opened the car door.

"It's all in there—don't forget," Ashton said.

Stuart nodded and stepped out of the car. "Thanks again!" he called softly. Then he shut the door and the limo sped away as quietly as it had come. Stuart ducked into a side street. His mind was a whirl of conflicting thoughts, and all he could focus on was getting back to the safety of home and family before any other horrible things happened.



It was nearly two o'clock when Stuart arrived back at the hideout.

"You're home!" Kim greeted him delightedly, running into his arms with a little more than her usual exuberance.

Stuart noticed and smiled, a twinkle in his eye. "I see that things went well in my absence," he said.

Kim momentarily faked a shocked look, then dissolved into a little giggle. "You wicked man!" she said. "How come you can read me so well?"

Just then Julian came in, looking awkward and sheepish.

“Julian,” Stuart said with a warm smile, then decided against making any comments that the man could have easily misinterpreted, and looked around quickly. “Where is the other team?”

“They’re not back yet,” Kim said, then suddenly brought her hands up to cover her mouth.

“Where’s the rest of *your* team?” she asked. “Where’s Alana?”

Stuart scowled darkly. “Give me a blanket and a cushion and I’ll tell you every horrifying detail,” he said. “That and the rest of the bad news. What a night this has been!”

“What’s happening, Stu?” Kim said. “You’ve got me worried now.”

“If it’s time for anything, it’s not to worry,” Stuart said, as they walked into the blanket room and Kim scurried around to fulfill Stuart’s requests. “That’s way at the bottom of our lists. But we do have one heck of a prayer session lined up for ourselves. I just wish I knew how the others were doing.”



At that very moment, Cal and Warner were standing in the middle of the food warehouse, shouting at the top of their lungs.

“I say NO PEANUT BUTTER!” Warner shouted. “Everybody in the entire friggin’ world hates peanut butter!”

Cal sighed, exasperated, and suddenly turned and punched his fist hard into a nearby box. Releasing the tension made him feel better. “We’re taking the peanut butter, okay? I’m the senior citizen around here, and I say we take it.”

Warner was too involved in his side of the debate to notice Cal’s slip of tongue. He narrowed his eyes nastily. “Why the big draw for the goopy stuff?”

“I like peanut butter, okay? You have a problem with that?”

“Well, if you want peanut butter, then you carry

it.”

“Fine, I’ll do that. You take the rest of the stuff.”

“No way. You take your fair half *and* the peanut butter.”

Cal groaned and plopped down on an old wooden pallet. “I think I know just about what we should be doing now.”

“What do you mean?” Warner asked, still a little incensed.

“Didn’t all our prayer stuff at the beginning of this jam say how we were supposed to pray as we went and all that, ask the Lord what to do and where to go?”

Warner looked ashamed, and sat down roughly next to Cal. “Yeah, I guess so. And here we are, hacking like a bunch of hyenas over some small-time *cacahuette* mixture.” He shook his head. “Cal, man, I’m sorry. I don’t know what came over me.”

“I’m sorry too. It’s really not that big a deal.”

“No, it’s fine. You’re entitled to your likes.”

“Well, let’s just take a jar or two, I guess. We don’t need a whole box.”

“Okay.” Warner jumped up again. “Let’s go to it, man.”

“We didn’t pray yet,” Cal said.

“Yeah, but I guess just mentioning it did the trick, ‘cause look—we’re not arguing no more!”

Cal laughed. “Still, we’d better just check in and make sure we’re doing okay, don’t you think?”

Warner didn’t look convinced.

“What would Stuart do?” Cal asked.

Warner sat down immediately.

The two bowed their heads and Cal mumbled up a few disjointed words. It was not eloquent, but it was sufficient, and after a few moments they lifted their heads and looked at each other.

“Anything?” Warner asked hopefully.

Cal sighed. “Nothing really clear and booming,”

he said. "But I get the feeling we're on the right path. I feel like we should beat it fast."

"That's all clear with me," Warner said. He strode over to the pile of three boxes and two big burlap bags. Then he gave a shout. "Hey, man! Take a look at this—I'm sure it wasn't there before!"

He rushed over to a corner, and grabbed hold of a two-wheeled pushing trolley that leaned up against a corner of the room. "Looks like we'll be able to bring some of that peanut butter after all!"

Cal came over with a smaller box that was half full of peanut butter jars and to which various other assorted foodstuffs have been added, and they quickly loaded up the trolley with all the items they had gathered. The final touches were balanced precariously on the top.

"I guess this'll have to do us for our first trip," Cal said. "Not bad, I'd say. We'll have to make double-sure to stay out of sight in back streets, though."

"Sounds good by me," Warner said with a nod.

Cal looked around, picking at the box that he had punched and trying to even out the small dent a little. "We've taken from the inner boxes, so I don't think the little we took could be discovered, even if someone comes around here after all."

"Okay, well, that was the easy part—now we've gotta get it three blocks down back to the hideout."

"Across the street?" Cal asked.

"Yeah, man! I'm not gonna go lugging this stuff up and down those tunnels. It's the dead of night, man. Nobody's gonna be up this side of town, and with this trolley, we can make it back in no time. You'll see. We'll be fine."

Cal didn't feel like arguing again. "All right, then. But let's make it fast. That's what the orders said." Cal steadied the pile while Warner wheeled the trolley to the nearest exit, and then out onto the

deserted streets.

As they moved quietly along the back streets with their heavy cargo in tow, Warner suddenly uttered a mild exclamation. "You hear that, man?" he asked.

"Hear what?" Cal asked, then he froze. They were nearing the end of the little alleyway, and now they could clearly hear that some sort of loud commotion seemed to be going on just around the corner.

Cal looked around. Warner was standing right next to a large open doorway, and Cal quickly motioned him to get inside it. He parked the trolley beside him. "You stay here with the stuff," he said. "I'll see what's happening and if we can get by or need to find some other way around. I don't want to have to go a mile around even if we *do* have a trolley."

Warner grunted his consent and put down one of the sacks to serve as a seat, while Cal slipped back out onto the street. He walked carefully along, keeping almost completely flattened against the sides of the building, and quite covered by its shadows. When he got to the corner, he carefully peered ever so slightly around the side. There was a long, bare stretch of wall adjoining a strip of shops. Standing grouped around near the wall was a small group of six or seven black-clad figures, who seemed to be huddled together, discussing something.

From Cal's vantage point, he could see that a rather slight in build, but obviously athletic and wiry youth seemed to be calling the shots. His dark brown skin and the black cap pulled down nearly over his eyes further served to blend him into the post-midnight surroundings. With a final nod of the leader's head, the rest of the group sprang into motion, and he with them. A variety of dark-colored bags were rifled open, and several of the group began pulling out sheaves of paper.

"All right—spread out," the leader said in a muffled whisper. "We all know the meeting place."

Some of the dark figures began to move silently down the street, papers in hand, while others began to hastily cover the bare wall with the ones they were holding. Cal could clearly see that the weapon of choice was vehement anti-government propaganda, and he wondered if these people were acting alone, or if they had some type of backup. If not, they were surely begging for the wrath of the one-world government.

I wonder if there's anything I'm supposed to do? he thought desperately. As clearly as the thoughts formed in his mind, he suddenly remembered the earlier admonitions about being in the right place at the right time. "Okay," he whispered in reply to the nudging that he felt in his head. "I'm in the right place—I hope. Now You're just gonna have to tell me when the green light's on for real."

A sudden dim flash of light caught his eye at the end of the street, and he caught his breath. He blinked and looked again, but sure enough, there was definitely a car driving slowly down the street, headlights off.

Cal squinted. Perhaps it was a getaway car that the rebels had planned for. But one look at the furtive way they were all making their way down the street belied that fact. As the vehicle came a bit closer, he could also see that it was not a car at all. It was a truck—one that he recognized only too well. It was an army truck.

All of a sudden Cal heard a voice thundering through his mind: "NOW!"

Without thinking he barreled out across the sidewalk, throwing both arms around the young leader of the band of rebels, who was the only one within his reach, and dragging him back behind the building. The young man appeared to be too

shocked to say anything, and by the time he realized what was happening, Cal had his hands firmly clapped over his mouth.

“Look,” Cal hissed in the man’s ear, slowly taking his hands off his mouth at the same time, and pointing out towards the nearing army truck. Cal tightened his grip as he felt the youth’s body lurch and strain to break free.

“Let me go!” he hissed. “If they’re going down, I’m going with them!”

“No,” Cal said. “I don’t know why, but I was led to you. You’re gonna have to stay with me.”

“TRAITOR!” the young man shouted in a high-pitched scream. “ALL IS DISCOVERED! RUN!”

Cal’s heart nearly dropped right out of orbit as he quickly yanked off the man’s hat and stuffed it roughly into his open mouth. He clamped his hand down over top of that for further emphasis, then dragged him, kicking and squirming, back deeper into the alleyway.

They just had time to see an amazing transformation take over the street—from out of nowhere, dozens of thousand-watt lights snapped on, painting the entire area where the rebels had been standing in beams of garish, painted daylight. The army truck screamed into high gear and two or three megaphones at once started proclaiming to the band of rebels orders to stop where they were and place their hands above their heads.

“Death to the one-world order!” came a bold cry.

“Where’s that flag?” sounded a woman’s voice. “Light it! I want to die by the fire of its burning!”

Cal’s captive squirmed and wriggled, but he held on mercilessly as the savage bursts of gunfire echoed hollowly through the empty night.

Cal slipped inside the doorway, where Warner was anxiously awaiting him.

“What’s going on out there, man?” Warner asked,

then he looked closer at Cal. "What on earth did you bring home with you? Some fresh meat?"

"I think it's a revolutionary," Cal said. "But I can't take this out of his mouth or he'll scream and we'll all go down together. I don't know why, but I just felt like I needed to save him."

"God told you, huh?" Warner said.

Cal nodded, and set the man down. His long hair that had fallen loose when Cal took his cap off cascaded around his shoulders. With his mouth full of hat and his hands still restrained, he looked a very unusual sight indeed.

"Your guy's crying, Cal," Warner said suddenly.

Cal ignored him. "We've got to get out of here," he said. "We're too close for comfort. Leave the bags—I've gotta carry this guy. Push the trolley if you can, run if you can't. We've gotta get back in that warehouse."

After making sure the coast was clear, the two made their way back down the way they'd come, and soon slipped inside the little side entrance.

"We're going to have to stay overnight in here, man," Warner said. "That sounds like one helluva bloodbath going on out there."

Cal shuddered to think of all the uniformed men who were not much different than he had been, now out there mowing down unarmed, idealistic rebels. Then he steeled his mind to the job at hand. "Come on," he said. "Let's get ourselves in one of the middle aisles, in between some of these piles of boxes. We're gonna have to camp the night here and somehow find our way out tomorrow."

Warner nodded, and the two—and their still-resisting bundle—slowly made their way to safety, for yet another night.

- 10 -

THE NINTH MEMBER

“This is not good,” Julian said, shaking his head anxiously. “They should have been back a long time ago.—They should have been back last night. I wonder what’s become of them?”

Kim looked anxiously at Dylan and Maya, who were sitting quietly on a cushion against the wall. Their eyes were slowly morphing into two giant empty cereal bowls, and their little mournful lips were quivering with hunger. Nevertheless, Kim had explained the situation to them and they were willing to patiently wait until the Lord supplied their breakfast.

“I don’t know,” Stuart said quietly, pacing back and forth. “We’re going to have to ask the Lord where they are and what we should do about it. Boy, our team members are dropping like flies, aren’t they?”

“Don’t, sweetheart!” Kim said, coming up behind Stuart and wrapping her arms around his chest. “What happened to Alana was not your fault. It was the Lord’s will. And whatever has happened to Cal and Warner, I’m sure is the Lord too. We’ll see. It’s all going to work out for good in the end. Let’s take some time to pray, shall we?”

A little plaintive whimper arose from the cushion in the corner. “Jesus, we’re hungry! We don’t have

any bread to eat!"

Kim turned to look at Maya, who had scooted forward on the cushion, with her hands interlocked and her eyes squeezed shut pleadingly. Dylan looked equally earnest, and equally hungry, though his eyes were open at that moment.

Kim turned quickly away, hoping they had not seen the worried look in her eyes. *Jesus, what's happening?* she thought. *Why does everything seem to be falling apart? You promised that You would never leave or forsake us. What's going on? Where is everybody? Why have You left Your children hungry?*

Dylan suddenly jumped up. "I got a verse!" he exclaimed, sunshine breaking over his dimpled face. "I got a verse! It's that one: 'I have never seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread.' It's for us, Maya. He said He wouldn't forsake us, so that means He has bread for us. We've just gotta look for it!"

"Like 'seek and ye shall find'?" Maya asked doubtfully.

"*Exactly* like that!" Dylan jumped up and grabbed her by the hand. "Come on, let's look!"

Kim turned and walked quickly out of the room. She could not let the children see her crying. Stuart went after her. Julian looked at the door, then at the kids, then at the door again, unsure of what to do.

"Come on, Julian," Dylan said. "Help us look!"

With a sigh, Julian walked over to the children and squatted down next to the box they were burrowing in.

"Kim!" Stuart called out. She didn't answer, but he followed the sound of stifled sobs until he came upon her, curled up in a little heap against the wall.

"Why?" she moaned, as Stuart sat down next to her and cradled her in his arms. "Why the kids? Why do they have to suffer?"

“Kim,” Stuart said, reaching out and holding her face in both his hands. “Honey, this is the Enemy! Here. Now. It’s him! We’ve gotta fight the Enemy, we can’t give in to it! This is the time to be strong. Remember? Has He ever forsaken us? Ever? Has He ever let them go hungry?”

Kim shook her head.

“Then why should He start now?” Stuart said gently. “Come on, let’s ask the Lord about all this.”

They hardly had to bow their heads before the Words came pouring out, as clear and strong as ever before: “It is just a test. This time is a test—for you all. I must bring things to points of darkness, that you might more fully appreciate the light. You must experience the sorrow, that the joy might shine forth all the more sweetly as the victory is revealed. You have much that you must seek Me for, but I say unto you, go now and eat to your heart’s content, for your prayers are already being answered.”

Kim lifted up her head and looked doubtfully at Stuart. “What does that mean?” she asked.

At the same moment, they heard loud squeals and exclamations coming from the blanket room. “Oh, my Jesus!” Kim gasped.

They both leaped up and went bolting into the room. There, they could not believe their eyes. Dylan was holding high above his head the very same white plastic bag that yesterday they had eaten all the sandwiches and other food out of—except now it seemed to be empty no more. Maya’s hands were full of...

“Cake!” she squealed. “Jesus gave us some cake!”

“Yeah!” Dylan chirped in rapturous delight. “We asked for bread and He gave us carrot cake instead!”

Maya paused. “It’s made with honey, right Mama?”

Kim laughed and cried as she lifted the little girl into her arms. "I'm sure it is, sweetheart. It's manna from Heaven. I'm sure it's made with all the best things."

Julian sidled his way over to Stuart. "I thought we *ate* all the food," he said, out of the corner of his mouth.

"We did," Stuart said seriously.

"So, what happened?" Julian said. "You overlooked something, or what? I mean, there's cake here. It doesn't just appear out of nowhere."

"I don't know," Stuart said, taking the bag that Dylan passed him. "All I know is, yesterday this bag was empty, and now it's full of carrot cake. I don't ask questions. I'm too hungry right now."

"I just don't get it," Julian said, shaking his head again.

"Ever hear of the 'loaves and the fishes'?" Kim said significantly. "There's no point in trying to think—just eat. Eat and believe. Our God is a God of miracles."

"AMEN!" Dylan and Maya chorused in unison.



"It's ten o'clock, man," Warner said, shaking Cal vigorously. "I knew I should have set my alarm for earlier. I didn't want to risk it in this haphazard, screwed up world we've gotten ourselves in, but now look at us! There's no way we can drag a struggling kidnap victim through the streets in broad daylight!"

Cal rubbed his eyes and sat up. "Our kidnap victim is still here," he said. "That's a good sign."

"No gagas from me, man," Warner said. "You've got him tied up to where he's about as mobile as a frankfurter."

"Not really," Cal said. "I tied his arms but he could have run off any time." Cal raised his voice a little to make sure their captor could hear him. "I'm not interested in keeping him against his will. I

know we were meant to save him from what would have been his death last night, but I'm not interested in dragging him around any further."

The young man opened his eyes plaintively.

Cal pulled the rough ties off his hands, and he immediately reached up and yanked the hat out of his mouth.

The man angrily shoved it back on his head, stuffing all his hair back out of sight. "Disgusting taste those fibers have," he said in a low, husky voice, then looked spitefully at his two captors. "So what's the big idea, kidnapping people right off the street?"

"You heard what I said," Cal said stubbornly. "You're free to go."

"Yeah," Warner said. "We don't want to take you to our hideout anyway."

"Hideout?" the boy brightened a little. "You have a hideout?"

"What's it to you?" Warner said snidely. "You're the kidnap victim, remember?"

The boy looked at the ground and scuffed his feet a little. "Actually, I'm basically screwed right now," he said. "I don't have anywhere to go."

"What do you mean?" Cal asked.

"Well, I'm not a professional rebel or anything. On the surface I'm actually quite a bona fide citizen. And I only took up these counterculture activities recently. I've ... well, it's a long story but I've been through some stuff and basically I just about had it up to here. So I figured I'd do what I could, real quietly and all, to organize some anti-go' strikes. Well ... I guess we had an informant or something, 'cause they were pretty well onto us."

"What's that got to do with you, though?" Cal asked. "They didn't catch you. You can just go back and no one will know."

"No, I'm sure it's not that easy. I had my implant

shield on so they couldn't have scanned for me, but if there was an informant—and obviously there was, with that whole setup last night—then I'm sure my name would have been mentioned. I was the ringleader, you know."

"So we're stuck with you now?" Warner said incredulously. "God, Cal, what have you gotten us into?"

The boy glared at Warner, then shrugged his shoulders. "Yeah? Well I'm better off on the street anyway. I'd just as soon fend for myself than hook up with you boners."

Cal threw up his hands. "Whoa here, let's not generalize. I do not fall under the general classification of a boner." Then he added jokingly, "Warner, yes—I see your point there. But let's not over-allegate, okay?"

The boy forced a little smile, and Warner laughed out loud.

Then Cal said, "Look, would you mind just giving us a second? It's nothing personal but we've got to discuss this." He looked searchingly into the boy's clear brown eyes. There was something strangely drawing about his face, something that seemed almost vaguely familiar. Cal couldn't quite put his finger on it.

The boy apparently noticed the increased scrutiny and shoved his head down. "Sure," he said. "I'll just stroll around out there a bit."

He slipped out through the boxes and into the outer aisle.

"Man!" Warner started.

"You, hush!" Cal said fiercely. "I've had enough of your opinions for one day. So we know we can't turn him out on the street on his own. What do we do?"

Warner shrugged sulkily.

"I think Stuart will die of a heart attack if we

show up at the hideout with a new face.”

“One of us could go ahead and ask him, then come back and tell the other,” Warner offered.

Cal stared at Warner. “That is a decent suggestion,” he said. Then he couldn’t resist adding sarcastically, “I appreciate the effort it must have cost you.”

At that Warner burst out laughing. “Loosen up, man! The day is new! My life of crime is over. I’m a new man! No more swearing, right?—You never thought you’d see me kick that one in the balls. But who’s eating Cheerios now, huh? So maybe this whole, you know, verbal assault thing is my next commando strike. Maybe I need someone like you chasing after me with a pitchfork. I can handle that. Just, you know, take it with the whole ‘it’s me’ thing and don’t go all Cold War on me, hey?”

Cal laughed. “Okay, Warner, you’ve got it. Now let’s really focus here. Our little guy’s gonna be getting nervous.”

“So you want me to go and ask Stu and the others what to do?”

“I don’t know,” Cal said. “I wonder if we should just ... you know, do the prayer thing, like they do.”

Warner coughed loudly, as though he either had a small creature caught in his throat or he was trying to suppress a loud mocking laugh. “Um, yeah man, that’s class. I’d just like ... maybe, you know, add here...”

“Warner,” Cal said, “hit the high notes, would you? There’s a pretty big ocean between ‘verbal assault’ and ‘senseless prattle,’ but I think you’ve skipped it in one jump. Hit it head-on, okay? I can take it.”

“Okay, yeah,” Warner said, taking a deep breath. “Well, these guys who do the whole prayer deal—aren’t they like, you know, lifetime prophets, stuff like that? Did you read their papers? They’ve got

thousands of them, man!—Trunks of the stuff. I read that somewhere, or saw it in a picture book! *Trunks!* If I had lived with a trunk of papers like that all my life, I'd be sitting here right now saying to you, 'Cal, brother, let's *pray* to God for wisdom on what to do.' But since I grew up in the backhills chasing deer and running from my pappy's belt buckle, I am finding myself instead sitting here saying to you, 'No freaking way.'"

Cal contemplated that. "Thank you, Warner. That was very enlightening. I think you're getting a little closer to the whole ocean thing. Anyhow, I think you're wrong."

"Well, thanks for the praise, man. Compliments like that, I can take by the dozen."

"No, look, I see your point. But then what we are going to do, crawl back on our hands and knees? I think Stuart is a great guy, I respect him like hell. His wife too, she's got stuff. And yeah they've spent their whole lives doing this stuff—and that's why they're doing what they're doing and how they're doing it, instead of yabbering around like us monkeys. But my point is this, the whole sort of drift I'm getting here is we can do as much as we want to do, and the feeling I keep getting is something like I heard Stu say the other day: 'God's not limited.' Maybe it's not as easy for us as for them, but I sure as hell don't want to give up without a try. What do you say?"

Warner shrugged. "Whatever, man, if you're doing the talking, I'll shut my eyes and look religious for you while you do it. Sure, I'll do that. No sweat, man. Better whisk it up, though, 'cause that guy's gonna be sniffing around sooner than later."

Cal nodded, and shut his eyes. Not feeling entirely comfortable in the situation, he chose to mumble his prayer quite inaudibly under his breath, then got quiet and listened. *Oh, please!* he

added in his mind as a footnote prayer, *I know there are better reasons that I could be asking this of You, but I don't want to fizz in front of Warner, here. At least give me something—please? I've gotta just hear a little something, just enough to know what to do.*

At last he stopped his mental petitioning, and forced his spirit to grow quiet and still. And just as soon as he did, he heard the words forming in his mind. He could not bring himself to speak them—in front of this recent infidel, as he put it—but he allowed them to form in his mind, and more followed them: *Do not be afraid to take this one with you. He shall be a blessing. Bring him back to your home, and he will be well with you. This is a part of My plan.*

Cal's eyes fairly burst open. "Hey!" he called out in a raised whisper. "Hey ... boy? Whatever your name is—get back here! You still out there?"

The voice right nearby made the two jump noticeably. "Yeah, I'm here."

Warner bristled and started to stand up, but Cal clamped his hand down on his arm. "I thought you were going to walk around," Cal said for the both of them.

"I was, and I did. Now I'm back."

"Fine, well, whatever. Look—I know we freaked you out back then," Cal said, with a weary sigh. "But if you're going to stick with us we're going to have to put all that behind us. We can't have this constant germ warfare going on, or it's not going to work."

"Fair enough," the boy replied.

"Okay then," Cal said. "I'm Cal, and this is my friend Warner. We're old army buddies, but we put all that behind us and recently joined up with some Christian anti-government outlaws. That's the short version of it. We're living on the lam right now. What's your story?"

"My name is Shem," the boy said, coughing a little.

"Yes, and?" Warner said, after a little pause.

"And that's it," Shem replied. "I don't want to talk about my life right now. Is that okay?" He coughed again.

"Are you all right?" Cal asked.

"I'm fine."

"Okay well, we'd better head on back."

"Whoa—how are we going to do that? It's broad daylight."

"We're going to stroll casually—and very quickly—back over through the back streets, and pray we don't get noticed."

"What about the food?" Warner asked.

"I guess we'll have to come back for it tonight. There's no way we're lugging with the lights on." He reached over and grabbed two jars of peanut butter, and put one in each pocket.

Warner rolled his eyes and grabbed two cans of beans. "Take something," he said to Shem.

Shem complied.

"Hey, wait!" Warner said. "What exactly is this registration shield thing, before we take you any further?"

"It's perfectly secure," Shem answered, showing the rather bulky sticker on his hand, directly over where the implant's scar would have been. "Generates some sort of magnetic disruption field that diffuses its signal so nothing can lock on to it. It's got at least another 12 hours of power left."

Warner looked suspiciously at Cal. "What do you think, man? I never heard of this type of device."

Cal looked uncertain. "Me neither," he said.

"Look—you think I'd be doing what I was doing with an active chip?"

"All right, well," Cal said. "I guess we can take care of it when we get back to the hideout. Let's hit

on out. Shem—stick close and keep your eyes on the ground. Let's not make eye contact with anyone we might run into. It's mid-morning so hopefully there shouldn't be too many people milling around."

They made good progress, and were glad that the streets were fairly deserted. The few people they passed did not give them a second glance. But their hearts were pounding and their palms were sweaty by the time they turned onto the little side street that they'd come to know as the road to home.

"Thank God," Cal whispered. "I wasn't sure if we'd make it!"

They ran down the steps and slipped through the wooden door. Before long they were standing at the big metal door, ringing the little electric buzzer.

With a great deal of whirring and clicking, the door swung open. Almost before it opened they could hear Kim gushing in her warm and wonderfully appealing voice. "We've been so worried! We've just been praying for you guys non-stop! I'm so glad you're back safe and sound.—Thank You, Jesus, for answering prayer." Kim stopped short as she suddenly noticed the newcomer. "Uh ... hello," she finally said. "Cal—who is this?"

"It's a long story," Cal said, groaning a little at the thought of explanations to come. If he had ever doubted his channel, now was his time to hope it had not all been a fake. "This is Shem. He's an anti, like us. Didn't have anywhere to go. So we ... I prayed about it, and the Lord said that we should bring him back."

"Oh?" Kim raised her eyebrows. "Well, I suppose you all had better come in then."

They walked through the door and Kim shut it securely behind them. Then Stuart and Julian came out into the hallway, and Cal had to start his explanations all over again.

"Actually, we kidnapped him," Warner inserted

at just the right moment, and the room erupted into a frenzy of dialogue once again.

It took a good fifteen minutes to get everything straightened out, and for Cal to thoroughly explain all sides of the story, how they had met Shem and all that had followed, and then for Stuart and Kim to slip away privately for a moment of conference on high, so that this new addition to their group might be confirmed by their own channels as well. Once all that was done, the three produced their food supplements, and with that, the welcome was sealed.

“Now we just need to take care of that implant of yours, Shem,” Stuart said, “before your little disruption device runs out.”

Shem nodded, and tried to look brave. He carefully removed the sticker, and stuffed it in his pocket.

“Don’t worry—it’ll just hurt a little bit,” Warner explained as he took a sharp pocketknife and poked the small blade quickly into Shem’s skin just above the implant. With the help of the knife’s tweezers, he easily finished the job. Shem grabbed his hand away as soon as possible, and nursed the wound for a few moments before he looked up again at any of the others.

As they sat in the blanket room enjoying an early lunch, Julian looked closely at Shem. “I’m sure we haven’t met before,” he said, “but you sure look familiar. I could have sworn I’d seen you somewhere before.”

Shem looked down and scratched his head nervously, tugging his cap a little tighter to his head.

“He’s got one helluva head of hair,” Warner said with a laugh, as he chowed down his beans.

“You have long hair?” Dylan said. “Can I see it?”

“No, not really,” Shem said. “I’m pretty sensitive about my hair. I don’t like showing people.”

"That's so weird," Maya said seriously, shaking her head. "You can see *my* hair all the time."

"What's the matter with your hair?" Dylan asked. "Is it sick?"

"My hair is fine," Shem said. "I just don't like showing it, okay?"

"Kids, if you're done eating, why don't you go play in the other room for a few minutes," Kim said brightly, lifting Maya up and patting her affectionately on the backside.

The two were more than happy to oblige, and skipped gleefully off in the direction of their chosen playroom.

As the door shut behind them, Stuart looked seriously at Shem. "Is there something you want to tell us?" he asked.

"Me? No, of course not! Why would there be?" Shem said nervously.

Stuart looked at the ground, then up at Kim. He made an almost imperceptible questioning gesture. She nodded ever so slightly. They both felt it—something in the pits of their stomach that said that all was not as it seemed. It was not necessarily a bad feeling, not a feeling of danger. But there was definitely a note of something hidden that needed to be revealed. Honesty would have to be drawn out, whatever the method.

"Shem," Kim said gently, "I'm sure you can understand how risky it is for people like us to just take someone off the street, so to speak, and bring them right in with our children, to our hideout. And come to think of it, it's also dangerous for you to be mixed up with us. We're trusting you with a lot of information—and we don't know anything more about you than your first name. The very least you can do is be completely honest with us."

"You don't understand," Shem said, his voice squeaking a little with exasperation. "It's nothing

like that. It's not something bad. I just..."

The others waited in silence while he struggled within himself.

At last he heaved a great sigh, and leaned his head forward where he sat, until it almost touched the ground. Then he pulled his hat off his head and brought it around to the front of his face, where he rubbed his face vigorously all over, clearing it of its fairly thick coating of dirt. Then he lifted his head back up, throwing his hair back behind his head.

The others looked on in dumb silence, as one jaw dropped and then another. For there, sitting crouched up against the wall, was none other than the world-renowned Sheba of Hollywood herself.

THE CALL OF THE WILD

The room was quite dark, and Alana had to blink a couple of times as she looked around the room and tried to focus on her surroundings. There was an unpleasant, pungent odor in the air that she knew all too well—it was her mom’s favorite brand of bleach-deodorizer, that all-consuming product that she poured lavishly over every surface, as if she hoped that the sanitary smell would compensate for the kingdom of chaos that reigned supreme over the house.

It’s enough to make you want to stuff mothballs up your nostrils, Alana thought to herself in disgust. She looked at her watch and jumped up suddenly. It was nearly noon. That night had sure gone by fast.

Alana jumped up and gave the front of her clothing a few token de-wrinkling tugs, then flipped on a nearby lamp and frowned at her reflection. That would never do. She tiptoed out into the darkened hallway and let herself into the bathroom next door.

“Time for one of my favorite tricks,” she said to herself. She took off her clothes, turned the hot water on full blast, and hung the garments up next in strategic locations around the now-billowing

clouds. She took advantage of the four-minute wait with a quick shower, then she emerged and shut off the taps. The clothes felt slightly damp, and she smoothed every wrinkle easily out with her hands. Then she produced a spray can of body mist from the cupboard behind the mirror and gave them a good hose-down. "Perfect," she said aloud to herself. "That should do just nicely—better than wearing the old lady's clothes, anyway."

She dressed quickly and reemerged into the hallway. "Hello!" she called out, flipping a couple of light switches. "Anybody home?"

The door opposite the bathroom swung open and the older woman stumbled out, blinking like a bat in the garish morning light. "What on earth do you need all this brightness for, child? Turn some stuff off!"

Alana flipped off the nearest switch in an uncharacteristic show of obedience.

Her mother seemed to notice, and was duly impressed. "You spook me twice in the same quarter, girl!" she said, as she lumbered into the bathroom and banged the door shut. She shouted through, "Why are you still here?"

Alana leaned her back against the bathroom door. "Why? Maybe on account of your little navy blue friends with the red and white siren who are camped out the back? You'll remember a certain phone call you made before you checked out last night, telling them to guard all entrances since you thought I might show up, conveniently to be there in case I should try to leave?"

The sound of laughter drifted through the shut door. "That's right. I'd forgotten about that. Anyhow, I'm glad you're still here."

"Yeah, well, I'm not glad. Can we make this quick and get it over with? I've got stuff to do."

The bathroom door swung open abruptly,

sending Alana flying backward and sprawling headlong across the floor. Her mother towered over her, fiercely waving her dripping toothbrush. Alana winced slightly and tried to maneuver herself to avoid the fallout.

“Look here, Alana,” the woman said. “I don’t want any of your lip. We’ve got to talk—and we’re going to do it any way it has to be done. Now you go out there and make me some breakfast. I’ll be the one to say when you go and where, you hear me?”

“I’m not going to make you breakfast,” Alana said, clambering up to her feet.

“Suit yourself,” her mother said, shoving the door shut behind her. “But you hang around ’cause if not, you’re history.”

Alana kicked the bathroom door as hard as she could, but it was solid mahogany and she only succeeded in stubbing her toe. Wincing angrily, she limped towards the kitchen and climbed up on a tall barstool. “Drat that woman!” she exclaimed. Then she suddenly felt ashamed. For some reason a strange verse kept coming back to her mind. She couldn’t recall where she’d heard it—maybe in one of those Bible studies that Stuart loved to give. She couldn’t remember the exact wording, but it went something like, “Love your enemies, do good to them that hate you...” She couldn’t remember the rest, but that far things were fitting pretty snug.

“What do You say?” she finally whispered, slipping off the barstool and strolling over to the window, oblivious now to her still-throbbing toe. “I suppose I should have checked in a long time ago. I guess it’s easy to live the whole faith-walk thing when you’ve got a crowd to back you up and do it when you forget. Then all of a sudden you’re on your own, and ... well, I guess you end up where I am.” She sighed, pulled the curtain aside and peered down on the street. She could clearly see a

stout policeman sitting vigilantly on the front steps of the apartment building. She guessed that his buddy was in the car around the back entrance.

"Let's face it, Jesus, I'm weak! I'm a screw-up. I'm a downright hopeless mess. For all I know this should be some karma punishment for all my sins, but I know it's not. I guess if there's anything I've learned living for You these last months it's that everything that happens is all part of Your big mapmaking thing, and You're the One Who's doing all the shorthand. So even though I can't see what's happening, I'm guessing that You can. So please ... please show me what to do!"

Alana pressed her forehead against the glass and shut her eyes. She smiled as the peace came flooding all through her. She felt the words sprinkling through her thirsty soul like rain on a parched bit of ground, and she couldn't help but smile: *Fear not, My love, My precious one. I have not forgotten the special bond of love that was formed between us two, and neither will you forget it. You have been given a lot, and I will ask a lot of you, but rest assured that I will be with you every step of the way. I am in this now, and I am in what shall be, and I will keep you unto the end. Fear not, but be the warrior you were meant to be. For now your destiny begins.*

Alana sighed. Any uneasiness that might have been generated by some of the lines in the message was obliterated by the tangible peace and tranquility that it left in its wake. Almost without realizing it she had walked over to the stove and begun to cook. When her mother walked into the room, she was astonished to see an omelet and toast waiting for her on the kitchen table.

"Sit down, woman, and quit gaping," Alana said with a laugh. "I was just following orders. Take a load off, and have something to eat."

Alana slid her own plate down opposite her mother's and climbed into the chair, tucking her feet up under her. "So let's get going," she said. "What's the bottom line here?"

"You don't waste any time, do you?" her mother said, sitting down and picking up her fork.

"Of course not. Why should I? I don't have anything better to do. I'm the hostage here."

Her mother nodded. "All right then, let's get on with it. I want to know what you're up to."

"What do you mean, 'what I'm up to'?"

Her mother reached into her pocket and shoved a neon orange sheet of paper in her direction. Alana recognized the same 'Wanted' brochure that they had seen earlier. She laughed aloud. "Not a bad picture, huh? I wonder where they got it from."

"I gave it to them."

"Oh," Alana said, momentarily discomfited. Then she shrugged. "Well, good on you, then. I'm glad you picked a nice one. These mug shots are usually really gross looking. I mean, look at the one they have of Stuart! For goodness' sake."

The dishes on the table rattled loudly as her mother brought her fist down full on the table. "What's going on, Alana? I want to know! Are you mixed up in this religious group nonsense?"

Alana stopped laughing and narrowed her eyes. She pushed her plate aside and set her hands firmly down on the table. "Now look here, Ma," she said. "I know ever since Daddy died you've been desperate to control my life, but I'm a big girl. I'm all grown up. My life is mine—you hear that? It's *my own*. I can do whatever I damn well please with it. I can join any two-bit religious nonsense that I want. And I'm not bound to tell anyone about it, not even you—least of all you!"

"Are you with *them*?" Her mother screamed, her face turning red.

“What if I was?” Alana asked calmly.

That seemed to be the last straw. Her mother started hyperventilating, and Alana’s eyebrows shot up in concern. Her face seemed to be turning purple. But before Alana could do anything the woman jumped up and dove across the room. By the time Alana saw she was heading for the little black remote control, it was too late. Her fleshy finger came down hard on the button, and the noiseless click sounded in Alana’s soul like the clanging of prison doors. She knew only too well that her fate was being sealed.

Alana jumped up from the table and looked around wildly. They were at the very top of the building—no chance for a window exit. The only door out led out to the apartment hallway, and there was no hope of getting out that way either. It was only a matter of minutes before she would be taken—and to what? She could only guess.

What do I do? Her mind screamed. *Tell me, what do I do?*

Almost as if in response, her head turned mechanically back to the kitchen counter, where her mother was slumped over, half-crouched over the surface, her hand still clamped onto the remote control. As Alana took in the scene before her, she was shocked to feel a sudden wave of compassion sweep through her. In all her life, she could not remember ever having felt much more for her mother than mere tolerance at best, contempt at worse. Never once had she felt anything remotely compared to love, and compassion was about as far from a feeling she’d relate to that woman as ground beef to a bullfrog.

Maybe it was the very audacity of what she was feeling that forced her to act on it; maybe it had to do with the life-and-death urgency of the situation she now found herself in. Whatever the reason, the

chance to do anything for herself was out, and so her whole focus suddenly switched to the pitiful life form that stood, crumpled and sniveling, before her.

Alana cleared the kitchen floor in one leap and threw her arms awkwardly around her mother's back. She felt the woman stiffen and try to pull away, but Alana held her fast. Her weight-lifting days had not been in vain.

"What do you want from me?" her mother whispered.

"I want you to tell me that you love me," Alana said, and the words shocked her as much as they did her mother.

The woman broke free of Alana's grasp and spun around to face her. "Was that you?" she said. "Was someone else just standing here?"

Alana couldn't help but smile. "That was me, Ma, though I can't think why I said that. No, I take that back. I'll be darned if I know what's happening to me, but maybe this is the whole 'power of love' thing those guys keep talking about. It's real, you know? He's real—Jesus. Love. All that stuff. I've had some experiences since I've been hooked up with this crowd that would make your hair stand on end. But I love it. It's my life." She shrugged. "I wish I could have had more time to tell you about it."

"Oh!" Her mother's eyes grew wide, as if she was just now realizing what she'd done. "What did I do? I called the police, didn't I? It's okay. I'll tell them it was a mistake. They'll let you go. You'll see!"

"Yeah, yeah," Alana said. "You just take care of yourself, okay?" She flicked her ma's right hand where she saw the tiny scar mark left by the registration-chip implant. "You gotta get yourself rid of that. It's a truckload of garbage—it'll ruin your life. You never know what it'll make you do."

At that moment there was a loud shouting

outside, and the front door burst open.

"Hide!" her mother said. "Get under the counter! I'll tell them it was a mistake."

"It's too late," Alana said. She reached out her hand and squeezed her mother's. "I love you, Ma! Maybe I never said it before, but I do. And I forgive you too. You just get yourself a Bible again and do your thing, okay?"

They were out of time. The kitchen door burst open and three men in full combat gear leaped over to Alana, their fingers quivering on the triggers of their automatic assault rifles.

"Stand away from the prisoner! Stand back!" two of them shouted in unison.

"Wait!" the woman cried out. She was trembling from head to toe. "There's been a big mistake. I don't want to turn her in. This is my daughter!"

"Stand back, woman! The prisoner is dangerous!"

The third soldier did a flying leap across the room and jumped on top of Alana's mother, pinning her to the ground. Alana smiled and gave a little wave, then turned to the gun-toting soldiers. "Easy, boys, I'm not going anywhere," she said. "I don't feel any fire rising up in me."

That might have been the last straw for the jumpy attack squad, who had been instructed to be prepared for anything. Just then, Alana felt a strange premonition. She turned in time to see the third soldier coming behind her with his rifle lifted high over his head. Before she could shout, the butt hit her with the full force of the man's weight on the back of her head. Alana slumped to the floor, unconscious.



The little circle sat for a good ten minutes digesting their new information and looking at their latest recruit.

Sheba looked embarrassed. "I'm sorry. I guess you know my name. I'm Sheba. I always dress as a man when I'm going out for anti-go' activities. It's easier that way—avoids all the questions and unnecessary attention."

The others were still looking at her, speechless. Finally, Stuart said, "Well, Sheba—welcome. We're glad that you were honest with us."

"Well, thank you for having me," she said bashfully. "I'm afraid I caused you two a lot of trouble last night. I'm sorry. I should have thanked you then for saving my life."

Cal and Warner were looking very confused, and very embarrassed.

"It's all right, really," Cal said.

"How old are you, Sheba?" Kim asked.

"I'm eighteen," she replied. "I just turned last month." Abruptly she started coughing. The coughs were very forceful, and Kim looked worried as she passed her a napkin. "Are you all right?" she whispered.

Sheba nodded, crumpled up the napkin, and quickly said, "So, I heard the guys talking some earlier ... you all are Christians?"

"We're a bit more than that, I'm happy to say," Stuart said. "We're sort of an elite spiritual army striving to free people's souls from the clutches of the one-world Antichrist government—and perhaps do Big Brother a little damage in the process."

"Really?" Sheba said, her eyes shining. "I love that! Really, I do! You have no idea, but I've been looking for a way out of my life for a long time."

"What?" Julian said. "You've been looking for a way out of what? You're a great actress—and successful, too! You are famous, rich—you have everything. Why would you want to leave it?"

"It's not all it's made out to be," she said quietly. "If I knew you better I could tell you some stories

that would fry all your notions of glamour and such. But I won't. I'll just say that I'm glad to be out. And I owe it to you both. Thank you for kidnapping me." She sighed. "I guess I was kind of hoping I would get caught last night. I think a lot of us knew we had an informant. But we were so desperate ... I know I was, anyway. I just had to keep going. At least if they caught me I wouldn't have to go on pretending, living a lie like I was."

A little silence followed. Then Stuart said, "Well, now that we've been introduced I guess we need to go on to the other business at hand. Before you guys got back we'd been discussing our options. I think we have a great deal of praying to do."

"What's new?" Cal said. "You met Ashton?"

"Yes. And there's trouble in the Middle East. Ashton's got word that Jay and Kate are holed up in this triad of rebel cities we've been hearing about, which it turns out are solidly Christian cities, and there's a big biological weapons strike gearing up to hit them sometime in the next two weeks." Stuart put the white envelope in the middle of the floor. "Inside here are two disks, and a page with some instructions of how to get to an airfield, and a hangar number. One of the disks is labeled 'Auto: Friends.' I think Ashton's left us his plane so we can warn Jay and Kate—if we want to."

"Fly halfway around the world to tell them they're going to be attacked? What's the purpose in that?" Warner asked. "And who's gonna fly it?"

"I've had some pilot training," Cal said, almost under his breath.

"What's to say you're not going to end up right in the middle of it?" Julian interjected. "After all, we don't know when the strike is."

"I guess there's tons more questions," Kim said. "But we all know what we've gotta do."

The others nodded. There didn't seem to be much

else that they could do. Something like this could not just be decided; it had to be decreed from on high, or not at all.

And so the room grew quiet, as all closed their eyes—either out of reverence or out of a notable respect for what everybody else was doing—and absorbed the instructions from on high. One or two people led out in prayer; one or two others spoke the words as they were dictated into their minds. But when it was all over and the six sat blinking at one another across the circle, there was only one word that remained clear in their minds: “Go!”

“That’s it?” Cal spoke the words slowly and hesitantly. “Doesn’t He usually have a lot more hows and how-tos?”

Kim looked a little puzzled. “He usually does,” she said.

“Maybe this time He doesn’t want us to know the end from the beginning,” Stuart said. “Maybe that’s all the instructions there are.”

“You think?” Kim asked, a little uncertainly.

“So what, we all head off to parts unknown?” Julian asked.

Stuart looked at Kim, then around at the others. “Was anyone getting anything along the lines of names?”

Warner started picking at a hole in his jeans. Cal looked at the ceiling. Julian started whistling a nonchalant tune under his breath. Sheba looked totally and utterly bewildered.

“All right, people, out with it!” Stuart said.

“You start, Stu,” Kim said, grinning.

“Okay,” Stuart said. “It’s bad to be the first, isn’t it? But I was getting Cal and Warner.”

Immediately the room erupted into a volley of exclamations. However unlikely it might have seemed, apparently everyone had received the exact same set of names.

Sheba looked at Warner, who was sitting next to her, having somehow figured out that he was the greenest of them all. "Do you know what's going on here?" she whispered.

"Just barely," Warner whispered back. "It's a long story, but very worth knowing. Get one of them to tell you about it sometime."

"So, what—that's it? I'm packed in some flying cubicle with this loser and shipped off to the Middle East?" Cal exclaimed, jumping up suddenly.

"What did you get, Cal?" Kim asked.

Cal scowled. "Yeah, that's what I got. But I thought maybe I was wrong."

"Hey, man, *carpe diem!*" Warner said, jumping up. "When do we go?"

"Right away, I guess," Stuart said. He ran his hands through his hair and heaved a long sigh. "Oh boy, do we have some details to work out!"



Working out the details was a mild-mannered way of describing the next 24 hours. Several separate confirmation prayers were first launched, and each one confirmed that this was the designated plan for Cal and Warner. Kim gathered together a small bag of essentials that they could take with them for their long trip.

As a finishing touch, Stuart gathered the whole team together for some praise time. Stuart explained to the newcomers the principle of praise, and though it seemed odd to be thanking God for something that had not yet happened, each one joined in wholeheartedly. By the time they were done, each felt a bit better and more prepared in some way for the adventure ahead.

When night fell, Stuart and Julian accompanied Cal and Warner back to the food warehouse, where they rounded off their plastic bag with some victuals. Stuart led the way to the underground

maze of tunnels, and they took to the wall-side plaque for the task of comparing, mental probing and consultation with Julian's ever-ready laptop to determine exactly where they were going and how to get there.

It was nearly ten o'clock by the time the last details were set, and they were happy to find out that their aerial launch pad was not unrealistically far away. By keeping up a good pace in the underground, they determined they could make it back to their target outlet in just under an hour. This brought them right to the eastern edge of the city, where another hour-and-a-half's jog or brisk walk should take them right to where they were going.

All in all, things were looking very hopeful when Stuart and Julian waved goodbye to their two buddies. Before parting, Stuart entrusted Cal with his flee-knife. "I'm sure it'll come in handy on your travels," he said. "But it's got sentimental value so I'm expecting it back."

Cal nodded. He was feeling uncharacteristically forlorn at the thought of launching out and leaving these friends that he had grown so close to. "You guys take care," he said, forcing himself to sound casual and composed. "Say bye to Alana for me ... when you see her."

"Will do," Stuart said.

There was nothing more to say, and another minute later, the two figures had vanished into the darkness, while Stuart and Julian made their way back to the warehouse to pick up the remainder of the items that Cal and Warner had left behind, and bring them back home.



Alana blinked several times, and then brought her hands down hard on her forehead. For the first

few minutes she was disoriented, and looked around about herself in startled surprise. There was not much to see. Whatever holding cell she had been placed in, it had not been designed for comfort. There were no windows; a narrow slit under the door let just enough light through for her to make out her bare surroundings.

She scrambled into a sitting position and leaned her back against the hard stone wall. She stretched her feet out in front of her, and found to her surprise that her legs just fit, with no space to spare. On impulse she lay down on the ground in the opposite direction, curious to test the limits of her new dwelling place. It was not quite long enough for her to lie down flat.

As she did so, an unpleasant odor warned her that she had placed her head at the wrong end, and she did not care to feel around to find the bare hole that she knew to be the origin of the stench. Lying down was obviously not the position of choice, and so Alana hoisted herself upright again.

"Oh Lord, where am I?" she whispered softly to herself. Then she stopped and raised an eyebrow. "WHERE AM I?" she shouted out, as loud as she could. "SPEAK TO ME, JESUS!" She paused, satisfied at the interesting sound the echo made on the low, warped ceiling. She wondered if there was anyone within hearing range. She decided to try and find out. "Does anybody have any X-rated movies?" she shouted. "Any sex toys I could play with? I'm dying of boredom in here!"

Silence was her only response, so she finally figured that her audience was either deaf or indifferent, and decided to postpone the show to another time. Yet the silence and the darkness and the stench marched on, and as seconds turned to minutes and then into alarming hours, Alana grew more and more restless. Never one to take well to

confinement or lack of occupation, she found the long hours increasingly nerve-wracking.

“Oh please, oh please!” she finally whispered. “Maybe it’s taken me just getting pancaked out before I came to You like this. I guess You’ve noticed I haven’t been talking to You much over the past couple hours. I’m sorry, Man, I guess I just knew that if I started praying I’d just be begging You for this and that, and that kills me. I don’t like to ask stuff from nobody, and I don’t want to just come groveling for deliverance and all that.” She paused. “I don’t know, what is it that Stuart is always saying about doing humble stuff? Darn, wish I could remember what it was, but I can’t. Anyhow, maybe that’s what You’re waiting for—just wanting me to ask. So just for the record, if there was ever a question about it, I do want out of here. I do want peace and joy and light and good smells and stuff. Food too, if possible. I just want to do what You sent me back to this stinking Earth to do. You said You had a purpose I had to fulfill, so that’s what I’m here for. You just lay it on me.”

The last words were still on her lips when the door to her cell abruptly swung open. Alana’s hand shot up to shield her eyes from the glaring light that cut into them like searing irons. Two muscular arms reached in and pulled her out into the fluorescent-lit outer cell.

Glad to be pulled out of the grasp of boredom, but still not sure if she might be going from the frying pan to the fire, Alana was only mildly surprised when the world suddenly faded into the background, as a volley of unearthly words rang in her ears: *Fear not for that which is to come, or for what you shall suffer. You are My servant and you serve My name. Your life will glorify Me.*



ALANA

MESSENGERS OF DOOM

“Is that the place?” Warner asked, pointing down the hill where several hangars and a cluster of small buildings huddled next to a quiet, unlit runway that pointed towards the horizon.

Cal nodded. “It’s gotta be,” he said.

“Darn sight smaller than what I was expecting. Doesn’t even have a control tower!”

“Maybe that’s good. We don’t want to take off from the center of a beehive anyway. Who cares about some little junker airplane from Nobodysville and where it might be going? But if we flew out of some big mega-joint, we might get a lot more garbage.”

“I guess so,” Warner said. “As long as she flies, that’s good enough for me.”

“Have you done any flying, Warner?” Cal asked curiously.

“I thought you were the pilot here.”

“I said I had some training—you know, those small military training aircraft. But I did so bad I had to go for ground duty instead.”

“NOW you fess up?” Warner exclaimed.

“Well,” Cal said, defending himself, “the disk does say ‘Auto.’ I guess we’ll have to see just how automatic this thing is.”

The moon was clear and bright, the predawn

skies still deep and inky. Cal and Warner quickened their step. The little airport buildings were all but dark, but the great looming hulk of the storage hangars rose up clearly in the foreground.

Cal looked down again at the piece of notepaper scrunched up in his hand, thankful for the crude lines and arrows that silently led them through this graveyard world. "It's up here," he whispered, and a few minutes later they found themselves standing in front of a moderately sized hangar door. There was a small, computerized keypad near the door.

"Does the note give a code or password?" Warner asked.

"No," Cal said. He turned the paper over a couple times. There was only one line of text on the paper at all, other than the simple map and bare directions which had led them thus far. "It just says, 'One size fits all. Follow the leader.'"

Warner looked up and shrugged to signify depth overload. "Anything else in the package?"

"The mini-disks!" Cal's eyes lit up. "Here's the 'Auto: Friends' one. The other one's labeled 'Auto: Request.' They both look the same to me!"

"One size fits all," Warner said. "Let's just try one. If it doesn't work, we'll try the other."

"Okay."

Cal slid the first disk into the slit-like opening just above the keypad. The machine purred responsively, digested for a few seconds, then spat the disk back out again. The door clicked open, and the sound was echoed by the bigger lock of the sliding hangar door.

"I guess it worked," Warner said.

Cal and Warner stepped inside the door and it swung shut behind them, locking automatically at the same moment as a series of lights lit up the room. Their eyes were instantly riveted on the sleek teal-blue executive jet that stood before them.

Warner's eyes were wide as he walked reverently up to the craft and touched it. He seemed at a loss for words.

Cal was also somewhat awed at the shiny, ultramodern jet, but the press of time and the approach of dawn kept his euphoria in check. "Come on," he said. "Let's get on in."

They circled around to the other side of the craft, until they found the door, which again opened easily after they inserted the disk. The cockpit was small, but the pilot and co-pilot's seats were plush and comfortable. To their surprise, Cal and Warner saw no controls, handles or even buttons. Facing the two cockpit seats was only a sleek, dark gray control panel, which seemed to be some sort of lit computer screen, and a number of dials—only some of which Cal recognized.

Cal settled himself into the pilot's seat, and Warner strapped himself in alongside him.

Cal was scratching his head. "This baby is way beyond me ... I wouldn't even know where to begin!"

"Well, so far this 'auto' disk has done just about everything for us. I suppose we'll just have to find out where to stick it."

They began investigating the area a little more. Warner discovered a narrow red handlebar on a panel near the wall, marked "Manual Override: Emergency Use Only." They decided not to start with an emergency pull. Finally, Cal found the spot—a small slit just below the dashboard's screen. As he inserted the disk, the machine leapt eagerly to life and started humming comfortably. Several lights and notices flashed across the screen.

"What happens now?" Warner asked.

"I guess we find out just how 'auto' this baby really is!" Cal answered nervously.

They did not have long to wait. The display screen blipped, then kicked into action.

Cal and Warner were fascinated; it was like watching an animated brain at work. First, a world map was etched onto the screen, then it zoomed in three or four times until their little airport was clearly visible. An animated airplane cursor marked their present location, and the map zoomed back out. Then a dotted line projected itself halfway around the world to their final destination, which was marked with a red X.

"It's setting its own course," Cal said in wonder. "Ashton must have preset all the signals!"

The world map vanished, and sets of numbers began to flash across the screen, along with sparse words of explanation.

"Transmitting coordinates," Warner read. "It keeps saying that."

"I bet it's arranging our flight with the computerized air-traffic control centers on our route. It's mapping out the way before we even start off."

"Coordinates acknowledged; trajectory cleared," Warner read, nodding his head. "This is the life, man!"

The screen changed again, this time to weather readings, meteorological forecasts, and area satellite scans. At the same time, the dual tail engines kicked into high gear and the jet lurched slightly. To Cal and Warner's relief, the great door of the hangar slid smoothly open, and the plane set off down the tarmac at a slow pace. They slipped out under the magenta skies and made a smooth turn onto the runway, all without the novice pilot or copilot touching a single control. The plane taxied down the runway, picked up speed, and then seared off into the morning skies, blending with the sunrise as it journeyed east.



The long hours blurred and blended as the little craft cut through the skies. For the first few hours

Cal felt bound to stay in the pilot's seat, but his boredom increased with every self-satisfied blip of the computer screen. The clincher came when he was startled out of a light doze, as the entire panel lit up like a flashing red beacon, and a loud alarm signal started going off.

"What's going on?" Warner screamed.

"I don't know," Cal said. "How are we supposed to fix it if..." He then saw the message at the bottom of the screen: "In-cabin temperature has exceeded recommended levels by 1.5 degrees." Cal groaned. "Turn down the heat, will you?"

Warner scrambled into the back and fiddled with the controls. A moment later, the display screen resumed its green-light composure.

Cal had had enough. He got out of his seat and climbed into the back.

"Yeah, man!" Warner greeted him with a nod. "Let it stew in its own juice. It can handle us okay."

Cal suddenly burst out laughing. "I guess so. If it's gonna get that steamed over some temperature climb, I guess it'll let us know if there's any wild geese in our path we've gotta dodge."

"Check out the pad!"

Warner had extensively familiarized himself with the comforts of cabin travel, and was quick to show Cal the ropes. There was a comfortable lounge/couch setup, with a satellite television, extensive DVD collection, a satellite phone, and foldout armrests with Internet-linked laptops. There was a well-stocked bar and mini-galley. A door at the back led into a small bedroom equipped with two seats that folded back into beds. There was a compact bathroom accessible from both the bedroom and lounge area.

Cal was impressed. "This is certainly not going to be a painful journey," he said, smiling widely.

"I think not," Warner agreed, holding up a

martini, then downing it in one gulp.

Cal grinned and threw himself onto the couch. "I think I'll start with a nap," he said. "Keep an ear out for our autopilot, would you?"



As the day blended into night, Cal and Warner had more than enough time to explore their surroundings and occupy themselves with all that there was to do. By the evening, though, they were starting to feel the confines of their close quarters. Cal was almost glad when he heard a strident beep proceeding from the cockpit, and ran up to investigate.

Slipping into his seat, he took stock of the control panel. "Hey," he called back. "We're starting our descent!"

"Already?" Warner asked, sticking his head up from the back.

"You bet. Better get yourself strapped in."

"Man, that was fast," Warner grumbled. "There was another two movies I wanted to see! You know, there's a couple of Sheba ones in there."

Cal suddenly grew thoughtful. "You know, I'm thinking there's something we forgot to do. We've been in this plane all day and we haven't even once, you know, done the whole praying thing. Didn't we promise Stuart and the others we'd do it all the time?"

Warner looked slightly ashamed. "Yeah, man. I mean, I thought of it all the time but I never wanted to say anything. You know, you're the boss and all."

Cal sighed. "That's the most pitiful excuse attempt I've ever heard," he said. He unstrapped his seat belt and climbed into the back, throwing himself down on the couch.

"What about the descent?" Warner asked warily.

"It'll be okay. We've got at least another ten or fifteen minutes before we get low enough to worry. I

think this is more important. I mean—think of it! We're going to land out in the middle of some desert town, and we don't know squat about anything!"

Warner nodded in appreciation of that fact.

The two closed their eyes and were silent for a minute. Then Cal said, "Look, let's just each take our turn, okay? I'm feeling more and more out of my league the closer we get to whatever it is that's ahead of us."

Warner kept his eyes closed and nodded his head. "Whatever you say, man, you're the cheese."

And so they did; each in his own way, with eyes closed and thoughts in turmoil, they lifted their hearts to the heavens to beg for directions on where to go and what to do. Then the prayers were over and they slipped, unnoticed, into silence. Thus they remained for nearly ten minutes, neither one breathing a word of all that was rushing through his mind. But when at last Warner tentatively lifted up his head and looked at Cal, he found Cal doing the same thing.

It just took one look into each other's eyes for them to know and understand everything that had transpired with the other. The pace had been set, and they felt like little twigs that had been cast into a huge riverbed. All the while they had been sitting on the dry earth, waiting to find out what was supposed to happen in their lives. Now they were fully immersed in the raging cataract, and they were hurtling downstream at a rate that was far beyond their control. It was exhilarating; it was dangerous; they loved it.

"Let's go to it," Cal said at last. Without another word, the two stood up and took their places in the cockpit.

The night sky around them was fairly clear and the moon seemed to have been specially appointed as a beacon for them. As they broke through the

cloud cover, they could see the sparse landscape that looked inky blue below them. Here and there a lone light could be seen, presumably belonging to some cottage or village outpost, but there was no doubt about it: They were far from any major center of civilization.

As they cleared five thousand feet, the control panel lit up again, and a new menu popped up. Cal watched in interest as the program flipped casually through the options, settling at last on one earmarked "Descent: Silent Glide Slope." As the setting kicked in, both of the engines immediately died out, and there was the whir of some type of activity in the plane's wing regions.

Warner looked nervously out his side window. "It's not sounding too good, man!" he said. "What's going on?"

"Sounds like we're set for a noiseless descent," Cal said. "I just hope everything goes okay."

There was no more time for speculation. With the engines off, the plane began to drop quickly from the sky, but it kept going forward and—at least so far as Cal could tell in following the animated map that had reappeared on the dash—they were continuing along their preset course.

They were quite low over the desert now.

"Hey man, aren't we supposed to start seeing a landing strip about now, or something?" Warner asked nervously. "I see nothing but sand, sand, and more sand."

Cal remained silent, not sure himself. Getting the same idea at the same time, both Cal and Warner grabbed ahold of the safety handles and leaned their heads fully back on the headrests, hoping to preempt the unpleasant effects of what looked like a very jarring landing ahead. But they needn't have worried. Just as the desert floor loomed in below them, another message flicked on

the panel before them: "Vertical Landing Activated: Desert Mode."

The noise of lowering gear sounded hollowly through the plane's fuselage. The gliding jet suddenly lost most of its forward motion as air jets ignited and released a sudden burst of power from the craft's belly. The plane was instantly enveloped in a cloud of dust, but within seconds the two nervous passengers felt the soft, unmistakable thud of the landing gear making contact with the sand below them. The flight had ended.

Warner hesitated only a minute before jumping out of his seat and lowering the jet's stepdoor, letting in a gust of desert sand that was being whipped up from the still-spinning turbines. "We made it!" he called out jubilantly to the deserted surroundings. Clambering up the side of the door, and hoisting himself atop the plane's fuselage, he spread his arms wide and threw back his head and laughed aloud at the top of his voice. "We made it!" he screamed to the night sky. "We're here, and we've come to save you all!"

Warner was interrupted from his moment of thrilling self-glorification by a firm tapping under his feet. He looked down to see that he was standing on the top of the domed front window of the airplane and, still inside, Cal was not nearly as impressed with his performance as he himself had been. Still undaunted, he scrambled back down and got inside the plane, shutting the door behind him.

"It's chilly out there," he said, wrapping his arms around himself. "Haven't felt the real bite of a good animal night in years."

"Did you see anything when you were up there?" Cal asked.

"See anything?"

"Yeah—you know—civilization?"

"Oh, anything like *that*," Warner said. "Naw man,

I was shouting to the full moon. I wasn't looking around myself. I could get back up and look again if you like, though."

"Never mind," Cal said. "I can get up myself."

He jumped up and they both raced for the door. Warner made it first, quickly scrambling back onto the top of the plane where he had been before. Cal came up, red-faced and panting, two or three seconds later. "No fair," he gasped. "You did it once already."

Warner grinned. "Hey," he said. "Look at that—there is life on this planet." He pointed out ahead. The aircraft had settled into what seemed to be a small crevasse on a large flat-topped sand dune. Just down the slope was a small cluster of houses. They looked like they'd been thrown together haphazardly, without much rhyme or reason. But Stone Age or not, it was definitely civilization, and with no other options before them at the present moment, Cal and Warner were glad for that.

Cal found an empty duffle bag in the storage closet, and filled it with a few bottles of ready-mixed martinis and other suitable offerings that he found strewn around the plane. He ejected the mini-disk and stowed it carefully in his shirt pocket. Then they closed the aircraft door and offered a prayer for the aircraft's preservation as they set off down the sandy hillside towards civilization.



After a tedious hour-long hike through the sand, Cal and Warner found themselves in the cozy innards of what they were now ashamed to have referred to as a Stone Age cottage. Whatever the humble abodes lacked in outer pizzazz, they more than made up for with that elusive quality of hominess that somehow seemed to burst out of every object, animate and inanimate, that graced their dirt floors.

Warner and Cal both surveyed the simple joy that had first met their eyes upon beholding these simple folks and their comfortable peasant lifestyle. Somehow it was such a contradiction to all the Western ways that they had come to equate with satisfaction and contentment, that it threw all their senses for a loop.

"It was like walking into a little bit of the Bible," Cal later confided to Kate. "The household just seemed to bubble over with love and effervescence."

And there were plenty of them to bubble, too. Unknown to them at first, Cal and Warner had stumbled straight into the house of Rashid and his twelve children, who filled the four bedrooms as though living quarters were going out of style.

The new arrivals were viewed at first with suspicion, but all was made clear when Kate and Jay were mentioned, who one of the barefooted ruffians was soon dispatched to locate from their own house a few doors down. And now they were all together, sitting cross-legged on cushions in front of a roaring fire, swapping tales of days gone by and never even stopping to wonder what exactly had brought them all together.

They talked long into the night, but always focused on the past. It might not have been a conscious avoidance, but something seemed to tell the desert-dwellers that if indeed there was a reason for the newcomers' sudden drop into their lifestyle, the reasons would be revealed at just the right time. There was no need to rush destiny.

The moment came a few hours later, though jet lag and the long, comfortable doze aboard their flight had left Cal and Warner hardly tired. It was well past midnight, and polite yawns were proceeding from the hosts. The children had all gone to bed, and Mrs. Rashid had joined the group seated in the living room some fifteen minutes

before. Jay, Kate and Ringo were sitting on the floor, Rashid sat on a low armchair, and Perez, the eldest son, was also sprawled out nearby.

Cal and Warner looked at each other, wondering if the right time had indeed come.

"I guess you're wondering why we're here," Cal said hesitantly.

"I guess so," Jay said with a smile.

Warner studied the floor, trying as hard as he could to look useless so that he wouldn't be called upon to contribute. The message to be delivered was certainly not an enviable one.

Cal took a deep breath. "Oh boy," he said. "How do you preface something like this?"

Kate looked at Jay, then back at Cal. "Just say it," she said quietly. "We can take it."

Cal nodded. "Okay then," he said. "We've got some friends in high places, you might say, in the government. There was a big strike planned against this area a couple months ago, but it was foiled at the last minute. Apparently, though, things are gearing up for another big strike—seems for somewhere around a week or two."

The room sat in stunned silence.

Then Rashid leaned forward in his chair. "They will bomb us?" he asked incredulously. "But that could not be! This region is highly unstable already. Our neighbors could all turn against them in a moment. They would not dare do something so foolish right now!"

Cal shook his head. "No, I'm afraid they're much more devious than that. We heard they're planning a totally silent, off-the-books biological strike—you know, germ warfare. I guess they want to just fade things out quietly."

Rashid slumped back in his chair. "Ah," he said. "It is clever, that. To put poison in the wind, poof! Overnight, there is sickness in the air. Slowly, people

start to die, and what a tragedy it is!”

Jay nodded. “The government calls for a swift investigation into the mysterious deaths—and discovers that those ‘terrorists’ accidentally killed themselves experimenting with some deadly new biological weapon intended to be used against the one-world government—and declares the incident tragic, but nevertheless good riddance to bad rubbish for all,” he said sarcastically.

“What are we going to do?” Ringo said, a hint of panic in his voice. His eyes were bright and blazing. “We’ve got to do something. We can’t just wait here to be knocked off, can we?” He looked around at the others. “Can we?”

“Easy, man,” Jay said. “Nobody’s gonna be knocked off.”

“What makes you so sure of that?” Perez asked fearfully, looking up at his father. “I say we are. I say we’re all going to start dying one day. We’ll never know it either. It might have already happened! We could be infected already.”

Warner scratched his legs uncomfortably. Suddenly he felt itchy all over.

“I thought I heard a plane approaching a couple of hours ago,” Kate said quietly.

“Wait, hold it!” Cal said. “That was us! We just came in a plane.”

The others turned to look at him suspiciously.

“No, no!” he said, throwing up his hands. “That’s not what I meant. We’re the *good* guys, remember? We brought you the news.”

“Why?” Perez said coldly. “What brings you over here to give us this news and then return where you came from? We should have been better to die not knowing. But now as we die we will not even see the face of our murderers.”

Cal looked desperately at Jay. He felt a bit at a loss as to what to do.

Jay shrugged ever so slightly, but smiled at him encouragingly. Jay could see the spark of faith and anointing in Cal's eyes, and he knew everything would turn out all right.

"We're not leaving you," Cal said suddenly.

Warner bolted up from his place on the floor. Cal swung his arm back and knocked him back down into his place.

"What?" Rashid said, narrowing his eyes.

"We're here to stay—for the time being anyway," Cal said. "Look, we don't know much more than you do, but as far as I can tell, we have the same Lord in common, and He's the One Who sent us over here. He told us to come, and God helping us, we're going to stay till we find out why we're here. If He's taken the trouble to warn us all and give us advance notice—and it's not supposed to happen for another week or two, mind you—then He must have some great plan, right?"

"That's right," Jay said enthusiastically. "We've just got to find out what it is!"

"And then do it," Warner said woefully.

The others looked slightly ashamed.

"You are right," Rashid said. "I confess it is simple to forget such things when one is taken in the force of emotion. Thank you for troubling yourself to follow our Lord's steps and coming to our help."

Ringo muttered something under his breath that no one seemed to catch except Warner, who snickered quietly to himself.

"So what do we do?" Kate asked, after a moment's pause.

"I think we'll need to talk about this more tomorrow," Jay said. "I don't know about anyone else, but I've had one heavy-duty, sun-baked day, and I don't think I could assimilate one more iota of input."

"Hear, hear," Warner said.

Rashid looked thoughtful. "I am thinking tomorrow could be a holiday from work," he said. "I would greatly enjoy to discuss with you all the future of our village and the safety of the area."

"Maybe we could all get together tomorrow and have some good prayer and discussion time, and then have a second meeting with the city fathers of the three towns," Jay suggested.

Cal nodded, and Rashid inclined his head in agreement as well.

"Don't you think we should tell everyone else right away?" Kate asked.

"I think Jay speaks wisdom," Rashid said. "To tell this to all is important, but not before we know the plan and our counterattack. Otherwise we will speak only fear and no faith, and that is not healthy for any man."

With that, everyone agreed and the matter was settled. The fire had died down to the bare coals and the night chill was creeping into the living area. Gradually, they all stood up and prepared to make their way to their sleeping quarters.

Jay sidled over to Cal. "Hey," he whispered. "You didn't bring any ... like, Word or anything, did you?"

Cal smiled. "Funny you should ask," he said, reaching inside his duffle bag. "Kim slipped this into my bag just before I left. She must have known you would ask."

Jay snatched the little white plastic-bound book from Cal's hands. It was worn and the pages were gray and dingy, but Jay felt like he was holding raw power. "Thank you," he said. "You don't know how I've been missing the printed Word! We have our own collection that we've been gathering—we have a couple Bibles, and a slew of notebooks where we've been writing down as much as we can remember, as well as new stuff that we get. But since the only 'we' who has a history to remember

is me—and if you knew me when I was storing up my memory banks, you'd know what I mean—well, our store isn't exactly overflowing.”

Cal smiled. “Glad I could help,” he said. “You can keep that. I'm sure Kim will get over it.”

Jay thanked him again, and they parted.

Cal and Warner set off towards the jet, but their minds were already focused on the next day, and what new adventures it would bring them.

- 13 -

IN THE CHAMBER

Alana felt very small and insignificant as she was led inside the great wooden doors. And to make Alana feel small and insignificant was no mean task; in fact, she could not specifically remember having felt that way before. It was an unpleasant feeling.

She was completely surrounded by a well-armed escort, and her hands and feet were chained together. Still, she strove to keep up her heady stride, and for all the relaxed poise of her gait, she could have been strutting alongside the rich and famous. But she was not, and that fact was rudely impressed upon her once again the moment she stepped through the great double doors.

The room she was led into had a tall, fashionably arched ceiling. A combination of powerful aircons and huge ceiling fans lent the air an almost tangible flu quotient which hit the entrants like a blast from the Arctic. Alana was not surprised to note that all the people sitting around the long, oval stone table were wearing heavy pullovers and turtleneck sweaters.

The people themselves looked like they had volunteered for the graveyard shift, and as her escort parted to both sides, they looked at Alana—

obviously the current center of their focus—with a variety of gazes, ranging from livid hate to the type of disdain one would tender to a filthy piece of trash: The sooner and easier it could be disposed of, the better.

There was a small see-through fiberplast cubicle at the far end of the room, and there Alana was unceremoniously dumped, after which most of her escort left. Two wall-like guards took up their posts in front of the impervious cage, which was sealed and locked. Alana shuffled over to the only piece of furniture in her transparent cage—a white plastic lawn chair. It was thin and flimsy, and the surface felt somewhat slimy, as though the last occupant had done a lot of heavy-duty sweating while in its embrace. The connotations of that particular thought were not worth contemplating further.

But before she could consider if it was worth trying, her attention turned to a round speaker at the front of the cage. “Alana Williams!” a curt voice boomed. She noticed curiously that the sound came only out of the little round speaker. Apparently the rest of the booth was soundproof.

“Yes, your honor,” Alana said, debating whether a dignified approach would serve her purposes better. But the sound of her own voice speaking such a line turned her stomach so that she knew instantly that that was not the road for her.

“Silence!” the voice boomed, and once again, Alana wished she had not wasted her energy forcing out those words, when apparently anything was unwelcome from her at this point. “You will speak when told to and not before.”

Alana slid defiantly back in her chair and pasted on her most implacable face.

“You have not been brought here to determine your innocence or guilt,” the voice continued. “We know that you are guilty. We are tired of you. We

are tired of your people. We are tired of this whole 'struggle between good and evil.' It's a damned nuisance. We are not even going to ask if you will relinquish your faith, because we are not interested. As far as we're concerned, your past negates any repentance you might have to offer us."

Alana allowed herself to grin slightly. Whatever the collective anti-government resistance was doing, apparently it was working. These people's patience was stretched to the limit. She wondered what it would take to see it snap back in their faces.

The voice continued: "What we need is an example. We've eliminated many rebels in the last months, and—frankly, between you and me—it is not deterring others damn near as well as it should. What we need is some decisive action, and you are it. We're only informing you of our intentions out of a cursory obligation to procedures, you know. Can't have you stumbling around like some ignorant fool, wondering what on earth is happening. No, this is going to be much more efficient. And don't start entertaining any hopes of a daring rescue. No indeed! When we're done with you, not only will you be relieved to go to your grave, but—with the blessing of our great leader—you will take a whole litter of your friends along with you as well."

The speaker became silent. The monologue was over. Then: "Do you have any questions?"

"Oh yes!" Alana said eagerly.

"Speak."

"I'm having a bit of a spelling problem these days ... can you help me? What does this spell: 'G-O space T-O space H-E-L-L'?"

Alana watched with interest as the whitened face she had by now connected with the expressionless speaker turned a livid red and started dribbling a little frothy trickle from the corner of his mouth.

Another voice echoed through the speaker. "You

will be taken to the fitting room now.”

The door was flung open and Alana’s former contingent returned. She was led out of the room and down a long flight of stairs, then through another corridor, and down another staircase. They walked for almost 30 minutes, till even her steel nerves felt frayed and withered. She felt like she was losing circulation in her hands, and she could see the little red prints her shoes made on the floor, from the blood that had dripped from her raw, swollen ankles.

They then arrived at the bottom of the huge compound—an underground basement. The room they entered was dark and dingy, and vaguely reminiscent of an old-fashioned blacksmith’s shop. The air was thick with a sulfurous smoke, and the huge man who worked the bellows had the sort of look you’d expect from somebody who breathed those fumes all day long. For all her tough demeanor, Alana couldn’t help but recoil a little as he approached her.

He had no interest in her as a person, however. Under the watchful eye of her guards, she was shoved down in a cold metal chair and strapped into place. As she fought the various horrifying thoughts which flooded her mind, the blacksmith pushed her back against the hard metal, and fastened another sturdy leather strap around her shoulders.

The chair’s back ended just at her neck level, and at the touch of a switch the back began to lower and straighten itself, until Alana was laying flat, with her head dangling down, two or three feet from the huge furnace.

The leering blacksmith pulled up a stool of his own and a basket of something that Alana could not make out from her angle. He sat down behind her head and began to work deftly and quickly,

alternating brisk pulls with tugs from terrifyingly sharp-looking objects and steel instruments with tips heated till they glowed, which Alana could barely glimpse from the corner of her eye.

Alana couldn't bear the suspense any longer, and shut her eyes. Her mind floundered desperately around for something she could hold onto. She strained to remember even a fragment of a line, something that Stuart or Kim or Jay had said ... anything.

Oh, please! she begged inwardly. *I don't beg, but I need something now. Just give me anything!*

Then she remembered a fragment of the message that she had received the night before. As clear as could be, the words came rushing back to her: *You are My servant and You serve My name. Your life will glorify Me.* Through the choking smoke and the heat and the horrible, gnawing fear, she repeated those words noiselessly. *Your life will glorify My name.*

And then it was over. The chair was snapped back into place so suddenly that it caught Alana quite off guard and she almost let out a scream, but found to her surprise that she couldn't. There was something very wrong with her face, but she couldn't tell what it was because her hands were shackled into place and there were no reflective surfaces around. She tried to move her lips but found that she couldn't. She felt like something was constricting her face, and there was definitely something hard and uncomfortable filling her mouth. She could hardly swallow.

Her mind raced. What exactly had happened? She remembered seeing pieces of steel and leather hovering above her face, then she had closed her eyes to try to find a promise to hold onto. But she did not remember having anything put in her mouth. She had no idea whether her spirit had

been transported out of her body for a time, or if perhaps the sulfuric fumes had given her mind a temporary leave of absence.

Whatever the ruse, it had worked, and she now stumbled along behind her captors. The rich-and-famous swing was completely gone this time. Her left ankle was causing her serious pain, and she found herself limping slightly under the strain. There was also a muscle that ran all the way down the right side of her back that she had never known existed, but which had apparently been forced out of hibernation by her rude jolt out of the metal torture chair.

Your life will glorify My name. Again and again the words echoed in her mind, as she lumbered on, struggling for every blood-soaked step and gritting her teeth as hard as she could. She was determined not to ask for any human help or sympathy. Whatever it was they were going to dish out to her, she could take it. After another grueling half-hour walk back the way they'd come, she could not contain a sigh of relief to finally be approaching the door to the outside.

She followed the guards through the main hallway, but as she neared the glass doors she stopped suddenly. It only took her one look in the glass to realize why every person that she had met so far had gone scurrying timidly in the opposite direction. That horrifying figure encased in a face-tight leather mask that stared mockingly back in the glass ... was her.

She took a step closer, trying to better examine the miracle of craftsmanship that was encasing her face. Whatever it was—some kind of leatherized man-in-the-iron-mask wannabe—it was solid, and it wasn't going anywhere. Two forlorn holes left her eyes barely visible, and another one her nose. Her mouth, however, was completely sealed in. Already

her lips felt dry and chapped.

The moment of self-analysis was over. Her guards had noticed her halt in progress, and a quick jab with a rifle butt got her on the move again. Alana was glad to see a police transport van with its engine running in the no-park zone directly at the bottom of the steps. The doors swung open and she wearily climbed in, where she collapsed on the hard floor. Exhausted in both body and soul, she closed her eyes and a deep, blessed sleep overtook her.



Alana knew nothing for the next three hours. The fear, tension and pain had all taken their toll, and had propelled her into a semi-comatose state. As the vehicle came to a halt, the guards found she could not be roused and so she was simply carried along between them and duly delivered to her destination.

She slowly began to come to, in part due to the loud, incessant chatter she heard around her, in part from the strong gnawing she felt in the pit of her stomach, and mostly from the heavy stench that enveloped her nostrils.

Suddenly fully alert, she scrambled up to a sitting position as best she could. The stench rose with her, and she looked with disgust at the puddle of excrement she had been lying face down in. She guessed that whatever filth she had been tossed into had also absorbed its way into her headgear. At the very best it would help keep predators away, she hoped.

The thought of predators brought Alana's eyes up again, and she saw that everyone was looking at her. It was a fairly large cell that she had been thrown into, and seemed to be a holding cell—whose current inhabitants had obviously not thought much of keeping up its previously polished décor. There was an assortment of women, in about every

imaginable shape and size, all as disheveled as the room they occupied. Most of them seemed scarcely recognizable as humans under their outer layer of filth.

Alana shuddered to think of their impression of her.

"Hey, leather face," taunted a tall woman with stick-thin legs and long, scraggly hair. "Whatcha got to say for yourself? Where you from?"

"She can't talk, Sandra," retorted another. "Can't you see? There's no mouth hole on her mask."

"That's just the weirdest thing I've ever seen!" said a third.

Four or five women were sidling in closer, apparently a little leery of approaching too quickly, not being sure of what the newcomer was capable of. Then the tall woman sprang around behind Alana and crooked an arm around her neck, pinning her limp and still-shackled arms with the other.

The other women seized their moment and moved in closer, buzzing around Alana and inspecting her from head to toe.

"I'll be damned if I've ever seen such a contraption. I wonder what she's in for. Must be some sort of cannibal."

The others snickered.

"Why the hell did they leave her legs shackled? There's no way we can get those jeans off now. They look like they're about my size too."

Just then there was a commotion at the door. Sandra let go of Alana's neck, and Alana slumped back onto the floor. The front grate swung open and a huge, hulking woman was thrown several feet into the center of the room. She landed with a loud thump and cursed loudly at the guard who had prompted the skid.

"Great, Jackass is back," said Sandra sar-

castically.

“Hey, Jackie, how did it go?” asked another.

The huge woman shrugged. “You know,” she said. “Routine. I did get some juicy new info though. Overheard some guards talking about the new-comer. That it over there?”

They all looked over at the pitiful heap that was Alana, and Sandra nodded. “Pretty damn lifeless. Bleeding from two or three places. No mouth opening. She’ll be dead in 48, I’d say.”

“I don’t know about that,” Jackie said, stretching her great frame out along the filthy floor and putting her hands up behind her head. “Apparently they want to keep her alive.”

Everyone burst out into uproarious laughter upon hearing that.

“Oh, hell!” said one woman. “They couldn’t have fooled us better. So what’s their great strategy?”

“Dunno for sure. They were just saying how she was some sort of bait for rebels. The mask stays on, apparently. They don’t want her talking is my guess. Maybe she knows some dirt they don’t want spread. But apparently they think she’s got some friends that are out to rescue her. Except they’re planning a big sting to counter them and hope to catch ’em all.”

The women started to curse loudly. “And we get caught in the crossfire, I’ll bet,” Sandra said. “I say let’s kill her now. Nix the threat and foil their plans all in one.”

“No,” Jackie said firmly, standing and lumbering over to where Alana lay. “She’s mine. I’m staking official claim to her, and anyone who wants her has to fight me first.”

“Jackass,” Sandra snarled, “you can’t ‘claim’ a person. That only works for stuff.”

“Look at her,” Jackie retorted. “Right now, she’s ‘stuff.’ And she’s mine.”

No one said anything. Sandra was the most outspoken of the bunch, and the only one who ever dared to call Jackie by her notorious nickname. If Sandra was backing down—and she was the only one who would have had any chance to lead an uprising against the bigger woman—everyone else was content with things as they were.

And so Alana found herself being dragged like a bag of dog food further back into the cell, where an outermost corner had been designated as Jackie's kingdom. Apparently, Jackie had done more than her fair share of 'claiming,' for she had no small palace accumulated in her little domain. Some sort of dark brown sheet or towel had been draped to form a tent-like boundary, and inside was a thin mattress and an assortment of other items that Alana didn't have the strength to look around at. Jackie picked Alana up and dropped her on the mattress, then took some sort of cloth and wiped off the surface of her mask.

"There, girl," she said, and there was a touch of tenderness in her voice. "You'll be okay with me. You take a little sleep now. We'll talk more later."



Alana slept through the evening meal, and woke up in the middle of the night ravenously hungry. She chewed at the heavy object in her mouth, which she had by now identified as some sort of leather thong, and wondered if she was supposed to starve to death.

I thought they were going to keep me alive, she mused. So how can I stay alive if I'm starving? It all didn't seem to make much sense, but then her brain was so woolly at the moment that she doubted if a preschool primer would have made sense. She closed her eyes and slept again.

She was awakened by the sound of Jackie's voice echoing across from the far side of the room. "What

about the girl with the mask on? What's she get to eat?"

"Where is she?" the guard asked suspiciously.

"I'll get the prisoner, you bring her food," Jackie ordered.

The guard snapped something and slammed the gate shut.

Moments later, Jackie appeared in the door of the tent. "Up and shine, girl," she whispered cheerfully. Apparently the happy voice was for use in private places only. "I think we're going to be getting your mask off—for a little bit anyway. Guard's gone to get you some chow. These morons just need someone to tell 'em what to do."

She reached over and helped Alana to her feet, but as soon as she let go, Alana stumbled again and fell to the ground.

"I can't help you, you know," Jackie said. "It wouldn't look right. Gotta keep up the image. You just crawl on over. They'll fix you with your meal."

Alana tried to nod but her head felt too heavy. Instead, she concentrated all her efforts on clearing the huge floor area. She got to the grate at the same time the guard did on the other side. There were two white-clad orderlies behind him. Alana was too confused to understand what was happening. The first orderly bent over and pulled Alana's sleeve up and turned her arm out, tying a tourniquet roughly below her elbow. He swabbed the area with a moist cotton ball, then backed away. The second orderly approached with an abnormally long syringe.

In an instant, Jackie came bounding across the room. "Hey!" she yelled. "What are you doing?"

"Stand back, prisoner!" the guard ordered, aiming his gun at Jackie's head.

"Easy, man, I'm not doing nothing!" Jackie said, throwing her hands up. "But what are you doing to the kid? I thought you were gonna feed her."

"You don't have to tell her anything," the guard told the orderly, who had paused, syringe in hand.

"Go ahead," said the other. "We're gonna have to do this every day. They might as well know, or we won't get any peace."

"This is her food," the orderly sneered. "That mask is on for good. If she wants any nourishment at all, this is how she's getting it."

That statement stunned the room to silence, and the orderly took the chance to finish the injection, and the three cleared out of the room. Jackie walked grimly up to where Alana lay, picked her up, and carried her back to the tent.



Alana awoke a few hours later and sat bolt upright. She felt better than she had felt in a long time. She looked around herself, then she lifted her hands. They were free. She reached up gingerly to touch her face ... it was clear! Her heart lurched with excitement, but only for a moment. Then reality sank in.

"This is a dream, isn't it?" she shouted. "Some twisted dream?"

The Voice sounded so close to her that she nearly jumped. "It is a dream, but it's not twisted. It's the closest thing you have to sanity right now."

Alana turned. "It's You," she said, lowering her head a little. "I've missed You."

"I know. Even though you don't always show it, I know."

"So why am I here? Am I dead again?"

"No, but I have something very important to tell you. You remember that time—it seems like so long ago, but for Me it is like yesterday—when you first came Here?"

Alana nodded. She felt the pictures rushing through her mind as though she were experiencing it all over again.

“It was not your time to come Home then, and I told you that there was a special reason for which I was sending you back. Do you remember?”

Alana nodded again.

“The reason has come and the time is now. There is a great deal for you to do, and you are the only one who can do it.”

“Why me? And what could I possibly do?—I’m wrapped up like some electrocuted mummy! I can’t even say one word.”

“All is unfolding according to My perfect plan. You don’t have to do a thing. You just need to be, to wait, to trust. Use the iron will that I have given you to survive. That is your commission.”

Alana grinned. “It’s gonna be that bad, huh?”

“You are tough in body as well as in spirit. I need a special vessel for this job—someone who can take a lot of beating, and still come out standing.”

“That’s me,” Alana said wryly, then quickly added, “always at Your service.” A bit overcome at how free she felt with her words, she knelt down and placed her head on His knee. It would have been uncharacteristic for her normally, but in this unearthly setting it felt perfectly natural, even expected.

He placed his strong hands on her head and stroked her hair softly. “Everything will work out perfectly,” He said. “Just hold on. It won’t be too much to bear.”

BEFORE THE RAMPAGE

“I think the main task at hand is figuring out what to do with this great stash of tools,” Kim said. “Wasn’t that the whole purpose of finding this place so we could ‘open the storehouses’?”

Stuart nodded. It was strange having such a small team again, with just Kim and him, Julian, Sheba and the kids. It felt like part of their body was missing. They had grown tremendously close to one another through the battles they had fought. Though they had prayed earnestly for each missing member at any opportunity they had, still, being apart was taking some getting used to. Consequently, they were pouring their focus into the task at hand with increased determination; thus the animated early-morning discussion.

“I just don’t see any way that we could get out something in this volume without doing the whole ‘lamb to the slaughter’ thing,” Julian said. Then he chuckled at Sheba’s blank stare. “Funny how much you pick up being around these loons without even realizing it,” he added. “It’s a thing from the Bible. Don’t know what it was originally meant for, but it just sort of fit my sentence.”

Sheba nodded in understanding. Then she wrinkled up her brows and tucked her hair behind

her ear thoughtfully. "It's funny," she said, and gave a little laugh.

"What?" Stuart asked.

"I just keep thinking of stuff falling from the sky," she said. "Heaps and heaps of stuff, falling from the sky. It's actually a dream I've had—oh, I couldn't count the number of times. Used to give me such a thrill every time I'd wake up with it."

"From the sky?" Julian echoed, looking at Sheba.

"That would be a feat," Stuart added. Then he smiled slightly, "Funny ... I seem to remember Alana having a similar vision—what was it she was saying we should do? Rent a helicopter and lambast the city with 'em?"

Sheba blushed. "Not that I expected us to do that, of course. I don't even know what it is that we're dropping ... that is, passing out. It's just something that used to come to me all the time. Kind of silly I guess."

Kim looked thoughtful. "I don't know," she said, "but as far as getting to see the stuff ... there's no time like the present. Why don't I give you a rundown on it?"

"Good idea," Stuart said. "Julian and I can pray about options, while you show her the troves."

Kim stood up and started across the room, making somewhat slow progress on account of the koala embrace that her right shin was receiving from Maya. Dylan had taken up permanent residence at Sheba's side, and followed her around more reliably than her own shadow. And so the four of them moved down the hallway and into the other room.

Sheba gasped as they entered the room. "Amazing!" she breathed in awe. "What is all this stuff? Pamphlets from your group?"

"You could say that," Kim said, her chest swelling with pride. "It's a good thirty-plus years of work—

no small task and no small output, in my opinion. We've got it all!—Books, videos, DVDs, posters ... yes, even pamphlets. Reams of 'em! When the whole one-world thing got off the ground the demand for this stuff went way down as far as our distributors were concerned. I'm sure you can imagine. Doesn't really run with the whole 'low profile' pack. But then last week we got a message that we've been chosen to liquidate these stocks—so here we are! That's our big assignment."

"That is just so unreal," Sheba said, picking up a book. "Can I read some of these? I love to read."

"Sure," Kim said. "You just read as much as you want. Looks like the kids already have some viewing matter going too, so you can just take your pick."

Sheba smiled, then she looked up at Kim, her eyes wet with tears. "Thank you," she said.

"What for?" Kim asked quickly.

"Thanks for just being natural. I've been so sick of the whole hog-worship deal. For the past three or four years I've had people fawning over me like an airborne disease. I guess it was a thrill at first, but after a while I'd have done anything to just be me again. Being with you guys I feel like I've found myself at last. You treat me just like I was anyone else."

"Everybody's special in some way," Kim said, not quite sure how to respond to the glowing praise. "We're sure happy to have you."

"Me more," Sheba said. "And thanks for that prayer too—the other night, that you prayed with me? You can't believe how different I feel. It's almost like when my registration implant was deactivated or something." She laughed, then coughed a little.

"You could feel your implant?" Kim asked curiously.

Sheba nodded. "I guess not everyone can, but I felt different from the moment it was put in. It was

horrible—like having a termite in my soul. I felt like I was watched night and day. But not anymore.” She coughed again.

Kim reached out and touched her shoulder. “Sheba, are you all right? Is there something that you haven’t told us about your health?”

Sheba shook her head quickly, but turned her head away.

Kim pulled her gently back around, and Sheba looked up full into her face—two lost, frightened eyes staring desperately at her.

“It’s not just the flu, is it?” Kim asked. She noticed the little traces of blood on her hands where she had coughed, and quickly dug in her pocket for a tissue to give her.

“Nobody knows what it is,” Sheba said. “But it doesn’t bother me much. Please, don’t tell the others.”

“Why? We don’t usually keep secrets from each other.”

Sheba shrugged. “I’d feel better if you didn’t.”

“Listen, we can pray for you. You have no idea the kind of stuff people in our group have gotten healed from.”

“Really?” Sheba asked.

Kim nodded, then something suddenly caught her eye. “Here,” she said, picking up a book. “This one is terrific about that. It’s one astounding story. I think you’ll relate to it particularly.”

Sheba looked at the title: *The Gift of Wings*. “I love the cover,” she said, then slipped down on the floor and turned the page. After a minute or two of standing around, Kim figured she had outlasted her usefulness and slipped quietly out of the room to join the others.

She found them in the room with their heads bowed and their eyes shut, sitting in complete silence. As she walked in, they each lifted their head

in turn. "Did I miss it?" she asked.

"Sort of, I guess," Stuart said, but he sounded puzzled.

"What happened?"

"We didn't get anything at all about the passing out stuff," Julian said. "Not a word."

"Yes, we did," Stuart said. "Didn't you get something about waiting?"

"Yeah well, that doesn't count," Julian said. "That was me. I'm no prophet."

"The Lord uses what He has," Kim said teasingly. "So we're supposed to wait?"

"It was pretty vague," Stuart admitted. "But I didn't get anything more about it, so I guess that seals it up for now. He must have some other plan for it."

"So what is the plan?" Kim asked.

"Something about going to a hospital," Julian said.

"We're going on a rampage," Stuart said, rubbing his hands together. "A rampage of mercy, He called it."

"In a hospital?" Kim asked.

"Yeah, one specific one. You got the paper, Ju?"

Julian pushed it over. "I know the place," he said. "Actually, I have some ideas for getting us inside, too."

"Excellent," Kim said. "Computer ideas?"

"Well," Julian hesitated, "sort of. I mean, yes, but the bad news is I'll need Natalie's help. She'd have to get us technical readouts of the place. They're in our communal storage files, but I can't access them from here. Then we could bypass the hospital's security systems and do some kind of a nighttime break-in."

Kim sat down on the floor. "I really dropped my pencil here," she said, "but what *exactly* are we going to do in the hospital?"

"I don't know," Stuart said. "He just said to go there and do our rampage thing—tell them about the Lord, maybe heal some ... give out posters and tracts. I don't know. Maybe that's how we're supposed to use the tools."

"We couldn't carry a tenth of them by hand like that," Kim said.

"Well, we can use what we can, I guess. Better than leaving 'em here."

Kim nodded, then looked at Julian. "So you can get that stuff from Natalie Mitchell?"

Julian scrunched up his face. The thought of merely communicating with what he considered a toddler authority figure, much less begging for favors, was loathsome to him. The others waited while he hacked the problem out in his mind. At last he surfaced, slightly nauseous but still alive and kicking. "All right," he said. "I'll go write her now." He sidled off, muttering under his breath, "Get the dirt off my hands as quickly as I can..."

Kim came over and sat on Stuart's lap, wrapping her arms around him with a sigh. "Seems like there's not much time to be alone together these days," she said, kissing his forehead.

"Just makes the moments all the sweeter," he said with a laugh.

"It's hard to know where to start getting ready for this big shebang," she said.

"Look, you've been with the kids for a while. Why don't you take some time off, get retanked while we do the prep work? You'll need it."

Kim opened her mouth to protest but then stopped. "Actually, I think I will," she said. "I have the feeling that with what's coming up, I'll be glad I did."

Stuart nodded and kissed her tenderly, then she jumped up to grab the mailings. "I'll see you in an hour or so," she whispered, and slipped out into

the hallway.



Halfway around the world, an entirely different type of meeting was coming together. The room was not a large one, and it was filled with full-bearded men in robes. Kate squirmed in her seat, uncomfortable in the knowledge that she was the only female present. In an effort to make it easier on the elders to tolerate her presence—as she had insisted on coming along—Rashid, forward thinker that he was, had wrapped her up in a traditional male garb. Anyone looking closely at her face (though she had taken care to rub in a good quantity of homegrown mud for good measure) would have easily noted her female features. However, they were playing on the gamble that the moment Cal and Warner shared their news, everything else would fade very quickly into the background. Laden with the final stipulation of total silence, Kate kept to her place at Jay's side and watched the proceedings from the corner of her headdress.

The initial news had just been presented, and after the first moments of shocked silence, the room had erupted in a similar—though much higher-pressured—version of the lava flow they had experienced the night before around the fireplace.

They let the village fathers air their collective grievances to the rafters, then Rashid held up his hands for silence, and began to speak. "My friends," he said, "this news which has been delivered unto us is grievous indeed, but not entirely unexpected. We knew trouble would come, and that this dictator would never be content to let us defy him as we have. So we can thank God that He has seen fit to use these messengers to inform us of how this trouble will come. And yet we must look beyond their words. We must look even unto our God Who has kept us time and time again, and has now seen

fit to deliver this news unto us for a reason. And would not that reason be for us to prepare ourselves?"

"How could we hope to prepare ourselves against invisible spores?" one asked. "There is no protection from the wind that blows death."

"I do not have a solution," Rashid said, sitting down again. "But I know that as sure as our God lives, there must be one."

"Rashid speaks right," came the deep baritone voice of a wizened figure at the very end of the table. Former mayor of the central town in this enclave of resistance, Akim had retired from active service some thirty years before. He was now so old that many had lost count of his years. The combination of age, wisdom and snow-white hair had lent him a certain mystical air of authority, to where he had been established almost as a de facto leader of the elders. To all he was a mentor and a guiding mind. When Akim spoke, everyone listened.

"There is much that we can do," Akim now continued, as all around the table turned and gave him their rapt attention. "Is not ours the true God, and has He not done signs and wonders since the days of old?"

A murmur of assent swept through those gathered, though more in acknowledgement of the speaker than what he was saying.

"And to those of you in this room who pray to the name of Allah, I beg you at this time not to forget that it is the same God we all worship. Therefore our God Who has done these wonders will truly lead us in faith," Akim pronounced authoritatively. "It seems as though our great enemy grows more powerful every day. I say we should welcome any ally we can, whatever continent he comes from—especially if they come in the name of our God."

"Well spoken," Rashid said. "Well spoken! I think

that it may be that we have been brought together for a reason, that we might harness the power of God to confront this evil that now comes to us.”

Some of the others looked puzzled. “Do not speak in riddles, Rashid,” one said. “Tell us plainly what you mean. Our God is not a magician.”

“And neither are we,” Rashid said, smiling a little. “But as I have learned from my young friends here”—Rashid looked over at Jay and Ringo, but avoided Kate’s gaze—“it seems that our God can still speak secrets into the ears of His servants.”

“Of what servants do you speak? Are we not all His children?” Akim asked curiously. While this was a predominantly Christian enclave, there were many Christians whose faith was little more than nominal, and Akim was one of them. But there had been no mistaking that a revival of sorts had swept through Rashid’s town in the past weeks, and many in the two neighboring Christian towns had become increasingly interested. What exactly was going on they never could make out—too proud to actually ask, or even to appear remotely interested—but having now seen an avenue where scrutiny could be passed off for casual interest, Akim was anxious to seize it.

Rashid took a deep breath, then turned to Jay. “Perhaps it would be better spoken in the words of this young foreigner,” he said. “He does not speak enough of our tongue to make himself understood, but my own interpreter sits near him and will pronounce his words for us all.”

Akim nodded his consent.

It took a few moments for the translation to reach Jay, at which time he nodded and took a deep breath as he looked around at the silent room. All eyes were upon him. He didn’t feel nervous, just very much on the spot. He knew that the course of events of the next few days would likely hinge on

what he was about to say. And what that was he had no clue. *Please, Jesus, he prayed silently, if ever I needed that mouth and wisdom, now is it! Please pour it down, Lord! I need You, Jesus.* That was all he had time for, and that was all it took. As surely as though reading the scrolling text of a teleprompter, the words from Above began forming in Jay's mind.

And those words came out as follows: "My respected hosts, I come before you in all humility. I am honored to be accepted into your council, to have shared your friendship, to have broken bread with you and partaken of your joys and laughter and tears for these many weeks. This time for me has been both memorable and a time of great learning. The more I see of your people, the more I see there is to life. I should be happy if I could live the rest of my days here."

A murmur of approval swept through the room. Jay had started on a good foot, and all were eager for more.

"The servants of which Rashid spoke are men and women like yourselves—children of the one God, and those who have accepted His Son, Jesus, as their Savior, and through His Word have the wisdom to reject the impostor, this man of sin and son of perdition who would make himself as a god to all people.

"These are His children, His prophets to whom He reveals His secrets, if they will but open their ears to listen. As our Savior said, he that has ears to hear, let him hear.

"My two friends and I traveled as prisoners across the ocean on a cargo transport arranged for our death—part of the notorious minesweeping operation a month or more ago, and which the government finally abandoned as useless two or three weeks later. Even that we know was in part

due to your collective prayers. My two friends and I walked through that minefield, and all around us we saw other prisoners pass on into the next life—most dying slow and agonizing deaths. Yet through hours and days of walking, we ourselves were not harmed. Our Lord then provided us with water, shelter, and loosed our shackles for us.”

“There is no shelter in the great desert,” one man said suspiciously. “No shelter at all. There is likewise no water. Those minefields are still a great distance from our towns. There is no way that you can be speaking truth.”

Jay smiled and acknowledged the comment by spreading his hands out. “And yet this is our experience,” he said. “Even we did not know these facts. We only prayed for deliverance, and we took that which was gladly given us.”

“What message is there in this for us?” Akim said, rather impatiently. He had enjoyed the story, but was now growing restless, wondering where it was leading. “How will this help us fight the great power of the global government? And what does all this have to do with your ‘secrets’—and the frenzy that has been raised in your village?”

“It is quite simple,” Jay said, bowing his head respectfully. “I shared my experience with you as a testimony to the living wonders that we experience in serving and following our Lord. Many of Rashid’s town have begun to partake of these wonders—albeit on a smaller scale, for these have been peaceful times—in their everyday lives. From this, I believe, comes the frenzy of joy that you referred to. And it is this same power, this assurance that God is indeed our refuge and strength, that I wish for us to harness and turn against the one-world government.”

One of the men burst out into raucous laughter. “How do you expect to do that, Westerner?” he said,

loudly and angrily. "You want to *pray* in the face of the great plague?"

Rashid took the floor again. "Brethren," he said, "we have no practical defense against this great evil that we hear is to come. What should we do? Journey with our three cities into the desert? Run with haste to the sea, or to the high mountains, far off though they may be, that we may seek shelter there? And when there are too many of us, what shall the others do? When the enemy sees us running and sends his birds of prey to chase after us, what then? I say that this defense, ineffectual though it might seem to some, is our only hope and recourse."

A contemplative silence followed this plea, until Akim finally broke it with a grunt. "The words of the young man carry a ring of truth," he said. "He shall instruct us and we shall do as he says. It may be that the God we serve has chosen this method to provide our deliverance."

The room was clearly divided. No one dared lift his voice once Akim had pronounced judgment, but not all were as settled with the notion as he. A good third of the men in the room were visibly bristling and barely containing their anger.

Jay noticed this and looked at Rashid, who hinted at a shrug. There was nothing further that could be done. To believe and accept was the prerogative of each person.

"Proceed, then!" Akim said impatiently. "For time passes, and we are not saved."

Jay smiled at the choice of words, though Akim had clearly not meant them in the sense that Jay was familiar with. Nevertheless, something about them kindled an extra glow in his heart. All the many times in his life that he had felt small and insignificant, like nothing he did or ever would do really mattered ... in a moment they all flashed

before his eye and he couldn't help but smile.

Who would have ever thought? he mused. *All those times when I was washing dishes, bouncing babies, peeling potatoes and scrubbing trash cans—who would have known that the life or death of thousands would one day rest directly in my hands?*

It was a sobering thought, but though he was duly sobered, Jay was not one to shy away from a challenge—another skill honed in his earlier muck-scrubbing, bottom-wiping, mountain-peeling days—and so he now took a deep breath and laid into it with a relish.

Pulling up his sleeves slightly and tucking his robe in a little tighter around his waist, he leaned forward on the table and smiled directly at Akim. “All right then,” he began. “First, it is important that everybody knows what is coming, so they can prepare themselves in heart and spirit for anything God may ask of us to do....”



JULIAN

- 15 -

SHOW TIME

The preliminaries had gone astonishingly quickly. The others didn't really know what had transpired between Julian and Natalie in their cyber-power struggle, but the Julian that came walking sheepishly out of his room with several papers in hand seemed somehow different than the one who had gone in. He did have the shine of pride that belied a full victory for the goal he had set out towards, but he also had the tinge of humility that inferred that it had not come without cost in the place where it mattered most. Whatever Natalie had wangled out of him, he looked some notches lower in his own esteem than he had been that morning.

But all that was of little importance now, and the rest of the day was devoted exclusively to the timeless art of planning. Julian assured the others that the blueprints and access codes that he had gotten from his rebel group's communal vault of knowledge had come to him heavily encrypted—"only the best"—and he had proudly printed them out on his own personal built-in.

No famous historical generals who were setting out to war ever pored over plans and diagrams with more concentrated fervor and meticulous care than did these four. They stopped only every so often to

pop another DVD into Kim's laptop for the kids, or to inhale some token bit of nourishment. But by the time the day was over, everything was set. The plan had been soaked, scrubbed and rinsed, and was now ready to be hung out to dry. After that, it was show time.

Show time was appointed at 11 p.m. sharp, and at 10 all gathered together—sober faced and with their internal organs trembling like leaves—into the blanket room for a final prayer and benediction.

A great amount of prayer and supplication had gone into the question of the children. It seemed obvious that they should not be involved in what could only be termed as a suicide mission of sorts, and—loathe though Kim was at the thought of missing out on the action—she had volunteered to either stay back with them at the hideout, or find another suitable location nearby. Stuart had protested that Kim didn't need to miss out on the fun; he could take the kids himself. As they could not come to an amicable agreement, the matter had been brought before the High Council, where all had been made clearly plain: The children were to come along.

Kim had hesitated when that statement was made, but the echo of peace that she felt in her own heart told her that the Words that had been spoken were the truth. And so, here they were now.

The kids had been woken up from an extra long daytime sleepathon, and were now bright-eyed and ready to go. Kim held each of them by the hand, squeezing them so tightly that Maya broke out into a noisy protest.

When they sat down on the floor for their final prayer circle, Dylan and Maya joyfully traipsed into the center of the circle and sat down.

Kim felt a tear start to rise to the surface. She felt like Abraham on Mount Moriah, and the

children's joyful trust only added to the growing fear that suddenly threatened to overwhelm her soul.

"Oh, Jesus!" she gasped, as they all shut their eyes. "You know how weak I am. You know how I've shied away from involving the kids in the heat of the battle. I've just wanted to keep these little ones safe, to keep them far away from any sort of possible harm. That's been my goal in life, and I know it's not been wrong. They are the precious jewels that You've given us to care for and raise up to know and love You. I've sacrificed a lot for them and I would give anything for them now, do anything to see them safe.

"And yet now, You're asking me to do what I have often feared most—go out into the unknown *with them* alongside me. You know how much this kills me, Jesus, but You're asking it of me anyway. I will obey, Jesus, and I will do it gladly, because this is what You have asked of me. You are my Husband and Lover and I know You would not ask anything of me unless it was for a very good reason. I only ask for the strength and grace to see this through, and to follow Your plan no matter where it leads."

The others were silent, and Stuart reached out and wrapped his arm around Kim's shoulder. Dylan and Maya sat like pawns on a chessboard—motionless and seemingly expendable. Maya's eyes were wide and round, but Dylan's were shut as he focused all his attention on the task at hand.

Suddenly his little mouth flew open and a torrent of words flew out that clearly took him quite by surprise: "You are My children, and the mission that I call you to this day will not be a time of defeat. You are going into a battle, yes, but it will be a battle victorious, and you shall walk away with the shine of glory on your armor. Do not fear, do not be afraid, for I walk with you. These children are no farther

from My side than is My own shadow. I promise you that I will not let them out of My sight, or out of My care. As you have put them into My hands, I will care for them better than you ever could.”

Kim broke out into a fresh round of tears, and both Dylan and Maya scrambled over onto her lap and rocked slowly back and forth. The moment had passed, and peace had been reborn in her soul. She knew that everything would be under the Lord’s control.

Once the rest of the prayers were prayed and the final words of blessing and counsel received, it was time to venture forth. When three watches beeped 11 o’clock in unison, and then Sheba’s watch beeped 11 o’clock 25 seconds later, they all looked at one another and nodded.

There was a crackle of unspoken excitement tingling between them. For Stuart and Kim it was their first such daring mission together as a family, and that held a special thrill of meaning for them. For Julian it was just another demonstration of the awesome power that he had somehow become connected with, and which never failed to bring him to his knees with wonder.

And as for Sheba, she was reveling in everything, and feeding off the tangible spirituality like it was candy. She had not stopped reading, watching and listening for the entire day, and she felt like a veritable spiritual firecracker, just waiting for the right thing to light her fuse and make her explode. All the years of searching, of pent-up emotions, of protracted depression and heartfelt tears—all were resolved in this one great, final solution. She knew she had come home, and she felt like she had been here forever. She fit, perfectly. She had never been so happy in her life.



The targeted hospital was a mere thirty-five

minute walk from their street. When they arrived, they were breathless with excitement. They ducked into a little back alleyway to consolidate their plans.

“Are you sure this is going to work?” Kim asked, looking over Julian’s shoulder as he powered up his laptop.

Julian nodded confidently. “It’s practically foolproof,” he said. “Especially with the big Heaven-power we have on our side, right?”

“So first you’ll get us all into the building,” Stuart began. No matter how many times they had gone over the plan, reiterating it one last time before putting it into action seemed to be something they needed to do. It had a steeling effect on the nerves which they all sorely needed, walking as they were into the jaws of the enemy and expecting to not only live but prosper, and perhaps give life to others as well.

Julian nodded again. “You all gather by the back door. When you’re in place, signal me. I’ll simulate the auto-repair routine on the door’s lock. The security panel will deactivate and attempt to reset itself. You’ll have seven seconds to get in that door and close it again before the security system reactivates itself. Once you’re in, you know where to go. Then it’ll be about another ten minutes before I dummy-loop the first cameras along your route. After that, stick to the schedule, and pray for the best.”

“Okay then,” Sheba said, twitching anxiously. “Let’s do it! I can’t wait a second longer!”

The children started jumping up and down where they stood, so Kim seized the opportunity to say another good prayer with them, and included a stiff list of dos and don’ts, along with a tersely spoken warning of all that could happen if they did not obey and mind as they went.

The children nodded wisely, as though she was

standing there reciting her 1-2-3s when they were getting ready to learn calculus. Still, with all the wisdom of childhood they knew that mothers have certain needs, so they nodded and smiled and promised to be good.

And then they were off. Julian sandwiched himself in between two large dumpsters just in sight of the service door. At a nod from Stuart, there was a sudden hum and the numerical keypad beside the door went dark. At the same moment Stuart pried open the door and the five adventurers dove inside, letting it fall shut heavily behind them a full two seconds before the security lock reactivated itself with a loud click.

Continuing with their plan, they ran down the hall and opened the second door on the right, slipping into the refuge of the laundry room. There they sat, panting and wheezing, waiting for their next move. Stuart momentarily took off his heavy backpack that had been appropriated for their trip and packed with spiritual goodies.

The minutes ticked by, punctuated by total silence.

“Look!” Dylan whispered suddenly. “Let’s get dressed up!”

The others turned to look at the little five-year-old. His words sounded absurd in their grave situation, but they had long since learned not to discount any happening as trivial, no matter how tempted they were to do so. Another moment confirmed this. Dylan was pointing directly at a pile of freshly laundered hospital orderlies’ gowns.

“He has a point,” Sheba said slowly. “I don’t know how it would help us if we were going to get caught, but at least we could blend in, maybe...”

“Become one!” Kim giggled. She grabbed a handful of gowns off the shelf and passed them around to the others. Dylan and Maya insisted on

“dressing up” as well, so Kim rolled up the sleeves and buttoned the three top buttons, leaving the rest of the gown open and trailing behind them like they were hospital royalty.

There was now less than a minute left to go. They knew they had to wait precisely until their watches beeped—Stuart and Kim’s watches, that is, not Sheba’s—before they could emerge.

They did not care to ask how, but between Julian’s genius and the resources of his clan, he had been able to hack into the hospital’s closed circuit TV network. As long as they kept strictly to their timetable, Julian could remotely cover them all the way by feeding the computer system pre-recorded patches of the hospital’s empty hallways along the pre-planned route. This way, and relying on a little intercessory power to keep the attendants on duty from watching too closely, he hoped to be able to make everything seem perfectly normal, while the five proceeded with their rampage.

It was painstaking work, but Julian felt an anointing flow through his fingers that he had never felt before. This, truly, was hacking in its highest form. He loved the high it gave him, and he knew he would work his fingers to the bone to protect the safety of these friends that he had come to love so dearly.



“The first room is just up ahead,” Stuart whispered as they ventured into the hallway. “It’s rather amazing, isn’t it?”

“What?” Sheba asked.

“Well—look at the hallways. They’re deserted! I know it’s midnight, but usually there’s at least someone around. This place is quiet as a tomb.”

Kim smiled. “I guess that must mean we’re on the right track—the sign of Heaven going before us.”

They paused outside the first door, then Stuart

whispered. "12:05. We're all set."

They swung the door open quietly, and peered inside. Everything was dark. Sheba fiddled with the light switch, and tentatively turned it on. The room was empty.

They all looked at each other, disappointed.

"What a great start to our glorious mission!" Kim said, with a giggle. The others started laughing too, and soon they were coming apart at the seams. It felt good to just let loose and have it out with the elements like that.

When they were finished and the room was saturated with carbon dioxide, Stuart looked at his watch. "We've got two minutes before we have to be back in the hallway. Let's get ready."

It was agonizing to have to move so slowly when all they wanted was to be and rush and do. But they knew that everything depended on their meticulousness, so they waited, spending the extra moments in prayer, and checking in with the Boss to see that everything was still going according to plan. They approached the next door somewhat gingerly, but a loud cough from the other side told them right away that they would not face the same problem again.

At the appointed time, Stuart swung the door open, and they all burst inside. There were three patients in the room, and their eyes opened wide at the unusual midnight vision. One of them rubbed his eyes and automatically reached for the button to call the nurse. "What is this?" he muttered.

Sheba saw what was happening and dove to his side. "It's okay," she whispered. "Just a little cheering up time! It's all cleared."

The old man propped himself up on one elbow. Dylan and Maya stepped forward and stood in between the three beds. They immediately and quite spontaneously broke out into song: "I am the

resurrection and the life, he that believeth in Me though he were dead, yet shall he live, yet shall he live, and whosoever liveth and believeth in Me shall never, never die.”

Stuart and Kim looked at each other. Every detail of getting in and going through the building had been planned out, but for some strange reason they had never once discussed what they were going to do once they got inside. Perhaps they all knew instinctively that when the time came, they would know. And the time had come.

The children had started singing again, a song that sent shivers through the bodies of all present: “Silver and gold have I none, but such as I have give I thee. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk!”

There was a stunned silence as the three patients looked at the newcomers with incredulous stares.

“Are you angels?” the old woman on the right finally asked. “You’re all in white, you must be angels.”

“They’re not angels,” said the crotchety old man scornfully. “That one’s got a blemish on her chin.”

“Why are you here?” asked the third, a younger man.

“Rise up and walk,” Dylan repeated. “Jesus sent us here to heal you! He wants to live in your hearts and He wants you to go to Heaven!”

“And He wants you to be healed!” Maya squealed. She ran over to the old woman and grabbed her hand. “Get up!” she said, tugging gently on her.

The woman looked at Kim.

Kim quaked inwardly for only a moment, but she suddenly felt the well-known power rushing through her veins again. It was like a shot of adrenaline, and she knew exactly what it meant. “Listen to us,” she said loudly. “There is healing right now for

anyone who wants it. All you have to do is stand up right now and take Jesus, and He will restore your body to complete health. Raise your hands and take Him into your heart and He will give you healing of body and of spirit.”

The woman looked at the man in the other bed, and her eyes lit up with excitement. “I heard about Jesus once,” she whispered. “It sounded too good to be true. I didn’t believe it. But I’ll believe it now. I have glaucoma and severe arthritis. I’ve been in bed for the last eight months. I haven’t left this room in three months. But I believe!” She struggled to sit up.

Sheba rushed over and grabbed her other hand, as Maya still clung to her as well.

With their assistance, the old woman put one foot out of bed and then the other. Then they let go of her hands and the old woman slowly lifted them straight up towards the ceiling. “I believe!” she whispered reverently, standing in her flimsy hospital gown, her feet trembling on the icy floor. “Jesus, I believe!” There was a fraction of a second’s pause, and then tears started to gush down her face. “Oh, God! I believe, and I can feel it. I’m healed. By God, I’m HEALED!”

The other two patients stared incredulously at the woman, then suddenly the young man leaped out of bed and threw his hands up in the air. Everyone watched in astonishment as his skin slowly flushed from a sickly white to a healthy pink. His breathing, which had been short and labored, was suddenly calm and refreshed.

The third man quickly followed suit, but in the middle of the action, Stuart gently nudged the girls. “Let’s go!” he whispered. “We’ve got a schedule to keep.”

The old man and woman were now dancing the polka to a tune being pumped out by the younger

man, who had produced a harmonica from the bag under his bed. They hardly noticed when the five white-clad figures slipped out of their room and into the hallway, after leaving an array of brightly colored reading materials on the foot of their beds.

The next room they went to was a larger one, subdivided with thick white plastic curtains between each bed. They knew they didn't have long, and so they launched straight into their songs and speech with gusto, as the nightstand lamps flicked on and the curtains were rolled back one by one. Once again, a procession of thunderous roars were echoing in their ears as they made their way across the hallway to the next room.

"Do you realize," Sheba said tentatively, "that we're going to have the attendants up here in no time? Julian is only keeping the cameras blocked as long as we are in the room. Once we leave, they're going to see the hoopla and commotion. They'll be up in a flash."

"I was just thinking that," Stuart said. "I guess we'll have to play it by ear."

They slipped into the next room, put in their ten minutes and burst out again, overjoyed and tingling all over with the power of the Lord. In every room the same thing happened: Desperate souls and wounded bodies were more than eager to grasp ahold of the ultimate lifesaver, and joyously threw up their hands to embrace the One Who had been there for them all the time. And each one who did was marvelously healed.

As the small group burst out of the fourth room, they were startled to see the medium-sized hallway teeming with life. All the residents from the first rooms had apparently figured that there was no more purpose remaining in their quarters. They had never felt better in their lives, and they were eager to share the joy with any and all they could.

To this dozen or so people were added a handful of curious insomniacs from adjoining rooms, who were beginning to hear the fuss and wonder what on earth was going on.

Stuart, Kim, and Sheba surveyed the scene with mixed emotions.

“What do we do, Jesus?” Kim whispered. “The guards are going to be up here any minute. Is it safe to stay?”

No sooner were the words out of her lips than their attention turned to the elevator. The little arrival light lit up red and the welcome bell pinged out welcomingly. They held their breath and waited. And waited. And nothing happened. The doors did not open. Then they heard—ever so faintly below the noise of the hallway din—the sound of muffled shouts and banging on the doors.

“They’re stuck in the elevator!” Sheba gasped.

Kim broke into a huge grin. “We’ve got our time!” she said. “Let’s do it!”

Stuart nodded, and together the three started motioning to the people from the first four rooms, instructing them to go wake up all the patients on the floor and get them out into the hallway as quickly as they could. “If they can’t walk, put them in a chair and wheel them out! Bring them on a stretcher.—Just get them here!”

As the delegates fanned out to bring the remainder, Stuart lifted his hands to bring the growing crowd to silence. “My friends!” he called out. In the distance the sound of the emergency bell went off, apparently having been sounded by the team who were stuck in the elevator. He raised his voice a little. “We do not have much time,” he said. “But what you have seen and what some of you have heard from those among you is all true. There is healing for the body and there is salvation for the soul! We are here to give you a message today,

and that message is this: Jesus Christ will make you whole! He can heal your body and He can transform your soul. All you have to do is take Him!”

Kim pulled open Stuart’s bag and handed a stack of tracts to each of the children, then a pile of booklets and magazines to Sheba and herself. They sped through the crowd, putting the tools into the eager hands, as more and more people joined the crowd and Stuart kept talking. “Keep these safe, and hidden. Those who are in charge here will do anything to keep you from discovering the truth written and recorded on these pages and tapes.”

After just a few minutes Stuart called for those who wanted to receive Jesus and His healing of body and soul to raise their hands and ask Him. They watched with tears in their eyes as more than two thirds of those present took the challenge, and in the same instant burst out into spontaneous praise and testimonials. It was a tremendous moment.

Just then Stuart felt a sudden lurching in his stomach. He quickly turned back around, just as the stairwell door burst open. Two gun-toting guards and three wide-eyed nurses burst in on the scene, and their mouths dropped open.

“What is going on here?” bellowed one of the guards, pointing his gun at Stuart’s head. “Who are these people? What kind of an uprising is this?”

“Jesus Christ has made us whole,” a woman’s voice rang out. It was the same elderly woman who had first been healed. Her silver-white hair shone like a halo on her head and her eyes held a peace that stunned the onlookers.

“You will come with us at once,” the guard said belligerently, motioning to Stuart, Kim, and Sheba.

Stuart looked at the girls, wondering what they should do. But before they could move, the crowd began to churn, and a wall of people slowly formed around them, completely blocking them from the

guards.

"You need to let them go," the old woman said. "They have helped us. They have opened our eyes to the truth."

"You are delusional," one of the nurses said soothingly. "Whatever drug they have given you, it's giving you hallucinations. Now please step aside, and let us take them away peacefully."

"You won't get to them," said another man angrily. "Never!"

"You'll all be cast as traitors if you hide them! These people are condemned fugitives from the One-World Government!" the second guard shouted, recognizing Stuart from the ubiquitous wanted posters.

Then the head nurse motioned to the guards and said something to them in a low voice. With a nod, the small group retreated back down the stairwell.

The crowd immediately opened up again, as the newly healed believers looked to Stuart, Kim, and Sheba with questioning eyes.

"You've got to leave," the old woman said firmly. "They'll be back for you with more police and bigger guns, and even we won't be able to protect you then."

"What will you do?" Kim asked. "We can't just leave you!"

"We'll be all right," the woman said. "Jesus is with us now. He will take care of us."

Kim didn't look convinced.

Just then there was a shout on the far side of the room. "It's locked!" came a boy's voice. "The exit door is locked!"

A tizzle of nervousness swept through the room, as people fanned out to the various floor exits. Each one had been automatically locked and sealed. The stairwell door was the only manual locking one, and it had been firmly secured from the outside. The

elevator door was still jammed and the other three emergency exits were automatic, and had been blocked.

“Get out the windows!” someone offered. “There’s a fire escape ladder that goes down the wall of nearly every room.”

“We’re on the third floor,” said another. “There’s no quick way out of this place—not with that crowd I hear gathering down below us.” He turned to look Stuart full in the face. “You are trapped in here.”



KATE

- 16 -

DAY OF DESTRUCTION

It all started rather slowly, and so subtly that no one really knew when to consider that the greatly feared time had actually begun. At first it was the reports over the radio of the new nuclear-class aircraft carrier moving in for military exercises. Lone jet fighters had been seen streaking high overhead—though Cal and Warner assured the villagers that they were flying far too high to discharge any biological loads. There were reports of helicopter landings to the far north of the villages, in the direction of the sea.

The townspeople seemed to have responded remarkably well to the disclosure of their dire situation. When Rashid and the others presented the terse words of explanation to the huge gathering comprised of 90% of the area's male inhabitants, he was met with a stunned silence.

Perhaps feeling a little less in control of their fates than their leaders, this was also a people who had endured generations of hardship. Some might even have gone so far as to say that they had expected something of the sort from the day they had rebelled against the government. Whatever the reason, those for whom the revelation came as a complete shock were few and far between.

After Rashid, the microphone had been turned over to Jay, who looked soberly out at the crowd of thousands of men. Women and children would have multiplied this number many times over, but this was still by far the largest assembly he had ever faced on his own. Yet perfect peace filled his heart; he did not feel even a twinge of nervousness. Somehow it seemed to be just the next natural step of progression in his life. And he loved the feeling of being needed. He loved the desperation that he felt in his soul and how it forced him to live in the arms of his Savior every moment of the day. And he loved the feeling he now had of looking back on his life—which, admittedly, had looked an awful lot like a path of stumbling from one problem situation to another—to see how each hurdle, each obstacle, each problem that had been overcome was just another stepping stone to bring him to this place, where thousands upon thousands of lives were dependent on his faithfulness, clinging to his every word.

And so he had lifted his voice high across the crowd—although those who understood him were the few, and he had to pause after every line to wait for the interpreter to catch up. Even that gave him extra time to pray and ponder what his next words would be. And as he spoke, the people wept. These were tough men, hardened men, but they melted at Jay's words like wax in the heat of the sun.

Jay held nothing back. This was his moment when the entire population lent him their undivided attention, a time when all hearts were ripe and yearning, and he milked every drop of receptivity out of them.

He told them stories from the book of Acts, of the miraculous escapes of the apostles on several occasions, and of the multitudes of ways that God's

power had been manifested. He surprised himself by several times recalling his own life story and recent experiences, finding each time that what he had gone through was exactly the example that he needed to make his point. Once again he could do nothing but marvel and praise at the perfection of the Lord's path.

"When it comes right down to it," Jay exhorted, "this is our *only* hope. There is no place we can hide! There is nowhere we can run. We are sitting ducks. But there is salvation to be had, and I believe that God does not want us to die here. I believe that He intends to use this as a chance to show His mighty hand, and to turn this plague back on the heads of those who wished us ill."

A loud voice suddenly boomed from the crowd, "So what do we do?"

Jay smiled. "We must pray, brethren! Pray to the God of Heaven, that this plague will pass over us. We do not know when it will strike, but we can pray here and now together, and then we can each return to our homes and pray day and night, without stopping, until we know that the danger is passed."

And so they did. They prayed like none of them had ever prayed before. The entire crowd lay prostrate, not noticing that dirt caked their tear-stained faces and dust rose into their mouths as they made supplication to the God of Heaven. Yet all of them knew that it was not the position of their bodies that mattered. Their spirits were standing before the throne of God together, begging Him for mercy and deliverance.

After the tears had dried and the prayers had faded, Jay said that his door would be open day and night for anyone needing encouragement, prayer or strengthening, or if anyone had any questions. The meeting was over.



The next days were busy ones for Jay, Kate, and Cal. Ringo and Warner did their best to participate as well, but usually ended up being paired with one of the others as smiling, nodding sidekicks. A section of Rashid's factory was quickly converted into a makeshift meeting center, where they all stayed—with the ever-helpful Rashid family helping to care for them.

After the first exhausting day, Rashid developed a system whereby Kate and Ringo, Cal and Warner formed two teams to screen the visitors at the door, offering them tea and biscuits (of which a constant stream was made available to them by Mrs. Rashid), and finding out what they wanted to discuss. The simple matters or requests for prayer, they would attend to themselves, while the deeper questions or requests for counsel would be passed on to Jay, or a request would be made for the people return at a more opportune time, if Jay was too busy.

They were finally forced to curtail the "day or night" flow slightly, and ordained a nighttime cutoff of midnight and a morning start of 9 o'clock. This gave them enough time for sleep and retanking their own spiritual batteries. As for the rest of their daily necessities—eating, exercise, and so on—these were always done with a needy one by their side. Time was just too precious to waste by keeping it all to one's self.

Then came the day that the first squadron of enemy aircraft flew directly overhead. It seemed that everyone in this little cluster of towns had heard the roar of the engines and came outside of their houses to watch the terror scream past. Then it was gone, and all was silent.

People in the streets looked at each other, wondering what they were to gather from this. Was it only another reconnaissance mission? Or perhaps the deadly spores were even now trickling

down through the atmosphere—invisible, odorless and tasteless—waiting to spring their fatal symptoms upon the populace unawares?

Jay quickly put a sign on his door and summoned Rashid. Then the six of them prostrated themselves on the floor and begged for God's counsel and direction. And just as surely as ever, the answer came.

"It has begun," came the clear message, "but it is the beginning, and not the end."

There was more, much more, but that was all they needed to hear for the peace to begin flowing through their hearts. As Rashid put it later, "What is it about this connection to Heaven that has the power to render us impervious to any attack of man, any evil situation in the world? I could see the entire universe crumbling around me, and then I could hear the voice of God telling me, 'It is all right,' and I would be at peace."

There was no other aircraft after that, and at first things carried on as normal. Jay, Rashid, and the others did their best to prepare the people that the attack may well have already been launched, but most seemed to feel that things were still safe. Life went on.

Then came the first unexplained illness: A young boy began spitting blood in the middle of the night, and two women found a rash of unexplained sores on their lower legs. Word spread like wildfire, and Jay and the others were awakened at four a.m. by loud banging on the factory doors—and a mob of angry voices shouting their names.

They opened the door and peered out into the semi-darkness, and were aghast at what they saw. Whipped up in a frenzy of anger and fear, nearly all the inhabitants of the three small cities had gathered, holding torches high and shouting angrily.

Jay rubbed his eyes quickly, banishing all traces of sleep while praying for guidance. Then he lifted up his hands high in the air. The crowd slowly became silent, waiting for him to speak. Before he could begin, the people slowly stepped aside and made way for a burly man who was holding a limp figure in his arms. The man brought the little boy and laid him down on the ground in front of Jay's feet.

"This is my son," the man whispered, then lifted up his voice and shouted with all his might. "This is my only son! He is passing blood, and his face is like the desert sand in color. He has not been able to eat since yesterday."

"It is the plague," came a woman's voice behind him. "It is the plague from the skies that is upon us." Throwing aside modesty she lifted her skirt so that her legs were plainly seen, covered with huge, gaping sores.

Kate, standing behind Jay, winced at the sight of them. It was almost enough to make her own legs begin to hurt.

Jay reached down and picked up the boy. He stood up, holding him in his arms. Motioning his interpreter to come forward, he began to speak. "My brethren," he said, "it has come—just as we knew it would. Is not this that time for which we have been preparing, and expecting?"

The crowd remained silently belligerent.

"This is no secret that springs out on us from the rocks. This is that day for which we have been arming our souls. This is the day that we all do battle with the forces of evil!" Jay held the little boy tight, and felt his slight whimper and the tremor that swept through his feverish body. On sudden impulse he reached out his arms, holding the limp figure out straight in front of him. "This boy shall live!" he proclaimed loudly, shocking even himself

with his own directness. "Through our faith and through the power of the God of Heaven, this boy shall not die but shall live! Who believes this with me?"

There was silence. Then, slowly, the boy's father stepped forward and stood next to Jay. His head hung low, and his words were barely above a whisper. "I believe," he said. "If you say it, I will believe."

A ripple went through the crowd, and there was a moment of confusion as people talked together and struggled with their own souls about what to do. It was a trying moment. Finally, nearly half of the people who had gathered had moved forward to stand with Jay and the others. The remainder stood back a little ways, stepping backwards toward the shadows of the street.

"We shall leave at dawn," said a thin, homely man, apparently the self-appointed leader of this group of dissenters. "We will be gone from this cursed place."

"I'm afraid this will not help you much," Jay said tentatively. "We've all been exposed. The germs have touched all of us, and just leaving the city and heading out into the open desert is not going to save you. Only God can save us now."

"Why should I believe anything you say?—You or your God!" the man retorted.

Jay inclined his head. "I beg you," he said softly. "If you disagree with anything that I have said, do not put this to our Lord's account. We are believers in the same God—surely He is able to deliver. That is all you have to believe."

But the man turned away coldly and began walking away without another word. There were some among the departing crowd who hesitated, and another three or four slipped away to join those who were staying. The rest melted back into the

shadows towards their own homes.

“And so it begins,” Rashid murmured. “So begins the day of destruction.”



By dawn, everybody knew of somebody who had departed. No one knew exactly where they had headed, but a plethora of tire tracks led off into the open desert. A small group remained gathered outside the factory, where they waited for some sign, for some feather of hope that God was indeed with them, and had not forsaken them in this hour of their greatest trial.

The day ground on, and the young boy showed no improvement. The two women with the sores on their legs had been amongst those who had departed, but the same afternoon, more signs began to show themselves. The plague seemed to attack the strong and hardy first with sores, boils, and open wounds, while the young and the very old were plagued by a tightness in their chest and a deep cough which brought up blood. By the end of the day, not one person in the settlement could keep down food. Many were having a hard time keeping down their drink.

Jay, Kate, and the others were no exception.

“Man, what’s going on here?” Ringo croaked weakly from his mat in the corner of the room. “I thought God was on our side, man? So what’s He doing?”

“We’ve been exposed to biological weapons, Ringo,” Kate said. “What did you think was going to happen?”

Ringo tried to shrug, though it was uncomfortable to move at the moment. “Dunno, but the way Jay here told it, our Jesus was gonna just zap the spores before they landed, something like that.”

“I don’t know how it’s going to play out, Ringo,” Jay said, through his coughing. “But I do know the

end, and that is that we will not die from this. He's promised."

Jay went quiet then, and did not respond even when the others prodded him with further questions. His eyes were tightly shut and he seemed to be almost in a trance.

"What's up with the guru?" Ringo said in alarm, propping himself up with great effort on his elbows. "He's not dead, is he?"

"I don't think so," Kate said nervously. "Jay?"

Jay sat up suddenly, and broke out into a fit of coughing. Still he stood up and walked painstakingly over to the door, reaching for his jacket. "Come on!" he said. "Get up—we've got work to do."

"What's going on, man?" Warner said. "I'm an invalid! I'm not going anywhere."

"You stay here and you'll die," Jay said curtly. "We've got to tell everyone—everyone! We've got to get everyone to the main town square."

"That's an hour's drive!" Kate said. "You mean we've all got to go there?"

Jay turned around and reached out for Kate's shoulders, squeezing them tightly. "Kate, I need you to be strong. I need you to hold onto Jesus' strength. I know how you feel. We all feel that way. But I've heard the Lord's Words, and the only way we will survive this is if we fight all together. The Enemy's strength is in division, aloneness, separateness. We've got to get everyone to the town square.

"I'm going to Rashid's. We've got to mobilize every vehicle we can find to bring the people together, and spread the word to the outer settlements. I need you and Ringo to gather up everyone here and bring them with you—as fast as you can. Will you do that for me, Kate?"

Kate swallowed a lump in her throat, and nodded. Jay kissed her and limped out the door as fast as he could manage.



It was a strange sight, had anyone taken the time to really look at what was happening. The people gathered together in the town square where they had so often prayed and sang and praised the name of the Lord. Yet now these same happy, carefree, joy-filled people were sliding slowly towards the center, like lepers they shuffled along, moving first one foot and then the other. Some could not walk any more, and so they crawled along, dragging their bleeding limbs behind them and leaving a trail of pus along the dirt road. Babies tied firmly onto their weary mother's backs cried inconsolably, and young children moaned softly.

But they all moved forward, slowly but steadily, coming in from all directions on foot, on beast, or in vehicles, as the minutes turned to hours. At last they were all gathered, and Jay struggled to pull himself into an upright position. His head was pounding, his eyes were burning, and his extremities felt like they were alternating between burning and freezing. His body was wracked with uncontrollable shivers one minute and burning with fever the next. He could only guess at how the young children felt, and at the thought his eyes welled up with tears and he forced himself to stand.

He was the only one standing—one lone pillar of faith amongst a sea of infected, dying bodies. A terrible smell hung in the still, windless air. It was the smell of death, the grim reaper sending his scent before him and claiming the corpses as his own.

Jay forcibly shook himself. "No!" he shouted aloud suddenly, and even that cry did little to rouse the many delirious bodies that lay before him. "No!" he called again. "It is not His will that we should die like this! We are here all together, and now we need to fight! By the power of Heaven, we must fight. 'As they went, they were healed!' This is the action

of faith that must be rewarded!”

Jay looked wildly around himself. They needed a sign, a symbol. And then he saw it. Just behind where they were gathered was the old fountain that had stood in that place for generations—a landmark to the rich oasis this place had been in its days of glory. It was a rustic stone structure, with a small circular pool and an elaborate centerpiece. The bottom bed was covered in clinging moss and the water that trickled out of the top and dripped down into the outlying pool could only be called sparse, at best. The half-foot of water that filled the bottom of the fountain was stale and green. But it was exactly what Jay was looking for. It would be the illustration of faith.

Jay walked as best and as quickly as he could over to the fountain and pulled himself up on its outer rim. “This will be our healing fountain!” he proclaimed. “This is where Jesus will do the miracle! Come!” he called out. “Come and plunge into the water and be healed!” Again he called out the invitation, this time translating his words as best he could, to make sure that everyone understood.

Not a single person moved. Dragging their bodies to the square had been effort enough, and many were far beyond full control of their faculties.

Jay looked desperately around himself. “Kate!” he pleaded. “Come!”

Kate looked at Jay. She tried with all her might to move. “I can’t,” she whispered. “My body is not listening. I cannot move my hands or my legs. I’m sorry, Jay!”

Jay jumped down off the fountain and started back towards the crowd. Then there was a little movement off to the side. It was Cal, and he stood laboriously up. His face was half-covered in the familiar open wounds, and he staggered like an old

man in need of a crutch. He apparently could not speak but he half-walked, half-dragged himself across the courtyard, around the scattered bodies, and then clasped his hands firmly on the side of the fountain.

Every head was lifted, every eye turned and riveted upon Cal, who stepped laboriously over the rim.

Taking a deep breath, Cal let himself go and dropped to his knees in the shallow pool.

Jay held his breath, fighting back a horde of doubts that beat down upon his mind. Then he opened his mouth wide. "In the name of Jesus," he called aloud, "in the name of Jesus, we claim Your mighty power!"

The moment he spoke those words, the water flow at the top of the fountain suddenly started sputtering and gurgling. In another second, a torrent of water gushed out of the fountain's top, replacing the former trickle and covering Cal from head to toe. Cal struggled to his feet, dripping wet and still covered in sores, but moving more easily than he had been a moment before. He stood up to his full height and let the water flow down over him.

The people gasped and some of them screamed aloud as they literally watched the water washing away Cal's sores. Before their eyes the blood, pus and filth poured off his body until his face, arms and hands—every part of his body they could see—were as clear as the day he was born.

That was all it took. To a man, the people started scrambling to their feet. Jay clambered up on the side of the fountain again, and Cal climbed up on the other side to help him out.

"Slowly!" Jay called above the din. "Everyone will have a turn. Go slowly ... easily!"

One by one the desperate, dying people took their place under the mysterious healing flow, and the

onlookers never tired of watching the plague melt off of their bodies before their very eyes.

Suddenly a scream went up from the very back of the crowd. "My baby!" cried a woman in a piercing voice. "Oh God, my baby!"

The people stepped aside as Cal ran forward to assist the sobbing woman. She was holding in her arms the limp form of a young girl, not more than three years old.

"She's dead!" the woman shrieked. "She's ... she's not breathing anymore!"

Cal looked at Jay, who was steadying himself by the side of the fountain, not yet having passed through its healing flow. Jay nodded at Cal, who laid the girl's form over his shoulder and helped the mother with his other hand. Together they stepped up onto the side of the fountain. Just as they were about to step inside, Cal turned and grabbed Jay by the shoulders, pushing him under the fountain's waters instead, and laying the little girl in his arms.

Time stood still as Jay and the woman felt a peace and power they had never experienced before, bathing them in its rich, luxurious flow. Then they heard a small, quiet whimper. "Mama!"

The woman screamed again, but it was a scream of inexpressible joy, a gratitude that cannot make itself known with words. Mother and daughter stumbled out of the fountain together as the next people stepped in and took their turn.

The hours crawled by, and Jay quickly commissioned those who had been healed to take to the surrounding countryside. "Scour every home, every room," he ordered. "Look in every street, every shop. Find any ones who have not yet heard and bring them speedily! Tell them that there is healing to be had in Jesus."



SHEBA

TANKS AND LADDERS

The minutes passed like agonizing hours as the silent group of healed patients watched Stuart, Kim, and Sheba closely to see what they were planning on doing.

“Well, I guess we just hang tight till they get back, huh?” Sheba said nervously.

“Hey, haven’t I seen you somewhere before?” one of the men asked suddenly, coming up close and looking at her curiously.

“Oh, I don’t know...” Sheba faltered, hoping not to get into the whole Hollywood thing right then.

But someone else quickly jumped on the bandwagon. “Yeah, you look just like...”

“Oh my God! Are you...?”

The crowd moved in closer, and Stuart and Kim seized the chance to slip quietly into the outskirts. Kim was holding each of the kids by the hand, and the four now stepped into one of the unoccupied rooms. Stuart shut the door and Dylan and Maya ran over to the window.

“Hey, look at this!” Dylan crowed, prodding a respiration device that was set up with an oxygen tank. It lay where its owner had left it not long before, in a frenzy of the joy of deliverance.

“Yeah, I got one too!” Maya giggled, grabbing the

little plastic tube and tugging on it playfully.

“Leave those things, kids,” Kim said quickly. “They’re very delicate. Why don’t you look at the ventilation shaft—there on the floor, by the window. See if you can tell whether it’s hot or cold air coming out, and which way it’s blowing.”

The kids dove to the ground, and Stuart and Kim plopped down by the door, their backs up against the wall.

“What’s going on, Stu?” Kim asked, wearily resting her head on his shoulder. “You think we got way off somewhere? Are we supposed to be here?”

“I don’t know, Kim,” Stuart said, stroking her hair gently. “All I know is the instructions we got, and we followed those to the T. I know He must have something up His sleeve. I guess all we’ve gotta do is ask.”

Kim nodded, and the two closed their eyes and desperately scanned the heavens for orders and instructions. Their breath quickly became calmer, their pulses returned to normal and the deafening pounding of their hearts settled to a more comfortable level. Kim opened her eyes. “It’s gonna be all right,” she whispered.

Stuart nodded. “Just like it always is,” he added.

Kim sighed. “Still, I wish we could have some more details. For instance, what are we supposed to do now?”

Stuart shook his head. “I didn’t get a thing. I suppose that must mean we’re soon going to find out.”

All of a sudden Kim looked up, and screamed out loud. “Jesus!” she shrieked, jumping to her feet as fast as she could. She dashed across the room to where Dylan and Maya lay in a crumpled heap, sprawled over the ventilation shaft.

Stuart sized up the situation in an instant. “Something’s coming up the vent,” he said. He

dashed over and grabbed the oxygen mask closest to him, struggling it onto Kim's face as she was bending over the children and feeling their pulses.

"They're all right!" she exclaimed thankfully. "Oh, Jesus! They're okay." Suddenly she frowned. "What are you doing?"

"Must be sleeping gas," Stuart said, now reeling dizzily himself.

Kim gasped, and looked quickly around the room. She made a mad dash for the other mask and quickly grabbed it, fastening it onto Stuart's face. It was not a second too late. He took a few deep breaths, then his eyes opened, and he nodded. "Thanks," he said.

"We'd better get out there quick," Kim said. "They'll all be unconscious in a couple of minutes."

Kim tenderly settled the kids onto one of the beds while Stuart stumbled out into the hallway, dragging his portable oxygen device behind him. The hallway was still buzzing with activity, but he could see some people on the outskirts swaying slightly and rubbing their eyes.

Stuart found that he could not make himself heard very well through the mask, so he took a deep breath of air, pulled down his mask and shouted at the top of his voice. "SLEEPING GAS! Find oxygen!"

The room was instantly plunged into silence, turning to look at Stuart. He took another breath, then came back up for more instructions. "Quick, everybody!" he said. "How many of these do we have? Run as fast as you can, we need to get enough for us all."

"There's at least twenty-five of us here," someone said. "There's nowhere near that amount of them around."

"What makes you think they're spreading sleeping gas?" asked another. "Why would they do that?"

"Quickly," Stuart said again. "We don't have time!"

Sheba and some of the others were already dashing around to the rooms, but Stuart noticed with alarm that one or two people had already shifted into sitting positions.

"Come here!" he called. "Somebody, come help me with this. Sheba!"

Sheba came running over, and he shoved the respirator onto her face. Three or four more people gathered around him, and they started passing the device quickly around between them, each one taking a deep, gasping breath, then passing it on to the next person.

Kim likewise gathered a small crowd around herself, but in the midst of this, the couple exchanged despairing glances. Kim shook her head at Stuart. "This is not going to work," she whispered.

He did not hear her, but he was thinking the same thing. In a matter of minutes their party would in all likelihood be joined by some unwanted company.

More than a dozen of those who had not made it to the tanks were now sprawled out on the floor, unconscious. There were eight of them left now, fighting desperately for consciousness, praying for guidance, and wondering what they were supposed to do. And still no answer came. So they kept on with what they were doing.

Five minutes passed. Then ten. Just when Stuart was ready to call it quits and put the Lord on the spot—although he did not specifically feel the urge to do so, which was why he had not done so up till then—there was the noise of a commotion at the end of the hall.

"They're coming up!" Sheba gasped.

"What now?" one of the men asked. "What do we do?"

"Let's get back!" Stuart called out in a raised whisper, waving his hands at the other group. "We'll duck into the room. Maybe we can lie low till they're gone, or figure out what to do."

Sheba nodded. "At least it'll buy us a few more minutes," she gasped, then dove back for her turn on the respirator.

The last of them slipped inside the door just in time, and Kim shut it quietly behind them. They kept as close to the door as they could, trying to hear what was going on while still keeping up their contact with bottled consciousness. Mostly the noise in the hallway was a jumble of voices. There was raucous laughter and some stomping, and marching.

"Look, we've got to get out of here," Kim said suddenly. "Any minute now they're going to be checking the rooms. We *know* they're going to be checking the rooms."

Sheba looked over towards the window. "There's the fire escape—a few windows off to the side," she said.

Stuart put on his most doubtful look. "We already thought of that," he said. "It seems pretty dicey. There's a gathering crowd out there—what are the chances of us getting away that way? Besides, we'd have to crawl a pretty tight ledge before we reached it."

"I don't know, Stu," Kim said. "It might be our only hope."

"If we stay here we're skewered for sure," one of the men piped up. "I'd say it's worth a try."

Stuart and Kim locked eyes for a moment of Heavenly communication. "All right," Stuart said finally. "I think this is what He wants us to do."

The small group shuffled over towards the windows. Stuart picked up Dylan and Kim picked up Maya, each holding them over their shoulders

with one hand while keeping the other hand free for climbing and breathing.

"All right, let me lead the way here," said a tall man called Ray. He began fumbling with the window, turning the little manual crank. The window tilted about 30 degrees and then stopped.

"That's as far as it goes," said an old woman, Petunia. "I remember that. Yesterday I tried to open my window and that's as far as it went."

"You think we can make it out through that?" Ray asked.

Stuart looked doubtful. "I guess we're going to have to try," he said.

"We're going to need both hands free," Kim said thoughtfully, then suddenly called to Sheba. "Grab a sheet off that bed, will you?" Kim meanwhile stripped the mattress nearest her, and started to form it into a sling. "We're going to need both hands free for climbing," she explained again. "Look at that ledge out there."

Stuart looked out the window. Ray had just squeezed his way through the narrow opening—no small feat for a man his size. Watching him was reassuring to the others, however, for he was bigger than any of them except perhaps Stuart. So they all felt relatively at ease that escape was possible. Ray was now sidling along the narrow walkway that led to the ladder. So far the sizeable crowd that had gathered below had not seemed to notice their activity.

"Wait," Stuart said. "You can't walk along that ledge with a kid on your back. The weight will drag you right off the edge."

Kim paused, then sighed. "You're right," she said. "And we also wouldn't fit through the opening. Well, at least we can bring the sheets. We might need them later."

Petunia was now through the window.

"You go next, Stuart," Sheba said. "We can pass the kids along."

They had turned off the oxygen tanks by now, as it was easier to just keep their faces pressed to the window opening. The warm, refreshing breeze that swept through seemed custom-made for them, keeping their lungs pumped with fresh air and their faces perfumed with the scent of blooming flowers from across the street.

Stuart was having some trouble getting through the window, but at last he was nearly through. Then they were suddenly riveted by a loud voice that seemed to be right outside their door. "All right men, the main gang is missing—those troublemakers who started all this. They're not here. We're going to have to go room to room."

Greased by desperation, Stuart shot the rest of the way out of the window in a flash. Kim and Sheba together lifted Dylan up and passed him out.

"You'd better go next," Kim said to the other man. "I won't be able to hold Maya out there on the ledge. She hesitated, and looked him over thoroughly. "You will be able to, won't you?"

The middle-aged man looked serious. "Yes, ma'am, I will. I have two of my own, you know. I will guard her with my life."

Thus satisfied, they proceeded with their intent. A twelve-year-old girl was the next one to slip out, and only Kim and Sheba were left.

"You go next," Kim said.

Sheba hesitated. "There's something that doesn't feel right," she said. She coughed a little, and looked at Kim, puzzled. "This is not the way it's supposed to be."

At that very moment, the door swung open, and the two girls came face to face with two gun-toting soldiers, who seemed almost as surprised as the girls themselves.

Then the moment wore off and the first shouted. "Hey! We've got life forms! In here!"

"Get out!" Sheba hissed, turning to Kim. "Get out quick! I'll cover for you."

"No!" Kim said. "Come with me. We can make it."

"Are you kidding?" Sheba said. "They'll be on our tail in seconds."

"Come with me," Kim said. "I'm not leaving you."

Sheba paused. "All right then, but you climb out first."

Kim wondered whether to believe her, but finally reasoned that she had no choice. She slipped under the window frame as Sheba reached for the oxygen mask. Just as Kim slipped out of sight, three more soldiers came through the door. Kim could not help looking for just a moment longer. She winced as she saw the men point their guns at Sheba and start shouting. Sheba backed against the window, slamming it shut.

"No, Sheba!" Kim whispered, fighting back tears.

"Kim! Sheba!" came a raised whisper further down the piping. Kim forced herself to move quickly along towards the others.

Back inside the room, Sheba's heart was pounding. *Is this the reason I was called by You?* she thought, her mind racing wildly. She could see the soldiers' mouths moving, and she could see more and more of them flocking into the room, but she couldn't hear what they were saying. Her ears were filled with music, and with sweet, unearthly words like she had never heard before. She wondered why the men weren't coming any closer, but were drawing nearer in a sort of semi-circle, like a pack of dogs closing in on their prey.

Why aren't they shooting me? she wondered.

"*They want you alive,*" came the reply in her mind. It was that same Voice.

Is it You? she asked incredulously, breaking out

into a huge smile. *How I've longed to hear Your voice! How I've dreamed of this moment!*

"You must concentrate," the Voice came again. "This is a very important time. This is your mission. As you have chosen it, so you will be anointed for it. You must cover their escape."

Just tell me what to do. Sheba coughed again, and as she moved she noticed that the soldiers flinched and some moved backwards almost imperceptibly. The commander was shouting something out again, but Sheba could only hear the inner Voice in her mind.

Why are they afraid of me? she asked. *Why don't they attack me?*

"They are afraid of you because they do not know what you are capable of. The one-world government has had many bad experiences at the hand of My children."

Sheba's eyes grew round. *Do they have reason to be afraid?* she asked curiously.

"That is up to you..."

All of a sudden Sheba knew what she had to do. In that instant she snapped back into full contact with the world. The voices broke through their consciousness like a switch had suddenly flicked on.

"—not gonna say it again! Get down on the floor with your hands above your head!—Or we will shoot!"

Sheba looked the commander squarely in the eye, and then took one step towards him. "Why are you afraid of me?" she asked. "Is it me you are afraid of, or is it Jesus?"

The commander's eyes darkened. "Get down, girl, or we will shoot!"

"Do you know me?" Sheba asked, stopping suddenly and looking one of the soldiers in the eye. "Would you shoot a celebrity?" She played with the

top button on her shirt, then popped it open teasingly.

“What is she talking about?” the commander asked gruffly.

“It looks like ... it looks like ...” one of the soldiers nearby was struggling with the words he couldn’t quite get out. “She looks a helluva lot like Sheba.”

“That’s me!” Sheba said, momentarily removing the oxygen mask she held with her hand, and flinging her arms out wide. “At your service. So what can I do for you?”

“Were you with those anti-government resistors?” the commander asked suspiciously, for the first time feeling a twinge of uncertainty.

“Of course I was,” Sheba said, replacing the mask. “You know that. That’s why you’re surrounding me like this. But I’m not going to let you by, you know. And I’m not going to lie down on the ground either, or put my hands above my head. I’ve got to hold this mask on, after all...”

The commander’s eyes flashed darkly, angry that he had been taken in by this crazed woman, whoever she said she was. “We will shoot you,” he said. “On the count of three.”

“If you shoot me,” Sheba said, and her voice was chillingly low, “you will sign your own death warrant.” She looked at the other dozen men that were crowded around her in the room. “If you value your lives, soldiers, you’ll get out of here right now. I have to warn you, then I’m not responsible for you anymore. Just remember—Jesus is the one true power in this world. Nothing can stop Him or His love!”

“That’s it!” the commander interrupted. “Three! Fire, I say! Fire!”

There was a momentary pause, and in that pause, Sheba suddenly started to cough. Her stomach was lurching and she felt uncontrollably

nauseous. She reached out her hand to steady herself against the wall, but the coughing still continued. The soldiers had taken their fingers off the trigger and were riveted, wondering what would happen. Perhaps she would die all on her own without them even having to shoot her. One or two of the soldiers nearest the door slipped quietly out, hoping their commander would not notice.

Still the coughs continued, and they just seemed to be getting stronger. This had happened before—some degenerative lung disease the doctors had not been able to diagnose or treat, and somehow Sheba knew she would not have to grapple with it much longer. She threw down the oxygen mask and took deep breaths. The gas seemed to have dissipated, but she could not regain control of her breathing. She looked at the inside of the mask, staring up at her from the floor. It was stained with splotches of blood.

The commander came back to his senses. "Shoot her, men! What are you waiting for?"

Sheba's body was suddenly jolted upright, and as she recoiled to cough again, the first gun went off. In that same moment, her mouth flew open and a blood-red torrent gushed out, with such power and force that it threw her backwards against the wall.

The separate barrages hit simultaneously. Seven bullets riddled Sheba's body and she fell lifeless to the ground. And the great volley of blood swept across the room, soaking every one of the men who remained gathered around her. It was an inhuman amount, for somehow it spilled onto the bodies of each of the men in that room, and they all shouted out with the horror of it.

As they began to rush wildly around the room, grasping for sheets or towels to wipe themselves off with, a loud Voice suddenly resonated through the

room. "The blood of My children will I require at your hands."

One of the men started screaming—an unearthly scream of desperate torment and pain.

"My face!" yelled another. "My face is burning up!"

"What is this stuff? Is it acid? Get it off of me!"

The men pushed and shoved one another to get out the door and into the hallway, screaming from the pain. The escape window lay all but forgotten, with Sheba's body lying peacefully below it. She had fulfilled her mission, though she had paid the ultimate price.



They were all there, clustered on the flimsy deck above the long ladder that would extend down to the ground. Stuart and Kim were each holding one of the children, who had by now revived and were looking around groggily. Then there was Petunia, Ray, Jac, and the twelve-year-old girl, who had not yet told the others her name. They all knew what must have become of Sheba by now, and not one eye was dry. Despite the gravity of their own situation, it had only seemed fitting to stop for a moment of prayer, to dedicate Sheba's soul to Heaven.

Then they returned their attention to the problem at hand: escape. They had somehow avoided being seen thus far, but the chance of that continuing for long was marginal at best. Their wire platform balanced against the side of the building was quite a ways down the street from the main crowds, who were flocked around the front of the hospital. But they were still in plain view, and once they began their downward climb, it seemed that it would only be a matter of time until they were detected.

"I guess there's nothing to do but give it a try,"

Stuart finally said. "If we can by some miracle make it down the ladder, we can make a dive for that huge clump of bushes there, and we can probably wait there till the commotion dies down."

The others nodded, and with some trepidation Ray began the downward journey. They followed him in single file, stopping occasionally to steal a glance at the buzzing crowd of onlookers, officials, and buzzing reporters. The cameras were panning all sides of the building, and it was with some surprise that mid-climb the escapees noticed that a wide lens with one brightly lit eye was shining directly at them. But the onlookers seemed unconcerned by their rapid escape. In fact, they did not even seem to be noticing.

"It's like they don't see us," Kim whispered.

"I've never seen the like," huffed Petunia, just barely able to make conversation above the effort being expended on her high-energy descent. "They're either one dense crowd or they all need glasses."

All of a sudden a loud cracking sound ripped through the air, and the ladder tipped precariously.

"There's too much weight on this thing!" Stuart called from the top. "Get off, fast!"

Ray jumped the last ten feet to the ground, and the others doubled their speed. It was hard to move quickly on the ladder that was now swaying and swinging gently back and forth along the wall. More than once their knuckles smashed into the side of the building and their thighs rammed into outlying window ledges. But still none of the crowd said a word. There were two or three cameras that now seemed to be pointed directly at them, but nobody seemed more than mildly interested. And even that interest did not last longer than two or three minutes.

By that time, the last of them had dived to safety

in the bushes. And upon that execution, the entire ladder crumpled off the wall and fell to the ground in a roar of twisted metal. It missed their clump of bushes by several yards, and they heaved a collective sigh of relief and bunched closer together for comfort. It was not clear what was going on, but whatever it was, the tide seemed to be turning in their favor. They had accomplished their mission and so far, they had lived to tell the tale.

THE REMNANT AND THE WRATH

The desert search parties were gone for the rest of the day, with small teams returning periodically from the surrounding area bringing in dying sufferers, who joyfully took their place under the healing flow. There were also the few who for some inexplicable reason still chose to doubt the source of the fountain's strange, magical healing power. Among these were several of the elders who had been in the room to hear Jay's original proclamation.

Jay, Kate, and Cal were conferring in a small open tent near the fountain when word came of a group of three large families who were holding out in a settlement on the outskirts of town.

"I just don't understand it," Jay said, shaking his head. "Why would you keep your whole family back, to their sure deaths, just because of pride or not wanting to yield to what you see as the ways of the west?"

The messenger shook his head dismally. "I am only the bearer of such tidings," he said humbly, "I know not the inner workings of the mind of such ones as they."

"I wonder if we should go try and talk to them," Cal offered.

"I was just thinking the same thing," Jay said, looking up in surprise. "I'll take that as a confirmation." He motioned to the man again, who had just turned to walk away. "How far is this place?"

"Maybe thirty minutes' drive—in the direction of your own town. It lies just on the fringe between the desert and the town. Between a cluster of palm trees. You cannot miss it—follow the smell."

Kate put her hand over her eyes. "I don't know if I want to go with you guys," she said, falteringly. "I've seen enough sights today. You'd think my stomach would have stopped churning for good, or that nothing would make me nauseous anymore. But somehow, the thought of going into a whole group of them again..."

"It's okay, Kate," Jay said. "Why don't you stay back here with Ringo and Warner?" He looked over to where the two sat in deep conversation, some feet away. "I wouldn't mind having a level head to balance those guys out, in case anything happens while we're gone."

Kate nodded thankfully.

After a short, desperate prayer, Cal and Jay confirmed their plans with Rashid and received his blessing, as well as his suggestion to bring their interpreter along to assist them with any language difficulties. Minutes later, the three jumped in Rashid's jeep and tore off along the sandy road.

Jay had by now gotten used to driving along this rugged type of terrain, but it was still a new experience for Cal, who noted every bump and jump along the way. But this road around the outskirts of the town was even rougher than the one Jay was used to. By the time the cluster of palm trees came into view, they were both glad to be off their wheeled torture machine and on firm ground again.

As soon as the dust settled around the car, Jay and Cal instinctively drew both hands up around

their faces.

“By God, the man was right!” Cal exclaimed in a muffled voice, through his fingers. “It smells like a baking party in hell!”

That was all they had time for, as they had reached the threshold of the first house. He knocked on the door. “Hello?” he called. “May we come in?”

“Who goes there?” came a hoarse voice from the inside.

“It is Jay,” Jay replied tentatively, cracking the door and peering inside. “My friends and I have come to see if you’re all right.”

“Go away!” the voice exploded, almost before the translation was completed, but it triggered a bout of coughing in its owner so frightful-sounding that Jay promptly opened the door the rest of the way and stepped inside. Cal and the interpreter were close behind him.

The room was filthy and unkempt, and the smell that had permeated the air so strongly outside the cluster of cottages was nearly overpowering indoors. A large man—apparently the owner of the gruff voice—was sprawled on the floor, his legs wide apart, his mouth agape, and looking much more dead than alive. His skin looked like one great big open wound, and his body was wracked with violent coughing fits every few seconds. Jay recognized him as Ankar, and recalled several unpleasant discussions they had held in times past.

In the corner of the room a thin woman’s frame lay half-draped across a small crib. There were no other people in the room. Jay rushed over to the man. “Please,” Jay begged, “please, let us help! All your friends and neighbors have been healed of this horrible pestilence! Their health has been returned in full. Do not cling to your principles so strongly that you seal your own sentence of death and that of your family. I beg you!”

Ankar shook his head ever so faintly, but when he spoke it was in a tone much softer than before. "Too late," he said. "Too late."

Jay looked helplessly around at the motionless woman, then up at Cal.

"No!" Cal said, kneeling down next to Jay. "It's not too late. Tell him, Jay! Tell him it's never too late."

"Just say that you believe, and all will be well with you," Jay said, holding Ankar's hand gently. "Accept Jesus' healing touch—that's all you need to do."

There was a strange crackling noise, which at first the three couldn't place, but they finally realized that the man on the floor was crying. "I ... believe," he said, his voice cracking. "Oh, God forgive me, I believe! Save me—my family!"

"Stand up," Jay said firmly, making his voice as soft as possible.

"I can't—"Ankar began, but Jay was already grabbing ahold of his arm—desperately looking for some healthy flesh to hold onto, so as not to put pressure on the open wounds that covered most of the man's body.

With some struggle, and supported by Jay and Cal on either side, Ankar finally dragged himself to his feet, and the three proceeded to make their way slowly to the door of the cottage. Cal kicked open the door and just as they reached the threshold, Jay and Cal let go of their grip.

Stumbling at first but gaining greater confidence as he walked, Ankar stumbled out into the morning sunshine. As he did, he looked down at his hands. "By Allah!" he exclaimed. "By Allah, look at these hands—look at these arms! I am clean! I am whole! By God!" He dropped to his knees in a torrent of weeping and praise, pouring out his heart to God in his native tongue.

Suddenly he stopped mid-flow, and jumped up, running wildly back into the house. "Anna!" he yelled. "My love—my little one! Is there hope for them too?"

Cal looked at Jay. They both rushed over to the woman. Cal quickly felt her pulse. It was still, and her flesh was cold. The small bundle in the crib was equally lifeless. Jay's eyes filled with tears as they met Ankar's.

"My God, what have I done?" he said, gasping in horror. "Have I killed my own wife, the light of my day?"

They were interrupted by the sound of a faint whimper from the other room, and Ankar jumped up. "But there is yet a ray of hope!" he exclaimed. "Come with me!"

Cal and Jay followed him into the adjoining room, where three young children—who all seemed to be between six and ten years old—lay on blankets on the floor.

"My children, my little ones," Ankar exclaimed, gathering them up into his arms. "There is hope—there is healing for you. Listen to the words that these men will tell you."

Jay suddenly looked back towards the door. "Cal," he said, "I'll have to leave you here—there are others who need the Lord's healing touch. Can you manage? I think I can go without an interpreter—I'll do my best with what I know."

Cal swallowed hard, but knew there was only one answer to give. "You bet," he said with a firm nod.

Jay dashed out the door.

And so Cal began to speak—haltingly at first, with trembling voice he told the well-known story of Jesus and His power to heal, and the very simple act that it was to grab ahold of that tremendous power, even in such a dire time as this.

By the time ten minutes had passed, Ankar was reunited with his three little ones, in full health. And though no amount of tears or remorse could bring back the lives of those he loved so dearly, still Ankar thanked God that he had regained the day, and another chance to give his life to this God Who had been so merciful in the face of his brazen scorn and denial.



The dwellers of the remaining houses in the area had not been so fortunate. Of the near twenty people who combined to fill the other two homes, Jay had found only two alive: a young mother, and her infant son, who by a miracle of Heaven had been spared where the men had perished.

“I don’t suppose there’s any hope of bringing the dead ones to the fountain, is there? Like that little girl came back to life—you think it could do the same for these?” Cal whispered grimly to Jay once they had met up again.

“It’s not the fountain that healed all those people, Cal,” Jay answered quietly. “It was their faith, manifested in their obedience in heeding the call and coming to it. Faith is something that can’t be reversed. You either take the step of faith or you don’t—and then you have to live with the consequences of your actions.”

The two grown survivors wept not a few tears upon the realization that what had happened to their families was partly on their account, and so the three decided to spend the remainder of the day helping them to bury their dead and to help them get on the path to restoring their lives.

By the time they had finished their arduous and unpleasant task, the sun was beginning to set on the horizon. Jay and Cal paused for a moment on the brink of the small oasis and looked out on the desert.

All of a sudden Cal scrunched his eyes a little. "Do you see something—way out there?" he asked.

Jay looked in the direction Cal's finger was pointing. Way off in the distance, a small cluster of camels could be seen. They seemed to be heading in their direction. The two watched for a few minutes, and as their eyes adjusted further, they could tell something was not right.

"I don't see any people with them," Jay said, an ominous dread sinking on him.

"Maybe they got the plague too," Cal said.

The three looked at each other, then dashed for the jeep, leaped inside and went careening across the desert.

It took nearly fifteen minutes before they were in clear sight of the eerie caravan, and another ten before they got right up to them. The camels, obviously weary and wounded, immediately stopped and lay down upon seeing the arrival of the vehicle.

The interpreter took one look at the weary beasts. "They've been walking for days, it looks like—haven't stopped for food or water."

"They look exhausted," Jay said. "I guess this disease attacks beasts as well as humans."

There were eight or nine camels in the little group, and many carried vestiges of articles that had apparently belonged to their former owners—whoever and wherever they now were. Several thick blankets were tossed over some of their backs. One camel had a large knapsack strapped to his hump. Another was pulling a makeshift sling-style sled behind him. The sled was empty and the sheet was now flapping in the wind, but on the white surface could clearly be seen a smattering of bloody marks that hinted at a less than happy fate of the one who had last occupied that space.

Cal dropped down in the sand. "What a dismal picture," he said.

Jay was looking back out at the horizon, and his eyes were teary. "Do you know who was with this train of camels?" he asked.

Cal looked up curiously. "No, of course not. Why, do you?"

"Yes," the interpreter said. "I recognize these blankets."

"You remember the team that split from the factory?" Jay said quietly. "We tried to warn them."

Cal lowered his eyes, unsure of what to say. They stood there for about ten minutes, quietly absorbing what had happened, and offering up a prayer for the souls of those who had passed on so needlessly. Then they gathered up the camels' reins, and Jay and the other man began to walk them back towards the oasis, while Cal drove the car slowly alongside.



Kate was becoming restless. What had happened to Jay and Cal? The sun was already setting and there had been no sign or word from them all day. Not that rapid communication was very common in these parts, but how long could it take to visit a small enclave of houses a half-hour drive away? More than once Kate had contemplated going after them herself to see what was going on, but she always fell back on her responsibility to continue comforting and encouraging those who had been recently healed, as well as being on hand for the few stragglers who were still in need of healing.

But now it had been over six hours since any newcomers had arrived, and Kate had a feeling that it was now too late for any who had not yet come for healing. The last woman who had dragged herself in had been in such poor shape that Kate had to try her very hardest not to doubt. Yet once again, the healing power of faith had worked its magic, and she had stepped out of the fountain fresher and younger than she had been in twenty years.

To be sure, taking Jay's place in the healing fountain had been a great leap of faith for Kate, and at first she had hesitated as to whether she could even do it properly. The first moment when the subjects, sick and wheezing, had taken her hand and stepped into the water, had been one of the most difficult of her life. She had tried to avoid saying or doing anything, hoping that things would just flow and happen all on their own. They hadn't.

After a few minutes of the three dripping people looking around at each other, somewhat bewildered, Ringo had shouted across the square, "Hey Kate, what's up? Cat got your tongue?"

He and Warner had laughed out loud, and Warner had shouted a somewhat encouraging comment. But that had been enough to prod Kate into action, as she realized that she was going to have to take that same step of faith as these people for whom the miracle was going to take place. Somehow, realizing that their fate rested as much in her faith as in theirs scared her into action. And the moment she took the plunge and began repeating the procedure as she remembered Jay doing it, there had been no stopping until the two had stepped out of the fountain, completely healed and praising God at the top of their voices.

Things had gone smoothly after that, but now it was getting dark and Kate was worried. Once again she paced back and forth in front of the fountain. Most of the people had returned to their homes by now, and the remainder seemed to be now heading off in that direction. As for Warner and Ringo, she had not seen them for several hours and had no idea what they were up to.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of an approaching vehicle. Kate's heart jumped. At last, Jay was back! But as the car approached, her face clouded over. It was only Ringo and Warner.

Then she looked a little closer. They both looked worried—no, worse. They looked terrified. And there were three others in the car with them, partially out of sight in the back seat.

The car screeched to a halt and the passengers jumped out. Now Kate could see that the people in the back were Rashid, another man that she did not recognize, and ... Akim.

Kate swallowed. "Jay!" she whined to herself. "Where are you when I need you? I don't know what's going on but I know it's gonna be bad. Oh, Jesus help me!"

By the time she finished her own form of intercession, the group was upon her. They all seemed bursting with news, but for a moment no one spoke.

"What's going on?" Kate asked.

Rashid looked at Akim, who nodded and cleared his throat. "Where is your friend?" Akim barked gruffly. "What is his name?—Jay? There is trouble. He must be found at once."

"Jay ... Jay went off early this morning to check on a group of people—" Kate stuttered and stammered, but her sentence was interrupted by the sound of another approaching vehicle.

They all turned their attention to the road. Cal and Jay could be clearly seen in the front, looking tired and very sunburned, but clearly glad to be back amongst friends. In a few minutes they were all gathered together, and the group moved over to the edge of the fountain, where those who could took a seating of sorts on the rough stone ledge.

"Jay," Rashid said, "we have bad news." He looked at Akim. Seniority apparently took preference in the delivering of news.

Akim looked seriously at Jay and Cal. "The government forces are approaching from the north," he said. "Even now they are drawing near. We have

seen with our own eyes the small troop of soldiers that drives towards us in tanks and armored cars. They are not more than a few hours away."

"They're coming to finish up the job, man," Warner said, unable to contain himself any longer. "They came to see how their little potion worked."

"But ... why are they sending troops from the north now?" Jay asked. "I thought they could only come from the east—that's why they had to do that whole mine-clearing thing at the border."

"Sometimes the politics of the desert are as shifting as its sands," Rashid said, shaking his head. "Perhaps it falls under the cover of one of the exercises that they have been speaking of. All we know is that they are approaching, on the main road into the city."

"I have heard it on the radio," Akim said grimly. "They are saying that a strange pestilence or plague that has mysteriously come upon our area, and thus the army's intervention is coming not as an invasive maneuver, but a mission of mercy—to see if we are all right, and to bring aid for our assistance."

"Tanks and armored cars, eh?" Warner said. "That kind of help I could do without."

Jay ran his hands through his close-cropped hair. "That's a lot to chew on," he said. "And you say they're right on us already?"

"Two hours at the most," Rashid said.

No one else said anything. There was nothing to say. To a man, the strange group of companions—the charismatic Westerners, with their strange ideas of electric Christianity; the stout desert-dweller with a strong history in faith; and the wizened old leader with a growing interest in Christianity—each together yet separate, in his own way petitioned the God of Heaven for guidance and direction. And slowly but clearly, a plan was

HEARTS OF STEEL

formed, a mission that would set the stage for the defeats that would reverberate within the very bowels of the one-world government from that day forward until its final collapse.

A TIME FOR COMFORT

The eight hideaways outside the hospital remained nearly motionless in their spot under the bushes all of the next day. It seemed there was no end to the media curiosity surrounding the event. From their distance they could make out some comings and goings at the main entrance, but only when the crowds parted. At midday a single, sheet-covered stretcher was wheeled out of the hospital, and loaded into a coroner's truck. There was no need to tell the fugitives who was in there. Kim buried her face in Stuart's chest and cried.

In the late afternoon, the crowd started to disperse, and by nightfall all seemed quiet again. Still, not till much later did they feel that it was safe to venture out again. Once things had settled down a bit and they felt free to hold hushed conversations, they had made good use of the time to check into what should be their plan for the future. Ray, Jac, and the twelve-year-old—who now introduced herself as Silvia—were anxious to return to their families. They understood the danger, but felt it imperative that they give the ones they loved most a chance to know the truth, and perhaps to escape together in search of a better life.

“I'm sure that God, Who we have only just learned

to love, will not forsake us,” Ray said. “And He will lead us to where He wants us to go from here.”

Petunia had no family that she cared to be in touch with, and eagerly asked if she might go along with Stuart and Kim. “I know I’m not as spry as I used to be,” she said. “I’m pushing 80, you know. But this healing has really given me a shot in the arm and I want to use my last bit of strength living for Jesus.”

“Live out my life in half the time...,” Dylan said thoughtfully, thinking of a favorite TK character of his who had used those words.

“Why, yes,” Petunia said, looking at the little boy with a smile. “But how did you know that?”

“When we get back home I’ll show you a story that I think you’ll like,” Dylan said. “You can read it to me.”

“There you go,” Petunia said. “I have a job already. These children look like they need a grandmother to take care of them.”

Stuart and Kim looked at each other, then smiled. “You’re more than welcome to come back with us,” Kim said, squeezing the old woman’s hand.

“Umm, on second thought,” Stuart interjected, “not to be intrusive or anything, but do you have a registration implant?”

“Actually, I don’t,” Petunia answered. “My senior’s identification card has worked well so far, and they’ve never pestered me about getting the implant, so I haven’t.”

“Well, so much the better, then,” Stuart said. “We’d be happy to have you with us.”

And so it was settled. When the clock struck midnight, the two groups quietly slipped out of the bushes, hugged each other quickly in the darkened street, and then headed off in separate directions. The three who were returning home would stick together as long as they could, and the others would

head directly back to their basement hideout.

As Stuart and the others quietly made their way back towards the road, they were startled by a sudden noise behind them. Stuart quickly jumped in front of Kim and the children. They could see a dark figure hunched over at the end of the road.

“Who goes there?” Stuart whispered in a raised whisper.

“Stuart?” came the reply, doubtful at first, then growing louder and quite exuberant. The voice started to run towards them, and in another moment Julian burst out of the shadows and they all started hugging at once. They soon discovered that Julian had spent the entire day hidden in the larger of the two dumpsters outside the back of the hospital, which he had slipped inside of when things had started to heat up for those inside the building.

“I tried to keep up your cover as long as I could,” he said, rather shamefacedly, “but once they were onto us, they started to run a trace and I had to unplug. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry, Julian,” Kim said, squeezing his hand warmly. “It all worked out—I’m sure the Lord planned it just perfectly. We have to trust that we were just following His path.”

Julian nodded, and shook his head. “Boy, all this time I thought you guys were all gone—fried in there! I’ve been nearly out of my mind with worry. Hey, where’s Sheba?”

“Sheba didn’t make it, Julian,” Stuart answered, as the reality of it again struck the group.

Julian turned pale.

“She gave her life,” Kim tried to explain, fighting back her tears, “...for me. I suppose she knew we couldn’t both make it ... she was with us till the end ... she gave her life to buy us time.”

"She's better off now," Stuart answered. "We all know that. I'm sure she's happier than she's ever been. We'll just have to hang on to that, and keep going."

Suddenly they all turned to look at Julian, who was standing rooted to the spot with a very odd look on his face. He didn't appear to have been following the conversation at all.

"What's wrong with him?" Petunia asked. "He looks as though he's seen a ghost."

"Julian?" Kim asked.

"I ... I thought I was dreaming," he answered hesitantly.

"What?" Stuart asked.

"It must have been right after you got out ... I turned around and there she was—Sheba. 'We did it!' she said, and she looked so happy—I've never seen her look so good, not in any of her movies. I thought you guys had gotten out. I asked where the rest of you were, and she said you were all fine, you were safe, and I'd be seeing you soon. It ... it was so real." Julian hesitated. "She sat down and we talked for quite awhile. She wasn't worried about us getting caught or anything. Then ... there was some kind of noise, and when I turned around, she was gone. She wasn't anywhere. I thought I must have been dreaming or something—that maybe I'd seen one too many of her movies." He gave a short laugh, then frowned again.

"It may have been more real than you think," Stuart answered.

"So it's true—she's ... gone?" Julian asked again.

Stuart nodded.

"What kind of things did you talk about?" Kim asked curiously.

"Well, I didn't get a lot of it. She was rambling on so fast much of the time, like she was real excited about it all. She said the seeds that you planted in

that clinic were going to go very far, that the people whose lives had been touched were going to be instrumental to our cause once they got out of that place. She said she never thought it could be so much fun to go into a hospital.

“Apparently she’d been to some before. She said she had some kind of lung disease or something, and that it was constantly getting worse, but the doctors still kept pestering her about tests and stuff. That’s why she started getting into these secret demonstrations, since she knew she didn’t have much longer to live anyway, and realized that she might as well die for something rather than nothing. And then she found us, and it was like she’d discovered her destiny, or something to that effect.

“But then she was talking about how she felt so much better, that she’d been cured, and something about how if only you could see her now, Kim, you wouldn’t worry about what happened....”

Kim choked back a sob.

“...That’s when I heard the noise, and figured I woke up, because after that she was gone, and there was no trace of her—or any of you, for that matter. And now you tell me she’s been dead this whole time.”

“Well, Julian,” Stuart answered, “I guess we’re all seeing that she’s more alive now than ever—and something tells me we haven’t heard the last from her!”

Julian looked curiously from Stuart to Kim. “This isn’t even surprising to you folks, is it?” he asked. “Visiting ghosts and spirits and stuff? I guess it’s all like these things you’ve been teaching me lately.”

“That’s right,” Kim said with a smile. “People we love have a way of coming back to visit us from time to time—to give us a helping hand, to chat, or maybe just to see what we’re up to.”

Julian went silent for a moment, a little half-

smirk on his face, as though the thought of Sheba coming by for an unexpected visit at some auspicious moment was somehow tantalizing to him.

“Come on, team,” Stuart finally said, seeing that Julian’s reverie had no landing place in sight. “We’d better head back to safety while we still can.”

Thus returned to reality, the small group moved in closer together and headed on down the deserted street.



The streets were quiet as the six climbed out of the tunnel and took the back streets back to their hideaway. Most of the shops were shut and boarded up for the night. The team was just nearing the corner where they would need to turn onto the street that led to their building when Stuart heard a noise up ahead, and saw some flashing lights. “What’s that?” he whispered, grabbing Kim’s hand.

“Oh, that’s Marvin’s, an electronics shop,” Petunia said, as she kept walking. “I know this street. Those infernal crooks keep the volume going day and night. I guess they figure it’ll help their business—sorry lot, I suppose they need it, with the antiquated junk they sell!”

As they neared the shop, the children skipped ahead and pressed their noses up to the glass window. Kim laughed. “They haven’t seen a place like this in ages!” she grinned. “Look at them!”

“Hey, look at that!” Dylan crowed. “That’s where we were!”

The others turned their attention to the screen, where a somber announcer appeared to be commenting on the day’s local highlight.

“...The story is still breaking after the events have largely subsided, but according to our sources, armed terrorists broke into this hospital in the early

hours of the morning in an attempt to kidnap acclaimed actress Sheba, who was being secretly treated in this hospital for an undisclosed respiratory disease. It has now been confirmed that she died in the shootout that ensued when security forces stormed the building only minutes after the terrorists had entered. An official report has not yet been made public, but it is believed that the terrorists took many casualties with them before they were overpowered. At least three soldiers are in critical condition and have been taken to a nearby hospital with multiple third-degree burns. While most likely scarred or disfigured for life, they may have been among the luckier ones..."

Stuart and Kim looked at each other. "Sheba!" Kim said softly. "I guess she got the anointing!"

"What's all this about terrorists and kidnapping?" Petunia asked.

"That's the one-world-government-flavored truth for you," Stuart answered, but further explanation was interrupted by the continuing broadcast.

"On a lighter note," the announcer added, "the onlooking crowd had quite a fright this morning when a fire escape ladder toppled clear off the side of the building."

The onlookers were now stopped dead in their tracks, gazing wide-eyed at the television footage. The shot was first a wide shot of the whole hospital side, which slowly zoomed in to a midshot of the ladder. Just then, there was a loud crack and the ladder began to sway gently from side to side. Then the clip changed to a rougher shot, apparently from later on, as the camera was swung around from where it had been pointed back towards the front of the building, just in time to catch the entire ladder crumbling down onto the ground.

Kim brought her hands up to cover her mouth. "Did you just see what I saw?" she asked incred-

ulously.

“You mean, did I see an empty ladder where we should have been shimmying down it in plain view?” Petunia asked.

Stuart just shook his head, feeling quite speechless. “Jesus, You are just incredible!” he said. “Come on, guys. We’d better keep on our way. I’m not gonna chance waiting around for the next scan-patrol.”

Still shaking their heads, they turned and started away. Maya was dancing around Petunia, holding her hand affectionately.

Kim turned back and saw that Dylan still had his nose glued to the glass. “Come on, Dill,” she called out softly. “We’re heading home—aren’t you hungry?”

“Look, Mommy!” Dylan chirped. “It’s Alana!”

It didn’t take two seconds for Stuart and Kim to be at Dylan’s side, taking in the broadcast with all their senses.

The same photograph of Alana that had appeared in the “Wanted” brochure was now on the screen, as the narrator explained, “This is just one of the captured rebels who will be taking part in the inaugural opening of ‘The Green Room,’ a new game show designed and produced by special effects wizard Lloyd Barkerson. ‘The Green Room’ is an interactive police-force training program based in part on the award-winning virtual-reality military training simulator of the same name.”

Kim would have liked to see more, but quickly began to move the two children out of earshot.

The broadcast continued: “Government sources have expressed hope that this innovative approach to displaying capital punishment as a spectator sport will prove a strong deterrent to would-be criminals, and confirm their new zero tolerance policy to crime. Of course, the television executives

and the show's sponsors look forward to the almost guaranteed high ratings.

"There have been a few critics of the plan, who feel that presenting capital punishment in a sports venue on prime-time television and webcast is a throwback to humankind's barbarous past, and will glorify violence and lead to an increase in crime and rebellion against the state. Not so, say the qualified experts, who are confident that the ethical and humane stipulations they have set in place—including the unique masks and body suits for both the law enforcement hunters and their criminal prey, along with the special green lighting—will carry an almost surreal atmosphere which will discourage copycats. Showing concern for impressionable youth, Barkerson affirmed that the younger audience will not even realize that what they are watching is actually happening, thinking rather that they are watching a dramatization of the popular computer game."

Stuart turned away, feeling sick to his stomach.

"The much-awaited opening event will be scheduled tomorrow, at 4 p.m. Stay tuned for our special live coverage of an experience you won't want to miss."



The shouting, as well as the clanging of the riot stick being run along the bars of the cell doors, startled everyone into instant alertness. A certain sleepy mid-afternoon air had hung over the dank prison block, but the sound of metal clanging upon metal changed all that.

After a few minutes, the guard with the stick stopped his noisy procession along the bars and picked up an amplified megaphone. Apparently he wasn't going to risk going hoarse. "Inmates of Cell 29," the guard belched into the device, "I will call out selected names and you will take your places

at the door, to be escorted out one at a time. Prisoner 2084, Perez. Prisoner 185, Norfolk. Prisoner 1093, Sharp. Prisoner 1253, Albanz. Prisoner 8712, Williams. That is all.”

The man did an about face and marched back down the hallway. The cell sprang to life as the named prisoners picked themselves up off the floor and shuffled towards the entrance. The ones whose names had not been called looked on uncertainly, wondering whether they should be pitying themselves or the departees.

“Hey, Jackass!” Sandra called. “You coming out? You’re Albanz, aren’t you?”

“I’ll come when I’m good and ready,” Jackie snapped from inside her tent. “I wasn’t quite prepared to move on out yet.”

“Maybe you’ll be back,” one of the women said hopefully. “Maybe it’s just an inspection.”

“I reckon not,” Sandra said. “You’ve got 8712 in the mixture—anything associated with that leather-ball is going down in flames.”

Jackie scowled and nudged Alana, who was lying on the mattress. “Get up, girl, we’re pulling out.”

Alana had heard the summons, but was having a hard time moving. The shots kept her alive, but did not seem to do much else for her. She was not sure why her body felt so drained and sapped of all life, but she was having a hard time crawling, so she opted for dragging herself along the floor.

The guards returned and surveyed the motley crew that had gathered by the door. They let the women out one by one, fastening their hands and feet securely with heavy iron fetters. Alana was the last in line, kneeling on the filthy ground. One of the guards leaned over and threw her on his back. Then they set off down the hallway.

“What happened to this one?” the guard asked his partner. “What’s the getup for?”

"I think the higher-ups were expecting some sort of bust-out from her gang. They wanted her all sealed up so she couldn't talk. Haven't a clue why. But she's been in here nearly a week and nothing from the outside. Had posters up all over town apparently, hoping to tease them up and into a big sting. But they didn't fall for it."

The other one just grunted and they continued on their way, while Alana thanked God for His mercy in not letting her loved ones fall into the trap.



"You have been chosen for a very special mission," barked the commander, sternly scrutinizing the twelve men and women who sat shackled to the steel benches in front of him. "Your efforts in the next few days will likely be immortalized for generations to come. And for your trouble, you will be given a chance to fight for your freedom to live."

He lifted his hands quickly to silence the flow of questions. "Don't misunderstand me," he said. "It will not be easy, and frankly, I would be lying if I didn't say that I will be surprised if anyone survives. But the chance is there, and that's all that matters, isn't it? You are all convicted criminals—condemned to die sooner or later. But our great leader has seen fit to give each of you another chance, and I think he is worthy of thanks for that much."

"So what's the catch?" one of the men grumbled. "There's gotta be a downside."

"Well, you needn't worry about the details," the commander said in his crisp clipped manner. "All will be explained to you in due time. Meanwhile, you have until three o'clock tomorrow afternoon to prepare yourselves. You will need to build your strength, energy, and stamina for the grueling workout that will be ahead of you, and no expense will be spared for this task."

The door to the right opened and three impressive-looking men entered. They seemed to be doctors or scientists of some sort. Each was followed by another man pushing a heavy trolley of equipment.

“You will be called up one at a time to be fitted with eight biometric sensors which will monitor your every move. For the next”—the man glanced at his watch—“twenty-six hours you will be free men and women. You will be assigned individual apartments, but these sensors will monitor and ensure your compliance with the rules. I caution you not to push the boundaries of the limits, for after the second infraction you will be removed from the program and your place given to another more worthy. Your every move will also be watched by an array of hidden cameras, so don’t think that you will get away with anything.

“The rules are as follows—and an infraction of any of them will set off an alarm which will have you surrounded by armed guards in seconds. One, no sudden movements of arms or legs. Two, you may not run. Three, you may not lift your hands higher than your head. Four, you may not bring your hands into contact with anything metal. And five, you may not step outside of the apartment. Are those five rules clear?”

The prisoners nodded, still unsure of what was happening to them.

Alana sat slouched in the back, propped up against the wall. Her mind felt clearer, but her body was still weak and unresponsive. She wondered how she was supposed to do anything with her mask still on.

One at a time, the prisoners were called up and their shackles were removed. They were then fitted with the sensors—some were implanted under the skin by injection by special syringes with thick

hollow needles, others clamped on with thin bracelets. The last sensor placed on the right shoulder resembled a small tattoo. Alana was the last one to be fitted, and she needed assistance to walk up to the front. Once all prisoners were thus marked, they were led out the door and to a corridor on the right.

“Prisoner 8712, remain,” barked the commander. He then turned to one of the scientists. “We’ll need to clear the headgear. It’s not needed anymore. That plan is rescinded, so we’re proceeding with phase B.”

The man nodded and inclined his head ever so slightly. “I’ll need to get the right equipment.”

“Well, get it on the double!” the commander snapped. “If anyone needs reviving, it’s this one. We can’t have our star attraction fainting in the program now, can we?”

The same burly-faced blacksmith who had been the start of Alana’s nightmare arrived no more than five minutes later, and was soon working away on Alana’s mask. It took the better part of a half-hour and the use of several unpleasant-looking instruments before he was finally able to remove it.

Alana blinked her eyes and lifted her head a little. It felt light and she felt giddy. Her mouth was sore and her lips and tongue swollen. She could only imagine what she looked like, but she could almost see her reflection in the disgusted faces of her captors who surrounded her.

“Get her to her quarters,” the commander said, waving his hand and looking the other way. “There are bathroom facilities there. She can help herself out.”

Three guards walked with Alana down the corridor to a room with a thick wooden door that had a new-looking plaque inscribed with the number 8712. The guard unlocked the door and

shoved it open.

“Remember,” he said, “no sudden movements, no lifting your hands, no touching metal, no fiddling with the sensors. Got it?”

Alana nodded and grunted sullenly and shut the door to her apartment behind her. She sighed at the relief of being alone, then turned her attention towards locating the bathroom. It was directly down the hallway and she stumbled into it thankfully.

She turned on the hot water to fill the bathtub. Then she lifted up her head, taking a deep breath before turning to face the mirror. Immediately she shut her eyes tightly. Then cautiously she opened one, then the other.

“Damn but you look wicked, woman!” she shouted at the top of her voice. Then she laughed. It felt good to hear her own voice, as rough and cracked as it was.

She turned her attention back to the mirror. Her entire face looked like one great mass of peeling skin, but it was so caked with grime and sweat that it was hard to tell that she was not some strange mutated species. Her hair was matted and knotted, and stuck out in all directions. Her lips were huge and swollen, cracked in places with great dried scabs.

Alana sighed and walked over to the bath, turned off the water and removed the plug. “I don’t think I could bear to sit in water I’ve just bathed in at this point,” she said aloud.

Peeling off her clothes, she turned on the shower and stepped inside. The hot water was like a healing elixir to her battered body, and she reveled in it. When she felt all the surface dirt had been washed away, she rinsed and cleaned the tub, then put the plug in and refilled the tub to the brim with water as hot as she could stand.

For the better part of an hour she lay there and

soaked, and all the while her thoughts were on high—past the sensors, past the cameras, past the ceiling, past the prison and guards and soldiers of this God-forsaken government—up where the birds still sang and where the Voice of God thundered in her ears, and whispered sweet promises of the world to come, and taught her and empowered her with what she would need to go through in order to fulfill her commission.

When she could soak no more, Alana climbed out of the tub and wrapped herself in a towel, then explored the bathroom closet. In there she found everything she could have ever wanted. An electric shaver was the first weapon of choice—plastic outer shell, of course. She shaved her head, at just above a half-inch, with a relish she had not experienced before. Clearly those locks were beyond repair. Alana dumped them into the trashcan without a second look, then admired her new self in the mirror.

“Kind of sporty, I’d say,” she mused.

Next she chose a strong exfoliating crème cleanser, and used half of the tube on her face. Once she’d rinsed that off, she used the rest of the tube for a second treatment.

“Oh, the gal has skin under that fur!” Alana said gleefully, taking delight at seeing her face begin to normalize again. There was nothing much she could do for her lips, but the warm water had taken off most of the scabs and had rehydrated them quite a bit. She smeared them with lip balm and figured they’d be better in the morning.

Alana’s stomach led the way to her immediate next stop. The kitchenette was straight ahead and she was overjoyed to find it stocked with everything she could have ever dreamed of. Alana ate for the next forty-five minutes straight, and after a ten-minute digestion break started all over again,

blissfully unaware of the inner miracle that was allowing her stomach to process such a quantity of food after its long period of inactivity.

It was the best meal she had ever had. It did not matter that the only utensils available were a collection of plastic cutlery. The simple joys of cheese toast and instant mushroom soup and chocolate chip ice cream and cherry tomatoes and cream-cheese bagels set her head reeling. After nearly a week without solid food, she could not get enough.

But enough did come, and finally she was content to throw herself on the long couch and happily close her eyes. As they drifted shut, she noticed snatches of voices speaking in her mind. She knew there was an important message she was supposed to get, and she struggled to hold onto her alertness so that she might not miss it. In the end, the effects of the hot water and good food won out, and the voices faded as she slipped into the oblivion of a deep, dreamless sleep.



Alana woke up gradually, like someone climbing a long staircase out of a dungeon where you can't quite tell where the darkness ends and the daylight begins. Eventually, though, she was sitting upright on the couch, stretching her stiff arms and legs which told her that she had not changed position during what she thought had been a short nap.

She scanned the room to find the wall clock, which read 2 p.m. Alana started to leap up and stretch her arms, catching herself just in time to slow down and avoid two simultaneous infractions. Was it possible that she'd slept for nearly a full day?

"Oh my God!" she groaned.

She stepped into the bathroom and turned on the cold water full blast, then dipped her whole head inside the sink. The icy cold flow felt incredibly

refreshing and invigorating, and cleared her fuzzy brain almost instantly.

She then made her way over to the kitchen, figuring that she might as well make the most of her provisions while she could. She guessed that whatever this “fight for freedom” program was that they were going to be offered, it wouldn’t involve a lot of creature comforts.

As she sat at the table anxiously plying a red plastic fork through her bacon and cheese omelet, Alana struggled with her memory banks. “There’s something I’m forgetting,” she whispered thoughtfully, “something very important that I was supposed to do, or remember. If only I could remember...”

She chewed and thought and chewed again, but nothing came to her. Finally she was finished and slouched miserably back in her chair. Then she closed her eyes and prayed desperately, “I don’t have much time, Jesus. I know there’s something important that was supposed to happen or I was supposed to do ... what was it?”

Alana stayed in that position, her eyes scrunched shut, her hands supporting her head, until slowly, things started to come back to her. The voices were there again, and they were whispering in her ear.

Alana felt transfixed. Through her shut eyes she could almost see the small, semi-translucent, sprite-like beings who were hovering all around her, each with a different message. Yet somehow she could hear and understand them all at once. There were warnings of danger, fear, trauma. There were promises of assurance, strength, and courage. There were cautions to be strong, to look to Heaven. There were assurances of ever-present help and guidance. The communication was instantaneous and completely refilling. Alana had never ex-

perienced anything like this, and thought it was completely out of this world. Clearly, she was right.

Finally it was over, and she stood up. "Just a second," she whispered conversationally, pacing back and forth around the small living room floor. "I seem to be getting a whole lot of advance preparation here. What exactly is it that I am going to be involved in?"

And then it happened. With a sort of gasp, Alana felt herself being forcibly propelled onto the floor. Nothing in this world could have floored her so completely and suddenly, although she tried her best to go slowly so as not to set off the infraction alarm. Then there she was, lying flat on her back on the carpet, her eyes glued to the ceiling. And on that white plaster screen she found herself watching, transfixed, as the events to come unfolded before her eyes.

"It's just like a movie," she whispered. Despite herself, she let out a chuckle. "I don't look half-bad with my new 'do!"

But as the showing went on, Alana grew increasingly quiet. This was clearly not a laughing matter. And when it was all over she could find no words to speak. Then she heard that Voice in her mind again.

"As you have asked, so have I done," He said, in a voice so gentle that hearing it after what she had just witnessed set Alana's hands trembling. *"You have asked for the future to be revealed, and thus have I done. Now you see for yourself the reason why I often withhold advance knowledge of events from My children. For the boldness that this type of stand requires is best given on the spot, at the time when it is needed.*

"To meditate ahead on what will be allows the carnal mind the chance to determine its own fate, to decide its own path. But when you are placed in a

situation of life-and-death urgency and you are not prepared, then you know that all you have is Me. So you cry out to Me with all your soul, and thus I am able to work through you and show My mighty power. And thus the end result is all that it should be, and so does Your life glorify Me."

Alana lowered her eyes. "So I screwed up by asking what was going to happen?" she whispered.

"Not at all. I was not bound to show this to you, but I felt it would be good for you. Yet I will put before you this choice now. Having seen what you have seen, having known what you know—would you know it? Would you have seen it? If you had the choice, would you that I go back and wipe those corners of your mind that have been visited by this prediction?"

Alana paused. "I don't know," she said, and then she laughed. "I don't know if I've ever been unsure of anything in my life, but right now I just don't know."

"And that is a sign of strength, Love. You see it as a weakness, but in truth it is the greatest strength. When you do not know what to do, then you look to Me for what I would have you do."

"What do You want me to do then?"

There was a little silence.

Alana lifted her eyes again, and suddenly scooted up to a sitting position. She saw Him. He was right there, standing in front of her. Then He knelt down by her feet, and sat down astride them. Alana's breath came in quick spurts. He felt as real and as warm as any person she had ever felt in her life.

"What is happening?" she whispered.

He leaned forward till He was laying flat on top of her, then He reached his hand up and touched her forehead.

Alana jumped. It was an indescribable feeling—almost like dipping your finger into the hot wax at

the rim of a candle. It was tingly, slightly painful, but strangely soothing at the same time. Then He put both His hands up on her temples, and her eyes shut of their own free will. She slept.

CONFRONTATION IN THE DESERT

It was a strange sort of gathering, etched against the desert sky, which was just as blue as it was in any big-screen movie rendition. More than fifty men, and a handful of young women—inspired by Kate’s presence—had made their way to the designated meeting point, just outside of the furthest of the three cities, by any means possible—on foot, by beast of burden and by car. Four very thin men had ridden all the way from their settlement on one moped, which had barely managed to wend its way across the sand-swept roads. Now they were all gathered, and stood together in the face of the oncoming army.

The cutting edge of the enemy force—tanks, followed by armored personnel carriers—was now clearly visible, less than a mile away. The attack force was not very large, but obviously well armed. Compared to them, the band of resisters looked not only small and weak, but pitifully powerless as well. They were not well armed or well positioned, much less trained in warfare. But in that strange dimension just out of sight of the human eye, they were towering giants of strength, pillars of the Kingdom of God. They were the true freedom fighters, and they would boldly stand by what He

had given them.

The approaching enemy soldiers had doubtless seen their quarry, but they gave no acknowledgment of this until they were about three hundred yards away. There all the mechanized armored vehicles—nearly a dozen in all—halted, engines idling, turrets positioning. After a minute, three officers climbed out of the first APC and conferred, discussing the human wall they were facing. One of them was shouting into a walkie-talkie. All were wearing protective body suits and masks.

A fourth officer got out of another APC, holding a large megaphone. His booming voice blared across the sand: “We have come to warn you that there appears to be a deadly plague in this sector. It’s airborne. We’re putting this area into strict quarantine. The disease is extremely contagious.”

Jay and Rashid looked at each other. Then Jay motioned to Cal, and the three strode across the open space between the two forces. After a pause, two of the conferring officers awkwardly strode out to meet them, moving as swiftly as they could in their cumbersome protective gear.

They met each other halfway between each camp. One of the officers, the one who had used the megaphone, spoke. “Do you speak English?” He addressed his question to Cal, the only one who was obviously not a local.

“Yes, we do,” Cal replied.

“We are quarantining this whole area,” the man repeated. “We’ve come to inform you of this.” He was obviously sweating underneath his protective clothing.

“There is no disease going around this area anymore,” Jay said firmly. “It’s gone. Your plan has failed.” From the corner of his eye, Jay could see other soldiers now disembarking from their armored vehicles, in apparent astonishment and un-

believing curiosity at the wall of survivors in front of them.

“What did you say?” the officer asked.

“I think you know as well as I do—if you’re in any kind of command, that is—that this wasn’t some natural plague. It was a biological weapon strike targeting our area of resistance, hoping to kill all the inhabitants—men, women and children.” Jay’s eyes were crackling with righteous anger. “Well, it didn’t work. We are not dead, and we are not even sick. So if you know what’s good for you, you’ll go back where you came from and tell those in authority to leave us the hell alone.”

The officers clearly had not been expecting anything like this, and they backed up a few steps, and exchanged some private words. Then they returned. “You’ll have to ask your people to stand aside, or we can’t be responsible for their safety,” the commander said. “We’re taking our forces through. We have orders to inspect the villages and measure the extent of the damage.”

“You will do no such thing,” Cal said. “You heard the man.—You’re not going past this point.”

Rashid looked nervously at Jay, then at the powerfully armed soldiers before them, most of whom had exited their vehicles for a better look at the showdown that was taking place. “Jay,” he whispered, nudging his friend gently, “perhaps we should discuss this.”

Jay looked Rashid firmly in the eyes, and in that moment Rashid knew that further discussion was useless. Jay was taking orders from a much higher Commanding Officer, and this was one battle that he did not intend to lose.

“Very well then,” barked the officer, “you can stay if you want. But don’t say we didn’t warn you.”

“Mark my words well, soldiers,” Jay called out in an authoritative voice which chilled the hearers

on both sides of the sandy barrier, "if you value your lives, turn around now. There is no match for the power of the Almighty God, and He is a God of vengeance as well as a God of love. He does not take kindly to the offending of His children. Turn back now while you still can."

Jay, Cal and Rashid watched soberly as the laughing group of officers walked back towards their APCs, with a line of masked and heavily armed soldiers forming the backdrop behind them. They were visible only a moment longer.

A sudden breeze whipped up out of nowhere, pulling up the sand in tempestuous whirls.

At first the men and soldiers shielded their hooded faces, but the sand just blew stronger and fiercer.

The wall of protestors watched in silence. Their portion of the desert was as quiet and still as it had ever been.

But the storm was raging fierce less than a hundred yards away, and through it all a loud megaphone call could suddenly be heard. "All units return to your vehicles. I repeat, all units return to your vehicles. Take cover until the storm blows over!"

The onlookers could barely make out groups of soldiers running around, trying to find their vehicles in a panicked frenzy. The sandstorm was so thick and fierce that they could not see their companions more than one foot away, much less their adversaries who stood observing in silence from their undisturbed position. As the soldiers stumbled around blindly, the mini-storm clung to them like a swarm of angry hornets. Gradually the soldiers, still running wildly around in circles, moved further and further away towards the open desert.

"We're not seeing those dudes again," Ringo said.

Kate jabbed him sharply in the ribs. It was no

time for jokes.

Jay looked at the abandoned tanks and armored cars. Then he turned to the others. "Come on," he said. "We have a mission to complete!"

With that, the group started running quickly towards the vehicles, into which they all piled with a relish. Kate, Jay and Rashid hopped onto the lead tank, which Cal and Warner already knew how to operate. Then the convoy set off, following the same still-visible tracks these vehicles had made on their way here, and heading towards the distant coast.

They drove for nearly three hours before the blue-green line on the horizon came close enough that they could smell the ocean air and revel in its salty breeze. They had passed through three settlements on the way, and the inhabitants had looked with not a little curiosity at this strange group of their fellowmen, driving a contingent of modern armed vehicles. But the vehicles being what they were, any wary stares had quickly been diverted into a forced indifference—apparently for fear of bringing upon any hapless observers whatever sad fate might have befallen the arsenal's original owners.

"There's our baby!" Warner yelled out, as the great aircraft carrier came within view. "The GFF Marauder."

"GFF—Global Federation Forces," Kate whispered.

"Looks like it's anchored about a mile out," Cal said

"There's at least another duck that made the trip down too, isn't there?" Warner asked. "Gotta have supply ships and escorts as well."

"Yeah, a small convoy," Cal said. "Must be even further out though.—We can't see them from here."

"Jay, what is the plan then?" Rashid asked. "We attack the aircraft carrier, or take it over?—Then

what?"

"Rashid," Jay said seriously. "I can't say that I know the answer for sure. All I know is that when we prayed, the verse that kept coming to me as clear as day was, 'Pursue, for ye shall surely recover all,' and 'The Lord our God is a God of vengeance.' I just get the feeling He wants to send back on the heads of these miserable pawns just a bit of the hell they've sent our way."

Rashid nodded in agreement. It didn't seem that the impossibility of the situation even needed mentioning.

They had reached the shoreline by this time, which was strangely still and entirely deserted.

"What now?" Kate asked, as the cars ground to a halt. "There's no shuttle craft or anything. How did they get ashore?"

"They must have airlifted them in from the transport via helicopters," Warner said.

"Well, that's not doing us much good, is it?" Ringo asked.

"Jay!" Cal said suddenly. "Over there is an all terrain armored speeder. It's amphibious! We can use it to get to the carrier!"

Jay nodded. Then he lifted his hands and addressed the small army who had by now climbed out of the tanks and APCs and had begun to gather around them. "Brethren," he said, "and sisters," he added quickly, noticing the smattering of women throughout the gathering. "Here we are—face to face with our enemy. We're the little ones of God who will bring to justice the great anti-God government giant. Now we're here, but we're not sure what to do, so I say we all bow our heads now and ask Jesus to show us the way—show us what we should do."

There was a murmur of assent among the people, and they all bowed their heads and closed their eyes. And there, in the strange stillness that

forebode of calm before the storm, the Lord spoke. The words were unlike anything those gathered had ever heard before—great, powerful words; words tremendous and awesome, and capable of moving to fear even those who knew that this immeasurable force was on their side. After a few minutes, the matter was sealed and settled.

Jay, Kate, Cal and Rashid climbed inside the amphibious speeder and waved goodbye to those who would stay back on the shore to support them in prayer.

The ride was short and choppy, and even those who were not prone to motion sickness had to fight to maintain a level stomach. The persistent calls on the radio receiver to identify themselves confirmed that their approach to the carrier had not gone undetected. Through the hardened fiberplast they could see a very wary contingent of sailors and soldiers streaming out onto the carrier's lowered boarding platform for which they were headed. A helicopter hovered noisily above them.

They eventually answered the obnoxious and repetitive radio calls with one of their own: "To the Commander of the GFF Marauder: We have not engaged or harmed your troops. But we have information that might be of great interest to you."

Even at their speed, it took another fifteen minutes till their feet were resting on the rocking platform of the aircraft carrier. The vehicle drove up the ramp of the platform, and immediately the elevator's motor began the slow ascent to the carrier's flight deck. As soon as the team opened the hatch they were surrounded by over twenty soldiers, each toting a submachine gun. Yet not one of the four felt afraid. Perhaps some of the magic of Heaven that had descended during their moments of prayer before the launch hung around them even now, preparing their hearts for what was to come.

"What is the meaning of this?" demanded a bearded admiral as he marched up to Jay, who was at the front of the small team. "Where did you get our vehicles and where are the men who originally manned them?" He gestured towards the amphibian and the other armored vehicles on the shore.

"They abandoned the vehicles of their own accord, sir," Jay said respectfully. "They were caught in a sandstorm. We needed a means to travel here, and figured they wouldn't mind if we borrowed them."

"Sandstorm?" the admiral echoed. "There's been no sandstorm."

"It was a very localized one, sir. Small sandstorm, that is," Warner added.

Cal couldn't help but quip, "Nasty things can happen in these parts."

"You should feel damned lucky that I kept my men from blowing you out of the water," the admiral said gruffly. "I am authorized to fire upon rebel forces, but I was curious as to the information you've come to offer.—Well, out with it!"

"We have a message for you, sir, a message from God—the one true God of the heavens and the earth, and His Son, Jesus Christ."

The admiral flinched visibly at those words, and his countenance darkened. "I see," he grunted. "More of these fanatical religionists. You come from the resistance towns to the south, I suppose."

"That is correct," Rashid said. "And what you have done to our people is very, very bad."

"Your people? We have sent a posse out to rescue them," the admiral said, laughing lightly. Then he scowled fiercely at Jay and the others. "Your spirit-worshipping scum got every bit of what they deserved—and that was too good for them in my opinion. Too quick. Not painful enough. If I'd have had my way..." He muttered a stream of profanities

that were thankfully drowned in his beard.

Jay took one step backward. It was fairly clear now where the confrontation would end, and what was ahead for this shameless anti-God rebel who insisted on holding out against the forces of Heaven. Nevertheless, Jay was bound to give them a fair chance. "Our message for you," Jay continued, "is one of warning. You are to leave this place at once, and you are to tell your superiors that by no means is this area to be touched again. None of your weapons will prosper against us—biological or otherwise."

Several of the soldiers standing cast a quizzical glance at the admiral. They had obviously heard nothing of the secret mission that had been carried out. Jay was quick to catch their glances.

"You think you were sent here on a routine military exercise? Let me tell you what this is really about. Several miles away from here you'll find three peaceful Christian towns, whose only crime has been to refuse to submit to this Antichrist government's one-world registration plan—which many more people are starting to wake up to now, realizing what a bad idea it really is. But your all-powerful commander-in-chief is not planning to stand idly by and let his plans go to waste. No, he will ruthlessly hunt down the opposition, but will find himself fighting against the only Almighty and powerful God.

"Several days ago, a secret mission was launched from aboard this vessel, a plan to eliminate our peaceful villages by bombing us with a silent biological killer."

Several men again cast questioning glances toward the admiral, but his expression remained cold, and he looked almost amused at Jay's report.

"But our God has delivered us from the pestilence that walked in darkness, and the destruction that

wasted at noonday, and sent us here with a message for you to leave these people alone, and to stop tempting the Lord our God!"

The admiral burst out into a harsh, strident laugh. Many of the soldiers who had gathered with him laughed as well, in obvious disbelief of Jay's words.

Jay felt himself getting hot inside his collar, but he forced himself to speak calmly and clearly. "This is your one and last chance," he paused, then continued quickly, "and this is too good for you, in my opinion. If it was up to me, I'd love to see you fry in the pits of Hell if you don't repent." He quickly resumed his deep, prophetic tone. "But it is not up to me. This is the battle of the living God, and there is not one of us who can stand against His wrath."

"All right, I've heard about enough of this," the admiral said, waving his hand to a group of the soldiers. "Seize them!" He turned and began walking away.

Then Jay shouted in a voice that thundered so loud that those standing on the shore could hear, "Admiral Andreas Letherkoff!"

The man froze in his tracks. Something about the voice chilled him to the bone.

"Admiral Andreas Letherkoff, you have been tried in the courts of Almighty God, and have been found guilty on all charges. Each of your men will be tried according to the thoughts and intents of his own heart. Upon those who receive the guilty verdict will be administered the same punishment as you sought to deliver upon the heads of the innocent children of God."

With those words, the four witnesses felt their mouths being forced open by a force beyond their control. The last thing the unrepentant soldiers saw was a cloud of black smoke pouring out of the four prophets' throats and engulfing them. The

surrounding soldiers gazed in silent awe at the spectacle before them. The cloud of smoke grew and gathered above them, then descended in a wet mist, coating every man aboard the vessel. Several, including the admiral, instantly cried out in pain, while others looked around, apparently unharmed by whatever strange weapon was being unleashed against them.

Jay and the others turned their backs immediately and began to climb aboard their amphibian. Even with the engine starting and the hatch closed, as they reached end of the ramp at the water's surface they could hear the screams of agony beginning, and the terrible coughing spasms as the cloud pursued every guilty and unrepentant soul on the vessel, soaking through each one's clothing, and festering on their skin.

Jay opened the hatch and called up one more time, as loud as he could. "Return to your homes, those of you who may," he shouted. "Turn this vessel around and head for home. Those of you who pass the test of the living God should examine your hearts and see why you have been spared. It may be that there is a chance of your salvation. But go and deliver the message to any and all who will hear it: Let that man beware who will raise his hand against the people of Almighty God."

With those words, he closed and sealed the hatch. Cal revved the engine and the amphibian entered the water, heading towards the shore.



JAY

- 21 -
PREY

The twelve specially chosen convicts were gathered in a bare circular room. The perfectly smooth and shiny walls were made of a silvery alloy. The floor was covered in a trim, businesslike gray carpet. Alana looked around at the others. The transformation that had taken place in each convict was remarkable.

Several of the other convicts were staring at Alana. She grinned back, and winked at Jackie. Sidling over to her in a moment of quiet while the guards were collecting their thoughts, she took the chance to exchange a few words.

“Thanks for looking out for me in there,” she said gruffly.

“So it’s old leather-face!” Jackie said, shaking her head in wonder. “I don’t know what I expected—I guess someone a little more fierce looking.”

“I’m not fierce enough for you?” Alana laughed. “I’d have killed you for saying that about a year ago.”

Jackie chuckled. “Sounds like maybe you and me are two peas in a pod.”

“Yeah well, I’ve had a little transformation time lately.”

“Oh?”

Alana looked up at the guards, who were huddled together. They seemed to be making plans but it was a quarter to four and she didn't know when they were going to start their introductory speeches. There could not be much time left.

Alana determined to seize her chance. "The whole leather contraption—they had that on me because they didn't want me talking."

"You were into some big hush-hush stuff?"

"I guess you could put it that way—government subversion and so on. In the last few months I've joined up with this Christian rebel group. It's called 'the Family.' You heard of them?"

Jackie picked at a little brown mole on the underside of her chin. "Now that is one helluva familiar tagline. I could have sworn I surfed onto some stuff about the group. A lot of sex hullabaloo. Those the ones?"

"You got it," Alana said. "There's sex and travel and spiritism and all types of danger—these days, anyway. I haven't been around that long, but as far as I've seen it's way past Batman and the Marvel gang."

Jackie looked impressed. Then she said, "But you're in here and they're out there. Guess that's the end of that, huh?"

Alana shrugged. "I don't know what's going to happen today, and frankly I don't care. I've had a great life. If I can give my life trashing out this sick government, I'll take the chance any day. See, the best part of all—we've got a better Place we're heading to. We're going straight up."

Jackie looked uneasily at the ceiling. "You talking about Jesus and Heaven and all that rot?"

"Rot to you, maybe—salvation to me," Alana said. The guards were lining up. There was not much time. "Look," she said urgently. "I'm not real good at this. All the other guys are good at the whole

spiel. I don't know much, but I know this. Jesus is as real as you or me. He talks and He breathes and He is. You ask Him to come be with you and that's it. You've got it made in life or in death. That gives you life now and life forever."

"All right, people!" commanded the largest guard with a loud bellow. "Attention focused this way!"

"Think about it," Alana whispered.

Jackie nodded. She did not look entirely convinced, but her eyes were thoughtful.

"Come into the center of the room and take your places on the red markings." The order was loud and forceful, and effectively ended all communication between the inmates.

Alana finally noticed a number of dark red X marks placed in a circle around the room, several feet from the wall. She took her place on one of them.

After everyone was settled, there was a slight whirring sound and a little door burst open behind each person.

"You may now turn and collect your interactive gear from the locker to your rear," they were instructed. "Then proceed into the changing room. There you will receive further instructions."

Each locker contained one large suit. It was completely black, and very heavy. It was made of material that somewhat resembled rubber, but seemed much sturdier. There was a huge helmet too, something like a motorcyclist's, with an opaque visor completely covering the front.

The twelve carried their helmets and suits and marched single file into the adjoining room, where they stepped into designated cubicles and struggled to put them on. There were air holes in the helmet, and everything seemed to make a faint swishing sound when Alana breathed.

This will take some getting used to, she thought. She ran quickly in place, trying to see how agile

she was in her new gear. She was not terribly impressed with the results. *Well, I hope I won't be running far*, she mused.

The group reunited back in the central room—looking and feeling like a mass of foreign, black-clad alien life forms, heavy and panting under their unfamiliar garb. The guards now stepped aside and the same commander who had first introduced them to “The Green Room” program stepped through the door. He looked grim and serious.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he began, before the door had even fully closed behind him, “the action is about to begin. I told you a little about this program at our meeting yesterday. It is now time to explain to you the full details. Our time is short, so I am going to have to ask you to listen very carefully. There will only be time to say this once.

“I told you that this would be your fight for freedom, and that is indeed the case. I also said that the fight would not be easy. Just behind that door there”—he motioned vaguely to the opposite side of the room, where presumably was another hidden entranceway—“is the entrance to an elaborate maze. You have been specially chosen to take part in this interactive neo-virtual training exercise, which is even now being broadcast worldwide. It is a new form of entertainment, a new sport, if you will—and you are the contestants.”

The aliens looked at each other, trying to gauge the others' reactions. But it was impossible to see into the others' visors, so they returned their full gaze to the commander, who continued his address.

“There is a high price to be paid for starring in this performance, but the reward is equally as high. You are criminals convicted of capital crimes, sentenced to die. And so even your being offered this opportunity to win your life back is very generous on the part of our government. So you

can see that we show ample mercy, even in the face of your horrendous crimes. And thus we bring this opportunity.

“For each of you—the hunted—there is a hunter, who will stalk you through the maze. Your goal is to evade these hunters for the next six hours. If you do so successfully, you will achieve instant worldwide celebrity status, and will serve your life sentence in a prison more luxurious than the accommodations most of you could have afforded before.”

The commander clapped his hands together and rubbed them vigorously. “So that’s it then. Let the games begin!”



It was risky venturing out in the middle of the day, but Stuart knew that they had to see the game. The Lord had indicated that He would keep and protect them for their short mission, and had also said that it would be important for them to be there, as there was something that they were supposed to see.

So Stuart and Julian had slipped out into the early afternoon sunlight and melted in among the throngs of passersby, scouting for a place where they could settle down and watch the dreaded event. It wasn’t difficult to find a viewing site. The government was anxious for as many people as possible to see the show and derive their message, thus the large multi-screen displays situated throughout the city showed only that. Clearly, this was a worldwide occurrence.

Stuart and Julian joined the throng in the main city square and watched uneasily as the winsome young announcer prattled her explanations and introductions. Then just when the crowd’s patience was wearing thin, their waiting was over and the action began. It only took a moment before Stuart

and Julian regretted their impatience.

The cameras walked through an eerie-looking maze, which consisted of curving, empty hallways. Each hallway looked the same as the one before, and each corner was completely blind, giving one the feeling that no matter where you turned, you kept walking down the same identical corridor. Every so often there were small cubbyholes, or lower-level tunnels that were big enough for a medium-sized person to crawl through. Everything was bathed in a strange luminescent green light, which lent it a surreal atmosphere.

Stuart shuddered, and prayed. He prayed for Alana and he prayed for the other unfortunates who were to be stuck in this voyeuristic game of death. And he prayed against this devilish government and its leaders, that their twisted, sadistic minds would in due time reap the judgment they deserved.



The convicts were let into the maze one by one, each through a different entranceway. Alana had gotten her last glimpse of Jackie who had laboriously given her what appeared to be a thumbs-up gesture, difficult to detect through the thick black suits they were wearing. The only way Alana even knew that it was Jackie who had signaled her was the obvious size difference which indicated that it had to be her.

Alana took a deep breath as she was shoved in through the door. The loud clang as it was sealed shut behind her was like nothing she had ever heard. It was profoundly more dense and disturbing than the closing of a prison gate. There was a ring of finality, a tomb-like coldness that laced her soul, which she had not experienced before. She shook herself vigorously and steeled her mind to the task at hand.

“Six hours...” She spoke the words aloud, although she was the only one who could hear them. “That’s not too long to stay alive, no? I can do this—we can do this. You and I.” She smiled at the thought that she was not alone. It was a good feeling to have in a place like this.

She turned another corner. She was glad for the visor, which cut down a lot of the fluorescent brightness, giving everything a murky, underwater quality. She looked at the timer that was built into the wrist of the protection suit: 5:44 and counting down.

“I’ve only been at this for 16 minutes?” she echoed aloud. A little cubbyhole caught her eye, low along the ground. *Perfect*, she thought. *I’ll crawl in there and just sit tight. I could pass my whole six hours in there easy.*

Feeling nearly as pleased as if the plan had already worked, Alana lowered herself to the small tunnel and crawled inside. It was hard going, bundled as she was, and the tunnel was not short. She inched along, pulling most of her weight on her arms, until she came to about the middle of the tunnel. Suddenly she heard a noise, muffled but distinct, at the far end of the tunnel. She weighed up her options, and decided to sit tight. There was definitely the sound of screaming—and a noise that sounded uncomfortably like phaser fire on a videogame or sci-fi program.

Alana squirmed in her suit. Then she decided to get closer to the action to find out what was going on. It was a five-minute crawl to the end of the tunnel. By then, all was silent. She slowly inched her head around the corner and peered out of the tunnel. Her heart lurched as she saw a limp black form sprawled across the corridor. The hunter seemed to be nowhere in sight. Undoubtedly he had done his business and moved on to find a new

target.

Alana jumped up and ran over to the motionless form. It was heavy and appeared completely lifeless. Then Alana noticed two or three sticky patches on the chest area. Despite the green lighting and black outfits, she knew instantly what it was.

“No!” she shouted, as a wave of nausea swept over her. It was not the blood. It was not the death. Maybe it was the sudden realization of exactly what she had been forced to participate in. Alana looked up at the ceiling. From where she sat, two cameras were clearly visible, and they were pointed directly at her. Perhaps there were more that she could not see.

She began fumbling with the latch at her fallen teammate’s helmet. It was hard work, as it had obviously been designed not to come off without a struggle. After all, it was part of the Rules. Alana didn’t care. Up till now she hadn’t been concerned enough about the Rules to even think of them. Now she couldn’t think of not breaking them.

The helmet came open with a loud snap as some inner spring or locking device gave way. She pulled it off gently and winced as she saw the glassy-eyed stare of the unfortunate man who had perished inside it.

She closed his eyes with her gloved fingers, then suddenly looked back up at the cameras. She moved her hands over his eyes again and returned them to their opened state. Moving as quickly as she could, she unzipped, unbuckled and unstrapped until she had stripped the dead man of his heavy suit. His body, dressed only in his undergarments, lay lifeless—broken and bleeding on the floor.

Alana reached up and grabbed her own helmet with all her might. “Jesus, help me now!” she whispered. At those words her helmet flew into the air, and the sudden release nearly offset her

balance. Alana threw the helmet as hard as she could against the side of the maze. It bounced off and rolled down the green hallway.

Alana blinked as her eyes readjusted to the brightness. Then she struggled over and with a great heave, picked up the body, and lifted it in her arms, holding it up under the camera.

“Do you see this?” she screamed at the top of her voice. “Do you see this, people? You great mass of CATTLE! Do you even know what’s going on in here? This is murder! This is persecution! Extermination! Wake up! Open your eyes!”

A sudden urgent fear gripped Alana’s heart and she knew that she didn’t have much time. Whatever her chances of survival had been, breaking the Rules had doubtless smashed them to bits. The moment she had pulled off her helmet, her timer had started glowing red and grating out a loud, obnoxious beeping noise. She tried to pry her own suit off, but was horrified to find the zipper would not budge. Whatever self-locking device was to blame for it, the beeping was there to stay. There would be no more hiding in holes for her.

She laid the body down and began to run down the corridor as fast as she could. Her heart was pounding and her eyes were stinging from the garish lighting that was obviously not intended to be braved *sans* covering. She ran and walked and ran some more. She felt like her heart was in her throat, and through it all, that incessant, horrible buzzer jarred her nerves and rattled her spirit. Her timer showed 5:09.

Suddenly she tripped and nearly fell as she came upon another black, lifeless form. Moving without question or hesitation—for surely her own life was as good as gone by this time—she stripped this body of its clothing and helmet too. The victim was a tough-looking young woman—apparently not tough

enough. Alana carefully closed the victim's eyes and left the body under a camera. Then she ran on.

Minutes turned to hours, and Alana felt like she was going crazy from the incessant beeping. It had not let up. Then, without warning, a Hunter came into view. Alana almost felt relief at seeing him approaching her, weapon at the ready position. He walked slowly, warily, methodically putting one foot in front of the other and not moving his finger from the weapon's trigger.

Alana backed against the wall. She stretched her hands out alongside her. The Hunter had a clear shot, and his gun was pointed right at her heart. There was a corner just a few feet away, but she knew that if she bolted, he would shoot. She chose to stay and confront her adversary.

"Why did you take your helmet off?" The voice that came through the Hunter's mask was metallic and synthesized. "It is against the Rules. You have cut your chances of survival in half."

"I don't need your damned survival tips," Alana hotly retorted. "You know we're all going to die in here anyway. I'd rather die with you looking right into my eyes. I'm not going to be some computer-generated target that you're zapping. I'm a real human being. I'm a person that you're *murdering*."

The Hunter kept inching forward, not shifting his stance in the slightest. "Turn around," he said.

"Not on your life," Alana said, and folded her hands across her chest.

"You won't get out of this, you know," the Hunter said, pausing in his approach for the first time. "This is the way things go. You are a convicted felon, and this is my job."

"Convicted felon, huh?" Alana laughed, then snorted, not just to the Hunter, but to the camera which was mounted on the wall behind him, "Yes, I stand convicted of believing in God, our Creator,

and exposing that the Devil is behind this one-world government who you say is your employer—sick bastards, the whole lot of 'm.”

A strange little warble came from behind the visor. Alana wondered for a moment if the Hunter might have been laughing. She allowed her eyes to flicker to the side for a moment, assessing whether she could survive a dash for the corner. Then she looked at the sturdy, hi-top running shoes that the Hunter was wearing, and at her own bulky padded-suit feet. She didn't hold a chance in heaven of outrunning him, even with her short lead.

The Hunter noticed her eye movements and started moving forward again, more quickly. “Prisoner 8712, located,” he said crisply.

There was a crackle and another voice came through on a remarkably clear frequency. “Target and eliminate. Number 10 of 12.”

“Number 10 of 12?” Alana echoed suddenly, looking down at her timer. The remain time read 3:15. “Not even halfway through and we've got five sixths of us already massacred? What is this?”

There was a sudden sardonic laugh that came through from the distant commander. “The viewing public are busy people, my dear,” it crooned. “If a six-hour program can finish up in four—where's the harm in that?”

“Oh, you—” Alana lunged forward towards the Hunter, her arms outstretched.

The weapon was pointed straight at her. Alana heard the familiar whiz of the computerized imitation phaser fire and stopped in her tracks. She looked down at her side, then felt it gingerly. It was dark and sticky. But she could not feel a thing.

All of a sudden she heard a deafening noise. She clapped her hands over her ears. It only lasted a split second, and when she looked up, she was not in the maze at all. She was dreaming. She was in

her prison dream of the night before. Vivid scenes shot through her mind like speeded up music video scenes, faster than she had ever thought she could assimilate information. All of a sudden she knew, she understood, she could see clearly what was going to happen. And why. And how.

Then she was back in the maze. She looked up at the Hunter and there was a strange peace in her eyes. "You can shoot me all you want," she said clearly, raising her voice as loud as she could. "You can kill me a hundred times over, but I will not die until you confess Christ as your Savior."

The Hunter stood entirely motionless for a full minute.

The voice came through the extension. "Commence firing, soldier! That's an order! Eliminate the target once and for all."

The Hunter adjusted a lever on his weapon and fired. Alana felt her body being thrown back against the wall. She looked down in awe at the ribboned shreds of her suit. The ground all around her was dark, and the circle was creeping outward. Still she did not feel a thing.

"I will not die," she said again, even louder than last time. "I will not die until you confess Jesus as your Savior."

The Hunter looked at her in disbelief, then stuck in another clip and fired again. This blast sent Alana to her knees, but still she smiled at him with her maddening smile.

"He loves you that much," she said again, and lifted up her hand to him. "Try Him!"

"Soldier!" came the voice over the intercom, loud and strident. "Soldier, keep ahold of yourself. Damn it, why didn't we seal down those masks?"

Another voice could be heard more faintly over the wire, "We did, sir."

"Well, dammit, then, why we are seeing this

scene? Can't even get reliable service these days. SOLDIER?!"

With a determined punch, the Hunter had switched off his communicator and snapped open his mask. He threw off the mask and dropped the gun to the floor. He knelt down next to Alana, his face wet with tears. "Oh God," he said hollowly. "What have I done? What have I done?"

"You've let Jesus save your damn soul, man," Alana said, smiling. She coughed suddenly, and blood poured out onto her chin.

"Oh God!" the Hunter said again. He was looking around himself wildly, unsure of what to do.

"Don't sweat, bud," Alana said, "I don't feel a thing."

"You're hallucinating," the Hunter said, looking at her in disbelief.

"Not me," Alana said, shaking her head. "But I don't know how long this anesthetic stuff is gonna hold out, so would you mind finishing your end of the deal?"

The Hunter put his head down on her arm and started to cry. "By God, I believe!" he said. "I do! I'm sorry for all my sins, and I confess Jesus!"

Alana smiled, and the young man lifted his head up. His face was almost completely red from the blood that covered Alana from head to toe. "What's your name, ex-Hunter?" she whispered weakly.

"Sergeant Wil—just Freddie," he said hesitantly.

"Stuart!" Alana said to the nearest camera, grabbing his hand and lifting it up. "His name is Freddie! Look after him, Stu. And Cal—I love you, man! Take care of this old world for me!—I've completed my mission."

"Oh God, she's spazzing," Freddie said nervously, looking up at the camera. "What can I do?"

"Goodbye, Freddie," Alana said. "You'd better start running, 'cause whether you just quit your

job or got fired, you've joined the ranks of the prey.”

With those words, Alana's mission was finished. She closed her eyes for the last time.

FOR DESTINY

Stuart could not believe what he was seeing. He looked at Julian, then back at the screen. The camera was zoomed in on Alana's bloodstained body and her wonderfully peaceful face. Freddie jumped up and scurried off down the hallway.

"What's going on, Stu?" Julian said. "You think Alana's really dead?"

Stuart shook his head. "I can't believe that she could be. She's the one who always 'almost dies.'— I can't think why she would be gone now." He put his hands up to his face. "We've gotta get back to the others. We've gotta ask the Lord about this. It's just too much—"

All of a sudden Julian looked back up to the screen. The Green Room was in chaos. Inside the maze, Freddie and two other Hunters were standing together, talking animatedly. The two threw off their helmets and they all started running through the maze together.

The crowd outside was abuzz with talk, everyone trying to figure out what on earth was happening. On the screen, things unfolded like some melodramatic Shakespeare play. The small band of Hunters grew steadily. Each time they met another one of their own, they would stop and talk together

in a hushed whisper, then move forward together. After a while they ran into the two remaining Prey, who joined forces with them also. At last they gathered in a central room in the heart of the maze, where Freddie, now almost unrecognizable for the power and Spirit of God that had begun pulsing through him, turned fearlessly towards the camera.

“People of the world,” he called. “You have been united under one lord, one savior, but he is not what you think he is. Our eyes have been opened today, through the life and the death of one woman whose name we don’t even know. You are being deceived, people! The world leader is not the true God! You must turn to Jesus now—He is the only One Who can save you from this spawn of hell.”

The crowds gasped in horror as Freddie and his companions turned to find themselves surrounded by a more elite squad of police, each pointing a loaded weapon at them.

“You must come with us,” said the team leader in a metallic voice.

“Not on our lives.” Freddie had spoken for them all.

“Turn off the cameras.” It was the icy voice of the commander. “Why are the cameras still on? Didn’t I give the order to have them diverted twenty minutes ago?”

“They-they don’t seem to be responding to our control panel, sir,” said a harried technician. “The viewer seems to be jammed, or have a mind of its own or something. It’s like the cameras themselves are picking what action they want to film. We have no control, sir.”

“You must come with us,” the team leader said to the expanded group of Prey.

“And what are you going to do if we don’t?” called out a large woman who was standing behind Freddie. “Are you going to mow us down right in

front of all the people of the world? Now what would that tell them? Why kill something unless it is a threat? What threat are we to you unless we are telling the truth?"

"Open fire," the commander said curtly, then turned his back on the circle. "And smash that lens," he said, motioning towards the camera.

A masked warrior could be seen moving closer to the viewfinder, then there was a crashing sound and a typical disclaimer streaked across the world's television screens. The broadcast was over.



"I guess we should have stayed out there and talked to people," Stuart said, his hands fully covering his face as he finished his story before the rest of the silent team. "But I'm just so shocked at how things turned out. I can't get used to the fact that she's really gone. Of course, she's happy with Jesus, so I should be glad for her."

Kim had her arms around his waist, and her own eyes were wet. "Look at *how* she died, too," she whispered. "I bet hundreds of millions around the world were watching that show. It was the most widely promoted thing the world government has done up till now. Can you imagine a more powerful witness? She fulfilled her destiny."

"She sure did," Stuart said.

Just then there was a loud buzz at the door. Everyone jumped up.

Julian ran over to the door and peered out of the viewfinder, then laughed aloud. "Good Lord, it's Cal and Warner!"

They opened the door and the weary travelers piled inside.

"You're back!" Kim exclaimed. "Alone?"

"Yes," Warner said. "The others wanted to stay there for the time being. They've got a great work going, you know."

"You'll have to tell us all about it sometime," Kim said, hugging the two warmly.

It was a happy time of reunion, but not without tears. Cal and Warner had also caught the end of the broadcast while on their way back. Cal was looking suspiciously stone-faced, and the others guessed this was his way of coping. And so they determined to leave the subject be.

"We've got to get out of here," Kim said at last.

"What?" Stuart said.

"I did some praying while you guys were gone. I think we've done our part in this country. It's getting too hot. I feel like we should go on to greener pastures."

"Where would that be?"

"I don't know—but the whole world awaits!"

"How would you plan to get us out of here?" Warner asked.

"You guys still have the plane, right?" Kim asked.

Warner scratched his head. "We used the first disk, and it took us right to Jay and Kate—and I mean to their very doorstep. The next time we powered it up, it was all set and just brought us back here automatically—even parked itself back inside the hangar without us touching a button. It was a ride, that's for sure."

"I didn't check the other disk, the one that said 'Auto: Request' but it might just take us wherever in the world we want to go."

"We're going to have to really pray about this," Stuart said slowly.

"I have, Stu," Kim said. "But of course you're right. I hope you don't mind I've already started packing—by faith."

"Packing what?" Cal and Stuart echoed together.

Kim was already opening the door, and she waved her arms enthusiastically at the piles of tools. "Don't you see?" she said. "We can fulfill Sheba's

dream and our commission all at once.”



After further confirmation, the matter was soon settled, and the five busied themselves in boxing up as many tracts, posters, books and disks as they could fit into four big boxes. The books and disks were placed in padded envelopes, of which they had also found a stack stashed in the storage room. As soon as darkness fell, the boys each picked up a box, and Kim and Petunia took the two kids and a few meager possessions. One by one they slipped out into the darkness. The loads were heavy, and it was nearly three hours before they all arrived at the dark, cold hangar.

“You really think this request disk can take us anywhere we want to go?” Kim asked Cal.

“There’s only one way to find out,” Cal said, climbing aboard the familiar aircraft, while the others were still feasting their eyes on their sleek getaway vehicle.

Julian quickly found his way into the co-pilot’s seat, as close to the on-board computer as he could get. This was something he would not miss for all the world.

As Cal and Julian proceeded to figure out how to set coordinates, Kim retreated into the back and opened up a secure transmission with the one remaining roving office team whose address she knew, and sent them a request for direction. “I need ‘any old car,’” she typed with a smirk. “Even a yellow taxi.” With a click of the mouse the message was off, and she prayed that the veiled message would be clear: They needed somewhere to land, and they didn’t care where it was.

The spirits must have been stirring on their behalf, because less than an hour later the unthinkable had happened. Kim had heard back about a small African country that was home to a

fledgling but thriving AAC operation.

"Hey, have you guys figured out how to operate this thing yet?" Kim called out.

"I think so," Julian answered from the cockpit, in which he already felt very much at home.

Within minutes, they had entered their destination into the airplane's navigational system.

"Now we just need to wait while it clears our plan with the computerized air-traffic control centers," Cal said, as the "transmitting coordinates" message once again appeared on the screen. "And with a bit of prayer, I think I can manage to give us a spin pretty low over the city with the manual controls, so we can do our thing."

"Isn't that a little risky, going through these computer control things?" Stuart asked with some concern.

"I don't know. We got through fine last time," Cal answered. "No fighters on our tail or anything. I guess this is a privately registered jet, so it's just cleared through to the final destination, no questions asked. One of the advantages of a one-world government system!"

"And the fuel system on this thing is just incredible," Stuart added, "just about enough to go around the world twice on a single tank. And it's still over the halfway mark, even after our little venture into Jay's back yard."

Dylan and Maya laughed and jumped up and down excitedly on the couch.

"Are we going for a ride, Mommy?" Maya asked.

"You bet we are, darling," Kim said, hugging the little girl close.



It was just after three a.m. when the hangar door rolled open and the slender blue jet slid smoothly out into the night, and began taxiing down the runway.

“Are we all set in the back?” Cal called out. “You’ll have to be ready when I give the call, because if we hang this low over the city too long, we’re bound to attract unwanted attention—and in hover-mode this baby’s not gonna be the easiest craft to control.”

Stuart had his hand on the door’s handle, and Kim stood nearby with a pile of carefully wrapped parcels of tracts, disks and books at her feet, ready to be shoved out the door as soon as it was opened. Warner was immediately behind her, ready to replenish the stock as it was jettisoned. With all the skill and prayer he could muster, Cal steered the jet over the city’s well-lit central district.

“Now!” Julian yelled from the front, as the plane lurched into a near-stationary hover.

Stuart opened the door, and then helped Kim push the load of parcels out into the waiting sky, the city streets slowly passing by below them. Warner furiously fed more parcels their direction until all the envelopes were ejected, leaving a healing trail of Godly litter over the city. And the winds had done their part as well: As each parcel was ejected, the thin paper wrapping tore open, sending the contents far and wide—a rain of white leaflets and envelopes falling as far as the wind could carry them. The city slumbered on, completely unaware—and would be until it was too late—that the Gospel had been spread far and wide.

When their cargo was discharged, and the door securely closed, Cal picked up speed, gained a little altitude, and everyone clapped aloud in frenzied excitement. It was nice to have a little relief after the taxing events of the recent days.

“Hey, look at that!” Dylan said suddenly. He had his nose pressed against the cockpit’s left windscreen.

A little ahead of them in the now brightening distance there was a tall, glowing pillar of smoke

ascending from the earth below. They were flying straight towards it, and as they got nearer, Julian exclaimed, "Well, I'll be—! That's the maximum security prison—home of 'The Green Room' and company!"

Everyone flocked to the window to look.

"Why is it burning?" Dylan asked.

"I don't know," Kim whispered, "but the building sure is history!"

Cal said, "I'm taking her down for a closer look. This is prophetic justice."

There had to be more than a dozen fire engines gathered around the burning building, but from their vantage point it was obvious that any intervention was fruitless. The whole building was beyond saving. Outside the circle of fire engines, highlighted by spotlights, was a crowd of clamoring reporters and cameramen.

And then Cal did a double take. "Do you see what I see?" he said, in a voice so incredulous that the others, who were viewing from the lounge windows, flocked into the cockpit again.

They did see it, though afterwards they couldn't have told exactly what it was. But as the flames leaped high into the sky, etched ominously against the black night sky, it was almost as though their dancing dust particles blended and joined to form letters ... words...

"The fire is saying something!" Warner said excitedly. "But I can't tell what. What's it saying?"

"I can't tell either," Stuart said.

"Hey, flick on the satellite TV," Kim called. "There's gotta be a billion reporters out there."

Petunia flipped the switch and everyone but Cal landed in one hovering mass in front of the set. The local news was playing on the second channel they tried, and they didn't have to wait longer than a minute before the scene switched back to the

FOR DESTINY

burning building. And there, clearly visible to all the world, was the final tribute to Alana's life and death, and those she had died to save. The dancing flames shot their message high into the sky: *We die for freedom!*

Seeing that Cal broke into a sudden huge sob—just one, but it came from so deep in his soul that just to hear it sent a tingle down the spine of each one present. And then it was over. He smiled weakly at the others. "Life must go on," he said. "I am proud to have known her."

Stuart reached over and poured some wine into an empty cocktail glass, which he held up in the center of the small circle. "To Alana," he toasted. "And to Jesus, for the thrill of serving in His Endtime army!"

THE END