

The Son of Man

CW. Johnson

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Acknowledgments:

A heartfelt thanks to my mentor, Fran Porretto.

The Son of Man

Other books by CW Johnson

The Son of Man two, Elders of Zion.

The Son of Man three, The Heylik.

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Chapter One The Gathering

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“We haven’t had a chance to talk much about what it will be like to be the parents of such a...unique child.”

The bride pulled her eyes away from the groom and looked up at the priest. “I thought the Vinces wanted the baby raised in as normal an environment as possible.”

The priest smiled. “Yes, that is true, and for that reason you must never tell anyone who the child really is.”

“They covered that when I was being interviewed,” the bride said, “but I never really understood why.”

The priest stood, walked around his desk and sat on the corner. “Ok—a hypothetical situation—we go right to the media and tell them about the baby—or say you tell your neighbors, parents, friends, that your little boy is the clone of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. First of all, they’re gonna’ think you’re crazy, or maybe they just might believe you. Imagine how they would then react to the child.

“Think of it this way,” the priest continued, rearranging himself on the corner of his desk, “there are roughly around—oh, let’s see—six and a half billion people in the world today. About a billion of those people are gonna’ believe your little boy is God’s own clone, and some of those folks can be pretty radical. There will be the crazy fringe bunch: those who will look upon the child as an abomination, or maybe a threat to their particular belief system. What I’m telling you now is not hypothetical. We know for a fact these people exist.”

“But, what about the baby?” the bride said. “How can we expect a little child to keep such a secret?”

“Easy, we don’t tell him.”

### Three Months Earlier

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It was easy for Todd Riley to say he didn't care about school before the deed was done but now reality was rolling in like an Atlantic sea fog. How was he going to tell his father he'd quit school?

It had been over two years since he and his mate Obie Baker left their home town of Muskogee, Oklahoma in search of an affordable state-of-the-art education. For them, that meant UCLA at Los Angeles, California. It wasn't an easy transition. The loud confusion and clamor was daunting in the beginning but the two country boys soon found their niche.

For the most part, life at UCLA had been good to Todd. The ever-present alcohol fuddle, the friends who never had to go home and the endless supply of girls orbiting his crew but always gravitating to him... but that was before he met Maria Rose.

Since Maria Rose, life at UCLA had consisted of sleep, booze, pain, and lonely, crowded parties, all of which had already cost him four of his five classes. He had managed to cling to his developmental biology class till the very end, but he wasn't sure why.

Truth of the matter was, since Maria, he'd been thinking about going back to Oklahoma. Get a job for awhile; take it back to his roots.

Deep in thought, he found himself entering the parking terrace of his apartment building. It was already getting late. He found a spot and pulled in just as the sun was going down. Before he was able to open the pickup door, his cell phone sounded. "Talk to me," he barked into the receiver, his baritone voice resonating off the concrete walls.

"Todd, what did you do?"

"News travels fast," Todd said.

"So you've really done it? You quit?"

Todd stepped out of his truck. "Obie, I'm sort of busy right now, could I call you later?"

"Okay buddy, but I gotta tell ya, I got news you're gonna wanna'

hear.”

“News about what?”

“Oh, it ain’t gonna be that easy, dude. I’m at Dub’s. If you wanna’ get the news, you know where I’ll be.”

“Not tonight, Obie. I gotta talk to my dad and make some plans-”

“Two words, Todd...I got two words for ya.”

Todd smiled. “Okay Obie, what’re your two words?”

“Maria Rose.”

Todd stopped mid-step. “Maria? What about her?”

“Maria Rose is out asking around for one Mr. Todd Riley’s phone number.”

“Get out!” Todd yelled.

“That’s right dude—she was here at Dub’s a minute ago. She was looking for you— just barely left. She was asking for your phone number. Which was weird man, cause I thought she already had it.”

“I changed it...long story. Who did she ask?”

“Dub’s...15 minutes.” The phone went silent.

Todd stared at it a moment before sprinting back to his pickup.

The roads winding in and out of the busy UCLA campus were packed, but Todd was able to make the five miles to Dub’s Pub in less than 20 minutes. The moment Todd walked in the crowded bar Obie was on him.

“Todd, TODD!” Obie hollered over the blasting rock band.

“We’re over in the corner, dude!”

Cody Fisher pushed a cold beer into Todd’s hand and slapped him on the back. Denny and Tadpole were standing at a table motioning for him to join them. Todd grinned, raised his beer, and slowly began making his way towards them.

“Todd the bro bra dudester!” Denny yelled as Todd approached the table. He offered the palm of his hand, and Todd soundly slapped it.

“I heard you totally quit school today,” he said. “I wish I could quit. My old man would kill me.”

“Why would you want to quit school?”

“Cause I suck at it, dude. I should just get a job and—”

“Obie...Obie!” Todd yelled over Tadpole’s shoulder. “What

about Maria Rose?”

Obie broke conversation with a couple of roving sorority girls and moved to Todd’s side. “She said she wants your new phone number, dude. She wanted to know where you’re living now.”

“Who did she ask?”

Obie pushed a sloshing beer bottle against his chest. “Emwaaa.”

“You?”

“Yeah, why not me?”

“I don’t know. Did she say why?”

“Not really.”

“You give her my number?”

“Sure I gave it to her.”

“You give her my cell number?”

“No dude, you said to never do that.”

“You didn’t give Maria Rose my cell phone number?”

Obie grinned stupidly, “Sorry dude.”

“So—did she say when she was gonna call?”

“No, she was in a hurry. She... is... so... frickin’ hot, dude.”

“Be back in a few,” the lead singer yelled from the bandstand.

“Don’t go anywhere!”

The pub quieted and the group of students quickly huddled around the small table.

“Maybe she wants to get back with you, dude,” Tadpole said.

“Maybe she’s sick of Jessie Espinosa.”

Todd shook his head. “I’m not seein’ it. The dude’s a movie star.”

“He’s just another city pretty,” Obie said, “all hat and no cattle.”

Todd grinned and clicked his raised beer bottle against Obie’s.

“What was she like?” Denny asked, changing the subject.

“Dude—is she as good as she looks?” Tadpole said.

Todd stared into his beer. “Wouldn’t know.”

“How could you not know?” Denny said. “You two went out together for three months. How could you go out with a girl like that for three months and never have sex? Could you tell me that?”

Todd pulled his beer to his mouth. “The opportunity never came up.”

“Why’d she call it off, dude?” Obie asked. “I thought you two

were close as fingers.”

“She didn’t call it off. I did.”

“You?”

“Yeah, me.”

“Why? How come this is the first time I’ve heard of it?”

Todd put his empty bottle on the table. “I gotta go. I’m here jackin’ around and Maria probably called already...”

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By the time Todd reached his apartment building it was well past midnight. He pulled into his parking spot, stepped out of his truck, and stood looking back out into the parking terrace. He’d been watching the sleek, black Jaguar in his rearview mirror since leaving the village. Now it was parked on the road in front of his complex, its dark, tinted windows gleaming in the moonlight.

As he stood watching, the car slowly pulled out and began making its way up the drive towards him. Todd left his truck and moved out into the driveway. He dropped the bill of his cap shielding his eyes from the glare of the headlights as the car pulled up and stopped directly in front of him. He heard a door open and close. Someone moved into the light.

“Maria,” Todd said. “What are you doing here?”

“Todd, I have to talk to you. It’s important.”

The car backed up, stopped, and quickly pulled up beside them.

“You sure this is what you want?” the driver asked, glaring at Todd.

“Jessie, please—just go,” Maria said softly.

Todd had seen the face in the car before. It was the face of Jessie Espinosa, star of the hit TV series *Run* and *Batch* magazine’s ‘world’s sexiest man.’

The driver shook his head. “Okay, that’s it then.” The tires squawked as the Jaguar jumped and sped away. It turned a corner and disappeared into the night.

Maria looked up at Todd. “Sorry,” she said.

Todd looked down into her dazzling green eyes sparkling in the soft moonlight. Her moon-lit raven hair framed her perfect face and



poured over her small shoulders. She stood in flawless feminine pose, tall and straight, looking up at him beneath sweeping long lashes. She was astonishingly beautiful, and completely unattainable.

"Was that—?"

"Yes... that was Jessie," Maria said.

"What's going on? Have you been crying?"

Maria shrugged. "We broke up—it was a little ugly."

Todd pulled his ball cap off and looked around the parking lot. He quietly rolled a pebble under his boot before looking back up at Maria. "You want to come in?" he asked.

Maria nodded and they made their way up the stairs and into Todd's apartment. Todd motioned toward his old green couch and went to the fridge.

"Why?" he said, returning with a soda. He took the lounge chair directly across from her.

"Why what?"

"Why did you break up?"

Maria smiled softly and stared into her soda. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Try me."

Maria shrugged. "We had a fight over...you."

"Me?"

"Truth is, Todd, I can't stop thinking about you."

Todd frowned. "Who are you?"

"Todd," Maria said, obviously suppressing a smile. "Jessie knew I wanted to be with you; that's why we broke up."

"Yeah, figures, only Maria could get her own movie star to drop her off at her old boyfriend's apartment."

"This is important," Maria said. "Stop changing the subject, especially since you're leaving L.A. soon."

"How did you know that?"

"I know you were expelled. I knew you wouldn't stay here."

"I quit."

"What?"

"I quit school. I wasn't expelled."

"Whatever Todd. The point is, I can't live without you. I can't let

you leave without you knowing that.”

Todd studied her face for a moment before lifting the soda to his mouth. He took a long drink and looked back at her. “Maria” he said softly, “what are you doing?”

“I want you to go to Nashville with me sometime next week to celebrate. It’s all on me.”

“Celebrate what?”

“Celebrate our getting back together.”

“What gave you the notion I wanted to get back together?”

“Todd,” she said, frowning like a little child, “I told you I wanted you, and that I can’t stop thinking about you. That’s what you said you needed from me—remember? What more can I say?”

“You could mean it.”

“I do. I do mean it.”

Todd eased out of the chair and moved towards the window. “Why Nashville?”

“I’m having tests run at Vanderbilt. I just thought, since we’re already there, we could take a few days—that is, if you want to come with me.”

“Testing you for what?”

“It’s a...medical thing.”

“You sick?” he said, looking back at her.

“No, nothing like that. It’s just something I’m doing for extra credit. They’ve been testing me for months. They need me to go to Vanderbilt for this last test.”

Todd looked back out into the dark. He stood in silence for a time before turning back. “What the hell. I could use a vacation. When do you want to leave?”

## One week later

~~~

Jesus Christ sat in his tattered cardboard refrigerator box waiting for instructions from God. It was so hard at times to take the taunts and jeers from the wicked ones. He would forgive them; he always did. It had been increasingly hard to make ends meet since they released him from the sanitarium. He missed his friends there. Dr. McClellan always listened to him. He didn't laugh when they talked. The only true friend he had left was Bartholomaei, but Bartholomaei wouldn't leave the box so he was never around when he was needed the most.

Jesus Christ was getting hungry. For a long time he'd been hesitant to leave the box for fear he'd miss a message from God, but then he realized God could reach him anywhere, even down on West End Avenue. Who knows, maybe some lost soul would redeem himself by buying Jesus Christ a meal and possibly even a bottle for after. He picked up his tattered coat.

"Don't go out there," Bartholomaei whispered.

"I'm hungry," Jesus Christ said.

"If you go out there you know what will happen—you know."

"I don't care. I'm hungry, and we need a bottle for after."

"If you go out there," Bartholomaei chanted, "you know what will happen—you know. If you go out there—you know what will happen—you know what will happen—you know."

Jesus Christ couldn't help but laugh at his old friend. Bartholomaei could be so funny sometimes.

He crawled out of his box and walked out into downtown Nashville, Tennessee. Bartholomaei's melodic chanting slowly faded into the distance as he headed west, crossing through the busy Sherrie's parking lot. At Demonbreun Street, he waited for the fast moving traffic to ebb and bolted across. Upon reaching the safety of the other side of the road, he slowed and casually made his way south past the Hank Williams Museum and on to the hot dog stand where the circle of Demonbreun meets the famous Sixteenth Avenue.

Normally, this area was filled with tourists coming from all over

the world to visit the country music capital, but it was chilly now and there had been a lot of rain lately. Besides, this area of Nashville, known as Music Row, was slowly being dismantled and reassembled in a place less likely to be frequented by the likes of Jesus Christ, so he mostly had the place to himself.

He turned west again and proceeded on toward West End Avenue. He was half-way to McGavock when they jumped out from the alley. Jesus Christ tried to run, but they were on him before he had a chance.

“Well, look here.” the crusty voice yelled. “It’s Jesus Christ himself!”

It was Barney and that one guy Pete. He hated them. He tried once more to get away, but Pete grabbed the lapel of his old coat along with a handful of skin. He held him high, forcing Jesus Christ to stand on his tiptoes.

Barney sauntered past and slowly turned to look into the dull, scared eyes. “Jesus—where you going?”

Jesus Christ winced from the pain. “Uh—I’m just going down to West End and get something to eat and then get a bottle for after.”

“Good idea, Jesus. You go on down to West End and get us a bottle and something to eat.”

“Y-yeah,” Pete said. “But why n-not just eat f-f-fish and J-Jesus could feed every b-body in N-Nashville?”

Barney smirked. “Yeah, better idea, Pete. Let’s have fish so Jesus here can feed everybody in Nashville.”

The two began laughing for reasons Jesus Christ didn’t fully understand. Barney abruptly stopped laughing, seized Jesus Christ by the throat and pulled his face up close to his own. “You go down on West End and get us a bottle and something to eat, and then you bring it back here. We’ll be waiting right here.”

He pushed Jesus Christ toward West End. Jesus Christ ran as fast as he could. He knew if he didn’t, Barney would kick him in the butt. He ran west, rounded the corner and ran south. He was nearing Eighteenth Avenue by the time their laughter completely faded.

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The Boeing 727 began its slow decent over metropolitan Nashville. Throughout the long flight, Dr. James Donahue had been flooded with warm memories of his days back at old Vanderbilt, back when he and Blaze Jenkins ran the place. Blaze was one of the best Commodore quarterbacks anyone could remember. He was fast as a sprinter, big as a linebacker, and mean as a badger when necessary. Jim was a second-string wide receiver.

The game was Vanderbilt at Tennessee, big, big rivalry, fourth down, last quarter, final play. Blaze threw the pass that counted and, because the starting wide receiver had pulled a groin, Jim was there to catch it. Nothing he'd done before or since could compare. Man, what a night. For Blaze it was just another game, but Jim would've been content to live in that moment forever.

Even then, they both had an abiding interest in the science of cellular biology. That's probably why they became friends to begin with. After graduating, they went on to receive doctorates and Blaze became a professor at their beloved Vanderbilt University in Nashville. He taught for a short time, then out of nowhere, got religion and became a Catholic priest. Go figure. Jim didn't even know Blaze was Catholic.

Seatbelts began clicking and he realized they were on the tarmac. He waited for the path to clear, and escaped down the jet-way, passed through the open double doors leading into the busy terminal gate, and walked into the crowded Nashville International Airport. He moved with the river of people through the terminal and into the vast, crowded halls filled with shops, restaurants, bars, and vendors, found baggage claim, and picked up the bags he had left home with.

He walked out onto the wide covered walkway. A driver standing on the curb holding a sign that read *Vanderbilt Medical School* caught his eye.

"You Dr. Donahue?" the driver said as Jim approached.

"That's me—did Bla—Father Jenkins send you?"

"Yes, sir."

"So, I take it you know where I'm going?"

“Yes, sir.”

The driver quickly opened the door for Jim and loaded his luggage into the cavernous trunk of the town-car. “Sorry, sir,” he said, “I hope you don’t mind, but I’m supposed to pick up another gentleman. You mind waiting?”

“Really? Anyone I know?”

“I’m not sure. You mind if I sit in there? It’s starting to rain a little.”

“Course not,” Jim said.

The driver leaned the sign against the gleaming white town-car, slipped into the driver seat, and looked down at his note pad. “You know a ... Dr. Victor Perez?”

“Victor—sure, he’s the in vitro guy. That’s interesting. Is he meeting with Father Jenkins, too?”

“I guess. Going to the same place as you, anyway. What’s an in vitro guy?”

“Oh he’s a—probably the biggest head in the field of in vitro fertilization right now. I wonder what—“

“I heard you won the Nobel Prize,” the driver said, interrupting Jim. “I’m guessing that don’t make you no slouch.”

Jim laughed. “I guess that don’t.”

The driver glanced out the window. “I think that’s our boy.”

Jim turned to see a balding little hispanic man in a dark blue crinkled suit standing just outside the town-car. His face was curled up in a frown behind crooked, thick-lens glasses. His right index finger was poised and ready to tap on the car window if necessary.

The driver stepped out and reached for the bald man’s luggage. “Hello, sir... “Dr. Perez?”

The little man looked up at the driver. “Yes. I take it you’re my ride?”

“Yes sir,” the driver said, moving away with the luggage.

The little man bent his knees to look into the car. “Dr. Donahue? You too?”

“Hi, Victor,” Jim said, pushing his hand out, “any idea why we’re here?”

Perez slid into one of the two facing seats, reached and shook

Jim's hand. "No idea. There was talk of unlimited funding, prosperity and fame...you know —the usual."

Jim smiled. "I know. I've been cross matching DNA samples for the last month, all under the radar. Nobody's talking, and they've even insisted I do the cross matching myself; no students. Knowing Blaze, It's probably cloak and dagger by design. He knows I can't pass on a good conundrum."

Perez pulled his glasses off, produced a handkerchief from his suit pocket and began earnestly buffing the lenses. "Whoever, or whatever they are," he said, "they certainly have the clout. Doctor Varese, the man whose finger is on my funding, practically insisted I come."

The town-car pulled away from the busy airport and was soon heading west on I-40.

"You went to school here, didn't you?" Perez said as they rode.

Jim looked out onto the Nashville skyline. "Yeah, Blaze—Father Jenkins and I were here together. We used to call this place Gotham City."

"A lot of people do," Perez said, pointing at the Bell South building. "Because of the bat building, I suppose."

"You know about the bat building?"

"Mrs. Perez and I spent a little time here back in our younger days. By the way, congrats on the Nobel."

"Yeah," Jim said shaking his head, "my God, what an honor."

Perez returned his glasses to his face. "I read your paper...tantalizing. You've really done it—reanimated inert DNA tissue. I've always heard you were a man who could flush out the birds, but you've outdone yourself on this one."

"I just came in first," Jim said. "Believe me, a lot of good people were right on my backside."

Perez grinned and re-adjusted his glasses. "Accept it my friend. Take it and run, I would."

Jim glanced out the window. "Here we are already," he said, as the car turned left into the spacious parking lot of the Patch Rankin building. The driver had called ahead and Blaze was waiting at the building's parking veranda. It still surprised Jim to see his 6 foot 7

pal dressed like a Catholic priest.

“Jimmy!” Blaze hollered. “I’ve finally got you back here.” He jumped, gave Jim the handshake-bear hug combo and turned to Perez. “Dr. Perez, what an honor it is to have you here—both of you here. This is just incredible.”

“Blaze, you big bear,” Jim said. “Haven’t changed a bit—well, I mean except for the outfit, the grey hair, pot belly—”

“Don’t start.” Blaze said, throwing his big arm over Jim’s shoulder. “How was your flight?”

“It was fine. The town-car was a nice touch.”

The car is just one of the perks, my friend. Come with me. There’s someone here who’s been waiting a long time to meet you—”

“Preacher, got any change?”

Jim glanced up at the intrusion. A dirty looking, rain soaked vagrant dressed in mismatched, ill fitting clothing had approached them from off the street. Jim was surprised at how young the vagrant appeared to be.

Blaze reached for his wallet. “I believe I do,” he said, handing the vagrant a \$20 bill.

The kid’s face brightened. “Thanks, preacher. Your sins are forgiven.”

Blaze smiled. “Why...thank you. That’s always good to know.”

Suddenly the vagrant inexplicably jumped as if he’d been shocked. He stood glaring at them before cautiously moving away.

“Unfortunately we have our share of the homeless,” Blaze said, motioned toward the lobby. “There’s a little cafe in the building. As I said, someone has been waiting to meet the two of you and I took the liberty of having her wait in the cafe, do you mind?”

“Her?” Jim said.

“Well, her and a friend, boyfriend I believe.”

Blaze led Jim into the lobby with Perez following close behind and took a quick shortcut through a small kitchenette. They moved into a dining area smelling of hot buttered rolls and coffee. Tables tastefully decorated with New England style décor, filled the small nook. The walls were adorned with nostalgic hundred-year-old black and white prints of nineteenth century Nashville.



As they rounded a corner Jim's eyes fixed on a young woman sitting at a table directly in front of him. He slowed to a stop, breaking Blaze's stride and stood staring. The girl looked up. Her exquisite green eyes focused on him. She smiled. Jim felt himself flush.

"Jim...Dr. Perez," Blaze said as they approached, "I'd like you to meet Todd Riley—and the young lady who wanted so much to meet you both, Ms. Maria Rose."

Jim reached for Maria's hand. "I'm—very happy to meet you," he said softly. He stood staring, unable to pull his eyes away. Finally he glanced off noticing for the first time the imposing young man sitting next to her.

Even Jim, a man who had grown up in Chicago, had spent his entire adult life immersed in the world of academia, could tell at a glance that this young man was old country. It had little to do with his clothing...indeed, in place of the iconic cowboy hat, he wore a black ball cap and an indistinct white tee shirt. Even so, he wore his old country like an aristocrat wears old money. He was tall and heavy built, probably over six feet. His face was refined, chiseled and masculine. His square jaw seemed incomplete without a plug of Copenhagen in his lip.

The kid was clearly jealous over the girl and although his seething, silver-blue eyes were glaring back at Jim, he seemed unsettlingly confident and comfortable. It occurred to Jim that this young man was probably not someone you would want to physically tangle with.

"Maria has to leave us right away," Blaze said. "She's having some very important tests done at the med school at Vanderbilt so she's in a bit of a hurry."

Jim took his seat. "What a shame."

"When Father Jenkins told me you were coming I had to meet you both," Maria said. "I've been following your work very closely."

Jim grinned. "Really? You've been following my work?"

"Absolutely," Maria said. "Both you and Doctor Perez, I'm very impressed." She reached, shook Dr. Perez's hand and turned back to face Jim.

“Maria and I gotta go,” Todd said, his deep velvet voice commanding attention. “We have an appointment in a few hours. We really ought to get off to the hotel and get squared away.”

Jim raised his eyebrows. “Where are you staying?”

“We’re at the Hillshire,” Maria answered.

“I’m there too,” Jim said, smiling at Maria, “room 123. We should have a drink—”

“Maria, we really should go,” Todd interrupted.

“You’re right. Let’s get this thing over with.”

She stood to leave.

Jim watched in silence as she fumbled about in her bag. Her raven hair fell over her face. He seized the moment to scan her svelte body in a glance, indiscreetly look away, and immediately notice every other man in the nook doing the same.

“It was nice meeting you all,” Maria said, as she and Todd made their way back to the lobby.

Jim continued watching as they left. “That’s the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen, Blaze—who is she?”

“You don’t want to get mixed up with her,” Blaze said. “Besides, she’s with that kid.”

“Who are they? Why is she interested in my work?”

“She’s a student. Turns out we’re here on mutual business. They were on their way to the hotel just as you arrived.”

“How long have you known her?”

Blaze laughed. “Jim...she’s just a kid.”

“Had to say it, didn’t you,” Jim said chuckling.

~~~

Jesus Christ walked quickly down a side street behind the Patch Rankin building. Something strange had just happened. He was talking to a kind priest—at least he might’ve been kind. He wasn’t sure now. He could feel a strange presence accompanied by an odd vibration. He had to get to his box. He’d go and sort things out there. As he walked, he noticed a sort of clarity, like frost clearing off a heated windshield. It terrified him. He started running.

He reached his box just in time. It was really starting to rain. He

had forgotten he was hungry. He'd even forgotten he had twenty bucks. All he could think of was the dark horror that seemed to be looming everywhere. Bartholomaei was nowhere to be found, and Bartholomaei never left the box.

He tried pulling the cardboard flaps closed as best he could to shield himself from the torrential rain. He peered out at the looming darkness into the surreal downpour distorting the Sherrie's Restaurant parking lot. The rain was zinging off the tour busses that lined the adjacent hotel. An occasional flash of lightning made a ghostly silhouette of a towering, five-story building behind Sherries. With each flash, the menacing spire somehow seemed to move closer. He had to try to take control of himself. Even he could see that the unseen, unreasonable terror was consuming him. He decided to try to sleep.

Lying in the wet mud filling the bottom of the box, he tried his best to cover himself with the newspapers he'd managed to salvage over the weekend.

"JESUS!"

He stopped mid-breath. He thought he heard something.

"JESUS!"

It was coming from just outside the box. He decided to stay put. He was sure it was Barney, that stupid guy. Tomorrow he'd tell him not to do that anymore or he might get a stick and—

"JESUS!"

He yelped, jumped to his knees and peered out between the flaps of the box.

That's when he saw it. It was standing in the downpour looking like a shimmering black flame, the size and shape of a man, silhouetted against the dim wash of the yellow parking lot lights. From the corner of the hotel sidewalk, it pushed off and began moving forward towards him. At first, Jesus Christ thought it was someone belonging to a tour bus because it appeared to get on one. But then, to his horror, it moved straight through the bus and then another. It was still moving towards him.

Jesus Christ began screaming as it approached. It was gliding inches from the ground, grinning a toothy, otherworldly grin, its

eyes devoid of all white—huge and black as pitch.

Jesus Christ's screaming intensified. His hysterical, reptilian mind took command as he wrestled the box into a wet, writhing pulp. The rain was coming down in torrential sheets now. The sticky liquid darkness held him as the abhorrence loomed down on him.

"JESUS!"

The horrid voice scraped across his eardrums like a rasp. He rolled onto his back. A sudden blinding burst of white lightning silhouetted the ghastly aberration as it hovered directly over him. He gasped a mouthful of rain and screamed a guttural, horrified shriek only to have it absorbed by an earth shattering clap of thunder.

"Jesus, son of the Father."

His hysteria cleared slightly.

"Jesus, son of the Father, with whom I am well pleased, fear not, for I have come to make desolate the lives of thine enemies."

It was the horror talking, he was sure of it.

"Fear not, my son. For behold, I will greatly bless thee."

"Go away!" Jesus Christ screamed.

In an instant, the aberration was gone. Jesus Christ rolled over and jumped to his feet. Looking wildly around him, he dove into the wet bushes and lay there in the deluge crying. Something broke loose, sending a torrent of water pouring over his head. It washed over him and was gone. Still, he dared not move.

Slowly, as his fear began to fade, he became aware of something pushing against his chest. He reached down to move it away and noticed it was a canvas bag. Carefully, he held it up trying to read the lettering on the side. He struggled to make it out. "We-Wells-Wells Fargo Bank, Northwest N.A."

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Blaze, Jim, and Perez left the small cafe and returned to the lobby of the Patch Rankin building in the heart of Nashville. They walked into the spacious north wing beneath its vanilla colored arches and stately crystal chandelier. Their hard-soled shoes clicked against the glistening inlaid white marble tiles as they made their way past rows of elegant, cherry wood tables surrounded by beefy leather clad chairs.

“You have an office in this building?” Jim said, looking at Blaze. Blaze grinned. “I do.”

“I’m a little surprised, Padre. I was expecting a small hacienda, maybe one of those little burrows.”

Perez smiled.

“Seriously though,” Jim said, as they continued, “aren’t you a priest now? This looks a little extravagant—”

“I’m on sabbatical,” Blaze said, slowing down, “as is Bishop Hickie, whom you’re about to meet.”

“Hmm,” Jim grunted. “Another career change in the works, Blaze? Already?”

“No,” Blaze said, laughing. “Nothing like that, it’s only temporary.”

They took one of two inversely matching dark-wood stairwells to an expansive lobby housing two rows of six bronze elevator doors. Within moments they were on the fourth floor.

“That’s my office,” Blaze said, pointing down a hall. “If you ever need anything at all, this is where I’ll be.”

He led them to the end of another hall toward a pair of thick glass double doors spanning six feet each, reaching from the floor to the ceiling. Twin logos bearing the name Patch and Rankin emblazoned each door. The doors automatically swung inward as they approached.

“What’s with the security?” Jim asked Blaze as they moved through the doors.

“You’ll see,” Blaze said, waving at the two police officers sitting across the room from each other.

A secretary met them and led them to a small, sparsely decorated conference room housing a lengthy, rosewood table surrounded by ambrosial red velvet chairs. Four men stood up and greeted them as they entered.

Blaze quickly moved to an old, bent priest and took his hand. “Bishop Hickie,” he said, “I’m so glad you could make it.” He turned and motioned towards Jim and Perez. “Gentlemen, may I introduce Dr. James Markus Donahue, one of only six Nobel laureates to come out of our own Vanderbilt University. And with

him, Doctor Victor Perez, considered to be the world's top expert in the field of in vitro fertilization."

"It's such an honor to finally meet you both," the old bishop said, putting his hand out.

Jim reached and shook the bishop's hand. "Thank you. Actually, this is a little awkward. I'd say I was happy to be here, but frankly I haven't a clue *why* I'm here."

Perez smiled, nodded, and adjusted his glasses. "I'm looking forward to discovering that as well."

"You will both know very soon, my old friend," one of the men said, looking at Jim.

Jim smiled at him.

"You don't remember me, do you Jim?"

"I'm sorry, no I don't."

"Jim," Blaze said, "it's Bing."

"Binghamton!" Jim yelled. "What are you doing here? How you been, buddy? I didn't recognize you with pants on—I mean," he turned to look at the other men. "He used to wear shorts all the time, and sandals... had these—sunglasses."

"It's Mayor Binghamton now, Jim," Blaze said. "You're in the presence of the honorable mayor of Music City, USA."

Jim reached for the mayor's hand. "No, that can't be... If your constituents only knew—"

"You've done pretty well for yourself," the mayor said, grinning. "No one was more shocked than I."

Blaze laughed. "I'm with you on that one. The world must be in pretty bad shape to put the likes of Bing and Jim Donahue at the top of the pile."

"Look who's talking," Jim said, chuckling. "Who'd ever guess you'd wind up a Catholic priest. Bing, you remember that time Blaze had that linebacker down and was pounding on his face—" Jim stopped mid-sentence and looked at the bishop. "Of course... Blaze is obviously a changed man now."

Blaze and Mayor Binghamton laughed in unison.

"I'm sorry, Dr. Perez," the mayor said finally. "We didn't mean to exclude you, it's just that we went to school here together; we're the

best of friends.”

Perez poked at his glasses. “That’s quite alright. I understand completely. My chums and I were known for cutting up a rug or two back at old Whitley.”

Jim had to suppress a smile.

“At any rate,” the mayor continued, motioning toward the two remaining men standing nearby, “this is Mr. Forrest Patch and Mr. Mathew Rankin.”

“I’ve seen your names before,” Jim said. “Like outside on the door, for instance.”

“These men own the door,” the mayor said, “along with the building and most of the block.”

Jim quickly sized the two men up. “This is an important meeting, isn’t it?”

“Very much so,” the mayor said. “So important that Blaze—Father Jenkins—has prepared a special presentation just for you two—”

“There was talk of catering,” Perez said a little too loudly, startling everyone. “I’m famished.”

The mayor turned and motioned to the secretary sitting at a desk just outside a glass petition.

“Yes, Mr. Mayor?” she said, poking her head in the door.

“Let the caterers know we’re ready, will you please?”

~~~

The meal arrived and was consumed over more small talk until Bishop Hickie finally directed the attention to Blaze. Blaze reached into a briefcase and pulled out a laptop computer, quickly made the connections, and a picture of DNA banding patterns appeared on the wall.

“What you’re looking at,” Blaze began, “are the results of two independently tested DNA samples, specifically, two minuscule samples of blood that have been found to be genetically identical. They were both processed by our own Dr. Donahue here so we know they’re genuine.”

Perez glanced at Jim.

“The sample labeled ‘A,’” Blaze continued, “is a sample of blood

tissue taken from the Shroud of Turin—”

Suddenly a monster clap of thunder rocked the building. It sounded like lightning struck just outside the window. The irony hadn’t escaped any of them.

“Nice touch,” Jim said, getting a chuckle.

Blaze was wondering if he shouldn’t start again when Perez spoke up.

“The Shroud of Turin has been proven to be a fake.”

“Actually,” Jim said, raising his eyebrows, “they thought it was a fake. I’ve heard there’s some question as to the validity of the carbon dating. They’re now thinking the sample taken was not a part of the original shroud, possibly from a corner that had been replaced.

Blaze pointed at Jim. “That’s exactly right.” He clicked the mouse, a picture of the man on the cloth appeared and he continued. “At any rate, my friends, whatever can be said about its origins, there *is* real blood on the Shroud. We know that for a fact.”

Jim shuffled in his seat. “Could be anyone’s blood.”

“I disagree,” Blaze said. “I think we can pin this blood down to one very important source.”

He maneuvered the mouse to point at several spots on the picture.

Jim grinned skeptically, but remained silent.

“This is what we know about the Shroud of Turin,” Blaze continued. “There are images on the Shroud of many objects, not just those of the body, markings that appear to be impressions of a crucified man, front and back. The cloth was folded over itself, half above the man, the other half below. The man’s wounds are consistent with the wounds inflicted upon Jesus during his torture leading up to his crucifixion. There appear to be wounds around the hairline, matching the description of the crown of thorns—”

“Whoa now,” Jim said. “All due respect, Blaze ol’ buddy, these observations are biased—clearly. They look like a bunch of little smudges to me.”

“Please Jim,” Blaze said, holding up one hand. “Bear with me.”

Jim smiled and looked around the room at the other men. They

sat silently looking on.

“Even if these allegations are true,” Dr. Perez said, breaking his silence, “that the Shroud could be traced back to the time and place in question, there is no evidence that it, or this blood sample ever belonged to Jesus. I can’t speak for Dr. Donahue, but if it’s some sort of confirmation or...endorsement you are after—”

“No, no, Dr. Perez,” Blaze said. “Nothing like that, I assure you—”

“Hey, wait a minute, wait a minute!” Jim said, interrupting Blaze mid-sentence. “What about the other sample? Where did you get the other sample, Blaze?”

“Ah, yes...the other sample.” Blaze clicked the mouse. The picture on the wall changed to a wooden altar, painstakingly decorated with what appeared to be a sculpture of the Last Supper. It showed the altar flanked left and right by exquisitely detailed paintings.

“What you are looking at,” Blaze said, “are pictures of the Holy Blood Altar located in a church in Rothenberg, Germany. It’s one of the sites included on the pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela. Other than that, it’s relatively unknown. However, in the west choir loft, there’s an altarpiece containing a very special relic—a capsule housing three drops of Christ’s blood.”

“No...,” Jim said. “Is this for real? Are you telling us the other sample is from this church? Where did it come from—the blood I mean? Are you sure?”

Blaze held up his hand. “Jim, these are the two samples you processed. I swear to you.”

“How were you able to procure this sample, Father Jenkins?” Perez said. “Can the blood from the altar be traced back?”

Blaze nodded. “Back to Philip the Second of Spain...then to his great grandparents, Ferdinand and Isabella, independent, verifiable writings from Constantine mentioning the blood and claiming Saint Stephen himself as the original source.”

“Where the sample from the church came from is not the issue,” Jim said, looking at Perez. “The point is, the blood on the Shroud of Turin is the same blood as the blood in Germany. What are the

odds?”

“Exactly,” Blaze said, pointing at Jim. “I think we must all agree, if these two independent genetic samples are a match—and if both of these blood samples can be traced back to the time of Christ, the odds are raised considerably. What we are dealing with is the actual blood of Jesus Christ.”

Jim chuckled. “I admit what you’re saying is interesting... albeit far from conclusive.”

Blaze smiled and continued. “Now, in order for me to go on, I’ll have to refer to the Bible.” He reached into his case.

“Really, Blaze, I—” Jim said stammering.

Blaze glanced up. “Jim, you two have come all this way, now please, hear me out.”

Jim raised an eyebrow and sat back in his seat. The two doctors exchanged glances again. Finally, Jim looked back at Blaze, shrugged and gestured for him to continue.

“In order to fully grasp what I’m trying to tell you,” Blaze said, “you have to understand the staggering importance of this particular blood. The writers of the Bible, both old and new testaments, were absolutely obsessed with the subject of this blood, and for very good reason.

The obsession started in genesis when Cain killed able. It wasn’t his kidneys crying out from the ground, it was his blood. The entire book of Leviticus deals almost exclusively with the proper way to sacrifice the blood of animals. It was something to be done strictly by the book or face banishment or even death. Blood was considered holy because they believed the blood contained the life. In the New Testament, Jesus himself refers to his own blood.”

He looked up 1 Corinthians 11:25. *‘After the same manner also he took the cup, when he had supped, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood: this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me.’*

“Not only were the writers of the old and new testaments obsessed with this blood,” Blaze continued, “but Christians, to this day, sing songs each Sunday describing how they have been redeemed by the blood of the lamb.” Blaze moved the mouse to the DNA banding patterns. “*This* blood gentlemen, “What you are

looking at is the actual blood of the lamb.”

He put the mouse on its pad, clasped his hands behind him and continued. “We belong to a very large and diverse group of people we collectively call the Vinces. We are literally a reincarnation of an ancient sect known as the ‘In hoc Signo Vinces,’ which is the Latin translation of the Greek phrase meaning ‘in this sign you will conquer’. While the Catholic Church does not sanction us, we are well represented in Rome. Suffice it to say, we have people in high places.

Two years ago, we were made aware of an archaeological find in a cave in Egypt. The find is a papyrus scroll dating back to around 65 B.C. It’s the book of Job, perfectly preserved except for one verse.” Looking at his Bible, he read Job 16:18. *‘O earth, cover not thou my blood, and let my cry have no place.’*

He reached and clicked the mouse. A picture of the scroll appeared complete with translation. “According to this scroll, that scripture isn’t complete.” He directed the mouse to the bottom of the picture containing the translated verse and continued reading.

‘O earth, cover not thou my blood, and let my cry have no place, for as the branch of a fig tree bringeth forth life anew, So shalt the Lamb be renewed. For behold, in those days my blood shall renew me.’

The room was silent. Blaze opened his computer bag and pulled out several sheets of paper. He placed them on the table in front of him and proceeded with his concluding summary.

“Traditional Christianity holds that all biblical reference to blood sacrifice points to Christ, who Himself was the final sacrifice. We of the Vinces believe that the overwhelming reference to the blood of Christ points prophetically to our own time, to this very undertaking. That means the conclusion of both the Old and New Testaments, the final chapter, will be written here in this very room. What we are talking about is...the second coming of Christ.”

Jim grunted and glanced around the room. “Tell me you people aren’t thinking about cloning Jesus Christ,” he said evenly.

“Jim, we believe we’ve been given a mandate,” Blaze said, lifting his Bible, “We’ve clearly been given a sign from God. It’s all right here—”

Perez leapt to his feet, his chair banging against the wall. “This is absolutely outrageous!” he yelled. “You people have brought me all this way in an attempt to recruit me into this madness? I’ll have no part of it, do you hear? No part!”

“Dr. Perez,” Bishop Hickie said, rising to his feet. “Please, hear us out. This is the most important undertaking—”

Perez blasted out the door leaving Bishop Hickie staring after him.

“Don’t worry,” the mayor said. “There are plenty of others.”

Bishop Hickie turned his attention to the mayor. “But, what if he makes a report to the authorities?”

“No one will believe him,” the mayor said.

The room fell silent. Jim looked at the men sitting around the table. “You people can’t be serious,” he said softly. “Cloning human beings is a major negative—you should know that. It’s illegal now, and for damn good reason. Each animal cloned today represents hundreds of failures. Most clones are stillborn. The ones that live are likely to have horrendous mutations, many of which manifest themselves later in life, usually killing the animal prematurely. What are we gonna do with the mutated baby Jesus?—throw them away? And what happens if we *are* successful, and we get a perfectly healthy baby? What then? What kind of life can he have? For the love of God ... people will think he’s Jesus!”

“People won’t know, Jim,” Mayor Binghamton said. “That’s why we have taken these precautions. That’s why we’re here in this private room instead of at Cambridge.”

“Maria will be the baby’s mother, Jim,” Blaze said, pulling Jim’s attention to the other side of the table. “We’ll see to their every need, they’ll live anonymously—”

“Maria?” Jim said. “The girl in the lobby?”

“Maria has volunteered to—”

“Oh my God, Blaze!”

~~~

Todd sat in the waiting room reading a magazine. He’d been waiting for Maria to return from a door she had disappeared into a

half hour earlier. He glanced up at the clock on the wall—10 p.m. He thought about how odd it was to schedule an appointment for so late in the evening.

Conflicting thoughts surrounding the men he had met earlier in the cafe still bubbled in his head. He had been studying processes discovered and refined by Doctor James Donahue for a good part of his last semester. The man was an Icon. Todd recognized him the moment he walked in, but then... he fell all over Maria. Todd might just as well have been invisible. How did Donahue know they weren't together, or married even?

"Todd Riley?"

Todd turned in his seat.

"Could you come with me, please?" A nurse was standing half in and half out of the open door

"No," Todd said, "I'm not a patient. I'm just here to—"

"Ms. Rose is asking for you."

Todd stood up. "Why? Is something wrong?"

"This way, please."

Todd quickly followed. The nurse led him to a small room and pushed the door open. Maria, wearing a hospital gown, was sitting on the end of an examination table. She'd been crying.

Todd glanced at the doctor sitting on a stool. "What's wrong? Why is she crying?"

"Because I'm so happy," Maria said. "I'm the one."

Todd returned his attention to Maria. "The one what?"

Maria pulled a tissue from a box and pointed at the doctor.

The doctor motioned toward a small chair in the corner of the room. "You should sit down," he said. "My name is Dr. Yates. I'm Maria's gynecologist—she's going to have a baby."

Todd looked at Maria for a brief moment before returning his attention to the doctor. "Whose?"

Dr. Yates smiled. "She isn't pregnant yet."

"No, no, no," Todd said, holding his hands out, "I won't be donating anything today, thank you very much."

Maria giggled. "No, Todd, that's not why you're here."

Todd pulled his brows together. "Ok...why *am* I here?"

Dr. Yates lifted his stethoscope off, placed it on a nearby table and looked back at Todd. "I'm gonna' let you in on some pretty sensitive information," he said, re-adjusting himself on the stool. "I'm going to because Maria asked me. Before I do, however, I think you should know that we've been watching you for some time, and we're certain you'll exercise discretion."

"We?" Todd said. "Who is we—what the hell are you talking about?"

"Maria, Father Jenkins and I, along with many other people, belong to an organization known as the Vincés—"

"The Vincés?"

"In hoc signo Vincés, to be precise."

"I've heard that before, It was—"

"Constantine's battle cry," the doctor said, interrupting Todd.

Todd nodded. "Yeah, yeah, but more than that—it was the name of a cult... cryptic, ancient stuff. In the same vein as the ....

Illuminati..." He turned, looked at Maria and back at the doctor.

"What exactly are you people into here?"

Dr. Yates laughed. "Nothing 'cryptic, or... cultic' I assure you. We're simply a group of people who have come together to bring about the birth of a very special child. Maria has volunteered to be the surrogate for that child."

Todd pulled his ball cap off and rolled a hand over his thick, honey blond hair. "I'm still not following. Maria's a big girl. If she wants to have someone's baby, it's her business."

"Todd!" Maria yelled. "There *is* no somebody, just me."

Todd slowly turned his attention to Maria. "Wait a minute, that doctor in the lobby— Donahue, that's what he does. You're talking about cloning here. You're talking about cloning a human being."

Maria smiled.

"Maria," Todd said softly, turning to lock eyes with the doctor, "have you paid this guy anything? Is he getting some money here? Cause if this is a scam...if you're workin' her..."

"No, no," Yates said. "I assure you, this is the real thing."

"But... it's illegal. How do you know I won't spill?"

"We're reasonably sure you won't want to bring that sort of

trouble down on Maria.”

Todd glanced around the sterile examination room, slowly rolled the ball cap in his hand and returned it to his head. “But that still doesn’t answer my question,” he said finally, “why are you telling me all this? Why am I here?”

“I told you,” Maria said, glancing at the doctor, “I wanted to celebrate our getting back together.”

Todd frowned and looked at Dr. Yates. Yates looked back and shrugged.

~~~

Brad Turner and his band of road musicians had all showered and were loaded into the bays of the big Prevost tour bus. The road manager had booked a total of five rooms for four days. Although they had rented the rooms for the full night, they were leaving early. The drummer failed to fully close the door behind him as he made the dash through the blinding rain. As the big bus lumbered out of the Sherrie’s parking lot, Jesus Christ moved into room 338. He would sleep in a warm, dry bed for the first time in months.

~~~

“Where to?” the town-car driver said.

Dr. Perez adjusted his glasses. “Airport, Just get me away from here.”

“Rough day, huh?”

“Worse than that—time wasted.”

“Oh, I’ve had wasted days, believe me. So how did it go...the big meeting I mean?”

“Listen, can we step on it? I’m in a bit of a hurry.”

“Yeah, no problem.”

They rode silently through the driving rain for a time. Finally the driver spoke. “Fan o’ country music, are you?” he said, smiling into the rear view mirror.

“God, no—say, could you pay a little more attention to the road?”

“Oh, sorry, you’ll have to pardon me; I’m not really a driver—it’s just a part time job. Helps make ends meet, know what I mean? Believe it or not, I work for the IRS.”

Perez rolled his eyes.

"I'm one of those guys who get to stick it to the deadbeats, ya know? Like for instance, there's this one case I'm workin' on right now. He's a doctor, just like you. He's involved in some project or another, something to do with that stem cell stuff. I don't understand it, but I know it's illegal. He's not from around here. He's from Minnesota, I think—yeah, Saint Paul. One of those guys who help women have babies... has a wife named Hillary. His address is 4998 South Bay Street. Phone number's 408-6842. Social security number is 522-72-919."

Perez felt the blood leave his face.

"Anyway, this doctor is doing it to make extra money, too. Course doctors, you know, when they make extra money, they make a *lot* of extra money. Know what's funny? This guy doesn't even know we've got him."

"How do you...why are you telling me this?" Perez said, stammering.

The driver glanced up and glared at Perez through the rear-view-mirror. "You know why."

"I have no idea why."

"This meeting," the driver said, "the one that just took place; it never happened."

"What do you mean?"

"Jenkins—the cloning project—never happened."

"You're with the IRS?"

"You really wanna find out?"

"You can't force me to be involved in this."

"Look," the driver said, "this is gonna be real simple. You don't have to be involved. You just have to keep your mouth shut. Understand? Oh, look, we're already at the airport. Don't worry about it—the tip's on me."

Perez stepped out of the town-car into the rain and turned to look back at the driver. The driver smiled, put his finger to his lips and drove away.

~~~

On the way to the hotel, Jim made it clear to Blaze that he wouldn't be involved in the project. He said he'd take the

considerable chance of not trying to stop him, but warned him that Perez might not take the same road. Drained, and deeply disappointed with the results of the meeting, Blaze sat on his bed. It was late. He reached for the remote, turned on the TV, shuffled through the channels until he found the news and settled in. The phone rang. He quickly switched off the TV and picked up.

"Father Jenkins, this is Maria. I just finished. It's official—they told me I'm the one."

"So I heard—congratulations. But I should tell you, we've known for some time."

"I'm so excited. Now I'll never be able to sleep."

"I wouldn't pop the cork just yet, Maria. You still have one major hill."

"He knows. Dr. Yates told him—about the cloning anyway. He doesn't know who the baby is yet. I need for you to tell him—you and Dr. Donahue."

"Dr. Donahue won't be involved."

"Why?"

"He has chosen not to be. Neither he, nor Dr. Perez will be involved. Both of them have declined."

"What's going to happen now?"

"That's not a problem—certainly not a problem for you. You haven't asked him yet. *That's* a problem."

"No, I can't yet. It'll be too obvious when he finds out who the baby is."

"Are you trying to manipulate this young man? Are you asking me to be a part of it?"

"No, no, Father, it's nothing like that, it...has to be done a certain way."

"This is getting more surreal by the minute, Maria."

"I know, Father—you just have to trust me."

"It was understood this matter was already resolved. It's getting a little late in the game, don't you think?"

"Just give me a little more time—I'll take care of it."

"I hope so. We can't move forward until all the I's are dotted. You understand that, don't you?"

"I understand, Father, and I've tried to talk to him, a couple of times. The timing hasn't been right. I have a certain...sense about these things. I'll do it right after you talk to him, I promise."

"I'll hold you to that," Blaze said.

He hung up the phone and bounced the remote off the TV screen. *Dammit, that girl is wrong for this project, probably the worst choice of all. She simply doesn't fit the profile. The Vinsces are completely taken with her for reasons only God knows.*

He snorted, shook his head, pushed the covers away from the bed, and lay down.

He had been so certain Jim and Perez could be recruited once they knew what they were dealing with and fully understood the importance. How could they have refused? This wasn't the Jim Donahue he remembered. The Jim he remembered would have jumped into the fray. He was fearless back then. What the hell happened to him?

He sat in the darkness for a time. Finally, he retrieved the remote and turned the TV back on.

"More unrest in Israel this week in the wake of still another bombing."

An attractive blond woman was stoically giving details. Behind her loomed a digitally enhanced picture depicting the flags of both Israel and Hamas. The flags were facing away from each other and flanking two superimposed soldiers locked in unending combat.

"Hamas has claimed responsibility," the newscaster concluded. Behind her, the picture changed into a likeness of a dark, mountainous rock hurling through space.

"Astronomers at the Los Alamos Institute believe they have spotted yet another asteroid headed our way. Scientists say there is no cause for alarm, however. The asteroid is expected to miss the earth by 300 million miles."

The camera shifted to another angle. "We'll be back with the local news, after these messages."

The lovely smiling face changed into a screaming middle-aged man.

"WE MUST BE CRAZY! We are extending our used car BLOW

OUT SALE FOR YET ANOTHER WEEK! THAT'S RIGHT! We are blowing out CARS, TRUCKS, VANS, and even SUVs for as little as..."

Blaze intervened and turned the TV off. He kicked his feet up on the bed and pulled his lap-top computer from his bag. *I'll just check my email.* He logged in to the World Wide Web. There were a few email messages, nothing important. Maybe he would just check for updates on the site. *No, not tonight...this is not the night for such things. From here on, I must try to remain focused. But then... I'll just check the updates.*

He went to 'favorites' and clicked the icon. The pictures appeared. His arousal was immediate. The soft curves, the skin...*can you imagine if anyone ever finds out?* A little panicked, he quickly logged off.

If I were sexually healthy... it would be different.

He found his folder hidden deep within his hard-drive and instructed it to Un-encrypt. His collection of special pictures appeared. He had been collecting them for months. He could feel the hot lust rise up as he clicked them back to life one by one...

If I were ever caught, he reminded himself, it would mean prison.

~~~

**Banging on the door!**

Blood poured like a waterfall from a huge wooden table.

"Let my people go!" Moses ranted through his snow-white beard as lightning flashed and thunder crashed behind him on the mountain. Blaze sat at Moses' colossal feet, hammering a massive golden bible with his fist.

**Banging on the door!**

The girl in the lobby smiled, her black hair framing her beautiful face, flowing down her neck, past her voluptuous breasts, down her curvy white stomach, swirling around her navel, dripping off—then turning liquid red, flowing into blood-stained buckets.

**BANG! BANG! BANG!**

Jim Donahue bolted upright from his nightmare. It took him a moment to fully regain his senses.

**BANG! BANG! BANG!**

He kicked off his covers and jumped from his bed, his heart

pounding in his chest. He glanced down at the glowing red clock sitting on the nightstand. 2:27 glimmered in the darkness. He turned and stumbled in the dark, searching for the light switch when he was rocked by yet another round of pounding.

BANG! BANG! BANG!

“Coming!” he yelled. “I’m comin’ already!” He found the switch, clicked on the light and reached for the doorknob. “Who’s there?”

No answer. He peered through the peephole...nothing.

BANG! BANG! BANG!

Jim leapt back, suppressing a scream and stood warily inspecting the door. *I’m acting like a little school girl* he thought as he reached for the door handle.

He wasn’t aware of the door opening, only that he was bathed in a swirling orb of indescribably bright light. He instinctively covered his eyes, and realized the light wasn’t painful. He felt profound awe, wonder, and—fear—as he became aware of a low, rumbling sound coming toward him like an approaching tsunami. The sound grew closer and louder until the walls shook around him. That’s when he realized the roar was forming...words. He braced himself as he felt it coming.

*“THOU SHALT NOT HINDER MY SON.”*

The immense, hot voice passed through him, blasting his hair back and knocking him backward to the floor. Pictures smashed against the wall. The mirror spun off, and crashed through the window as the colossal utterance roared on into the courtyard, bending and snapping trees as it pushed a path of debris into the darkness. And then it was gone.

The dazzling light gradually faded. Slowly, slivers of dull, earth-bound light began to appear as doors cautiously opened revealing panicked faces peering out into the dim-lit hall. Jim leapt to his feet and ran from his room wearing only his black sweat pants. He jumped over a pile of debris, rounded the first right, and disappeared down the hall.

~~~

That driver, or whoever he was, proved to have been very good at his job. He had Perez squirming like a fish in a puddle. If only he

could somehow back away from the stem cell project, as if that would do him any good now. He had been involved in the in vitro culture of stem cell—derivation of ES cells from early human embryos. Unethical, possibly, but not illegal, except for the fact that the Blackburn Institute was a federally-funded facility. The money had been phenomenal—and unreported. They had him dead to rights. Stem cell research was one thing, but cloning human beings.... How could Jenkins call himself a scientist, or even a priest?

“Can I get you something?” the flight attendant said, leaning over the first class seat.

Perez adjusted his glasses. “Yes, rum and cola.”

“One rum and cola coming up,” she said, smiling attractively.

Perez leaned back in his seat and began fidgeting with a magazine.

“Dr. Perez?”

Perez looked up. “Yes?” Someone had taken up the seat next to him.

“Hi, my name is Benjamin Santana.”

“Hello...do I know you?”

“I sure hope we can get to know each other,” the boorish, unshaven man said.

Perez noticed his wide girth all but overwhelmed the first class seat. Dark wet spots highlighted the armpits of his sweaty white shirt. A red tie, pulled open, lay on his tremendous, bulging belly. His breath smelled of alcohol. Perez had no recollection of ever seeing him before. He decided to ask. “Are you in the sciences?”

“Yeah, I am.”

Perez nodded and made an attempt to return to his magazine.

“Why not?” Santana said.

Perez glanced up again. “Why not what?”

“The Vincens, the cloning project. Why not?”

Perez sat up in his seat and quickly scanned the first class compartment. When he was satisfied he wouldn't be overheard, he looked back at Santana. “Who are you people? Listen—no matter what you think you have on me, you can't force me to do this thing. I'll keep my mouth shut, but I'm not interested in this little project

of yours. That's final—non-negotiable. Do I make myself clear?"

"But you haven't even heard our offer yet," Santana said.

Perez glared back at him. "You can tell Jenkins, and the rest of his cronies, that I—"

"No, you don't understand, I'm not with the Vincés. I'm what you might call the...competition."

The flight attendant appeared with Perez's drink.

"Hey—I'll take one of those," Santana said. "And here—let me pay for that one."

"No," Perez said. "I'll buy my own drink, thank you."

As the flight attendant left, the fat man reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a small note pad. He quickly jotted something down and pushed it at Perez.

"What's this?"

"Our offer."

Perez looked down at the pad and back at the fat man.

"You can't be serious."

~~~

Blaze was awakened by rapping at the door. He glanced at his clock—4:07

"Could you please come back later?" he hollered. It seemed awfully early for housekeeping to be making their rounds.

"Metro police," a female voice said from behind the door.

A wave of fear passed through him as he found his robe and answered the door. "Yes officer, can I help you?"

"Sorry to bother you, sir. Do you know this man?" She reached and pulled Jim into view. "We found him running half naked down West End. It took him a while, but he finally settled down. Says he knows you."

Blaze reached for Jim. "Yes, yes, this is Dr. Donahue. He's my friend. I'll take care of him."

"Okay," the officer said, "but he's gonna have to stay in the area until we have a chance to investigate this thing."

"What thing is that, officer?"

"His room was torn up pretty bad, but if you ask me, it's unlikely he had anything to do with it. The damage was far too extensive."

Blaze suppressed a smile. This police officer didn't know Jim Donahue very well.

"Scott—he's my partner," she said, rambling, "he thinks it might've been a weird atmospheric thing— says something a lot like this happened in New Hampshire about twenty years or so ago, blew a whole town—"

"Thank you officer," Blaze said, interrupting, "Anything else you need? I really should see to my friend."

"Yeah—okay, have him stick around awhile. We'll get back with you one way or another."

"Thank you," Blaze said, pulling Jim into his room and closing the door behind them.

"It might be time for you to think about settling down, my friend," Blaze said, as he pulled Jim toward the bed. Jim grabbed at the blankets, pulled them up over him, and immediately went to sleep. Blaze couldn't help but smile. This wasn't the first time he'd rescued Jim from the effects of the night before.

Once Jim was settled in, Blaze decided to go to the lobby for a cup of coffee and give Jim a chance to sleep it off. He walked out of his room, down the hall, and into a waiting elevator.

When he reached the lobby it was clear that something was definitely wrong. The entire east wing leading out of the lobby had been cordoned off. He walked to the front desk. It was still early and the the lobby was empty.

"What happened, young lady?"

A heavyset woman was working on the other side of the desk. Her back was toward him. She squealed and jumped.

Blaze looked at her nametag. "Sorry I startled you...Kathy."

"Oh, Father Jenkins, I'm sorry, it's just that it's been such a weird night."

"Really?" Blaze said. "Weird in what way?"

"Didn't the police talk to you, Father?"

"Yes, yes they did. Oh, I see—my friend—yes— I'm so very sorry. It seems he may have gotten a little out of control last night. He'll cover all expenses. I'll personally vouch for that."

"No, Father," Kathy said. "This was no party, believe me. I was

here all alone behind the desk and all of a sudden, the place just exploded. No reason. It just blew up. We had to evacuate the whole north wing of the first floor—spent the whole night trying to find rooms for everybody. A lot of people left—could be lawsuits. You know how things are these days—”

“Blew up?” Blaze said. “Why didn’t I hear anything?”

“That’s the strange thing. Only the people on the first floor heard it, isn’t that weird? It about knocked me off my feet.... At any rate, I’m glad they found your friend. It’s a good thing—we thought he might be dead.”

Blaze laughed. “He probably wishes he was at this point.”

Kathy looked at him curiously. “Father, you’re not getting it.” She reached and pulled a key from under the desk. “Your friend was in room 123. A half hour ago, that room was a crime scene, but the cops have opened it up now. Go take a look.” She handed him the key. “This opens the north wing doors.”

Blaze glanced towards the ravaged hall.

“Be careful,” Kathy said, pointing, “it’s a mess in there.”

Blaze walked up the landing, turned left, stepped under the yellow caution tape and opened the door.

“Be careful now!” Kathy yelled from the desk. “We’re not responsible if anything happens to you.”

“I understand,” Blaze said. He turned, entered the hall, and immediately pulled to a stop. Wallpaper had been ripped from the wall. Dysfunctional lighting fixtures, part of the once tiled ceiling grid, were swinging gently from their metallic umbilical cords. The carpet was pushed into a heap at the end of the hall.

Blaze stepped over the debris and slowly made his way north. 119, 120. He noticed the destruction seemed to be getting progressively worse as he proceeded down the hall. 121, 122. Finally, he reached the end and had to make a quick left to enter room 123. He rounded the corner.

“Oh my God,” he said. The door to the room had been ripped from its hinges. The wall and ceiling, visible from the hall, had been stripped clean of paint. He could see torn pieces of insulation clinging to bare wooden studs where the drywall had literally been



blown away. Stepping around the carnage, he entered what was left of Jim's room. The bed was up on its side, wedging the mattress and bedding against the opposite wall. Glass was strewn throughout the once-carpeted floor where the TV had fallen and imploded on impact. The curtains were surrealistically blowing through the gaping hole that once held a large plate glass window. Blaze carefully made his way towards the back of the room and looked out.

Just beyond Jim's first floor window, a small decorative gazebo lay on its side. A thirty-foot wide swath of debris had been catapulted halfway into the adjoining parking lot.

Concerned for his friend, Blaze turned and hurried back through the rubble. He reached the double doors and passed into the lobby. Kathy was waiting.

"Now do you see what I mean, Father?" she yelled, but Blaze wasn't listening. He walked to the elevator and pushed the third floor button.

Jim jumped when Blaze walked through the door. He had been sitting on the edge of the bed.

"Jim, your room looks like it's been bombed. What the hell happened? Why didn't I hear anything?"

Jim slowly looked up at Blaze. "Sit down," he said softly. "We need to talk."

~~~

Todd awoke early, hoping to have a chance to visit with Maria before their flight out. After taking a long shower, he took time milling over what shirt to wear. It had to be just right. He only had Maria for a few more hours. After that, she'd disappear into the vast UCLA student body. She had said she wanted to rekindle their relationship but Todd knew better. Maria could be intimate and caring one moment and completely disinterested the next. He knew this feeling well, like desperately clinging to a fast moving deep sea fish.

As he stood combing his hair, he again thought of Dr. Donahue brazenly coming on to Maria the way he did. How could he possibly compete with Dr. James Donahue? He realized he'd be crazy to go to her room. Maybe Donahue was with her. Maybe he'd find them

together. Of course he wanted her—everyone wanted her. What would he do if he found them together? Someone knocked at the door.

“Just a minute,” he yelled, clearing a path. “Who is it?”

“Maria.”

Todd’s black mood lifted at the sound of her voice. He reached the door and opened it. She was standing in a light blue terrycloth robe. Her black hair was wrapped loosely in a oversized towel. She stepped into the room wearing cute little fuzzy white slippers and smelling of lilacs. He endured the familiar impulse to reach out and take her where she stood, but quickly suppressed it.

“Oh, you’re already dressed,” she said, looking him up and down. “I wanted some coffee—want some?”

“Coffee sounds great.”

She turned and moved back towards the door. “Good, I’ll go get dressed.”

“No, no, why don’t we have coffee here? I’ll just have some brought up.”

“And a croissant,” she said.

She moved to Todd’s bed, sat and began vigorously rubbing the towel against her hair.

He paused, silently adoring her.

“I thought you were gonna call,” she said, glancing up.

“Oh, sorry.”

He moved to the phone, ordered, went to the lounge-chair next to the bed and took a seat. “Why me?” he said, finally.

Maria stopped rubbing her hair and looked at him. “How many times do I have to say it? I wanted to celebrate us getting back together.”

“The only time you talk about getting back together is when I bring it up.”

Maria looked away. “Okay, Todd, whatever you say. Maybe I just needed a friend.”

“I don’t want to be your friend, Maria. I love you.” He immediately cursed himself for saying it.

“I know,” she said, returning to her hair.

"I just..." he paused a moment to collect his thoughts and continued. "I think if we'd have set our minds to it...really set our minds to it... we could've made it real. Maybe still could..."

Maria stopped rubbing her hair and looked up at him. "I wasn't real?"

"You know what I mean."

"You decided you didn't want to be with me, remember?"

"I know."

"What about...you know,"

"I'd have to learn to live without it."

"You couldn't before."

"Maybe I could now."

"No love?" she said, "no sex—ever?"

"Maybe... I could love you enough for the both of us, but I need something. Most times you act like you don't care at all."

"Todd, Sweetie, it's not you. You have to understand, I don't want to be this way. It's not something I've chosen. It's the way I am. Some people are simply born asexual. It's not just sex either. I've never loved anyone. I don't even know what that means—I don't have any idea what that feels like. It never meant we couldn't be together. That's why we're here. I'm trying to make it so we can be together....But, no, it can never be the way you want it to be. It's just not in me, I'm sorry."

Todd had heard it all before, but it didn't make it any less painful. How could this consummate beauty be asexual? What kind of Draconian creator could have produced such a thing? Everything about this woman screamed sex; she *was* sex, and yet, she couldn't find interest in any kind of sexual intimacy with anyone.

"Why were you chosen for this project?" he said.

Maria shrugged. "I was approached by the Vines. Something about my genes, I guess. They interviewed a lot of girls; they picked me."

"They told you they were looking for a surrogate mother for their clone?"

She giggled. "Oh, no, they only told me that after I was closer to being chosen. We all thought we were donating our eggs for

research—they were offering extra credit—a *lot* of extra credit. When they finally told me the truth, I was absolutely zinged.”

Someone knocked at the door.

“Ooo, the coffee’s here,” Maria said.

Todd opened the door to see Father Jenkins. “Todd, we have to talk. I tried to reach Maria but—” The Priest seemed surprised to see Maria sitting on Todd’s bed dressed in a bathrobe. “Oh, I’m sorry. I should’ve called.”

“No, it’s all good, Father,” Todd said, glancing back at Maria.

“Maria just got here. We’re having coffee brought up. Care to join us?”

“Uh, no thanks.... Hello, Maria. Can you two stay in town for a few more days? Dr. Donahue wants to meet with you both. It’s very important.”

~~~

The maid at the Sherrie’s Hotel knocked twice but no one answered so she let herself in. Seeing the figure under the covers, she glanced away, excused herself, and left. It was a good thing. Had she looked, she would have easily recognized the familiar young vagrant who lived in the parking lot next door.

Jesus Christ leapt from the bed and ran for the bathroom. He paced the bathroom floor till he was reasonably sure she had moved on and returned to peer out the window. Satisfied she hadn’t seen him, he cautiously opened the door just wide enough to hang the ‘do not disturb’ sign and quickly slam it shut again.

The sudden shock of being awakened from such a sound sleep had rattled him, but the blur was starting to fade. He began to remember the night before. Was it a dream? He knew he had to get out of there, but first, he was going to get himself a shower. He hadn’t had a shower in months, and he wasn’t going to let some maid keep him from it.

The towels had been strewn all over the room, but Jesus Christ

was able to find a clean, dry one. He climbed into the shower, turned on the water, and moaned softly as his cupped hands channeled the soothing, warm water over his lean body.

As he walked from the bathroom, he realized he hadn't felt this good in years.

He'd been thinking about the aberration from the night before. Something strange had happened. He'd grown used to strange things, but this was different. Everything was different. He remembered the Wells Fargo bag, whirled to check under the bed, and was startled to see Bartholomaei lying there. Bartholomaei never left the box, but there he was, lying on the bed.

"It's still there," Bartholomaei said.

For the first time, Jesus Christ took a moment to seriously consider Bartholomaei.

Bartholomaei didn't usually talk like this, as a matter of fact, he usually just jibber-jabbered. That's funny, he continued to notice. Up until then, he never realized just how odd it was that Bartholomaei never left the box and spent all his time jibber-jabbering.

He moved to the side of the bed, dropped to his knees and looked under. The bag was there, right where he had left it.

"I told you it was there."

Jesus Christ decided to ignore Bartholomaei. He upended the bag. Money tumbled out on the floor in front of him.

"Years ago," Bartholomaei said, "this money was stolen. It was buried and eventually brought to this place in a load of landfill."

Jesus Christ continued to ignore him.

"Be wise spending this money, Lord, or you will certainly be stopped."

Jesus Christ jumped to his feet. Now Bartholomaei was really sounding weird. "Who are you?"

"It is I, Lord, your servant Bartholomaei."

"How did you get in here? Get the hell out of here!"

Jesus Christ caught his breath when Bartholomaei vanished. He ran to the window and looked out, not really sure why. *This is all so weird.*

He slowly returned to the bed and sat silently staring at the wall. After a short time, he decided he needed to talk to Bartholomaei. He was a little afraid, but he desperately needed answers and Bartholomaei seemed harmless—strange, but harmless.

Jesus Christ looked gingerly around the room and called, “Bartholomaei?”

As quickly as he’d left, Bartholomaei reappeared and stood in the middle of the room.

Jesus Christ was silent a moment, then asked, “Who are you?”

“I am your servant, Bartholomaei.”

Jesus Christ looked at Bartholomaei unsteadily and said, “Who—what—was that thing I saw last night?”

“It is one of the very old ones—it has many names: Hethron...Beale...Ramja... Bartholomaei.”

Jesus Christ stumbled backwards.

“You? That was you?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“What—why—are you here?”

“I am here to assist you in your great mission, Lord.”

“B-but, who am I?”

“You know who you are, my Lord.”

“Am I really...Jesus?”

“Yes.”

“*The* Jesus—Jesus Christ?”

“You are Jesus Christ, you are Mohammad, you are the Buddha, and you are the Great One, the champion of the only begotten son. In this life they will call you Brother Michael. You will bring many to the Father.”

Bartholomaei motioned for the newly named Brother Michael to sit in the chair by the bed. Michael gazed with wonder into the eyes of Bartholomaei. He had always known. No one believed him, but somehow he always knew this moment would come.

“I have much to teach you,” Bartholomaei said. “There is so much to do, and so little time left.”

## Chapter two

### Brother Michael

Barney was bending over an unconscious vagabond when Pete walked around the corner.

“Hi B-Barney, who’s th-that?”

“Don’t know, don’t care,” Barney grunted.

“He g-got any ci-cigarettes?”

“Don’t know! I just got here I said! Oh wait—here we go.” The discovery of half a pack of smashed cigarettes softened Barney’s mood.

“Hey l-look!” Pete said. “Somebody’s c-comin’!”

Barney quickly pushed away from the unconscious man and was trying to put space between them when he realized it was just another tourist walking the streets of Nashville. “Pete, you idiot, I thought a cop was coming!”

Pete was already on the unsuspecting tourist. “Hey—hey,” Pete said, stepping out in front of the stranger, “my w-wife and k-kids are in my c-car just down the block and w-we run out of g-gas. You got some ch-change?”

The tourist slowed to a stop just as Barney rounded a nearby corner. He was a young man in his mid-twenties. “This one of your kids?” the tourist asked, pointing at Barney.

“N-no this is my—”

“What’s wrong with getting jobs like the rest of us?” the tourist said.

Barney, from where he was standing, quickly sized the young man up. He noticed the tourist was a little small, held his head too high, walked a little too fast. This little tourist was no threat.

Barney cleared his throat loudly, signaling Pete to move in.

Looking back to make certain Barney was clearly visible, Pete made his move.

“Look, you—you m-mor— m-moro—! G-give us some money or we’ll just t-take it away from ya—how ‘bout that?”

He moved forward and pushed the tourist. The tourist calmly stepped back, pushed off with his right leg, and at the right moment,

swiveled his hip forward. The expertly executed maneuver channeled the young man's entire body weight directly behind the fist that smashed into Pete's forehead. Pete went down like a noodle.

The tourist turned on Barney. "You want some?"

"NO! NO! NO!" Barney yelled, moving away as fast as he could. By the time he rounded the corner, he was already at a dead run. He could hear the young man's laughter fading into the distance as he sprinted away down the narrow alley.

He hid behind the trash bin in the back of the Catholic bookstore until he was reasonably sure the tourist had left the area. Watching his friend knocked unconscious with one mighty blow had scared him. In fact, the sight had conjured up some sort of deep, dark terror that welled up from somewhere better left forgotten. He hadn't felt that terror since he took his last beating from the pig. It had been a long time since he thought about that filthy, fat, drunken pig who married his filthy, fat, drunken pig mother. He could still taste that big, fat drunken pig tongue wallowing around, pushing—slithering into his mouth like a turd. He bent down, retched and threw up his entire morning pillage. "My God," he moaned, he hadn't thought of that in years.

He finally picked himself up and began making his way back to where he'd left Pete. He turned the corner and was relieved to see Pete sitting unsteadily on the sidewalk. "Pete, are you alright? I chased that kid clear down to Eighteenth Avenue but he got away."

Pete, still trying to focus, slowly looked up at Barney. "Hey Barney, wh-what happened?"

Barney stopped and stared. Pete's eyes seemed to be working independent of each other. "Uh, that kid—remember? Pete, you sure you're all right?"

"Re...mem...ber." Pete rolled the word around in his mouth. "Hmm, the last thing I r-remember I was l-laying down on my m-mattress in the hut by the b-barges, then, th-that's it—th-that's all I c-can remember."

"Well, it's probably a good thing. When I got to you he had you down and you were crying like a little baby. I wasn't gonna step in. I



figured maybe if you took enough you'd stand—"

That's when Barney heard it. It was the laugh; the one he had heard as he ran terrified down the alley. It was coming from right over his left shoulder. The tourist was back. Terror choked the words off in his throat.

Without warning Barney released a guttural scream and whirled to face his horrifying adversary.

"YAAAAA OOOOOOOOOHMYGGODDDDDDDDD!"

Barney had braced himself for the fight of his life, only to turn and face that stupid moron kid who thought he was Jesus, standing there laughing and sounding all the world like that tourist. He felt adrenaline inrush his body. The veins on his neck bulged as his rage erupted. He screamed and threw himself in the direction of the stupid little retard. He'd had a day, and this little gimp was gonna pay the price, big.

~~~

Todd and Maria stepped off the elevator into a small crowd of onlookers. The north wing had been cordoned off, but the devastation could be clearly seen through the double glass doors. They stood with several Japanese tourists inspecting the scene. One of the tourists offered possible explanations in her own brand of broken English

"Ooo, cah crash in?"

Todd wasn't sure if the tourist was asking or telling.

"Maybe uh, uh, angry husband?"

The other tourists laughed. Todd smiled politely, took hold of Maria's arm, and gently ushered her toward the hotel lobby. Father Jenkins and Dr. Donahue sat waiting at a secluded table when the couple walked around the corner. Jim stood and pulled a chair out for Maria next to his own. Todd frowned and took a chair across from them.

Maria leaned towards Jim. "What happened? Wasn't your room in there? We didn't hear a thing."

"Uh, yes—yes it was." He reached for Maria's hand. "So, you're gonna be the child's mother?"

"Yes...isn't it wild?"

“What did you say happened last night?” Todd said a little too loudly.

Jim looked over his shoulder at the silent town car driver sitting nearby in the lobby. He turned and looked back at Todd. “Let’s go for a ride.”

~~~

Downtown Nashville slowly rolled past the port side windows of the town car as it silently rolled eastward on Interstate 40.

“Blaze watched the driver’s sectional window go up before turning back to the others. We can talk openly now,” he said, speaking from a seat across from Todd. “Maria told me you knew of the cloning project. Has she told you everything yet?”

“Yes” Todd said.

“No.”

Todd looked at Maria. “What do you mean no?”

“You don’t know everything yet.”

Todd glanced at Blaze and back at Maria. “Okay—so tell me everything.”

“Before we tell you what happened last night,” Blaze said, “it’s important that you understand who this child will be.”

“You mean who the donor is?”

“Exactly. You understand Dr. Donahue’s specialty, don’t you?”

Todd glanced at Jim. “Know *of* it...be lyin’ if I said I understood it.”

Jim leaned back in the seat and tugged at his jacket sleeves. “I’ve developed a process that reanimates inert DNA.”

“And how do you do that exactly?”

“Well,” Jim said, looking around the limo, “to put it simply, I’ve discovered that all DNA bases, no matter how badly compromised, leave a chemical trace. I use altered viruses to introduce an enzyme designed to use the trace as a pattern, replacing the nonviable, missing, and degenerated bases—basically rebuilding the strand from scratch.”

“Hmm, that really is amazing,” Todd said. He glanced at Maria before returning his attention to Jim. “Whose DNA are you

rebuilding for Maria?"

"Jesus," Maria said, grinning.

Todd turned and stared at Maria. "Jesus—like in... the Christ Jesus?"

Blaze nodded.

Todd laughed, looked at the floor and readjusted his Oakland ball cap. "Are you people out of your minds?" he said, looking up.

"Where ya gonna find Jesus' DNA?"

"We have two verified samples," Blaze said.

"Two samples of Jesus' DNA?"

"That's right."

"What kind of samples?"

"Blood."

"Why haven't we heard of this?"

"You have," Blaze said. "One sample is from the shroud of Turin and the other is from the Holy Blood Altar in Rothenberg, Germany."

Todd sat back in his seat staring at Blaze. "And those two samples match?"

"Perfectly," Jim said.

Todd frowned and he readjusted his cap. "Okay, okay, how 'bout this? There's this guy, he's a big gun in the early church. He's packin' the Shroud of Turin and the Holy...Blood...thing around with him altogether in a— covered wagon or—whatever. All of a sudden, he gets a bloody nose—taints everything."

"I understand your skepticism," Jim said. "That's exactly how I reacted, but something very important happened last night that changed my mind."

Maria leaned forward.

Jim, seeing he had the floor, hesitated before speaking. "Last night," he began softly, "I was sleeping, dreaming. Well, I was having a nightmare. Someone beating on my door woke me out of a sound sleep. I got up and looked out the peephole, but no one was there. While I was looking out into the hall, the damn thing banged again and I'm telling you, no one was in that hall." He paused and continued. "I opened the door and...this is gonna sound crazy, but,

well, I think—no, I’m sure—God came into the room.”

“What?” Todd said. “This whole damn thing is a joke isn’t it?”

Jim glared at Todd. “Yeah kid, this is a joke. That devastated hall back at the hotel—don’t you think it’s funny?”

“Jim,” Blaze said, “Todd is only—”

“Yeah, I know what he’s doing!” Jim yelled, glancing at Maria.

“Do you want to hear this or not?”

“Yeah—sorry,” Todd said, surprised at Dr. Donahue’s sudden rage.

The limo fell silent. Jim glanced at Todd, readjusted himself in the seat, and continued. “Okay, in the interest of the project, I’m gonna tell you what happened. What you choose to believe is entirely up to you.”

Todd and Maria exchanged glances.

“The devastation you saw in that hall,” Jim continued slowly, “was caused by monstrous, supernatural sound waves...or something.”

Todd’s eyes narrowed. “Sound waves? What sort of sound waves?”

Jim glanced at Todd before looking back at Maria. “It was a...voice.”

“A voice?” Maria said.

“No, not *a* voice,” Jim said stammering, “*the* voice—God’s voice.”

Todd stared, expecting Jim and Blaze to erupt with laughter at any moment.

“What did God say?” Maria said, wide eyed.

Her childlike naivety brought smiles to their faces. Even Jim managed to smile.

“What?” she asked.

Jim laughed and shook his head. “I can’t believe this is me saying this. God told me, these were His exact words: ‘Thou shalt not hinder my son.’” Everyone sat silent for a moment, then Jim continued. “After that, He smashed down my walls and blew the furniture out the window. I took it as a sign He was serious.”

“So you’re getting behind this thing?” Todd said.

“Not only am I getting behind it, my boy, but I intend to see to it that it happens, on schedule. Frankly,” he glanced at Blaze, “I’m

afraid to do otherwise.”

Maria’s face brightened. “Sweet, what do we do now?”

“First off,” Blaze said, “I’m sure I don’t have to tell you the importance of discretion. Maria and Todd, you can go on about your business for now. The Vinces will contact each of you the moment you are needed. The only delay I see at this point is replacing Dr. Perez. I’m confident the Vinces have a contingency. Jim, we need you now. We have the necessary DNA. All that is left is to prepare it for transfer into one of Maria’s cells.”

Maria leaned forward. “When will we do this?”

“When the details are worked out,” Blaze said, “we’ll bring you here to Vanderbilt where we’ll process and then transfer the zygote into your uterus.”

“Sounds easy,” Maria said.

Blaze and Jim smiled.

“It might sound easy,” Jim said, his face a little too close to Maria’s. “But let me assure you, it’s anything but.”

~~~

Barney threw himself at the Jesus guy. As quickly as he had launched his attack, he stiffened. His ragged scream was cut off as if he’d received a blow to the stomach.

The Jesus guy calmly stepped aside as Barney stumbled past him and fell to the ground. He lay in the dirt heaving, his legs and upper torso wracked by involuntary spasms.

“Barney is lying to you, Pete,” the Jesus guy said. “You were the one who stayed and took it like a man while Barney here scattered like a cockroach.”

The Jesus guy smiled, reached down, and took hold of Barney’s shoulder. At that moment, the all-consuming agony was gone. Barney lay there feeling his strength return. He tried to wipe vomit from his face as the Jesus guy helped him to his feet.

Barney yanked his elbow out of the Jesus guy’s hand. Again, he went down. The same agony enveloped him as he lay writhing on the ground and just as before, the pain subsided as quickly as it had appeared.

“You can’t resist me, Barney,” the Jesus guy said in a soft voice.

“You’re mine now. The Father has given you to me. You too, Pete. You two are the first of many.”

“N-n-no, I don’t th-think so,” Pete said, struggling to stand. “I was j-just headed to the m-m-mission to get something t-to eat.” Pete had just reached his feet when he too fell to the ground retching.

“There will be plenty to eat, my brothers,” the Jesus guy said, kneeling beside Pete. “Food is no longer our concern.”

Pete groaned and sat up.

“I want to show you something,” the Jesus guy said as he pulled a bag from under his coat. Making sure no one was around, he reached and pulled out a fistful of hundred dollar bills, made sure both transients got a good look, and pushed it all back into the bag.

Barney’s first impulse was to knock the kid down and take the money, but it didn’t take him long to return to his senses. Clearly something extraordinary had happened to the retard, and Barney had no interest in challenging him again. Besides, he knew where the money was, and there was plenty of time.

He glanced at Pete who seemed to be taking it in as just another bizarre event in an extraordinarily bizarre day.

“Today we’ll begin,” the Jesus guy said. He took a moment to inspect Pete and Barney. “What we need now is respectable clothing.”

Barney glanced at Pete before looking back at the Jesus guy. “You gonna buy us clothes?”

“No, Barney,” the Jesus guy said. He thoughtfully repeated the name Barney. “I don’t like the name Barney...from here out, I’ll call you Barnabas.”

Barney decided to play the game for the time being.

“Barnabas,” the Jesus guy continued. “You will go out and acquire a medium-sized suit, complete with shirt and tie.”

“Huh?” Barney said. “Me?”

“Yes you!”

“Why don’t we just buy ‘em?”

“Let’s think about that, Barnabas. Is that a good idea? What do you think, Pete?”

Pete glanced up as if to say something but the Jesus guy interrupted him.

“Let’s give Barney’s idea some thought. He suggested that we...” he turned and gestured towards Barney and Pete “...bums walk into a department store and buy three new suits with the tattered, crumbling money I keep tucked up under my coat. I think they’ll be suspicious, but maybe that’s just me.”

Barney and Pete stood motionless, staring at their new leader.

“Peter,” the Jesus guy said, breaking the awkward silence. “I’ll call you Peter. And while Barnabas is finding me some clothes to wear you and I will be liberating a tool belt from that van right over there.” He turned and pointed in the direction of a van parked deep in an alley behind a magazine store. An old sign painted on the side of the van read ‘Music City Electric.’

“N-no I can’t. M-my parole officer s-said if I get caught one m-more time I—”

“Shut up, Peter!” the Jesus guy screamed, his face contorted with rage. He quickly calmed himself. “All things are new, Peter. You must learn to trust me. In a very short time we’ll leave this place and start a new life in the service of the Father.” He moved forward and put his arm around Pete’s shoulder. “It’s like this, Peter, I belong to the Father, and you belong to me. No one can ever take you away from me, you’ll see. Now, go on Barnabas and do as I ask.”

Barney stood a moment staring at the Jesus guy who pointed back towards Music Row. “If I were you, I’d start looking for a medium sized black suit, shirt and tie just around the corner to your left.”

Barney shook his head slowly, turned and began walking away.

~~~

“Peter,” the Jesus guy said, pointing at the half hidden panel van, “you and I will go get the tools.”

The Jesus guy moved off toward the van. Pete held back momentarily before following from a short distance.

The two were brazenly making their way to the side of the van when Pete heard a screechy back door swing open. His heart bucked in his chest. He instinctively ducked for cover but to his horror, there was none. They were both standing within touching distance

of the van when the bulky man, wearing a tool belt full of electrician's tools, rounded the corner. The three men found themselves standing face to face.

~~~

Barney had made his way back to Music Row, turned onto Broadway, and immediately spotted several new suits hanging in a storefront window. He moved towards the door and abruptly stopped. *What am I doing?*

He turned away and proceeded north on Broadway. He'd go back to the hut and forget this weird day ever happened. As he moved away, nausea overtook him. "No," he groaned. He turned and moved back toward the storefront. The nausea subsided.

After taking a moment to try and calm himself he moved into the store and casually looked around. The place seemed to be empty. He moved to the back and peaked through a door left slightly ajar. No one was there. He slowly began making his way back toward the suits pausing occasionally to finger an article of clothing. As he approached the suit, he made a quick check for cameras and looked around the store one more time.

This is too weird, he thought.

He stared at one of the suits, his heart coursing. Finally he snagged it off the display, bolted out the door and ran south on Demonbreun, trying desperately to push the bulky suit under his shirt.

~~~

The big electrician seemed genuinely enraged to find two derelicts standing just outside his work van but to Pete's amazement he softened.

"My name is Brother Michael," the Jesus guy said. "This is my friend Peter. He insists you give us those tools you're wearing."

Pete prepared himself for the pummeling of a lifetime.

"Well," the electrician said thoughtfully, "okay, sure, if you really need them."

"Yes, we do," Brother Michael said, "and we will never bring them back."

The electrician reached into his bags and pulled out a tool used



for cutting new threads. "Can't let you have this, but the rest you can take."

"That'll do," Michael said cheerfully.

The electrician pulled the tool bags off and handed them over.

"Oh, and the shirt?" Michael said, pointing.

"Yeah...here, let me take it off. I have a t-shirt on underneath."

Pete watched in astonishment as the burly electrician pulled his shirt off and handed it over to Brother Michael.

Michael turned and began walking away with his bounty.

~~~

Barney, running west on 16th Avenue, reached the point where he'd left the Jesus guy and skidded to a stop. From where he was standing, he could see that Pete and the Jesus guy had been caught trying to rob the van. A large man was confronting them. Knowing the cops would be on their way, he slipped in behind a fenced dumpster, lifted a flap in the fence and peered out. He was amazed to see Pete and the big guy standing there watching the Jesus guy walk away with a bag of tools.

~~~

Pete stood, staring at the electrician who was watching Brother Michael disappear around the corner.

Without warning the huge man turned on Pete. "What are you doing here? Get the hell out of here!"

"Uh, I-I was j-j-just...okay." He spun and ran in Brother Michael's direction.

"Stay the hell away from my van!" the big man yelled as Pete sprinted away around the corner.

It took Pete a few minutes to locate and catch up with Brother Michael. "W-what, how how'd you do th-that?"

Brother Michael turned and smiled as he approached. "Who do you say that I am, Peter?"

"Huh?" Pete said, crinkling his brows.

"Who am I?"

"You're the, uh...Jesus guy?"

"And who do *you* say that I am, Barnabas?"

Pete stared back at Brother Michael, wondering if he was supposed to respond, when Barney slowly appeared from his hiding place between the fence and the dumpster.

"Uh, I guess you must be...Jesus," Barney answered, clearly shaken.

"Oh, that'll do nicely," Brother Michael said spotting the suit haphazardly pushed under Barney's shirt. Barney stared at him a moment before obediently handing the suit over. Brother Michael, still holding the tool bag and shirt, passed them over to Pete and reached for the suit.

~~~

Barney slowly handed the suit over and stood pondering this new version of the Jesus guy. One thing was perfectly clear, this little retard had become something strange and was somehow dragging him and Pete in a direction he wasn't sure he wanted to travel.

"Walk with me," Brother Michael said.

The three derelicts picked up their bounty and began making their way toward West End Avenue. As the trio approached Vanderbilt University, Brother Michael stopped and sat on the curb directly across from a high rise hotel. Barney and Pete followed suit and sat down beside him.

They both jumped when Brother Michael asked Barney, "Who do you say that I am?"

Barney sat silent for a time listening to the traffic. "Jesus," he said finally. "Like you said before, I guess you're Jesus."

To Barney's surprise, Brother Michael laughed and asked Pete, "Who do *you* say that I am?"

"W-well like B-Barney said, I guess you're J-Jesus."

"You will both call me Brother Michael."

Pete sat pondering for a time and finally spoke. "S-So, when you say who do you s-say that I am, we gotta say, B-B-Brother Michael?"

Michael threw his head back laughing and dropped his arm over Pete's shoulder.

Without warning Brother Michael jumped to his feet. He pointed a shaky finger across the street towards a cab that was picking up a young man and woman from the hotel lobby. Barney, alarmed by

Brother Michael's strange behavior, jumped to his feet and was quickly joined by Pete. They stood looking in the direction Michael was pointing.

"Look!" Brother Michael groaned, overcome with emotion, "the mother of my lord!"

Barney and Pete glanced around wildly, trying to see what it was Brother Michael was ranting about, but all they saw was a beautiful, raven-haired girl staring back from the rear seat of a cab as it pulled away from the hotel.

~~~

"I've seen you before," the old woman said. "You're that lady on the news." She was sitting behind a wide information booth located in the lobby of John the Baptist Hospital.

The news woman looked down at the old woman's name tag. "Hi, uh, Bettie...how are you? I guess you must be a volunteer here—"

"Natalie Brown," the old lady said. "You're Natalie Brown." She looked around the reporter at the disheveled, sandy-haired young man wrestling with a camera, two bags, and a box. "That's a TV camera, isn't it?"

"That's right, Bettie. You know what? If you want to...you can help us get a story for the news. We're working on one right now as a matter of fact."

"Really?" the old lady said grinning. "Why are you talking to me like I'm five? I'm old, not five."

Natalie smiled. "Sorry."

"It's okay, I'm used to it. How can I help?"

"We're looking for Senator Groyden's room—"

Bettie was already shaking her head. "Sorry, can't help you there."

"Why not?"

"Because that room is off limits."

"But we're the press. Politicians love the press."

"First I've heard of that. They specifically told me not to give the press his room number. I've sent five of you guys packing already."

"Why won't you just let us sneak—?"

"I don't know, maybe it's because he's, you know, sick." The old lady slowly stood up from her chair, glanced warily around the vast

lobby and leaned forward. "What's going on? Why's everybody trying to see this guy?"

"If I tell you, will you tell us his room number?"

"Maybe."

The reporter leaned closer to the old lady. "The place is filling up with big shots coming in from all over."

"Coming in where—this hospital?"

"No, Nashville."

"What do you mean by big shots?"

"A couple of senators, religious higher-ups, people like that. This guy was one of them, but he had a little heart attack. That's why we're here. We want to find out—"

"What's a religious higher-up?"

"Popes, cardinals, I don't know. Somebody said they saw Wayne Madsen at the airport this morning."

"Justice Wayne Madsen? The Supreme Court justice?"

"Yeah, he came in this morning."

"No entourage?"

"No, they're like...incognito or something."

"What are they all doing here?"

"I don't know. That's what we're trying to find out."

The old lady sat down, leaned back in her chair and sniffed. "So that's it, huh?"

"Yeah, that's it. Can we get the room number?"

"Sorry, no-can-do."

"But you said—"

"I said maybe."

"Okay," the reporter said, looking around the hospital lobby. She turned to her cameraman. "What do you think, Brett?"

"I don't know," the cameraman said. "We gotta have something."

The reporter glanced back at the old lady behind the booth. "We came here for a story. We can't very well leave without one. Go ahead and roll the camera."

The cameraman lifted the camera to his shoulder and aimed it at the old lady behind the booth.

"What the hell ya doing?" the old lady hollered.

The reporter reached and produced a microphone from one of the boxes the cameraman was carrying and plugged it in. She stood between the camera and the old lady with the palm of her hand facing the camera and began dropping fingers.

"Hey," the old lady yelled, "I don't want to be on the news. We're not supposed to tell you anything!"

Five, four, three, two, one. "This is Natalie Brown, reporting for Channel Two News. I'm here at John the Baptist Hospital talking to Bettie, a volunteer at the information desk and eyewitness to a late-breaking story. Apparently, Senator Groyden of Maine has been rushed to this hos—"

The old lady began pulling on the reporters arm. "Hey!" she yelled.

The reporter stopped talking.

"Room number 446," the old lady hissed.

"Thanks, Bettie," the reporter said. She turned and began putting her equipment away. The old lady scowled at them as they wrestled their camera gear towards the elevator.

~~~

Barney had never seen anything quite like it. At first, Brother Michael paced back and forth, up and down the sidewalk crying. Barney was afraid of the attention, but no one seemed to notice, or care. After a time Brother Michael seemed to return to his senses. He sat back down on the curb and stared at the veranda across the street. "We must go now," he said, finally. "It'll be late soon."

He stood and continued west. The other two fell in behind. They walked another two blocks before Brother Michael made a turn into a parking lot surrounding a branch of the Cumberland Bank and Trust. He continued on into an alley behind the bank. Once there, he sat down and motioned for Barney to sit next to him.

"Inside the bank," he said quietly, "you'll find a set of stairs leading down to a small break room."

Barney felt the color drain from his face as he realized Michael was about to attempt a bank heist.

"Once inside the break room," Michael continued, "you'll find a door off to the left. It'll have a plate on it that reads, 'Electrical

Room.”

Barney looked at Pete to see his reaction, but Pete appeared to be happily taking it all in.

“Inside the electrical room,” Michael said, “you’ll find metal boxes mounted on the walls. You want the one labeled ‘P1A.’ Use your tools to take off the front panel.”

Barney stared at Brother Michael, wondering what would happen if he suddenly bucked and ran.

“There are things in there that are not to be touched,” Michael continued. “Don’t touch anything I don’t specifically tell you to touch.”

Barney nodded.

“In that panel,” Michael said, “you’ll find five different colors of wire. The only ones that concern you are the white ones. They’ll all lead to one junction point. There should only be about ten of them. You’re looking for one white wire in particular. It’ll look different to you.”

“Huh?”

“You’ll know it when you see it. Now, when you see the wire, loosen the screw but do not take it out until I give you a signal.”

“What signal?”

“You’ll know it when you get it.”

Brother Michael picked up the electrician’s shirt. For the first time, Barney noticed it had a patch over the pocket that read ‘Music City Electric’.

“Put this on,” Michael said, pushing the shirt at him.

Barney put the shirt on and Michael helped him with the tool pouch. “Why do I have to do this?” he said, whining. “Why don’t Pet—er—Peter do it?”

Michael pulled Barney away from Pete, dragging him deeper into the alley. Once they were out of Pete’s earshot, he turned to Barney and whispered. “The Father has chosen you because of your superior abilities. We’ll need them if we are to have any hope of pulling this thing off. Do you understand?”

Barney glanced back at Pete. “I understand completely.”

“Good,” Brother Michael said. “Go into the bank and tell the girl

at the counter you work for Music City Electric and that you have come to look at the outdoor GFI circuit. Got it?"

"Okay," Barney said. He slowly moved off toward the front door of the bank desperately trying to remember all he'd been told. He reached the corner and turned back.

"What'll happen if they won't let me in?"

"They will."

Barney paused and decided to chance it. "How you know all this stuff?"

Brother Michael smiled. "I know at ten o'clock this morning Brian Mines, the bank manager, told Sarah Vasso, one of the loan officers, to call Music City Electric about a problem that Andy Ostler, the gardener, was having with the outside GFI circuit. Music City Electric said they'd be here to fix the problem around..." Michael glanced down at a non-existent wristwatch. "Let's see...around...now."

Barney gave Brother Michael the thumbs up and disappeared around the corner.

"Now?" he hollered, reappearing from around the corner.

"They're coming now? What if they come and I'm already in there?"

"They forgot... now go!" Michael shooed him away with his hands. Barney hesitated, shook his head, and moved off.

~~~

Michael turned his attention to his new suit.

"What sh-should I d-do, Brother M-M-Michael?" Pete said.

"Peter, you'll be our guardian. Without you standing guard, we have no hope of pulling this thing off. Do you understand?"

"Y-yes, sir," Pete said.

Michael smiled and patted Pete on the shoulder.

"Are w-we g-gonna rob the bank, B-Brother Michael?"

"Of course not, Peter. Why would you even ask?"

Pete looked on bewildered as Brother Michael began putting on his suit.

~~~

Inside the bank lobby, Barney was trying to look confident as his tool bags clanked and jingled. He walked to the nearest teller. "I'm with Music City Elec—"

"You know where to go?" she said with a thick African-American accent.

"Uh...downstairs?"

"Yeah, downstairs and to the left. You'll see it."

"Thanks," Barney said. *So far, so good*, he thought as he clattered down the stairs.

The break room was tiny so it was easy to spot the door sporting the electrical room sign. He opened it to find a small, musty-smelling room crammed with equipment—probably the heater and water heater—he wasn't sure. Five grey metal boxes were mounted on one of the walls along with racks of what looked like computer equipment. Identical pipes coming out of some of the boxes rose to the ceiling, leveled off, and disappeared through the walls. Little blue and white wires were stretched throughout the room, all originating from a sheet of plywood hanging on another wall. He wondered if these were some of the wires he was never supposed to touch.

He noticed labels on the grey boxes just as Brother Michael had said, but some of the boxes were much smaller than others. He realized with a start that he'd completely forgotten which box he was told to open.

"What should I do now?" he asked himself out loud. "I can't do this."

Panicking, he reached for the door but noticed a soft, orange glow coming from one of the boxes. He looked closer. P1A. That's it.

With newfound confidence, he pulled out his screwdriver and began removing the front cover. Once it was off, he could see the smaller cover Brother Michael had talked about. He carefully removed it, exposing all of the wire in the box, and noticed some of the wires were bigger than others. Some were factory-colored, but the big ones seemed to be taped. One of the big ones was taped white. He followed it to a point where all of the white wires were screwed into a bar attached to the back of the panel. He looked at

the other big wires with tape on them and remembered Brother Michael's warning not to touch them.

He went back to inspecting the white wires again when he noticed one of them had the same orange glow. *"No way. I'm friggin' James Bond here. Now, I'm supposed to loosen this screw...I just hope I don't get killed."*

He closed his eyes and quickly pushed the screwdriver into the bar holding the white wires...nothing. He opened his eyes, found the glowing white wire, and loosened the screw.

"Okay," he said out loud, "now I wait for some sort of signal."

~~~

Upstairs, a handsome young man in a new suit waited in line. When it was his turn, he stepped up to the teller and asked to see Mr. Mines. When the teller inquired as to his business with the bank manager, he told the teller to tell Mr. Mines that he had questions about young Hanna Christensen's account, questions only Mr. Mines could answer.

"Please wait there." The teller said, motioning towards a loan officer's vacant desk. She disappeared into the back. After a time, the puzzled-looking teller returned from the back with an ashen-faced, middle-aged man. Once there, the middle-aged man stood partially in the hall, timidly peeking around the corner. The young man in the new suit stood up and pushed his hand toward Mr. Mines.

"My name is Michael. Could we talk in your office?"

The bank manager casually scanned the room before shifting his gaze back to Michael. "Uh, yes, yes, of course... this way."

The two men walked the short distance to the small office where Mr. Mines offered Michael a seat. Mines took his seat and began shuffling through papers. Michael waited patiently as the bank manager continued to stall for time.

"You say...you're here regarding...Hann—"

"Hanna Christensen," Michael said, staring into the shifting eyes of the bank manager.

"I see..." The manager said, standing. "You know, I'll be right

ba—”

“I’m not a cop,” Michael said.

Mines staggered and clutched the corner of his desk.

“Yes...but...I really should—”

“I had a friend once who bought himself a little boxer puppy,” Michael said. “You’ve seen those dogs, haven’t you Mr. Mines?”

The bank manager didn’t respond.

“No? Well, anyway...my friend had a problem. You see, he knew at some point, because of the breed, he’d have to cut that poor little puppy’s tail off. He was a very softhearted sort and couldn’t imagine the shock of having one’s entire tail brutally hacked off like that, so do you know what he ended up doing Mr. Mines?”

The manager’s eyes dropped to the floor.

“He wanted to ease the puppy into it. He ended up cutting an inch off each week until it was just the right size.” Michael paused for effect. “I bet that tail got pretty sore after a while, Mr. Mines. Sometimes it’s less painful to just get things over with, don’t you think?”

That’s what you’ve been doing all this time, isn’t it Brian? Instead of just cutting that tail off way back at the beginning, you chose to live with this thing all these many years. Each year you tell yourself that next year you’re going to the police and confess...finally getting it over with. You know it’s just a matter of time before they find her... dumb move covering her with your jacket. You were so young and upset. It’s easy to see how you could have completely forgotten your mother’s habit of marking your clothing. You also know that once they do find her, there’s no way they’ll believe your story, but you keep putting it off... thinking maybe you still have a little more time. Just one more year, you tell yourself...chop, chop, chop.”

The bank manager collapsed into his chair.

“The papers say they’re about to start a major reconstruction project in the old subdivision. They’ll be digging that road up pretty soon.”

“I didn’t mean to kill her,” Brian Mines said quickly. “We were both just little kids.”

Michael raised a hand. "I know that, but the police won't understand."

Mines raised his eyes off the floor. "What the hell do you want?"

"I'm here to make a deal with you, Brian. You make my problems go away, and I'll take care of yours."

"How do you know about—?"

"How do I know Hanna Christensen's little body is buried in a shallow grave just under the asphalt road in front of your childhood friend Tyler's house? I don't know Brian...just a lucky guess I suppose."

Brian snorted. He leaned back in his chair, scanned the ceiling of his office before leveling a menacing glare back at Michael. "Well, I got news for you. Look up to your right. You see that security camera? It has an extra little goodie. It records audio. Everything you just said was recorded onto a security tape even I can't get into and since you're now an accessory, we'll both be going off to prison."

"Goodness, gracious," Michael said laughing. "So rude to someone who is trying so hard to help you." He reached for the phone on the desk. "What's your favorite teller's extension, Brian?"

"What in God's name are you doing now?"

"As I said, I'll take care of your problem if you take care of mine. The extension?"

"5549," the manager said softly, slumping heavily into his chair.

Michael spoke into the phone. "Yes, this is Music City Electric. I'm getting interference on my partner's cell phone. Would you mind going downstairs and telling him to turn off that circuit for, say, about, two minutes, then turn it back on? He'll know what you mean. Thank you."

Michael put the phone down and smiled at the bank manager who was staring back down at the floor.

~~~

"Some guy called and told you to turn off that circuit for two minutes and then turn it back on." The robustious voice bellowed from the other side of the closed door.

“Okay,” Barney hollered back. *Now that’s what I call a signal*, he said to himself as he jerked the wire out of the neutral bar.

~~~

Barney had no way of knowing it, but the neutral wire he had just pulled loose, was one that was being shared by three different circuits, on three different phases. When the neutral was lifted, the path back to ground was interrupted. This immediately changed the one hundred and ten volt circuit, into a two hundred and eight volt circuit, sharing two phases.

The surge protector at the computer in Sarah Vasso’s office sensed the change and momentarily absorbed the extra voltage long enough for a built in device to create a short circuit.

Down in the basement, at virtually the same moment, breaker number fourteen sensed the short and switched off with a loud click inches from Barney’s face. Barney yelped and jumped back.

Just on the other side of the door, in the break room, the only receptacle on circuit sixteen, was powering an old Crock-pot. It too, became part of the two pole, two hundred and eight volt circuit. The old element held its own, and quickly began heating up. As the element held, circuits number sixteen and eighteen, Phase B and C, were now free to concentrate their collective two hundred and eight volts on the one hundred and ten volt transformer inside the video machine, wired to the banks security cameras.

Under normal conditions, the fuse at the power supply would immediately burn up and break the circuit, but this fuse was a thirty-amp automobile fuse incorrectly installed to replace a blown half amp fuse.

As the current continued to flow unabated, the coils in the video machine’s transformer started heating up like a filament and quickly began shorting out. The amperage soared upwards of twenty amps but the old heating element in the crock-pot created just enough resistance to avoid a dead short. What was left of the coils in the video machine’s power supply was starting to glow red-hot.

“Damn it!” Sarah Vasso cursed as her computer went down.  
“Every time. Of course, I didn’t save a thing!”

“You smell smoke?” someone yelled from one of the back offices.

By then, the housing that enclosed the videotape power supply was glowing red. One of the lead wires feeding the primary side of the transformer finally melted, effectively shutting off the power, but it was too late. The videotape that had since ground to a stop began to buckle and wilt. Thirty seconds later, the incriminating tape was nothing more than a melted, gooey heap of plastic.

~~~

The bank manager looked up. "Do you smell smoke?"

Michael smiled. "Now that you mention it, yes Brian, I do smell smoke."

~~~

Down in the electrical room, Barney was getting nervous. The moment he pulled the white wire out, weird things began to happen. At first, one of those black switch things clicked real loud and then another one started buzzing. He decided two minutes were up and jabbed the wire back into the neutral bar. A blue spark flashed, causing him to jump back.

*"What the hell?"*

He gingerly poked at the bar with the screwdriver until he decided it was safe and quickly tightened the screw.

Scarcely managing to put the dead front and panel cover back on, Barney became aware of a commotion going on upstairs. Stepping out of the door, he heard someone yell, "I smell fire!" He walked up the stairs just as someone else yelled, "it's in the back...the security video machine...it's smoking like crazy!" No one seemed to notice Barney clank and clatter his way out the front door.

~~~

In the manager's office, Brian Mines jumped to his feet and ran into the back room where the secure box containing the video machine sat smoking.

"The fire department is on the phone, Mr. Mines," an employee said. "They're getting an alarm. They want to know if it's legit."

"Are they on their way yet?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Is anything on fire?"

"No, nothing's on fire."

"I don't think we need the fire department," the manager said. "It's obviously over. I don't think it's too smoky out in the front. Let's just get a...fan or something and blow the smoke out the window."

He turned and walked back into his office where Michael sat waiting. "How did you do that?"

"I told you, Brian, I'll take care of your problem if you take care of mine."

Brian turned, closed his door, and pulled a handkerchief from his shirt pocket. "Okay," he said, wiping the sweat from his forehead, "You have my attention. What is it you want me to do for you?"

Michael smiled and threw his feet on top of the bank manager's desk. "Brian...does the East Rutherford Operations Center mean anything to you? I think you fellas call it the EROC."

The bank manager nodded slightly.

Michael continued. "I think that's the place where they scan the bar-coded identification numbers of each container of currency and its seal into the computer system you folks call the CPMS. Isn't that where they keep track of each container and its depositing bank? I don't know, I'm just guessing here."

Brian nodded again mechanically. He already knew where this was going, but he was busy wondering how this young man could possibly know about Hanna. How did he know about EROC, and how the hell did he manage to destroy a security tape while it was still in the machine?

"I'll get right to the point," Michael continued. "I have this money. It's a little tattered and worn, and I'll be truthful with you Brian, it's a little suspect. Trouble is, I really need it now. It's not that big of a problem because at EROC, unfit currency is directed automatically to one end of the currency processor. That's where all the old money is shredded, am I right? So it occurred to me, if I had a friend in the banking business, he could trade my old money for new, distribute it evenly with other worn out bills and send it off to EROC. They would destroy it, none the wiser, and send the brand new replacement money right back here. What do you think?"

"You want me to launder money for you." Brian said. "How

much money are we talking about?”

“Thirty thousand.”

Brian raised his eyebrows. “Thirty thousand, that’s it?”

“Well,” Michael said, shrugging, “it’s a start.”

“And what will you do for me?”

“I’ll see to it that the body of a little girl will never be found.”

Brian slumped and sat down. “How do I know you won’t be back?”

“I give you my word.”

Brian had no choice but to trust him. “Do you have the money with you now?”

Michael reached under his jacket, pulled out the old Wells Fargo bag, and tossed it on the table.

Brian poured out the draggled hundred dollar bills and counted them. “Whom should I make the check out to?” he said.

“Make it out to...Michael Brothers.”

Brian cut a personal check to Michael Brothers for \$30,000. “Take this to Raylene at the counter. She’ll cash it for you.”

~~~

Blaze and Jim entered the lobby of one of the many buildings that made up the sprawling Vanderbilt Medical School.

“Hello, Father Jenkins,” a pretty young girl wearing a business suit said as the two approached. “We’ve been waiting for you.”

“This is my friend, Dr. James Donahue,” Blaze said.

The girl beamed a smile in Jim’s direction. “I know.”

“And you are?” Jim said, offering his hand.

“My name is Robyn Harding. I’m your escort. Let me know if there’s anything I can do for you during your stay.”

She turned and motioned toward the elevator. “If you gentleman would be kind enough to follow me, we have some folks who are very eager to see you.”

When the elevator stopped, the three stepped out into a broad, empty hall. They turned left and made their way through two large double doors.

“Are you a student here?” Jim said, his voice echoing.

“I’m a fourth-year medical student,” the girl said. “I can’t tell you

how excited I am to be involved in the project.”

“The project?”

Robyn smiled at Jim, turned and continued walking.

A quick right took them through a hall leading to a set of doors labeled ‘conference room D’. As they stepped into the spacious room, Jim pulled to a stop. The room contained multiple rows of long, strategically placed tables, flanked by grey metallic folding chairs. Every chair was occupied.

As the three entered, every head in the room turned to greet them. Those who were sitting stood, joining those who were not, and offered a thunderous round of applause. Blaze immediately fell into character, shaking hands and slapping backs. Jim stood back, overwhelmed by the sudden attention. Blaze quickly returned and pulled Jim into the adoring crowd, where the introductions began.

“Jim,” Blaze said, “this is Senator Cole Bentley and his lovely wife, Juanita. Senator, Mrs. Bentley, my friend, Dr. James Donahue.”

Jim self-consciously smiled and offered his hand.

“Father Randall Millyard, this is my friend, Dr. Donahue.”

“A pleasure to meet you, sir,” Millyard said.

“And this is the Honorable....”

“Justice Madsen,” Jim said, finishing Blaze’s introduction, “I’m humbled, sir.”

“No, I assure you young man...the honor is mine.”

Jim and Blaze made their way around the room meeting celebrities and dignitaries, each one seemingly more distinguished than the last, when both of them stopped mid-step. Between Bishop Hickie and Professor Tanner Cook sat Dr. and Mrs. Victor Perez.

“Victor?” Jim yelled.

“Yes, well,” Dr. Perez said as he poked at his glasses, “I suppose you can say I...had a change of heart.”

“And that’s a wonderful bit of news,” Blaze said.

When the introductions were over, Blaze and Jim were offered seats near the head of one of the center tables. A small stage had been set up and a program quickly began. Dr. Stephanie Wells took the mike.

“Ladies and gentleman, it’s truly an honor to be present at this



tremendous occasion and to be standing here in the presence of such a distinguished and celebrated group. We knew from the beginning, that in order to insure success, we would first of all be facing the daunting task of recruiting the world's finest and brightest scientific minds. I'm proud to report that through the efforts of Father Sterling Jenkins—some of us know him as Professor Jenkins—we have achieved that goal.”

The crowd responded with long thunderous applause. Wells held her hand up, signaling for the applause to fade.

“Heading up the team in the field of bioengineering will be the renowned Nobel Laureate, Dr. James Donahue.”

Applause rocked the room as Wells motioned for Jim to stand. When the ovation subsided, Wells continued.

“Heading up the team in the field of in-vitro fertilization, will be the equally distinguished Dr. Victor Perez.”

Applause reverberated again as Perez stood.

“The medical team will be under the direction of our renowned colleague, Dr. Raymond Yates...”

Wells continued introducing each team until all had been properly recognized. Then she asked them all to stand for one final enthusiastic ovation. When the crowd had quieted, she continued.

“The conversations I shared with many of you just prior to this meeting left very little doubt as to where the bulk of your curiosity lies.” She paused a moment as the crowd appeared to lean forward. “It is my extreme pleasure to announce that our host has finally been selected—the procedure can begin.”

The crowd leapt to their feet and began cheering wildly. Jim found himself caught up in the excitement. The fervor subsided and Wells continued.

“The child's biological roots are Jewish, As a result, the Surrogate is also Jewish, as was requested.” The doctor paused and looked out over the audience. She waited for the crowd to become completely quiet before she continued.

“Thousands of years ago, God the Father spoke to Job, and two years ago Job spoke to us. God's instructions were clear. We have been instructed to write the final chapter of both the Old and the

New Testaments and bring about the second coming of Christ. Ladies and gentlemen, it has already begun. I'm here to tell you—the Lamb will be renewed, and in *our* day, because of you. His blood shall *indeed* renew him.”

The crowd erupted. Jim found himself wildly applauding. He looked in Blaze's direction but in the mayhem, Blaze had moved away. Spotting him, Jim made his way through the pandemonium until he was finally standing by his side. Blaze stood, towering over everyone, banging his huge hands together as tears flowed down his cheeks.

“This is big, isn't it Blaze?” Jim screamed over the bedlam. Blaze looked down at his old friend and hollered.

“The biggest of the big, Jimmy boy, the biggest of the big!”

~~~

Barney had calmly left the bank and moved toward the back alley as quickly as the heavy tool belt would allow. He found Pete, vigilantly standing guard.

“Where's Brother Michael?” Barney said, expecting to hear an alarm go off at any moment.

“H-he went in a wh-while ago. Didn't y-you see him?”

“I didn't see nobody.”

Barney pulled the tools and shirt off and tossed them under a nearby juniper shrub. “I say we get out of here. I'm not sure, but I think something went wrong. Matter of fact....” he paused, staring out into the day.

“What?” Pete said, furrowing his brows.

“It just now hit me. What if that whole wire thing was just a trick to keep us busy while Brother Mich—while the Jesus guy robbed the bank and took off leaving us here to take the blame?”

“Brother M-Michael wouldn't do th-that,” Pete said. “He's s-still in there!”

“How do you know?” Barney said, a little surprised at Pete's sudden boldness. “You been standing here in the back all this time like an idiot. Besides, even if he was still in there, we don't owe him nothin'.”

“W-well, I don't c-care. I'm stayin', least 'till he c-comes out.”

“Fine!” Barney said, walking away. “I’m out!” He quickly made his way back out into the parking lot. Once he hit the street, he began walking northward as fast as he dared, trying not to attract attention. That friggin’ Pete he thought—what an idiot. We had a good thing going until that Jesus guy went psycho.

As he walked, he was surprised by the loneliness slowly enveloping him. He’d never had a real family and he was usually able to avoid any kind of emotional attachments, but Pete was different. Four years earlier, he had drifted from Missouri into Nashville and Pete was the first person he met. Since then, they practically hung out together all the time. Sure he was a dipstick, but Barney kind of liked Pete right from the start. He seemed to know his place. A lot of guys didn’t understand things like that but Pete knew. That is, until now. Now, Pete was pushing back and standing.

Some of the best times the two of them had were when they were bucking the Jesus guy. Now all of a sudden the friggin’ dude was in charge. What was the story with him, anyway? What had happened to him? One minute, he was a retard, and then the next, he was friggin’ Einstein. How did he get that big guy to give him his tools and...

That’s it, he told himself out loud. That big guy and him were in on this thing together. It was all so obvious he couldn’t believe he’d been so easily played.

He finally found Sixteenth Avenue and turned south, moving toward Music Row. It was getting late. He realized he was bone-tired and hungry. Slowly, he made his way back toward the hut by the barges where he planned to drum up something to eat and call it a night. He moved off the road, found his way through the thick foliage surrounding the Cumberland River and quickly located their overturned dumpster by the barges. Once there, he dug around until he found some old stale bread and began choking it down.

If it hadn’t been for the Jesus guy, he thought, I’d have scrounged up something to eat a long time ago.

Chapter Three

The powers that are in heaven shall be shaken

Mark 13:25

Edward Selander first professed to be a Christian in 1973. He attended church regularly the first few years, but became disillusioned and began to fall away from the traditional Christian teachings. In 1977, he began a pilgrimage to find “the one true church.” After a “long and arduous search” he found that virtually all of the earth’s religions were “abominations in the eyes of God.” In 1979, he ordained himself a minister, declared himself a Prophet of God, and founded the Church of the End Times. His new religion had a pretty good run in the early 1980s, but quickly dwindled and died by the end of the decade.

When his church failed, Edward made himself a recluse and withdrew into the woods of Tennessee where he had planned to live out a solitary life. The mailman found him lying in the middle of a dirt road two miles from his shack. He was rushed to the nearest hospital in Franklin, where he lay in a deep coma. It had been determined that he’d been bitten by a rabid raccoon.

As Edward progressed deeper into the ravages of the disease, he was moved to John the Baptist Hospital in Nashville where modern medical intervention made it possible for him to linger for two more agonizing months.

Nurse Nicole Pangos adjusted his ventilator and checked his pupils. They were fully dilated, showing no brain activity whatsoever. That was to be expected. The virus had ravaged his brain tissue until there was little left. For all intents and purposes, Edward Selander no longer had a brain. In fact, a machine was beating his heart and another was breathing for him. He was dead, if not clinically.

Nurse Pangos began giving Edward his daily sponge bath. Lifting his frail chest high off the bed, she untied the light blue hospital smock, pulled it down to his waist and began washing his chest and arms. Edward’s legs began to quake. Nurse Pangos backed away, let the seizure run its course, and continued washing. She pulled his

respirator off long enough to lift his upper torso, allowing her access to his back. She scrubbed hard, paying close attention to the reddening patches developing around his shoulder blades and hipbones. Satisfied he was clean, she laid him back on the bed and moved to his legs.

Pulling the covers down past Edward's feet, she lifted the smock allowing her access to his upper thighs. She had just resumed scrubbing when she felt his legs began to tremble. This time she paid little attention. She was running late and there were other patients who needed to be bathed. She began curiously inspecting the bite mark still clearly visible just above his right knee when she became aware of an odd sensation—a stirring near her right ear. She felt something warm... air, breath—hot, putrid breath—blowing on her right cheek. She turned and all but collided noses with a face, its black pupil-filled eyes inches from her own.

~~~

Nurse Wright heard the terrified screaming all the way back at the nurse's station. Unsure of where the screams were coming from, she jumped from behind the desk and began sprinting down the hall. Within seconds, she pinpointed the room and burst through Edward Selander's door. From her immediate vantage point she could see wild-eyed Nurse Pangos crouching in the corner of the room still shrieking.

Rounding the corner, Nurse Wright skidded to a stop. To her horror, Selander's body was sitting stiffly upright on the bed. A scream exploded from deep within her as she saw his dead eyes stare blankly at the hysterical nurse Pangos. Then his long dead, atrophied neck muscles began responding to his non-existent brain. Slowly, the head began turning towards Nurse Wright. The grisly black eyes, void of life, mechanically moved with the head until the ghastly face came full around and fixed a terrifying stare in the direction of Nurse Wright. Thick spit slowly oozed from the chin, hanging haphazardly from the contorted face.

Suddenly Nurse Joe Glines, one of the male nurses, blasted into the room. What he saw sent him reeling backwards into the wall.

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“What’s happening?” Senator Groyden said.

The news reporter moved toward the hospital room door. “I don’t know.” She peeked out into the hall and turned back. “Could you excuse me for a moment, Senator?”

The Senator sat up on the hospital bed. “Is that someone screaming?”

“I don’t know,” the reporter repeated, still staring down the hall in the direction of the commotion.

“Uh, Senator, I’m gonna go down there for a moment. I’ll be right back.”

She disappeared into the hall without getting an answer. The cameraman stood looking at the senator for an uncomfortable moment. “I’m sure she’ll be...right back.”

The senator scowled as the cameraman nervously went silent, turning his attention to his camera.

The reporter reappeared in the doorway. “Bring...camera...now...run...bring the camera...now!” She was ashen faced and screaming.

“What?”

She jumped, grabbed the cameraman, and pulled him out the door. The two clattered down the hall and turned into Edward Selander’s room. The cameraman gasped as the horror filled his viewfinder. He dropped his camera to his chest and joined Nurse Joe Glines, pressing himself against the wall.

The reporter pushed her way through the mayhem toward the cameraman. “Take...get...get this!” She pushed the camera back into the cameraman’s face. Again, the horror filled the camera’s view screen.

Something deep inside of what was left of Edward Selander began pushing air through dead, atrophied, vocal cords. As his oozing mouth began forming words, Nurse Joe Glines lost control of his bladder.

“Woe! Woe! Woe to the inhabitants of the earth!”

The voice sounded like heavy grade sandpaper grinding across a piece of hardwood.

“Woe! Woe! Woe to the inhabitants of the earth!”

The voice reverberated out of the room and down the hall, invading every room until every corner of the hospital was vibrating with the sound of it.

"How thou art fallen from heaven, o Lucifer, son of the morning! How thou art cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations!"

The three nurses and the news crew stood staring at the horror before them, still sitting up on the bed. The camera rolled as the very air in the room began to thicken. From nowhere and everywhere, near and far, it started softly at first. It was, they were almost sure, but it didn't sound human ... it sounded like... screaming. It sounded like a billion voices in one immense chorus. Like the unearthly disconnected screams of the forever damned.

The sound was building into an unimaginable roar. Everyone in the room cupped their ears and hit the floor. The cameraman glanced up just in time to see the horror collapse onto the bed like a rag doll.

Edward Selander had finally been granted his long awaited death.

~~~

The flight from Nashville had been uneventful. Maria managed to sleep most of the way and when they landed at LAX, she surprised Todd by asking to go to his apartment instead of the dorms where she lived. Todd had tried several times throughout the long flight to talk to her about the project but to his amazement, she had seemed completely disinterested.

When they finally reached his apartment, they flipped a coin for the shower and she won the toss. He waited patiently on the couch until he heard the shower stop and the bathroom door open.

"Todd," Maria called from the bedroom, "could you help me, please?"

Todd stood and walked through the bedroom door. "Whoa!" he yelled as he entered the room. She was standing at the bathroom door completely nude. "Sorry," he said, instinctively looking away.

She pulled the towel up over her perfect frame "Oops!...I didn't realize you were coming in."

Todd turned to leave, his face blazing red.

"I just wanted to know," she said.

He turned back.

"Just...wanted to know..." She slowly came towards him, the towel still loosely draped around her. He was instantly, overwhelmingly, aroused. She moved to him, pressed her firm breasts into his chest, and slowly lifted her resplendent face toward his, until their lips all but touched.

"I...just wanted to know...if I could...borrow a shirt?"

Todd could feel tiny beads of sweat forming around his eyebrows. "Sh...sure, in the...closet."

"Thanks," she said grinning. "Now get out of here and give me a little privacy."

Todd studied her face momentarily before leaving the room. "I think I finally have you figured out," he said through the closed door. "You're one of them multiple personalities." He could hear her giggle.

As he sat on the couch he began to feel angry. She was clearly teasing him. How could she do that when she knew how much he loved her? Maybe she wanted him to be forceful.

Maybe he... *no, of course not*, he told himself. This wasn't the fifties. Still, she had never done anything like this before, not to anyone he knew of. If she had, everyone would've known about it; the legendary Maria Rose, coming on to some dude. It would've been all over campus. Maybe...maybe she really wanted...

Maria appeared, wearing nothing but one of Todd's long shirts. "Ooo, that felt so good."

It took Todd a moment to remember she was talking about the shower.

"Oh...yes," he said. "I could handle one...a freezing one."

She giggled again and to his amazement moved right to him pressing her voluptuous form against his. "It's chilly in here," she said, snuggling under his arm.

"Maria!" Todd said, pushing her away. "What the hell are you up to?"

"I— just..."

"You don't love me so what are you pullin'?"



"Todd I, I can't say I...love you, but..."

"I know...so what do you want? Tell me now."

"I want..."

"You want me to kick around with you, be your...buddy or something, but it ain't working. I thought I could, but I can't. It's too frustrating."

"Todd!" Maria shouted, grabbing his face in her hands. Her demeanor turned grave, her flashing green eyes staring into his. "I want to...will you...marry me?"

Todd opened his mouth to speak, but nothing happened.

Maria slipped off the couch and went to her knees in front of him. She reached into a shirt pocket, produced a small black box, and timidly handed it to him.

Todd, still unable to react, reached down, took the box from her hand and opened it. Inside was a small gold wedding band. "What are you doing to me, woman?" he said quietly.

She moved closer. "I'm asking you to marry me." She began tenderly stroking the calf of his leg.

"Why... Maria why?"

She didn't answer.

Todd gently pulled her up from her knees. "You're driving me crazy. Why do you want to marry me? At least tell me that."

"Because you love me."

"Everybody loves you."

"Not like you."

Todd was silent for a time. "If we did get married," he said finally, "would you ever be able to...be able to love me back? Will we be able to make love...ever?"

Maria looked down and shrugged. "I don't know...maybe. I just don't feel those things like other people. Maybe you could teach me?"

Todd smiled. "Stop teasing me," he said softly. "If we ever got married, you'd have to stop teasing me like this. It ain't human."

"So that means the answer is yes? You will marry me?"

"Now hold up," Todd said, feeling a little pressed. "I'm still not sure why you all of a sudden—"

Todd stiffened. “So *that’s* it! How could I have been so stupid?” He pushed her away. “You’re looking for a daddy. A daddy was part of the deal. The Vincens weren’t gonna let you host the embryo unless you found yourself a dumb country tool.” He glared down at her. “What you did to me in the bedroom just now...it made you cheap, Maria. You were trying to use me, but you were only cheapening yourself.”

“No,” Maria said, backing away. “I’m not cheap—”

“No this is good,” Todd said, nodding. “This is helpful. I’m sure now... ol’ country tool Todd Riley has finally had his fill.”

“But...but Todd—”

“Get your things, Maria. I’m taking you home.”

“No, Todd!” Maria yelled, breaking into tears. “I thought I was supposed to do that...in the...in the bedroom. What am I supposed to do? I don’t know how. How do real girls do it? I thought you said you loved me enough for the two of us. Please Todd...don’t give up on me.”

“You’re Maria Rose,” Todd said. “Ain’t no way you’ll ever be alone.”

“Todd, please teach me what to do. I need you. Listen to me. I don’t love you. I can’t. Okay, I said it, but I never lied about that. Love isn’t everything. A lot of people get married who aren’t in love. Maybe it could happen someday. Who knows? Todd—” She stopped talking and took hold of his shoulders. “I want—I need—a family—”

A thunderous sound coming up from the street below stopped her mid-sentence. Todd realized he was hearing the familiar sound of an impending California earthquake. Instinctively, they both jumped for the bedroom doorframe. Todd took up position, bracing himself for what was coming. Maria wrapped her arms around his waist. The floor jumped beneath their feet. Maria looked up at Todd. This was not normal...this was more powerful.

Todd felt both door jams rip open beneath his hands as gaping cracks appeared. The top door jamb instantly gave way beneath the buckling ceiling and lodged in the doorway just short of crushing the two huddling figures. Maria screamed as debris rained down on their

heads. Suddenly, the cavorting room fell into darkness.

Todd grabbed for Maria and began crawling in the direction of the door as the television rolled off of its stand and smashed to the floor. The stove and refrigerator danced in the kitchen, pounding out a deafening rhythm as they bounced. His grandmother's oak china hutch teetered and crashed to the floor, slinging shards of glass throughout the wildly shaking apartment, narrowly missing them. The two pushed through the door into the hall and spotted the green exit sign glowing through the black tumultuous dust.

They ran, arms over their heads, trying to shield themselves against the falling rubble crashing down around them. They found the door leading to the dimly lit stairwell. Then something felt dreadfully different—a small change of atmospheric pressure. Maria felt it and pulled Todd's arm, jerking him to a stop at the top of the stairs. Something was coming—something horrible.

They whirled and dove into the corner as the titanic sound slammed them to the floor.

*"Woe! Woe! Woe to the inhabitants of the earth!"*

The otherworldly sound hit them like a truck. Todd wrapped his body around Maria. He could feel her screaming beneath him, but the sound was smothered by the colossal, unworldly shriek. The noise abruptly stopped, but the earth was still shaking. Todd jumped to his feet and began pulling Maria towards the stairs. They heard it approaching again.

*"Woe! Woe! Woe to the inhabitants of the earth!"*

They both winced and hit the floor, covering their tortured ears, as still another wave of sound crashed down upon them.

*"How thou art fallen from heaven, o Lucifer, son of the morning! How thou art cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations!"*

As the last sonic blast passed through, the quaking shuttered to a stop. They jumped to their feet and ran down the two flights of stairs, carefully dodging the debris. They managed to find the door leading into the parking lot. It took them a moment, but they finally pushed their way through.

As they quickly moved away, they could hear the sirens of emergency vehicles racing around the city. They saw people running

to and fro, but somehow they seemed distant. After some time, they found an isolated park bench behind a small garage and sat down.

Maria, still dressed only in Todd's shirt, looked up at him. Her moist, anxious eyes sparkled in the moonlight. "Todd, what was that? Did you hear that?"

"I-I'm not sure...sometimes earthquakes do weird things."

"It was a voice, Todd. You know it was. I think it was the same voice Dr. Donahue heard in Nashville."

"You mean like....God?"

"Yes," Maria said gravely, "like God."

Todd fell silent for a time. "What did you hear?" he said finally.

"Something about...woe unto the earth... and being cast down or... I'm not sure."

"Was it supposed to mean something?"

"I don't know," Maria said, "but I don't think it's a good thing when God talks."

He pulled his cap off, rubbed his hair and returned it to his head. "Do you..." his voice trailed off.

"What?"

"Do you think it has anything to do with the, you know, the baby?"

"Do *you* think it's about the baby?" she said, moving closer to him, "I hadn't thought of that. But why 'woe unto the earth'? Dr. Donahue said the voice told him God wanted the baby to be born."

"I don't know," Todd said, "maybe the baby will grow up and be like the... Dark Avenger or something."

"You mean Batman?"

"Well, no...not Batman, more like, kinda like...maybe he'll be the Messiah or something, only now he's like, mean to the, uh...sinners and stuff." Todd felt foolish. "You know, it's just a thought."

"No, I think you might be right," Maria said. "Good thing for us we're his mom and dad, huh?"

Todd knew he should be angry. As always, she had simply assumed he would eventually fold to her wishes no matter the cost...and of course, she was right. As he looked down into those dazzling, hypnotic eyes, what little remained of his resistance simply

surrendered to bovine-like compliance. He loved Maria Rose and all hope was lost. For better or worse, intimacy or no intimacy, he was cursed to love her unconditionally and unequivocally and there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it. Tears gathered in his eyes.

"What?" Maria said. "You look sad."

He reached and kissed her tenderly as if it were the first time. Then, sitting there in the pale moonlight, he pulled her even closer to him, holding her, adoring her, surrendering to her. A moment passed before he quietly answered, "Yeah... I guess it's a good thing we're his mom and dad."

~~~

Luckily, Jim and Blaze were walking together in one of the University parking lots when the quake hit. Nothing had prepared them for the noise. Blaze was instantly knocked to the ground, but Jim had managed to stay on his feet as the asphalt danced beneath him. From the moment the first colossal peal passed through, Jim realized, to his horror, that he'd heard that sound before; but this was much, much bigger.

"Blaze! BLAZE! Did you hear that?" Jim yelled after the quaking had ceased.

Blaze was working his jaw, trying to clear the pressure from his eardrums.

"Did you hear that, Blaze?" Jim yelled again, finally getting the priest's attention.

"Yes, Jim," Blaze said, scarcely able to hear his own voice, "I think it's safe to say I heard that. But what in the...what in God's holy name was it?"

"That's it, Blaze. It's God. That was His voice. That's what I heard in the room, only this...this was bigger. Boy, was this bigger."

Again, Blaze braced himself, cupping his ears. Jim whirled, covering his head. Both men winced as a police cruiser with its siren screaming blew past them, followed closely by a loud ambulance. They were heading toward one of the dorms.

"People must be hurt!" Blaze shouted. He jumped to his feet and began running in the direction of the dorms. Jim quickly followed. As they cleared a low knoll, they could see other people hurrying

toward student housing.

~~~

Barney bounced out of his makeshift cot as soon as the shaking began and ran into the bushes to hide from the horrible sounds trying to annihilate his eardrums. But the shaking stopped. He lay in the underbrush too terrified to move. From his days in California he remembered that sometimes these things had aftershocks, so he decided to stay put for a while. He lay in the thicket for what seemed like hours listening to the sounds of disaster as siren after siren screamed throughout the city. At one point, he thought he heard people coming down near the river but it turned out to be an old, terrified dog. As the cool evening slowly drifted back toward normalcy, Barney's exhaustion began to overcome his dark feeling of dread. He was just dozing off when he heard rustling just above his head.

He looked up. The sound was coming from the clearing. Nerves already on edge, he jumped to his feet.

"Who...who's there?"

"It's j-just m-me and Brother M-Michael." Pete said.

Barney bailed out of the bushes. "Boy, am I glad to see you!"

Pete pushed a brown paper bag in Barney's direction. "Hey, look it, we b-brought you some L-Lucky F-Fried Chicken."

"Oh man, I'm starved," Barney said, as he snatched the bag away and sat down on a rock.

"So," Barney said, between slurps, "where's the Jesus—where's Brother Michael?"

"He's over b-by the hut. Ever s-s-since the earthq-quake, he's b-been real q-quiet. It s-scared the hell out of him."

"Scared the hell outta me too," Barney said, spitting bits of chicken.

"Yeah, b-but he's not usually s-scared a n-n-nothin'."

Barney stopped eating long enough to dig a piece of gristle out of his mouth with a dirty fingernail. "You known him a day and you think you know all about him. You're an idiot...you know that."

"I d-don't know B-Barney, s-somethin' about him...seems like I've kn-n-nown him all m-my whole l-l-life."

“Hey, where’s the money from the bank?” Barney yelled, suddenly remembering.

“B-Brother Michael has it.”

“How much we get?”

“D-don’t know, Brother M-Michael never s-said.”

“Never said?” Barney yelled. “What do you mean he never said?”

“He s-said t-t-tomorrow w-w—”

“Come on gimpy, spit it out!” Barney said, making a rolling motion with his hand.

“He said t-tomorrow we was all g-gonna get j-j-jobs.”

“Jobs? It’ll be a cold day in hell before I get a job.”

“It’s cold as hell out here tonight, isn’t it Barnabas?” Brother Michael’s voice came from behind Barney.

“Uh, yeah, it’s kinda chilly,” Barney said.

Michael was carrying a handful of firewood. He dropped it into the fireplace, reached into his pocket, pulled out a piece of toilet paper, and strategically placed it into the wood. From another pocket, he produced a book of matches. Within moments, a brand new fire was popping and crackling at their feet.

“So...what did you think of the earthquake, Brother Michael?” Barney said.

“That was not an earthquake, Barnabas.”

“Really? Sure felt like an earthquake from where I was sittin’.”

“‘How thou art fallen from heaven, o Lucifer, son of the morning.’” Michael quoted, staring into the fire. “‘How thou art cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations.’ How many earthquakes say things like that, Barnabas?”

Barney felt uncomfortable. He’d heard it too, but he didn’t want to think about it.

“Gather around me, my brothers,” Michael said, motioning for the two men to move closer. Pete moved quickly. Barney held back a moment before slowly moved in.

“Barnabas,” Michael said, “who do you say that I am?”

“Like you said, you’re Brother Michael...whatever that means.”

“The voice you heard tonight, the one you called an earthquake, was the second sign foretelling the coming of the only begotten of

the father, whose shoelaces I am unworthy to untie. Soon there will come a third sign. The third sign will horrify the world and bring it to its very knees. All three of these signs will appear before the child is born.”

“W-what’s the f-first sign, Brother Michael?” Pete said.

Michael ignored his question. “Peter, who do you say that I am?”

“You’re B-Brother Michael,” Pete said softly, “my f-friend.”

Barney felt a stab of jealousy.

Brother Michael, silhouetted against the blackness of night, slowly stood up and smiled down at Pete. Pete jumped and scrambled backwards, narrowly avoiding the fire. Barney yelped and jumped to his feet. Standing slightly behind Brother Michael, to the right and to the left, two huge figures appeared and stood glowing in the firelight. The being standing to the right placed a colossal hand on Brother Michael’s shoulder and began speaking in a voice that somehow sounded familiar, as old as time itself.

*“This is my son, champion of the only begotten; of him I am well pleased. He is the first of three. You are the first of many. You have been chosen to bear witness of him, as he has been chosen to bear witness of He who is to come. He is the first of three. You are the first of many!”*

They were gone as quickly as they had appeared. Michael slowly sat back down on the rock where he’d been sitting. Barney and Pete stood staring at him. Finally, Michael spoke softly.

“I am the first of three, the first of three great signs. You are the first of many. The first disciples, the first of many disciples. I will teach you many things, and you will bear witness of my teachings and me, as I will bear witness of he who is to come, the only begotten of the Father.” After a long pause he continued. “Ask me anything, I will tell you everything.”

The campsite fell silent; only the crackling sound of the fire could be heard.

Pete finally summoned the courage and sat down at Michael’s feet. “Brother M-Michael, d-did you s-say I c-c-could ask you anything, and, and you’d t-t-tell m-me everything?”

“Yes, Peter, ask me anything.”

“Well, this is k-kinda s-stupid.”



“Go on, Peter, ask your question.”

“Okay,” he said slowly. “Why...do I...s-s-stutter?”

Barney snickered, drawing a fiery glare from Michael.

“W-well, I said it was s-stupid.” Pete said, lowering his eyes.

Michael reached down and gently patted Pete on the shoulder.

“It’s not stupid at all, Peter. I understand what it was like for you to grow up with an impairment that invited constant cruel ridicule your entire life. It must have been dreadfully painful, especially coming from your own father.”

Tears welled in Pete’s eyes.

“But it turns out there’s a reason for your impairment. You stutter...so you will believe.”

Barney crinkled his eyebrows and looked up from his place at the fire. “Huh?”

Pete glanced around at Barney and Brother Michael. “I don’t know what that means either.”

“You stutter so you will believe,” Michael repeated.

Pete looked at Michael and shook his head. “Sorry, Brother Michael, I don’t get it.”

“Pete,” Barney said, “say this real quick. The skunk sat on the stump, the skunk thunk the stump stunk but the stump thunk the skunk stunk.”

“Huh?” Pete said, scratching his chin.

Michael smiled at Barney.

“Try it Pete,” Barney said. “C’mon, I know you know it. You taught it to me, remember? It always makes me laugh ‘cause it makes you sound like such a retard.”

Pete looked up at Michael, who smiled and nodded.

“Well, okay, I know it, but you know I can’t say it. I’ll try if you want me to. Uh, let’s see, the...skunk sat on the stump, the skunk thunk the stump stunk, but the stump thunk the skunk stunk.”

“Pete!” Barney yelled. “You didn’t stutter. Not once!”

Pete’s face dropped. “I didn’t stutter...did I? I didn’t stutter. I’m not stuttering now. The skunk sat on the stump,” Pete began chanting faster and faster. “The skunk thunk the stump stunk but the stump thunk the skunk stunk.” His eyes filled with tears as he

chanted over and over, clapping his hands to the rhythm. He chanted until he became too emotional to continue and he began to cry. Brother Michael cried too.

"It's a miracle," Barney said softly, staring at Brother Michael in the firelight. "It's a real miracle."

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Nine days later

The wildly gyrating news footage zoomed through the pandemonium and settled onto the horror staring back with black, glistening eyes. The focus waned and the camera wobbled as something out of sight banged against it. The face of a frantic woman came into view. Instantly, the camera was back, focused on the nightmarish aberration. The oozing mouth was moving.

"*Woe! Woe! Woe to the inhabitants of the earth!*" The camera began shaking wildly. "*Woe! Woe! Woe to the inhabitants of the earth!*" The surreal, terrifying scene bucked against the sounds of screaming. "*How thou art fallen from heaven, o Lucifer, son of the morning! How thou art cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations!*" The unblinking footage bounced and blurred against the pandemonium.

"It's been nine days since the great earthquake. We've all seen the footage, we've all heard the sounds, and felt the earth move. What does it all mean? This is Hugh Brolley reporting live, from CNR headquarters. With us in studio is Dr. Stephen Fulbright, the author of the bestselling book *The Paranormal Crutch*. Also joining us is the executive editor of *The Conservative Eye News*, Reverend Lloyd Neal.

Dr. Fulbright, we have the footage. According to everyone involved, it was a clinical impossibility for Mr. Edward Selander, the man in the film, to do what he did."

"But he did it. How could it be impossible?"

"And...and...please let me finish, scientists around the world are saying that a worldwide earthquake is impossible."

"There again, how could it be impossible if it happened?"

"Let me make my point, Doctor. Some exceptionally prominent people are saying this wasn't an earthquake at all."

“Who’s saying that? Of course it was an earthquake. Are they saying what happened in California wasn’t an earthquake?”

“Scientists are saying that whatever it was, triggered the actual earthquake in California.”

“I don’t know who *they* are. Are they saying it was a supernatural event?”

“I’m saying these people had some real problems with the so-called ‘worldwide earthquake.’ First of all, the epicenter had apparently been in downtown Nashville, Tennessee, a place not known for its seismic activity. And it was unlike virtually every other known earthquake ever recorded. This one seemed to build momentum as it moved further away from its epicenter.”

“So?”

“Also, unlike every earthquake ever recorded, this one didn’t originate from tectonic activity.”

“So? How are they saying it originated? Are they saying it was a supernatural event? That’s all I need to know.”

“The scientists we talked to have no idea how this so-called earthquake originated, but doesn’t it bother you that it originated from the very place this footage was filmed, on the very day, hour, and minute it was filmed?”

“No, no, no, we can’t be sure when this footage was filmed.”

“Excuse me, Hugh, can I jump in here?”

“Yes, by all means, Reverend Neal.”

“This footage was shot by a well-known and respected news crew. There were several witnesses, including a United States senator.”

“Senator Groyden was in a hospital room down the hall. Let’s keep our facts straight, Reverend.”

“There were three nurses and the news crew. How do you explain the death certificate stating that Mr. Selander died at the very moment the earthquake started?”

“Easy. It was a fake.”

“Oh come on, Doctor. You’re telling me the nurses, the news team, and the hospital all took part in some elaborate scheme to dupe the world? For what reason?”

“I’m saying we had some very strange and abnormal seismic

activity. I'm saying it brought out all the kooks."

"Oh, I see. They were all kooks."

"Well, what do you think it all meant, Reverend? Do you think it was a message from God?"

"Of course!"

"See, that's what I'm talking about. Everything can be explained away by this all-enveloping God myth. That's why you have to buy my book, *The Paranormal Crutch*. In bookstores everywhere."

"Nice pitching, DiMaggio."

"Excuse me? DiMaggio wasn't a pitch—"

"Let's go over what happened, shall we Doctor?"

"By all means, Reverend Neal."

"Mr. Selander, brain dead—he had been in a coma for two months—sat up in his bed and quoted Isaiah 14:12 to the letter. The entire world heard his quote in the form of a never before experienced, non-tectonic, worldwide, earthquake. Then the man dropped dead in front of a news camera. What is it gonna take to convince you, Doctor?"

"We had a strange earthquake, Reverend Neal. Everything else you just said was bunk."

"Thank you, gentlemen. We appreciate you coming into the studio to chat with us. On to other related news, scientists continue to be amazed at what little damage the earthquake caused throughout the world as a whole. Only seventeen people were reported killed while fifty were injured. Most of the deaths and injuries occurred during the secondary earthquake in the Los Angeles, California, area. Business and services worldwide were able to resume normal activity within a week. I'm Hugh Brolley, thank you for watching CNR news."

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Deep in the great void of space, the school bus-sized craft floated 380 miles over the marbled turquoise planet. Its orbital speed, around 17,500 miles per hour, insured that it would return to this very spot, somewhere over the west coast of Africa every 97 minutes. The gleaming chrome cylinder, with its odd wing-like protrusions, glistened against the blackness of space. Suddenly, the

craft's four reaction wheels whirled to life. The gyros aboard the Hubble space telescope began tugging the big craft hard to port, as the hatch door energized and slowly swung open.

The craft methodically maneuvered around until the precise Fine Guidance Sensors began to slow the gyros down. The bulky telescope coasted to a stop exactly where it was told and quickly began focusing on a tiny point somewhere between the earth and star cluster NGC 3532. Once in place, the four cameras located within the Hubble's wide field and planetary camera began recording data.

Camera number four was recording a large panoramic view of the area, a view that would later be scaled down to be in proportion with the other three images being recorded simultaneously. The magnified view then fell on WFPC2's planetary camera. It was viewing a region of space four times smaller than that seen by the wide field cameras, but was recording four times as much detail, focusing on an area no larger than the state of California and two and a quarter trillion miles away.

Three hours later, deep in the lush, green Puerto Rican hills, 26 electric motors located at the Arecibo Observatory whirled to life and began tugging the vast Gregorian dome—suspended 450 feet above the inverted reflector—until it was over the exact spot corresponding with the frequency of the same small area of space.

Near San Diego, California, at the Palomar Observatory, two 125 ton dome shutters began swinging open. At the Atacama Large Millimeter Array, deep in the Atacama Desert of Chile, 64 colossal antennas, each spanning forty feet, began eerily moving in unison like mammoth faces staring into the sky. They moved until they located their programmed coordinates and stopped. Within hours, computers were crunching out the numbers as all over the world scientists frantically scrambled, checking and rechecking the disturbing data, now pouring in from everywhere.

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Brian Mines turned and locked the door to the bank. It was all but over. Two weeks earlier, when the earthquake hit, he thought for sure he'd be caught. With the banking operation down, it would've

been impossible to get that \$30,000 back into the system without his wife finding out it was gone. He was not a rich man and it was only a matter of time before she noticed the missing money. He'd been hiding the checkbook and luckily all online access to their account was unavailable because of the quake.

Within the last few days, he'd been able to slowly filter the old money through the system replacing it with new money which he quickly deposited back into his account. So far, he'd been able to launder \$24,000. He'd be able to get the last \$6,000 from a shipment coming in the following morning. Then it would finally be over.

As he drove toward his home in Brentwood, he realized how incredibly tired he was. For the last few weeks since the day of the quake, the day that strange young man had changed his life forever, he'd mindlessly been obsessed with getting the money back into his checking account. He hadn't had much time to think about anything else. Now, dark, unsettling thoughts began to emerge. Would Michael Brothers keep his end of the bargain? If he didn't, what could he do about it anyway? How did he know about little Hanna, where she was buried? No one knew that but him. He could be sure of that. If anyone had known about it, he would've been in prison now instead of driving down I-40.

Poor little Hanna...if only she hadn't started screaming like that. She was a couple years younger than him, a lot when you're only twelve years old. She didn't mind what they were doing, at first. They shouldn't have been doing that. He shouldn't have kissed her. He would've given anything if he hadn't put his hand where he did, but she didn't need to start screaming like that. He put his arm around her neck to shut her up...but she died...and so fast. Only years later did he realize he had cut off the blood supply to her brain.

"Oh God," he said out loud, remembering the moment he realized she was dead. They had been building the road in front of his best friend Tyler's new house and they had just finished digging a trench for the water pipe. He put her in there under the cover of darkness, put his jacket over her, and covered her up with a couple feet of dirt. Tears welled in his eyes as he remembered that night.

“Hanna...Hanna,” they were calling for her all night long, searching for her all over the neighborhood. He could still hear her mother crying as she called out. He could hear her calling and crying as he lay in his bed, the first of many, many sleepless nights. The next morning he was too upset for school. His mother wasn’t surprised. After all, the missing child was a friend of his. He spent the day staring out the window watching anxiously as neighbors and police continued searching the neighborhood. By then, they were all sure she had been taken far away.

After a few days the search for her was called off. The work crew arrived and began working just inches from where Hanna’s body lay buried. He thought he’d lose his mind each time a worker jumped in and out of the trench. Finally, they unknowingly finished burying her along with the pipe they had been working on. A week later, she was under the brand new blacktop road in front of his best friend’s house. There she remained, resurfacing only in his frequent nightmares. He’d never told anyone, not a soul, so how could Michael Brothers have known?

He pulled into his driveway a little relieved to see the lights in the bedroom were out. Marge was already in bed. He quietly opened the front door and made his way downstairs to his den, mixed himself a Crown and cola and settled down to watch TV. He scrolled through the dozens of channels until he found the news and threw the remote onto the couch.

“Just one call is all you need,” the attorney said, smiling into the camera. Brian threw his feet on the coffee table. A large, round-faced man appeared, waving a check.

“Rupert Tuckett got me half a million dollars.”

The camera switched back. “I can’t guarantee you half a million dollars for your accident,” the smiling attorney said, speaking in a thick southern accent, “but I’ll sure see to it that you get every penny ya’ll deserve.”

His smiling face gave way to an attractive African-American woman, sitting behind a desk in front of a large room. Techno music thumped as numbers scrolled across the bottom of the screen. The music faded and a close up of the woman’s face came

into view.

"This is news at the top of the hour," she said. "NASA scientists at the Lyndon B. Johnson Space Center have confirmed that an asteroid sighted over two billion miles away may come a little closer to the earth than was originally thought. Dr. Carl Waddington, shown here visiting the Baikonur Cosmodrome Kazakhstan launch site, assures us that there is absolutely no danger of the asteroid actually hitting the earth, but we might be able to catch a pretty close glimpse as it passes by—a mere thirty million miles away." She quickly turned to a new camera angle. "We'll return with Spencer Roark and news from around the world in a minute, as all-night news continues after these messages."

"Unbelievable," Brian grunted, shaking his head, "another damn commercial." He took the moment to freshen up his drink before returning to the TV. The techno music swelled and softened.

"A mountain lion, spotted up a tree in a Los Angeles suburb, spends time in the hoosegow as it recovers from a dart filled with tranquilizer, courtesy of the California Fish and Game." The TV screen filled with a caged cougar stalking back and forth. The happy sounding male voice continued. "The animal was taken back to the wild and released unharmed."

The TV geared up for another quick news snippet.

"The small Chicago subdivision of Westmire, Illinois, unearthed a trio of wacky pranksters this morning."

Brian held his breath and quickly put his drink down on the table. Did he say Westmire, Illinois? He pulled his feet from the coffee table and moved closer to the TV.

"Three men showed up this morning and proceeded to dig a hole in the street right in front of Joan Dorning's house and then..." the announcer paused for effect, "they just drove away, leaving Mrs. Dorning and the rest of her neighbors with this gaping hole in the street." Brian jumped to the screen as a middle-aged woman appeared standing in front of his childhood friend Tyler's house. It was old now, but he recognized it immediately.

"Yeah," she said, "they came in here with a city truck and tractor. They were dressed in water company coveralls so when they dug the

street up, nobody thought anything about it and then...they just left. Now I have a big hole in the street right in front of my house.”

“The water company told CNR News that there was no work planned for this area,” the announcer said as the camera panned around the familiar neighborhood and back to Joan Dorning, pointing at the large hole in the street. “And they told us they didn’t have any idea who it was digging up the roads or, for that matter, why. However, they do promise to have a crew out here first thing in the morning to clean up the mess. And that’s the news from around the world in a minute. Now, a word from our sponsors.”

Brian stared into the TV, not hearing or seeing.

“He did it. I can’t believe it. He really did it. He made her go away just like he said he would.”

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“Father Jenkins,” Maria said. “We want you to marry us.”

Blaze smiled and glanced at Todd. “That’s wonderful. I’d be honored to marry you. When are you planning this grand occasion?”

“How about right now?” Todd said, looking around the room. He had been surprised to see how well Father Jenkins appeared to be living.

The priest’s office on the fourth floor of the Patch Rankin building opened up into a small private lobby decorated lavishly with leafy, living plants. A cheerful secretary named KaLee was sitting behind a broad desk bearing nothing but a wide, flat screened computer monitor, a phone and a half-full cup of coffee. She had sent them directly into father Jenkins’ office the moment they arrived.

“We want to get married right away,” Maria said. “Todd wants to go back to school. We’re hoping he could start here at Vanderbilt right after the baby is born.”

Blaze paused, obviously collecting his thoughts. “Yes,” he said finally, “that would be good.” He walked behind his desk and sat down. “You know in all the turmoil of the last few weeks, we’ve never really been able to discuss your relationship with each other, with the child, and for that matter, your relationship with the Vinces.”

Todd glanced at Maria. This was the first time he had considered the implications of having to live under the scrutiny of the Vinces. He wouldn't be the child's father. Maria wouldn't be his mother. Technically, the Vinces would be both mother and father. He felt uneasy.

"We haven't had a chance to talk much about what it will be like to be the parents of such a...unique child," Blaze continued.

"I thought the Vinces wanted the baby raised in as normal an environment as possible," Maria said.

Blaze smiled. "Yes, that is true, and for that reason you must never tell anyone who the child is."

Maria glanced at Todd before looking back at Blaze. "They covered that when I was being interviewed, but I never really understood why."

Blaze stood, walked around his desk and sat on the corner. "Ok—a hypothetical situation—we go right to the media and tell them about the baby—"

"I know we can't go to the media," Maria said. "It's illegal to clone people."

Blaze held up his hand. "Please hear me out."

"The whole damn world would be camped in our front yard," Todd said, breaking his silence, "That's what would happen."

Blaze pointed at Todd. "Yes, and imagine what it would be like for the child."

"So, we can't tell anyone at all?" Maria said.

Blaze ignored her question. "Ok, say you tell your neighbors, parents, friends, that your little boy is the clone of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. First of all, they're gonna think you're crazy, or maybe they just might believe you. Imagine how they would then react to the child.

"Think of it this way," Blaze continued, rearranging himself on the corner of his desk, "there are roughly around—oh, let's see—six and a half billion people in the world today. About a billion of those people are gonna' believe your little boy is God's own clone, and some of those folks can be pretty radical. There will be the crazy fringe bunch, those who will look upon the child as an abomination,

or maybe a threat to their particular belief system. What I'm telling you now is not hypothetical. We know for a fact these people exist."

"But, what about the baby?" Maria said. "How can we expect a little child to keep such a secret?"

"Easy, we don't tell him."

"So you're saying we're supposed to raise up this child as our own and never tell him we're not his folks?" Todd said. "Don't you think that'll mess with him when he finally figures it all out?"

"We *will* tell him...when he's eighteen years old."

Todd glanced at Maria and looked back at Blaze. "Wait, I don't get it. Why have you people done this...gone to all of this trouble if the boy won't even know who he is?"

"Because this is a child, not a specimen. We're bringing him into the world and we are responsible. The child must be free to find his own way, to choose his own path, just like any other child."

"I thought you were calling this the second coming of Christ," Todd said, shuffling in his chair.

"We do believe this is the second coming of Christ as foretold in the Bible, but if he is who we think he is, he won't need us to introduce him. That's another thing Todd. You're an atheist aren't you? That's what your bio said."

Todd frowned. "Oh, now wait a minute, are you telling me I have to be religious?"

"No, no, to the contrary, we don't want you to instill any religious bias whatsoever onto the child."

"That's good," Todd said, feeling a little violated. "Yeah...I'm an atheist."

Maria looked up at him.

He glanced back at Maria and shrugged "Or at least...I...think I'm an atheist."

"This is a decision the Vincens made early on in the project," Blaze said. "It does have scientific merit, and it shouldn't be intrusive for the child. They don't want to contaminate any possible precognitive genetic traits that might arise."

"You mean they think he might actually carry over some of Jesus' traits?" Todd said.

Blaze shrugged. "We just don't know. These are such unique circumstances, we simply have no idea what to expect."

"So, if he walks across the water in the wading pool we shouldn't be overly concerned?"

Blaze chuckled.

"Is this what we have to look forward to Father Jenkins?" Maria said. "Are the Vincs gonna' micromanage our daily lives from here on?"

Todd realized she was upset and moved towards her.

She turned and pushed him away. "This isn't gonna' be our baby is it Todd? Ever." She jumped to her feet.

"Maria," Blaze said, "wait, I didn't mean—"

Maria turned towards Todd "Don't you see? The Vincs are gonna tell us where to live, where to work—"

"No Maria," Blaze said, "please sit down. I didn't mean to give you that impression. Believe me, the Vincs sympathize with you on this issue. We completely understand how intrusive all of this must be for you. What I've been talking about today are conditions the Vincs insisted upon before we can even begin. The truth is, I thought I was only repeating this for Todd's benefit. It was my understanding that you had fully understood and accepted the ground rules during the screening process." Blaze paused for a moment and continued. "Trust me, we have no interest in micromanaging the way you raise the baby. We know if we tried it would only damage the child."

Maria looked at Todd.

"Don't worry," Todd said. "Everything will be fine."

She dropped her face in her hands, sat silent for a time and glanced back up at Blaze. "You're right," she said softly, "I guess I'm being a little paranoid."

"Well," Blaze said, "I admit, I did sound a little... pushy."

The room became uncomfortably quiet. Blaze finally slapped his hands together. "So...about that wedding?"

Maria sniffed and wiped a tear from her face. "We're ready right now."

"Already — do you have the license?"

She pulled a license out of her bag and pushed it towards him.

“Blood tests?”

“Uh huh, here they are.”

Blaze looked the documents over and smiled. “Looks like everything’s in order.” He leaned and hit the COM button on his phone. “KaLee, would you come in here for a moment?”

Within moments, Blaze’s secretary appeared at the door. “We’re gonna’ have a wedding,” Blaze said.

“Great. When?”

“Right now,” Maria said grinning. “What do we need?”

“Traditionally or legally?”

“Legally.”

“Well, let’s see — we’ll need a license, blood tests, Father Jenkins and me. That’s about it.”

“We’re set,” Blaze said, shaking the documents in his hand.

The secretary looked the couple over and smiled. “I guess all that’s left is for you two to stand up and face Father Jenkins.”

Maria quickly stood and moved forward.

Todd took a moment to adjust his tie, stood and joined Maria.

“Face each other please,” Blaze said softly.

Todd turned and looked into Maria’s stunning eyes. Maria smiled pleasantly at Todd before shifting her eyes back to Father Jenkins who was pulling a Bible out of his desk drawer. The big man pulled several papers from the pages of his bible and began.

“The story goes like this,” he said. “The beautiful princess finds a toad in the forest. She kisses the toad. The toad turns into a prince, and the couple lives happily ever after. Another story goes something like this: The beautiful princess finds a toad in the forest. She kisses the toad. The princess becomes a toad, and they both live out the rest of their miserable lives as a couple of old toads.”

Maria smiled.

“I suspect your marriage will fall somewhere between these two fairy tales...it’s completely up to you. A marriage is like a garden, it needs constant attention. Like any garden, there will be weeds. Get rid of the weeds before they have a chance to grow and take hold: If you cultivate your garden it will yield a large bounty. If you don’t,

your bounty will wilt and die. It's up to you.

Do you Todd, take Maria to be your wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, from this day forward, until death do you part?"

Todd shifted his eyes away from Blaze and looked at Maria. "I do," he said softly.

"And do you Maria take Todd to be your husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until death do you part?"

"I do," Maria said, looking up at Todd.

"I pronounce you, husband and wife."

"Oh, look at me," KaLee said, wiping a tear from her eye. "I've done this a million times and I still cry."

"Todd, we're married," Maria said, smiling.

"Yeah, I guess we are."

"You don't seem very happy."

"Yeah, I'm...happy."

"I guess that makes you two Mr. and Mrs. Todd Riley." Blaze said.

Todd and Maria exchanged glances. "She's decided to keep the name Rose," Todd said, quietly.

Blaze leaned forward and signed the marriage certificate "Oh, I see. Well, a lot of kids are doing that these days."

"I guess you won't need me anymore," the secretary said, moving towards the door.

Blaze waited till she left the room before speaking. "When will you be seeing Dr. Perez?"

"Dr. Perez?"

"Yes, he's back in the project."

Maria frowned. "That's a surprise. Jim...Dr. Donahue said he was really angry."

Todd looked up. "When did you talk to Donahue?"

"Oh...it was at a... little bar...near the hotel—"

"When were you at a bar with—"

"He *was* a bit put off," Blaze said, smiling.

Todd was silent for a moment. "Why did Dr. Perez come back?" he said finally.

Blaze shrugged. "Truthfully, he didn't say,"

"We just got into Nashville last night," Maria said. "We've been dealing with the movers all morning and haven't had time to talk to anyone. This is the only place we've been so far."

Blaze reached into a small drawer, pulled out a business card, and handed it to Maria. "You should contact Dr. Perez as soon as you can. I understand this procedure needs to be scheduled very carefully. He's very anxious to talk to you."

"Ok," Maria said, retrieving the card. She sat silently scanning the card and looked up at Blaze. "Who all knows about...you know...all of this?"

"A good many people know about the project, of course, but only a few of them know who the surrogate parents are. Dr. Perez, Dr. Donahue, you folks and I are just about the only ones who know. I think a good policy would be to never talk about the project unless someone talks about it first."

"That's a good idea," Maria said. "That's what I'll do."

Todd and Maria stood and moved towards the door.

"Keep in touch," Blaze said. "I'm here if you need anything at all."

Maria returned, stood on her tiptoes and kissed him on the cheek. "You're the best."

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Blaze watched them walk across the lot from his office window. *My Lord, we've clearly made a mistake.* After all the hoopla, he couldn't imagine starting all over again. This girl fully understood the rules, otherwise she would have never been chosen. It was obvious she was trying to manipulate someone—the Vinces or that Todd kid. He didn't know why she was doing it. He decided to let it ride, for now.

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"You don't seem very happy," Maria said, as they pulled out of the driveway.

"Sorry."

“Aren’t you glad we’re married?”

“Of course I’m glad. It’s just that...” he sat quiet for a moment.

“It’s just that what?”

“It just didn’t feel...real.”

“But it was real. We’re really married now.”

Todd drove in silence for a time. “I suppose you’re right,” he said finally. “Maybe I’ve just got the newlywed jitters or something...I guess I just expected something...more.”

“Todd, please don’t. You know what I’m capable of...and incapable of. You knew before we started out.”

“I know,” Todd said, quickly changing the subject. “You know you got ‘em by the short hairs, don’t you?”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t worry about them stickin’ their nose in... they can’t.”

“It sounded to me like we have a lot to worry about.”

“Once the baby is born, he’ll be ours,” Todd said. “Even if they did try to get strong-handed...What they gonna tell a judge? The kid belongs to us because we cloned him?”

Maria laughed.

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Multinational Surface, Space Environment, Geochemistry, and Ranging — also known as MESSENGER— was a spacecraft specifically designed to spend a year orbiting Saturn’s moon, Titan. It was built to analyze the moon’s density, investigate the structure of its terrestrial core and look for clues as to how it evolved and interacted with its mother planet.

The recent discovery of a mountainous object careening towards the earth changed all that. Messenger was immediately sent on a near collision course with Saturn, a risky maneuver designed to use the planet’s gravitational pull as a slingshot. The maneuver had to be used three times to reach the necessary speed required to enable the craft to rendezvous with the asteroid somewhere between Saturn and Jupiter.

At the Johns Hopkins Applied Physics Laboratory, Mission Operations Center at Laurel, Maryland, solemn looking scientists gathered around computer monitors, collectively witnessing the first

pictures of the asteroid now coming into view via NASA's Deep Space Network of antenna stations.

What they saw was not encouraging. Most asteroids spin in space like a well-thrown football. This one was rolling rapidly in a perpetual somersault, rotating at the rate of around eight times every twenty-four hours.

It was too early to tell exactly what the asteroid was made of. Some asteroids were soft and covered with dust, others solid rock or ice. Upon first observation, this one seemed to be comprised of solid rock, or worse, iron. The most obvious and ominous reality clearly seen, even at this early stage, was the asteroid's enormous bulk. The first solid data to come in showed the asteroid was about seven miles wide, over nine miles long, and was traveling at the speed of just under 16,000 miles per hour.

As Messenger approached the asteroid, the team went to work. First to be used was the Dual Imaging System, an instrument consisting of wide and narrow-angle imagers, used in the mapping of landforms. It was also used to gather topographic information and track variations in surface spectra.

The news was not good. The data showed the asteroid was barbed and spiked with spear-like stalagmites covering most of its surface like an enormous porcupine. They were at a complete loss as to how this could have come to be.

Next to be used was the Gamma Ray and Neutron Spectrometer, an instrument used to detect the relative abundance of different elements on the surface. It determined that the asteroid was primarily made up of solid iron. Again, the news was bad.

The Mercury Laser Altimeter bounced laser light off the surface in an effort to further map the asteroid's topography. Finally, the scientists measured the asteroid's mass distribution using the Radio Science. The data had been accumulated. It was time for the team to meet with Homeland Security.

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**B**laze looked out the window of his office. It was getting dark. He'd been fighting that old familiar compulsion all day. He knew better, but he had already decided where he'd be going tonight. In

fact, he'd already made the call. *It didn't mean anything would happen*, he told himself. He was just going down there to have a look.

He buzzed his secretary, just to make sure she had left the building, removed the black suit and familiar white collar and hung them neatly in his office closet. He found a t-shirt and a pair of jeans and quickly put them on. His old Miami Dolphins baseball cap was deep in the back of the closet next to his Olathe cowboy boots. He dressed and stepped out of his office, made his way to his car and pulled out onto 24th Avenue. He drove towards Church Street and turned right.

Hot, forbidden lust swelled within him as he anticipated the evening that lay ahead. *I'll just go down there again and have a look around. If it looks like there could be any kind of trouble, I'll get out of there tout de suite.*

It wasn't long before he found Polk Avenue and turned left. He drove about a half block up Polk, and pulled to the curb.

His internet source had made the arrangements. The kid was supposed to meet him here. He looked up and down the street—nothing unusual.

*One good thing about being a priest, it makes for a good excuse if a cop ever wondered why I'm parked on the street in the middle of the night. Officer..., I'm just here looking for a certain boy. His old mother is worried sick about him. He is very rebellious so it's hard to say what he might tell you—*

Something off to the right caught his attention. He saw a kid walking his way. The adrenaline flowed as the lust surged into his chest. His heated face flushed with blood. For a moment he thought he might drool in his own lap. To his disappointment, the kid glanced his way and moved on. *Just as well, he looked a little too old anyway.*

He noticed the kid was slowly making his way back. The kid approached the car, walked to a wall and casually leaned against it. Blaze leaned over and rolled down the window, expecting the boy to respond, but the kid ignored him.

*He's a good looking boy, maybe as young as fifteen years old.* That's as young as he had dared hope for. The kid continued to ignore him. Finally, Blaze decided to take the chance.

“Hi,” he said, trying to appear friendly. The kid glanced at him, snickered, and began moving away.

“Wait!” Blaze yelled. The kid stopped and glanced back. He slowly moved to the car, leaned into the passenger side window and stood staring at Blaze.

“Are you — the one I’m supposed to see here tonight?” Blaze said.

“Show me what you got.” The kid’s voice was high-pitched and juvenile.

“Uh, I’m sorry...what did you say?”

“You heard me. Let me see what you got!”

Another long pause.

“Did Herb call you?” Blaze said.

“You want somethin’, you gotta show me what you got. That’s how it works, OK?”

“Didn’t Herb...”

“It’s the way I roll, old dude,” the kid yelled. “Either represent or I’m out the play... know what I’m sayin’?”

“I...uh...I don’t know what you mean.”

Blaze was stammering, looking for the right words when the kid abruptly turned and walked away. “Wait!” Blaze yelled.

The kid kept walking.

Blaze hit the key and the car roared. He quickly drove up the street until he caught up. “Just tell me what you want,” he yelled, “I’ll do it!”

The kid stopped and moved to the car. “Take off your pants.”

“My pants?”

“Take off your pants right now or I’m blowin’ out.”

Blaze unzipped his pants and pulled them down around his ankles.

“Pull down your underwear and lift your shirt. I want to see all you got...no playin’.”

Blaze looked around to be sure he wasn’t being observed and did as he was told.

The kid looked him over closely. “Ok,” he said finally, “put your clothes back on.”

Blaze quickly dressed himself. The kid swung the passenger door open and hopped in. Blaze stared at him.

"That's all I needed," the kid said. "Now I know you ain't a cop."

Blaze smiled, confused. "Why would you think I'm a cop?"

"You look like a cop."

"How do you know I'm not one?"

"Cause a cop can't show his junk, especially to a kid. It's against the game. It's called entrapment."

Blaze felt like the kid. "Where should we go?"

"You've never done this before, have you?"

"No," Blaze said sheepishly.

"I got a place."

Blaze pulled out and slowly drove east.

~~~

When Maria was chosen to be the surrogate it was understood the Vincens would provide lodging for her, the child and her husband, until the child reached the age of eighteen. They moved into a small home on the outskirts of Nashville. It was set far back from the road and was surrounded by thick forest. Todd brought Maria's old couch out onto the back patio and had a fire burning in the barbeque pit someone had built in a small rock wall.

"Very nice," he said, surveying their new domain. He was standing on an eight foot square wood deck extending off the kitchen patio doors and built three feet above the back yard landing. A few steps off the deck, a concrete patio edged a barbeque pit built into the rock wall bordering the west property line.

Thirty feet beyond the patio, a posh green carpet of grass flourished in the midst of thriving flowerbeds held together by thick, ivy crowned railroad ties stacked three high. Lights located on the back corners of the house illuminated the view.

He walked back into the kitchen and reappeared with two, thick cut t-bone steaks, a white chef hat and an apron that read, *I'm Smokin*.

Maria giggled when she saw him. She was sitting on her old couch they had managed to wrestle through the kitchen, over the deck and onto a special spot on the concrete patio.

“Where did you find a cooking suit at this time of night?” she said.

Todd glanced up at her, deadpan. “What suit?”

Maria’s attention shifted to the big steaks Todd had thrown onto the grill. “Ooo, when do we eat? I’m starved.”

“Patience my darling, one mustn’t rush these things.”

“Are you sure about the baby?” she said.

“What?”

“The Vines, they won’t be able to take the baby?”

“Over my dead body,” he said, poking one more time at the steaks. He turned and moved towards Maria. “They couldn’t do it legally, that’s for sure.” He sat down next to her on the couch. “If they tried to do it illegally, we could always threaten to go public.”

“But...Father Jenkins said, telling the world would only hurt the baby.”

“Well yeah,” Todd said, “and I agree, we should never *really* go public but we could sure threaten the hell out of them. What we could do is make sure our little family is very well documented.”

Maria frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Lots of family pictures...little league pictures, school pictures, movie pictures of the birth...things like that. Anything we could use against them if they try to pull something.”

“Yeah,” Maria said, thoughtfully.

“Whoa!” Todd hollered as a small fireball engulfed the two steaks. He jumped to his feet and rushed to their aid.

“I’m so excited about the baby,” Maria said.

Todd returned carrying two heavy, beef-laden plates. “Yeah me too.”

This would be the first meal in their new home. Todd was completely content and Maria seemed to be genuinely happy.

After they consumed the meal Todd left and returned carrying two glasses of champagne.

“Champagne,” Maria sang. “This is just perfect.”

Todd sat down. To his delight, Maria cuddled tightly under his arm.

“I love this place already,” she said.

They fell silent listening to the soft sounds of the night. Distant crickets chirped softly as a cool evening breeze made the fire embers flair and crackle. Todd stroked her raven hair.

“Remind me to call Dr. Perez in the morning,” she said.

He reached, pulled a lock of hair away from her face and gently kissed her neck. “Hmm...I will.”

“First thing in the morning,” she said, softly.

Todd rolled his hand down her shoulder and onto her hip.

She dropped her head onto his chest and sighed. The sound of a train echoed in the distance. “How long do you think it will take before we are actually pregnant?” she said after a long quiet time.

He moved his lips to her soft neck. “Not long.”

“I hope it goes well.”

“Mmm, me too.” Todd gently rolled his hand over her hip and onto her stomach.

“Todd,” she said softly.

Todd rolled over onto her, pressing himself against her.

“Todd,” she said, louder.

Todd pulled at the robe until it loosened. He pressed his lips to her soft, nubile skin.

“Todd!” Maria yelled, pushing him off her.

“Oh no, Maria...what?”

“Todd, we can’t...”

“Why not?”

“What if I get pregnant?”

“I...I’ll get protection.”

“Those things break!” she yelled, starting to cry.

“Oh Maria, they don’t break.”

Maria’s face morphed to an angry grimace. “Todd, stop pushing me! Stop pushing me, do you understand?” She jumped to her feet and ran into the house.

Todd slowly fell forward onto the couch. “I can’t do this. No one could do this.”

~~~

The evening Blaze had eagerly anticipated had come and gone. The boy had satisfied his deepest, most forbidden lusts and had left

him feeling filthy. Never, never again, he reassured himself. I will never do this again so help me God.

Fervently chanting, sometimes shouting out his new covenant with God, he drove out of the city of Nashville. If anyone ever found out, he thought, it would be the end of my life.

As he drove through the night, he imagined what it would be like if everyone found out. What would the Bishop think? What would Jim think?

He remembered all those times when he and Jim had been out with girls. It was almost laughable how well he had pretended. He couldn't remember a time when he wanted a girl. He'd always wanted men and boys.

The Godforsaken internet had come along. He owned a computer and had full access to the internet years before he had stumbled across that first gay porn site. The moment he saw it, he immediately moved on. But the next night he found himself looking for the site, until finally he found himself indulging all but every night.

Then Herb, a virtual, faceless computer friend, turned him on to the site. It was so well encrypted, it was virtually impossible for the authorities to penetrate. At least that's what he had been led to believe. Still, he was paranoid. Possessing and distributing child pornography was a huge crime, one that came with years of prison, especially for a priest.

He unlocked the door to his apartment and went straight to bed. As he lay in the dark, he began recalling the evening's events. The hot lust rose up, pushing his tortured mind back into the depths of depravity, again.

~~~

Weeks later

On the morning of March 12, Maria, with Todd by her side, was admitted into the maternity ward within the sprawling Vanderbilt hospital. This day had been very carefully chosen. It would be a full week before she would start her monthly menstrual cycle. The first item on the agenda was for Maria to undergo an ultrasound so that Doctor Perez's staff could determine the condition of her ovarian

follicles and begin an aggressive treatment program.

When the day's testing had been completed, Maria was taken to her private room, where she and Todd would be able to relax. They lay together on the small single hospital bed watching TV. After a short time, Dr. Perez stepped into the room.

"How are we feeling?" Perez said as he poked at his glasses.

Maria sat up on the bed "Never better. I just can't wait until we really get this thing going."

Perez found a stethoscope and put it to her chest. "Breathe in."

Maria inhaled deeply and exhaled. "How long before I'm pregnant

"We are all working hard to make that happen as soon as possible young lady. Basically what we're doing now is harvesting your eggs to—"

"They tested me you know," Maria said, interrupting Perez. "to see if my eggs were good, even before I was chosen."

"Yes," Perez said. "Your antral follicle count was tested and you were administered gonadotropins to see how your ovaries responded to the stimulation. Your tests were especially positive. I suspect that's one of the reasons you're here now."

Maria laughed and leaned forward. "I guess there isn't much I can tell you." She gently placed her small hand on the doctor's arm and moved closer.

He flushed, taking a moment to release himself from her gaze and quickly re-adjusted his glasses. "The medication I have prescribed should stimulate your ovaries and hopefully produce a number of eggs."

"What happens if it doesn't?" Maria said.

"Well—If it doesn't, we'll simply do it again."

"What's happening with, you know, the other cells?" Todd said, breaking his silence.

"Wouldn't know, that's Jim Donahue's Field. I do know that everything is going as planned. No foreseeable problems."

"Oooo, this is so exciting," Maria said. "I can't believe I will soon have Jesus' DNA right here in my own body."

Dr Perez looked over his glasses. "Yes, well... no matter whose DNA you'll be carrying, it will be a great scientific achievement."

Maria's radiant smile softened. "You don't believe do you...I mean like...Father Jenkins?"

Perez raised an eyebrow. "I believe you're going to give birth to the clone of a two thousand year old man. That certainly sounds like a miracle to me—a miracle of modern science, nothing more."

"We heard you left the project in a huff the very first night," Todd said. "You had a sudden change of heart. Why?"

"This will be a great scientific achievement. I simply decided it was worth the risks."

"You'll see," Maria said. "This baby will be very special."

He stood up from his stool and moved towards the door. "No argument there." He stopped, pulled the door open and looked back. "Everything is going very well so far. I'll be checking on you often. You've been scheduled for an ultrasound every day this week and we'll be keeping a close watch on you, so don't worry about a thing." He poked at his glasses, turned and walked out of the room.

Todd pointed towards the door. "Now, that's a funny guy."

Maria giggled. "He is...odd isn't he?"

They sat silent. Todd looked out a window for a time before turning back towards Maria. "Why do you do that?"

"Do what?"

"You know, come on to everyone like that, right in front of your husband."

Maria smiled and softly slugged Todd on the shoulder.

"Who...Dr. Perez?"

"Well yeah, him and every other man."

Maria moved closer, reached behind Todd's head and gently pulled their two foreheads together. "I'm sorry Todd," she said.

"Dr. Perez is the man for me."

Todd was quiet for a time then softly said, "but he's like, eighty."

"I like old men... not young, handsome men like yourself." She began gently rubbing her forehead against his, rolled her face and softly kissed his lips. He reached behind her, pulled her against him and gently pushed her to the bed. The moment passed. The kiss turned into a gentle hug. Finally Todd reluctantly pulled away. Then, in the flickering of the soundless television set, they drifted off to

sleep.

~~~

With the exception of the soft sounds produced by shuffling paper and the periodical re-adjustment into the opulent chairs that adorned the small oval office, the place had remained virtually silent for over fifteen minutes.

"There is no way that this thing could be a mistake?"

The sudden loud voice startled Carl Waddington. "Uh, no sir. We've gone over the numbers a thousand times. The data has been confirmed by every credible source."

The answer was met with a scowl from the man behind the desk. "First that earthquake, and now this," the President said.

The Secretary of Homeland Security leaned forward. "Mr. President, there's no question, this thing is real, and it's coming in very fast."

The President looked over his reading glasses. "Well obviously, I'll need to be made aware of all possible courses of action I have at my disposal." He slowly looked around the room and was visibly shocked by the lack of response. Finally, he turned towards General Turpin, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. "Well?"

"We... could send a co-operative multinational nuclear response...but—"

"But what?"

"Well sir, that scenario carries with it a whole new set of problems. Even if we did manage to blow this rock up, chances are, we would wind up powdering the entire earth with nuclear fallout."

"Could we steer it away using some sort of rocket?" the Secretary of State asked the President, who directed the question back to Carl Waddington.

"Boy...I don't know...Normally, we probably could. There are a number of ways. But this thing is as big as Vermont and traveling about...16,000 miles per hour. On top of that, we only have a few months."

"Say the worst happens," the President said, "and this thing hits us, do we have any idea where?"

Carl Waddington looked up. "North America."

"Hells Bells," the President said under his breath. He sat silent for a time. "Any other ideas?"

Again, the silence was deafening.

"I need solutions people and I need them fast!"

"We have been in touch with all of our resources Mr. President," the Director of the CIA said, obviously feeling a need to respond.

"They have assured us that we can count on their complete cooperation regarding any decision you might make."

The President stood and walked to the window. He stared out at the palatial white house lawn before turning back to speak.

"Put every available resource to work on the booster rocket plan, and people..." The President raised his finger and pointed it around the room "...no leaks, do you hear me? The American people are not to know about this until we have a real solution."

~~~

Six days after Maria entered the hospital, blood samples were drawn to measure her serum levels of estrogen. That data, coupled with the results of one last ultrasound, enabled Dr. Perez to determine that it was finally time to harvest the eggs. She and Todd were taken to a delivery room where they were met by Doctors Perez and Donahue. Todd held Maria's hand as she lay on the table. A nurse helped place her feet in the stirrups.

Using a vaginal speculum, Dr. Perez carefully exposed Maria's cervix. He guided the tip of a catheter containing a drop of culture medium through the cervix and deposited the fluid into her uterine cavity. Over a dozen of her eggs were then gently drawn back out and placed in a transfer catheter. The entire solution was then put into a small Petri dish and immediately whisked away by Dr. Donahue.

The eggs were taken to a lab on the fourth floor where Jim had already successfully reanimated a number of cells taken from the Rothenberg sample. The arrival of Maria's eggs meant that he was finally ready for the next crucial step.

Over the next few days, he and his small staff would carefully remove the nucleus from some of Maria's eggs and replace them with nuclei from the Rothenberg cells. Once that task was

completed, the staff would all but camp out at the lab, vigilantly watching for signs of life.

Maria had successfully completed the first phase necessary for her to become pregnant. The next phase would take place in less than a week. Excited and exhausted, she was finally allowed to go home. The two young people stopped at a quick mart on their way, purchased a bottle of Merlot, and a packaged fire log. Once they were home, they quickly consumed a pot of home-cooked spaghetti, curled up in front of the fire and sipped wine until they both acquired a happy little buzz.

"Tell me again," Maria said softly, snuggling up to Todd.

"Again?"

"Just one more time?"

"Ok, ok. Let's see. Uh, your eyes are like sparkling—"

"No!" Maria yelled, punching him in the chest.

"Ok, uh, right now the baby is pretty much a single cell. If I remember right, they're gonna pump him full of viruses."

"What?"

"That's how they turn him into an IPS cell."

"What's an IPS cell?"

"Pluri...pluri, oh, I don't remember... It's a...artificial stem cell."

"Why do they need to do that?"

"Well...when the egg is first coupled with the sperm... if this gets too racy for you let me know."

"I'll let you know...keep going," she said, tossing a load of popcorn in her mouth.

"When they first get together, the egg and sperm make up a complete cell, and for a little while it's... unassigned...undifferentiated. At this point it could become anything from a toenail to part of a brain. But right after conception the cell starts to divide and as it does each new cell is assigned a certain function."

"How do the cells know what to become?" Maria said, reaching for her glass of wine.

"No one knows how for sure but some scientist named Yamanaka figured out that only four genes control the whole deal. All they

have to do is change four genes.”

“That’s it?” Maria said, pulling her eyebrows together.

“Well, you know, a gene’s a big deal, pretty complicated—”

“Okay,” Maria said impatiently, “move on.”

Todd pulled away and grinned at her. “I’m not sure I remember all this. It’s been a while—”

“It’s okay sweetie,” Maria said. “Just tell me what you remember.”

“Todd leaned back into the couch. “Oh where was I—oh yeah—Our baby is a full up cell right now, a blood cell to be exact.”

“One of Jesus’ blood cells,” Maria said slowly.

Todd thoughtfully shook his head. “Dude, That is really wild, isn’t it?”

“Keep going, keep going,” Maria said.

“Ok, so now...since our cell has already been assigned to be a blood cell, they have to change it back into a stem cell or an... IPS cell... one that’s blank, or not assigned...you see what I mean?”

“Yeah, undifferentiated. Keep going Einstein.”

“Once it’s shut off, it’ll be free to reassign itself.

Maria sat for a time smiling. Finally, she pushed herself closer to Todd and looked up at him. “What do you think he will look like?”

Todd sat up straight and stretched his arms out to his side. He pushed his tongue out and slightly tilted his head.

“Shut up!” Maria yelled giggling. “I’m serious, what do you think he will look like?”

“Well, I read somewhere the clone retains the host’s mitochondria. Maybe he’ll take on some of your features. Some of the cloned sheep turned out a little different, physically from the parent...who knows?”

“Ooo, I can’t wait.”

“I did read somewhere,” Todd said, “Jesus was supposed to have been a very ordinary looking man; no one you would notice in a crowd. It’s likely he’ll be short by our standards. He sat up straight. “You know what we should do? We should find the Shroud of Turin on the internet now that we know it’s the real thing.”

He stood and walked to the computer. Maria followed. Soon, the picture of the shroud filled the screen. “That’s him,” Todd said

softly.

Maria put her hand to the screen. "It looks like his nose was broken."

"Yeah," Todd said. "His face looks long because his mouth is slightly open, see?" He pointed to the face.

Todd wasn't sure if it was the wine but he felt a deep sadness. It was as if the picture was calling to him. He shook it off. "Do you have a new testament?" he said.

Maria looked up at him. "You're not gonna get weird on me are you?"

"No...I just thought it might be cool if we could find out what he was like."

"Todd, I'm, you know... Jewish."

"Oh yeah," Todd said, feeling a little silly. "We could find a Bible online?"

"Let's not," Maria said. "Tell me one more time about the baby."

~~~

About twenty-four hours after Jim's team had completed the complicated embryonic transfers, the cells began dividing. Within forty-eight hours, the hardiest of them had divided several times while in the incubator. Two of them were chosen to be transplanted back into Maria's womb. The young couple was summoned into the hospital for the last procedure. In the same way the eggs were removed, Dr. Perez placed them back into Maria's uterus.

Three weeks later it was confirmed; Maria was pregnant. One of the embryos had taken and the other one hadn't. This was good news since it saved the team from having to perform a risky selective abortion. The other embryo had been placed in Maria's uterus strictly as a precaution. They never intended to bring both fetuses to full term...

Chapter Four

“And the stars of heaven shall fall.”

Mark 13:25

**Three months later**

Blaze pulled the car to the curb and let the boy out. This was getting easier. His conscience was beginning to bother him less and less. The truth be known, he was even starting to enjoy the covert danger. It had a certain appeal he didn't really understand. Tonight, he had asked Nathan if he had any runaway friends younger than he was. He said he knew of a few. Blaze was getting a little tired of Nathan anyway. He could tell he wasn't into it. Nathan was just a straight little kid trying to get by, someone who, in his other life, might've been recommended for counseling. The irony struck him for a moment, but he quickly shrugged it off.

He began thinking about the baby. Maria was now in her third month of pregnancy and everything was going perfectly. Jim had told him that the nuclei reanimation had gone even better than had been expected. The Vincens were buzzing about the news. Jim and Perez had briefed them at every turn and Todd and Maria's movements were being closely watched; very little escaped the Vincens attention. The Bishop had been in touch constantly since news of the pregnancy. Senator Bentley and even Justice Madsen called him daily.

Blaze couldn't help but enjoy the attention. He could only imagine how it would be the first time he laid eyes on the child. What was he going to look like? Would he be normal? Would he be abnormal, supernaturally abnormal... Would he have a natural propensity for good? The entire process was so new, groundbreaking and wild. There was absolutely no precedent to fall back on. The sky was the limit.

He drove through the night, pushing his way towards home. Somewhere on the highway he reached and turned on the radio.

“The existence of the object was first reported back in January of last year,” the stoic voice on the radio said, “but the seriousness of the situation was not fully understood until now.”

“Proff...professor, pro...” Reporters yelled over each other until one voice prevailed.

“Professor, are you telling us that your people didn’t know about the danger this comet posed until just recently?”

“Asteroid...it’s an asteroid, not a comet, and no, we didn’t know. It’s coming in so fast, we didn’t even know about it until just under a year ago.”

Blaze stared at the radio. He turned the station.

“What is being done about it now?” the same voice demanded.

“Both shuttles, Endeavor and Atlantis, are being prepped. We intend to place a number of modified booster rockets, similar to those used to launch the space shuttles, onto the asteroid itself and use them to apply enough force to deflect it away from the earth.”

“Proff...Proff...Professor, will the booster rockets succeed?”

The professor paused. “Absolutely,” he said, “no question.”

Blaze quickly changed the channel again, only to hear the same voice.

“Holy Hell,” he said out loud.

~~~

Soft music played as Todd pushed a shopping cart around the Smart Buy grocery store.

He had fulfilled Maria’s order and was shuffling toward the checkout counter when something caught his eye.

“Jesus.”

The name of the book boldly stood out in red print. He pushed the cart to the display and picked the book up.

“Did He really exist? Who was He? Why was He here?”

The subtitles called to him as he thumbed through the pages. He dropped the book into the cart and finished making his way to the checkout counter.

He was surprised and a little embarrassed when the girl checking him reached the book. She glanced up at him and... smirked? At first he wasn’t sure... but then...he was sure of it.

He wanted to say, Listen you little twit, I’m a scientist. I don’t believe in this. He would have loved to tell her he was just a little curious because less than a block away, his son, A.K.A. Jesus Christ,

was growing once more in yet another womb. He kept his silence and walked to the truck.

On his way home He decided not to mention the book to Maria. He stepped into the house and found Maria sitting in front of the TV. She quickly turned his way as he approached. Her eyes were wide and fearful.

“Maria, what’s wrong?”

“Todd, listen,” she said softly, pointing at the TV.

“How many rockets are you going to use,” a voice on the TV asked the middle aged man behind a podium, “and how many shuttle missions are planned to get them there?”

“Ten,” the man said, pointing into the crowd of yelling reporters. “We’re sending ten of them.”

“Professor,” a voice yelled from the back of the crowd. “How far away is the asteroid, and where will it hit?”

“It won’t hit. It’s about six months out.”

Todd sat down next to Maria. “What’s going on?”

“Shhh, listen...”

“We’ve been listening to Professor Carl Waddington, the current head of NASA. If you’re just now joining us we have grave news indeed. News of an object described as a tumbling mountain range coming at us at the speed of sixteen thousand miles per hour. Is this really the apocalypse that has been so often foretold? Could it be the end of mankind as it was for the dinosaurs millions of years ago? Our guest is Professor Louis Fasbender, Nobel laureate in the field of physics and the former head of the National Aeronautical Space Administration.”

“I’ve seen this guy,” Todd said, speaking over the TV. “I caught one of his lectures at UCLA. He’s brilliant.”

the TV anchorman turned towards his guest. “What’s your take on all of this, Doctor?”

“Well Howard,” the doctor said, removing his glasses, “I have to say that my outlook is slightly less optimistic than that of Professor Waddington, but I definitely stop short of the doom and gloom scenario some of my colleagues have been espousing. I don’t think there’s any question as to whether we have the ability to save

ourselves. My only question would be, can we do it in time?"

The anchorman quickly responded. "Professor Waddington said the prevailing plan is to place a number of booster rockets on the asteroid itself, and that these rockets will hopefully deflect the asteroid away from the earth. Could you elaborate on that?"

"Well...that is the plan...I believe the SRBs will be placed in orbit using Delta IV rockets..."

"By SRB," the anchorman said, "do you mean Solid Rocket Boosters?"

"Yes...SRBs are the rockets used to launch the space shuttles. These SRBs will be stockpiled at the international space station. Once they've been delivered, a team at the station will basically tie the boosters together, creating what we are calling the main propulsion assembly. The unit will then be attached directly to the surface of the asteroid and operated remotely."

"You said you wondered if there was enough time," the anchorman quickly said. "Could you give us an idea how much time you feel would be necessary to safely get the job done?"

"Well, the problem is this, Howard. We have less than four months to deliver all ten of the propulsion units, put together the propulsion assembly and get it all to the asteroid. Timing will be critical. If we are early, so much the better. We'll be able to get a little head start and hopefully deflect the thing sooner but...if we're too late, and the asteroid gets too close..." He stopped and shook his head, "We might not be able to move it at all."

He paused a moment and continued. "You have to realize, because of the great distances and the speed at which this thing is traveling...by the time it gets close enough for us to make our little rendezvous, it's practically going to be right on top of us. There isn't going to be a second chance."

"Professor Waddington seemed evasive," the anchor said, "when asked where the asteroid is expected to hit should it get through. Any thoughts on that?"

"It won't matter," Professor Fasbender said slowly. "If it hits...it'll hit us all..."

~~~

The asteroid streaked into the earth's atmosphere and impacted in a massive explosion. Huge plumes of fire blasted out in all directions as smoke and ash began raining down, quickly choking the atmosphere. Jim Donahue watched the CNR special for a while and decided it was too much like watching plane crash movies on an airplane. He reached for his remote and turned the TV off just as Blaze knocked at his door.

"Have you heard the news?" Blaze said.

Jim motioned for Blaze to sit. "Yeah, freaky huh? You wanna beer?"

Blaze nodded and sat down. "You think they'll be able to stop that thing before it hits?"

"I sure hope so," Jim said, delivering the beer to Blaze.

Blaze popped his beer open "I think they will...I'm sure they will."

"Yeah more than likely. I guess if they don't, it won't really matter anyway."

"That's true," Blaze said thoughtfully. "So... your work here is pretty much completed? Are you planning on going home soon?"

"Yeah, I have a few more fires to stomp. My lease on the condo is up. I figure I'll leave in a week or so."

Blaze nodded and looked around the room. He lifted the nearest magazine from the nearby coffee table and silently flipped through it. After a time he scratched his head and said, "Jim, you know...the reason I came here is...well...do you remember Huntsman?"

"Huntsman...Huntsman...Yeah, the kid with red hair... freckles."

"Yeah, that's him. He's a physicist now, right here at Vanderbilt."

"No kiddin'."

"Yeah, it's true," Blaze said nodding. "I...uh...I just talked to him, a little while ago. He's like a genius when it comes to understanding mechanical processes...stress points, things like that. Anyway, he says trying to push that asteroid out of its trajectory using those rockets would be like... I think he said it would be like gluing a housefly to a Piper Cub and expecting it to force the plane off course."

"Really?" Jim said. "That's a little disconcerting."

Blaze chuckled. "Yeah...a little."

"Well Blaze," Jim said, "I know you're skeptical about my little talk with God. I would be too if I were in your shoes and even though I was the one who experienced it, I probably would've been open to some sort of neurotic breakdown. You and I both know these things happen. People hear things...see things, and believe to heaven that what they experienced really happened but the reality is different. Turns out, it was all in their minds, and...I would probably accept that reality completely, but for one thing...the physical evidence. You and I know there's no way I could have done that amount of damage to that hotel room, not even in my wildest days could I have done that. So I'm telling you my friend—" He looked directly into Blaze's Eyes—"God told me I was not to stand in the way of the birth of this child."

He paused a moment. "You know me, Blaze. You know I've always been a man who puts his faith squarely in science...but I was there in that room that night. I felt his power. His child will be born. That damn asteroid wouldn't dare hit us."

Blaze grinned. "I envy you. That sort of personal confirmation must be comforting."

The two men sat silent for a time, Jim finally spoke. "So... you wanna watch TV? I think the Vikings are playing Baltimore."

"No," Blaze said, "I really should be going. The Bishop wants me to touch bases with Maria, make sure she's holding up."

"You never told me how you got into this thing," Jim said.

"You mean the Vincses?"

"Yeah... how did your group come to possess the Rothenberg sample in the first place?"

"It was the church originally," Blaze said, "very hush hush. The Vatican wanted a second look at some of the most prominent medieval relics... try to parry another bones of Rouen."

"Bones of Rouen?"

Blaze dropped the magazine back atop the table and leaned back into the couch. "As you know, Joan of Arc was burned at the stake. She was killed in a town called Rouen. Some bones were said to

have been recovered. Scientists, around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, declared it highly probable that the remains were hers. The church unofficially backed them up. About that time she was beatified.”

“I take it the bones weren’t hers,” Jim said, lifting the bottle to his mouth.

“Egyptian mummy it turns out.... At any rate... the Vatican doesn’t want a re-play.

“And that’s how the Rothenberg sample came to light?” Jim asked.

“Exactly,” Blaze said. “When we actually found blood tissue within the capsule the powers decided to try and match samples with the shroud of Turin... kill two birds, and that’s where I came in. I became a priest. I’m a cellular biologist. I was the logical choice to head up the project.”

“But, I thought you said the Vatican wasn’t involved,” Jim said.

“Well, they...we... were, up to this point, but when the implications were made clear, especially in the light of your work, the Pope put a stop to any further desecration.”

“Desecration?”

“That’s how the Pope sees it, I’m afraid.”

“But you’re going ahead anyway?”

Blaze shrugged. “It opened a window that couldn’t be ignored.”

“How did you manage to get the samples out?” Jim said.

“Oh, well,” Blaze said smiling, “That was easier than you would imagine. As I said, I was heading up the project. Not long after we started the matching process the Vatican, out of the blue, demanded a full reckoning of the samples...which, of course, was the writing on the wall.”

“And you provided them with a full reckoning?” Jim asked.

“Of course,” Blaze said. “They received back their full measure of blood, right down to the molecule... it’s just that, some of those molecules were mine.”

“You dog!” Jim yelled laughing. “Aren’t you afraid they might test the samples?”

“Why would they?” Blaze said. “They plan on shelving them anyway.”

Jim sat thoughtfully rolling the beer bottle in his hand. "How did Maria become involved?" he said finally.

Blaze looked up and grinned. "You've got a little thing for her, don't you?"

"No," Jim said laughing. "Well... maybe just a little. I can't help it. My God man, you see how beautiful she is. I don't know how any man could cross paths with her and not be affected. How that kid Todd managed to reel her in is beyond me. She could have anyone."

"You're right about that," Blaze said. "Up until recently she was Jesse Espinosa's live in."

"That's where I've seen her!" Jim yelled. "She was always there, in every paparazzi shot...always under his arm. They even talked about her a time or two. So... what's the deal with Todd?"

Blaze sighed and leaned forward. He retrieved his beer bottle from the coffee table. "I should tell you," he said thoughtfully, "Maria is far from my choice in candidates. And there were plenty let me tell you."

"Yeah, I sort of sensed that."

"She's conniving," Blaze said. "She's conniving and collusive. She's gulled everyone...Todd included. You should thank God you're not in her sites."

"Maria?" Jim said, surprised. He looked into his beer bottle for a time. "I guess she struck me as confident, maybe... purposeful, but I never took her as conniving. You sound convinced though...so...why is she the candidate?"

"I was overruled. She's formidable let me tell you. She could charm flies off dung."

"So, you're questioning her motives? Is that it?"

"That's the point," Blaze said, "I haven't a clue what her motive is. I just know she has one."

"What about her family?" Jim said. "Wouldn't a background check—"

"She has no family to speak of. Most of her family was killed by the Nazis during the war. Her parents died when she was six years old. She grew up on Long Island... an orphan."

"I hate to say this," Jim said, "but I'm surprised a little girl that

pretty wouldn't have been adopted early on."

"There were several attempts but nothing ever materialized. She had three foster families, but there were issues."

"Maybe she just wants a family... roots."

"Maybe," Blaze said, placing his empty beer bottle on the coffee table, "but I don't think so. She's obviously perfectly viable, reproductively. Surely there would be easier ways of putting together a family. At any rate...she seems to be in the driver's seat. All we can do is hang on and see where she takes us. Maybe if she trips up badly enough the Vincens will finally step in."

~~~

"Aren't you Dr. Victor Perez?"

A woman sat down next to him in first class.

"Yes I am," Perez said, a little embarrassed. He never was very comfortable with strangers, especially pretty women.

"You don't know me, but I know you. My name is Holly. You helped my sister have a baby."

"Really? What's your sister's name?"

"Excuse me?" Holly poked the man in front of her, ignoring Perez's question "Is that a camera?"

The man sitting in front of her glanced down at the camera in his lap. "Yeah,"

"Please, take a picture of us. This is the famous Dr. Victor Perez."

The man sitting in front didn't appear to be impressed but turned to take the picture anyway. Holly pressed herself into Perez. He blushed just as the snapshot was taken. "Take another one," she said.

Perez leaned away and adjusted his glasses "Uh... really, I was just about to..."

Holly pushed forward and kissed him on the cheek just as the flash went off.

Perez elbowed her away. "Would you excuse me? I'm trying to read here."

Holly grinned. "I'm sorry, it's just that girls like me don't meet famous, handsome doctors like you every day."

Perez blushed and pushed himself deep into his seat. He decided

to try to be invisible for the rest of the flight.

He had left Nashville and was flying to Dallas/Fort Worth via a short layover in Atlanta. As the flight droned towards Atlanta, Holly had insisted on keeping up an uninteresting conversation and Perez had tried his best to keep his answers short and uncommitted.

When they finally touched down, she had insisted on two more snapshots in the waiting area.

Perez quickly moved to the lounge in an effort to lose her. He sat at the bar and ordered a gin and tonic. The bartender moved away and returned.

“See that pretty lady over there?” he said, pushing the drink towards Perez, “She wants this one to be on her.” He grinned and winked.

Perez turned. Holly was sitting in a darkened booth on the far side of the lounge. She smiled and waved. He stood and briskly walked to the table where the grinning Holly sat waiting. “I don’t know what it is you’re after, but I’m getting a little tired of your intrusive behavior. I’m a married man...I think I already told you that, a number of times.”

“Excuse me,” she said, “are you talking to me? Don’t flatter yourself, Doctor. I’m just trying to be friendly!” She scooted out of the booth and quickly walked away.

Perez found himself feeling unpleasant. It had been so long since anyone other than Hillary had shown any interest in him he didn’t even know how to respond. He hated thinking he may have hurt Holly’s feelings. After a few more drinks he decided to forget about it. There was little he could do about it now anyway. He made his way back to the jet way and re-boarded the plane, requested a pillow and went to sleep.

Once he arrived in Dallas, he rented a car and drove to the Fairmont Hotel. He arose early the next morning and called the front desk for coffee, a copy of the Wall Street Journal and Newsweek.

The news was of the asteroid—how the asteroid had affected world and local markets, general public health and stress levels. There was a report on the effect the asteroid had on schoolchildren,

what to tell them and what not to tell them. There was even an article about the effect the asteroid was having on human sexuality.

He came across an article that made him smile. The asteroid had finally been given a name. It had been a long tradition to name a newly discovered interplanetary object after the person who first observed it. The first sky watcher to have noticed this asteroid was an amateur astrologer living in Iowa named Donald P Jolly. Apparently, the powers that be decided against naming the doomsday planet killer the Jolly asteroid, for obvious reasons. They did agree, however, to include Mr. Jolly's telescope I.N. Number 657.

The powers decided to call the asteroid "Hell657" and for PR reasons gave the coming desperate plight to save the planet from a catastrophic end a flashy code name: "Operation Hell's Shield." But that name offended the easily offended so they changed the name to Dante657, codenamed Operation Dante's Shield."

He smiled and put the paper down just as the front desk attendant knocked at the door.

"Dr. Perez," the young man said with a distinct Texas drawl, "the missus is down in the lobby...and she is causing a major ruckus. Could you come down there?"

"Who is causing a ruck...a disturbance?"

"Your wife sir...she's had a little too much to drink. She's just now gettin' in."

"There's been a mistake," Perez said. "My wife isn't here."

"Well, somebody is anxious to see you sir. Would you please come down to the front desk, just to find out what's goin' on if nothin' else? Or should we just send her up here?"

Perez motioned that he'd be right down.

Ten minutes later he appeared at the front desk. He was about to approach the desk attendant when someone accosted him from behind.

"Victor, where have you been? You were supposed to meet me at my room. I've been waiting there all night."

Perez turned. Holly was moving towards him wearing a shear negligee, obviously drunk. Perez pushed her away. She backed off

and fell on him again.

“Come on, let’s go. I’m gonna’ be sick.”

“Get away from me, woman!” Perez yelled, pushing her away again. He looked around the room at the eyes. “I don’t know this woman. Call the police...sanitarium... whatever, but get her away from me!”

“That’s it,” Holly said, “I’m telling your wife!”

Perez turned and quickly walked back towards the elevator. “This is a nightmare!”

“I’m telling your wife!” Holly yelled once more as the elevator door closed.

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The moment Perez left the lobby, Holly whirled and staggered to the door. “I’m telling your wife,” she muttered as she left the building. She turned and walked east half a block to where a car was waiting, opened the door and slid in the passenger side. “Did you get it?” she asked. The man who had sat in front of her and Perez in first class, turned to face her. He patted the digital zoom camera.

“Got it.”

~~~

It took Perez half an hour to calm down. Was there any way this crazy woman could reach Hillary, he wondered? He thought about calling his wife, but she wasn’t supposed to know anything about this. As far as she knew, he was at a convention in Philadelphia. She was to never know about his involvement with Santana. Santana had made it perfectly clear, if it came out, if she had any idea, the deal would automatically be null and void.

It took him another hour to dress and make his way to the lobby.

He looked around the room, expecting Holly to leap out of the shadows, but everything appeared normal. He moved through the lobby and quickly made the short trip to his car—still, no Holly.

Once he was safely on the highway, he decided Holly was probably not a threat to him. It was obvious she was just a nut case...probably picked up and returned to the sanitarium that very morning.

It takes all kinds, he said to himself as he made his way towards

the small town of McKinney, about twenty miles north of Dallas.

Santana's people had contacted him. They wanted a meeting. Perez wondered if they wanted to back out. The truth be known, he'd often wondered if the rewards were worth the considerable risks, especially in light of recent events. Still, he came all the way to Dallas, Texas.

He spotted the Salt Grass Steakhouse and quickly turned into the parking lot. He made his way towards the back of the building, parked the car and turned on the radio one more time for an asteroid update. Finally he stepped out, made his way back towards the entrance and into the restaurant.

Once inside, it wasn't hard to spot Santana. He was sitting in the back by himself, all three hundred pounds of him, completely absorbed in the task of eating. Perez could have sworn the man had grown fatter since they last talked on the airplane. Santana spotted Perez and waved him over.

"Sorry," he said, as Perez approached, "I went ahead and ate...I was starving."

Perez took his seat. "That's quite all right."

"Did you park in the back?" Santana said.

"I did exactly as I was told." He looked around the crowded restaurant. "Lovely place, I'm especially keen on the decapitated animals mounted on the walls."

Santana laughed. "It's good food, noisy, out of the way and off the path."

"Point taken," Perez said, poking at his glasses.

The waitress appeared and Perez ordered a salad.

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Holly studied the computer monitor "That's amazing. That looks just like we're a happy couple at a motel."

"Yeah," the man who was sitting in front of her and Perez in first class said, "I have a bunch of them." He scrolled through the individual pictures one by one.

She laughed. "Look, that's one taken on the plane. I'm kissing him and look...he looks just like he's smiling."

"It's amazing what you can do with the latest digital software," the

man said. "The trick is to catch it just right, try to keep constant pixel and color balance, even the experts can't tell if you're good enough."

"These are perfect," she said. "You're the best."

~~~

Watching Santana eat, Perez could only wonder how he could have possibly had the where-with-all to become one of the world's wealthiest men.

"That's all you're gonna' eat?" Santana said, launching bits of food into the air.

"Yes well...I'm not very—"

"Everything all right?" Santana said. "Going as planned?"

"The Rose fetus is coming along nicely."

"And the other one?" Santana said without looking up.

Perez looked around the restaurant in case someone was listening. "That fetus is progressing nicely as well."

"Great." Santana said. "So are you..." he was moving his hand in a rotating motion apparently searching for the right word, "finished?"

"Pardon me?"

"Have you done all that you can do? Are you still actively involved with these two pregnancies?"

"Oh no," Perez said. "At this point, they're both in the care of their prospective gynecologists. The fertilization process is comple—"

"So now," Santana said interrupted again, "Stalder is the guy in charge of our pregnancy...Is that right?"

"Yes, I suppose he is—"

"Good, well, you've done a great job doctor. It's been wonderful doing business with you." Santana stood and pushed out his hand.

"That's it?" Perez said. "This is the reason I came all the way to Dallas?"

Santana pulled back his unshaken hand. "Well ya' know, you can't be too careful. We can't be seen together...You know that don't you?"

"Of course I know that!" Perez yelled.

Santana sat back down and continued eating.

Perez quickly scanned the restaurant. "About our financial agreement—"

"We'll be in touch," Santana said. "Thanks for your help."

Perez turned away and quickly left the restaurant. By the time he reached his car he was furious. All those years of med school and residency and that fat little creature dismisses him as if he were a temporary office worker. He was beginning to wish he had never become involved. There was absolutely no appreciation for what he'd done. He was the one taking all the chances. He was the one who had managed to acquire several of Maria's embryos, whisk them out right under the noses of the Vincens. It was brilliant. They should be kissing his shoes. Instead he gets—dismissed. No. No amount of money was worth it.

He sped out of the parking lot vowing to never get caught up in anything like this again. Steadily moving south, towards Dallas, he began to settle down. He had learned in his disciplined life to quickly dismiss unwanted distractions. He had decided this entire trip was nothing but a distraction and not worth the expended energy. He wondered what was going on with the asteroid.

As he reached for the radio, he didn't notice the eighteen-wheeler edging up on him from behind. Before he had a chance to react, the semi-truck clipped his rear bumper just to the right of center. An expertly maneuvered flick of the truck driver's wheel sent the tiny car careening into the brush-covered center divider. It bottomed out as it blasted through the low point in the center and flew up the other side. The embankment shot him into the air like a ramp, straight into the path of an oncoming Kenworth.

At the point of impact, the car's airbag exploded in Perez's face. The steering wheel rammed through the airbag and into Perez's upper chest. The engine followed, enveloping, crushing and rolling his lower torso into the floorboard. The dashboard followed the windshield in an upward movement, catching him directly in the neck and lower jaw. As it passed through it separated his head, right shoulder and arm from the rest of his body and deposited them deep into the back seat.

The big truck jack-knifed across the interstate but the driver managed to bring the rig to a stop half a mile down the road. He leapt from the cab and ran around to the mangled, smoldering appendage hanging off and under the front of his truck.

It was immediately apparent that no one had survived...

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At Launch Complex 37, Cape Canaveral Air Force Station, a Boeing Delta IV Rocket was being pushed into place by the mammoth fixed pad erector. Two immense hydraulic pistons, measuring three feet in diameter, would lift the rocket ninety-five feet to its vertical position on the launch table. Once that was done, a Crane, standing atop the three hundred and thirty foot tall, ninety foot wide MST, would hoist the two solid rocket boosters into place where they would be strapped directly to the missile. Nothing like this had ever been done before. The two solid rocket boosters were to be the payload.

This was one of three Delta IV rockets to be launched from this site and the first to go. Two more would be launched from Launch Complex 6 at Vandenberg Air Force Base in California.

At the same time, and completely unprecedented in the history of the Kennedy Space Center, space shuttles Atlantis and Endeavor stood upright on their perspective twin launch tables. During less trying times, a shuttle would typically spend a month sitting on the pad before liftoff. During which time, communication lines would be checked and fixed, gas lines attached and hydraulics thoroughly looked over. Everything tested, re-tested and inspected. But due to the rapidly approaching asteroid, that timeline had been drastically moved forward and, instead of one orbiter, crews had to prepare two orbiters for launch in less than two weeks.

Countdown for liftoff was currently underway for Atlantis and her seven-man crew under the command of U.S. Air Force colonel John Lee Gunnarson. They were scheduled to rendezvous with the orbiting solid rocket boosters within two days.

Relatively close to pad A, launch pad B secured the towering space shuttle Endeavor. She sat smoking ominously from her colossal five hundred ton concrete and steel launch table. Her

commander, Lt. Colonel Andrea Lange, would oversee the mission. Their destination would be the international space station and then on to the asteroid. They too, were in countdown for launch, but their window was scheduled two hours behind that of Atlantis.

In less than an hour her crew would witness yet another first, the launch of a spacecraft from the lofty vantage point of another cockpit, atop another spacecraft, located just under a mile away. The television networks witnessed the largest worldwide viewing audience in history as the final countdown for the launch of the space shuttle Atlantis reached minus one.

~~~

“Ooooh, there they go,” Maria said as the shuttle blasted its way toward space. “They’ll stop it. Don’t you think so, Todd?”

“Yeah, they’ll stop it.”

“What if they don’t?”

“I don’t know...I guess we’ll be toast.”

Todd could feel her looking up at him. He wished he could reassure her in some way. It would help if he thought for a moment Dante could be moved but the truth was, most of the big heads were convinced the effort was too little too late.

Maria looked down and began rubbing her swollen belly. “Todd, he kicked me!” She reached for Todd’s hand and pushed it against her belly. The baby kicked again.

“Whoa,” Todd said, “he’s really tucked up in there.”

“Of course he’s in there; where did you think he was?”

“I...I just meant...It hasn’t seemed all that real before now, I guess.”

“It’s all been pretty real to me, buddy. How would you like it if your belly started swelling up?”

Todd laughed. “It seems a little soon for the boy to be kicking,” he said, “even if he is the almighty. How far along are you now?”

“I’m five months pregnant and don’t make fun of the baby...he’ll hear you.”

“Ok, one...his ears aren’t complete, and even if they were, I’m pretty sure he doesn’t understand English yet...”

“Oh what do you know?” Maria said. “According to you, he can’t

kick yet.”

Todd pointed at the TV. “There goes the other shuttle.”

Maria watched the coverage of the white plume pushing the space shuttle Endeavor into the sky. “Why do they need two of them?”

“Some sort of joint effort I s’pose...I’m not sure.”

Maria became quiet.

Todd looked down at her. “What’s wrong, Baby?” he pulled her close.

“Why’s this happening? Why now?”

“They’ll get that damn thing,” he said, trying to sound confident.

She pushed her face into his side. “But you don’t think they will, do you?”

The uncomfortable pause answered her question.

“I don’t want to die,” she said quietly. “I finally have everything I ever wanted.”

Todd rested his cheek on top of her head and began slowly rolling his fingers around in her thick black hair. “Everyone’s scared to die. Even Jesus was afraid to die.”

Maria sniffed and pulled away. “What?”

“Jesus was downright terrified...you know...Just before he was crucified.”

“How do you know?”

“I’ve been reading this book...about Jesus.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know...aren’t you a little curious?”

“Well, yes, to a point. I’d like to know what he looked like.” She paused and sat up straight. “Did he look healthy? Was he big, little, that sort of thing...because of the baby.”

“You haven’t considered the possibility that he really may have been the Jewish Messiah?”

“Never gave it a thought.”

“What about all the...prophecies he fulfilled?”

“What about them?”

“Well, maybe he was...is...the Messiah. You should read this book. There’s so much more...”

“Todd, listen to me!” Maria said, glaring at him with a new look.

“The whole story of the Messiah is nothing more than ancient Jewish folklore.”

“But Maria, according to this book, he fulfilled all of the prophecies describing the suffering Messiah...”

“Todd, listen to you!” she yelled. “The prophecies are ancient Jewish folklore too! Nobody believes that crap anymore. I thought you were supposed to be a scientist.”

“I was only trying to console you.” Todd said softly.

“Console me!” she yelled. “What are you talking about?”

“It’s just... We should consider the possibility that... we might die soon.”

Maria pushed away from him. “Oh that’s sweet. You’re turning into a Jesus freak!”

“What?” Todd said, sitting back.

Maria raised a finger and pushed it against Todd’s chest. “Listen to me. I won’t live with a Jesus freak!”

“Ok, Maria,” he said, backing down. “I just meant...”

“I don’t care what you meant! The baby and I need someone strong, not some moron who hides behind religion every time he comes across something scary!”

Todd couldn’t believe this was the same girl cuddling with him moments before. “Ok, ok,” he said, holding his palms up, “I won’t bring it up again.”

Maria flashed him one last ominous glare before she turned and quickly left the room.

“Whoosh,” Todd whispered out loud. *What happened?* He sat back on the couch in front of the TV.

Maria had always been a mystery, but the more he knew her, the more puzzling she became. She was completely devoted to this project—a project sponsored by the Vincens, a religious based organization bent on forcing ancient prophetic writings into reality. And yet, the mere mention of religion sent her into hysterics. No, he thought... The mere mention of Jesus the Messiah sent her into hysterics. But, from the beginning, Todd had noticed she was humbled and moved by her involvement in the cloning project. He remembered her amazement when she realized Perez wasn’t a

believer. It was the Christian view of the historic Jesus she so strongly objected to, he realized.

She was such an incredible enigma. She could be more tender, feminine and alluring than any woman he had ever known, She lived to cuddle, yet sexual intimacy, and even love were completely beyond her understanding. He only knew he loved her more desperately every day. Months earlier, he had defensively decided to stop thinking about what tomorrow might bring. Today she was his wife. She was still his...at least he hoped so.

The TV was covering yet another rocket launch, this time from somewhere in California.

"Another Delta IV rocket lifts into space from Vandenberg Air Force Base," the announcer said, his face filling the TV screen, "carrying with it, two of ten solid rocket boosters. The very engines NASA hopes will push Dante off a collision course with our own earth. In one hour, the fifth and final heavy load Delta IV will begin its historic journey...."

Todd reached for the remote and pushed the button to change the channel. All of the channels were covering the launches. "Damn," he said under his breath as he stood. He walked to the bedroom door Maria had slammed moments before and knocked softly.

"Baby, I'm going for a beer, wanna' come with m—"

"Ooooh," Maria sang as she burst through the door, "chips sound good, and some soda."

Todd stepped back, surprised. "Are you ok?"

"Of course I am. Why do you ask?"

Todd stared at her. "No reason. I'm going out for a beer. Wanna' come?"

"No, you run along. Hurry though, I've got the munchies."

Todd walked out the door. "I'll be right back," he hollered over his shoulder, "Want chips, did you say?"

"Pickles," Maria said, "and ice cream."

"Funny stuff," Todd said as he stepped into his truck and started backing down his driveway. At the bottom of the hill, he turned east and headed off towards Nashville. He turned on his radio only to find most stations were still covering the launches. He rolled the dial

till music blared from the speakers and gently tapped on the steering wheel as the song wafted through the truck.

"Mary did you know..." the singer's beautiful voice range out.

What a pretty song, Todd thought, as the music drifted in and out of his consciousness. He spotted the store.

"Mary did you know..."

As he turned into the parking lot the song went into its crescendo.

"...The great...I AM"

I AM. Where had he heard that before? Then he remembered. When he was a kid, he had watched the movie *The Ten Commandments*. He remembered, in the movie, when Moses asked God what his name was, God answered "I AM, that I AM."

The great I AM rolled over on his tongue. He thought about it for a moment. Then it came to him. *Before anything was, after everything else is no more...there is still, the great I AM. God is the only thing that IS.*

He pondered that for a moment. The magnitude of that one statement — "I AM" — began slowly forming in his mind.

A deep consuming sadness enveloped him unlike anything he had ever experienced before. He slumped in his seat and began sobbing uncontrollably.

"Wh...What is going on?" he said out loud, gulping between great heaving sobs, Maria was right. He was going crazy. People in the parking lot were beginning to stare. He started his truck and pulled away.

He drove...circling in and out of the Nashville side streets, trying desperately to regain his composure. The sobbing had finally ceased but he couldn't go home. His eyes were too red and puffy. Maria would think he was crazy for sure.

He drove west on Fillmore Street and passed a car sitting on the side of the road. The man in the driver's seat looked familiar. Todd turned to get a better look... Father Jenkins?...Father Jenkins. I need to talk to Father Jenkins. I need to find out what's wrong with me. He turned left and circled around the block. As he pulled up behind Father Jenkins' car, he noticed a young boy sitting in the passenger seat.

Blaze was about to pull out when Todd pulled up behind him,

blew his horn and stepped out of his truck...

~~~

Countdown was underway for liftoff of the final Delta IV rocket at Launch Complex 37, Cape Canaveral Air Force Station. The final two solid rocket boosters had been securely fastened to the sides of the towering spacecraft and the Fixed Umbilical Tower's swing arms, attached to the rocket's first stage, second stage and fairing, retracted their respective umbilicus right on cue.

No one noticed the fairing umbilical dislodging a nine sixteenth open-end wrench left out of place by an overworked technician, nor did they notice the wrench falling into one of the thermo tiles. When it fell, it chipped off a small piece of the tile used to separate the fiery plume generated by the Delta IV RL10B-2 engine from the incredibly combustible solid rocket booster hanging precariously on the left side of the craft.

At liftoff, it was still impossible to tell that an immense cataclysmic event was about to take place because the rocket engine thrust was directed away from the vehicle via the flame duct located beneath the launch table.

As the spacecraft lifted off the launch table, the white-hot flame, no longer being directed away from the booster, took less than a micro-second to penetrate the broken thermo tile. The two solid rocket boosters, together with the newly refueled RL10B-2 engine, ignited twenty feet above the launch table in one gigantic event.

Reaching three hundred and seventy eight feet into the air, the two lightning protection towers were the tallest structures at SLC-37. The force of the blast lifted the massive, ten foot deep, two hundred foot wide grid, attached to the towers via centenary wires, five hundred feet into the air, along with millions of tons of flaming debris.

The support equipment building was the first to go as exploding gasses blasted through the seventy foot long tunnel used to carry the air, power and electronic circuits to the launch support shelter beneath the pads launch deck. The blast instantly incinerating everyone and everything.

The two hundred-foot-tall, Fixed Umbilical Tower was instantly

airborne. Its three umbilicals were catapulted in three directions. The first managed to reach the 80,000-square-foot Delta Operations Center located two miles from the launch pad just microseconds ahead of the fire.

It took close to three minutes for one of the massive hydraulic pistons originating from the Fixed Pad Erector to fall from the sky directly on top of the D.O.C., effectively erasing any semblance of life. Debris from what was left of the Mobile Service Tower continued to rain on a ten-mile wide area for a full fifteen minutes after the blast.

Up to a billion people witnessed the carnage on television. Later, it was reported, no one within two miles of ground zero survived...

~~~

"Father Jenkins...I figured that was you."

The big man in the driver seat slowly turned. "Todd, well wha...where did you come from?"

"I was just driving by. I noticed you sitting here."

Blaze stared blankly back at Todd.

Todd paused and continued, "I...I just thought..." "I could really use someone to talk to."

Blaze shook his head. "Todd... uh." Both men fell silent for an uncomfortable moment.

"Maybe this is a bad time," Todd said finally.

"No...No, that's fine, Todd... I'm just a..."

Todd glanced at the grinning boy sitting next to Father Jenkins.

Blaze turned towards the boy and looked back at Todd.

"Uh...this is...uh..."

"Nathan," the boy said loudly, interrupting Blaze, "name's Nathan." He leaned forward, gesturing with his right hand.

"Father...Is that like in... priest father?"

"Father Jenkins," Blaze said softly.

The boy sat grinning, almost to the point of laughing. "Oh that's right...Father Jenkins. Catholic priest... Father Jenkins."

Blaze stared blankly at Nathan.

"I gotta' go," Nathan said quickly. He stepped out of the car and made his way up the street, leaving Blaze and Todd staring after

him.

"I...I'm sorry" Todd said, after another uncomfortable pause. "I didn't mean to interrupt."

Blaze shook his head. "Oh...that's ok. We were about finished anyway. That boy is a very troubled young man. His father is in prison and his mother is a crack addict. To be truthful, I think he was thinking of suicide, maybe even tonight. His parish called me and asked me to meet him here. Apparently he has some sort of animosity towards the church because they asked me to respond strictly as a counselor...I hadn't told him I was a priest...I would have...when the time was right."

"Oh lord," Todd said, "maybe I should let you go talk to..."

"No...no, that's ok, we were able to have a good talk. I'm sure he's fine, besides, we can always talk another time. As a matter of fact, I was just getting ready to take him home when you pulled up."

Todd was puzzled by this new version of Father Jenkins. He had always been so forthright and articulate. Now he seemed to be preoccupied and rattled.

"Now then, Todd," Blaze said, "what can I help you with?"

"Oh...oh, that...well, it's not that big a deal. I just happen to spot you here and—"

"Is it Maria?"

"No," Todd said. "Maria's fine, she's just... pregnant, you know."

"Is the baby all right?"

"Yes, the baby's fine too...that ain't it."

"Hey, I have an idea," Blaze said. "I could use a beer. Ever been to the Crazy Horse?"

"Uh...no, don't guess I have, but I thought you weren't supposed to—"

"No, that'll be the Protestants," Blaze said quickly.

Todd turned and began walking back towards his parked truck. "Sounds cool, I'll meet you there."

~~~

The sound of country music originating from a jukebox on the first floor could be heard from the balcony, so they decided to sit in a corner away from the bustling loft bar. Todd had to smile at the

three makeshift saddles sitting in the place of stools lining the long bar counter. Colorful red and white plastic print tablecloths sat atop the many round tables scattered throughout the dimly lit loft. On the far end of the room, early-bird customers gathered around spot-lit pool tables. They chattered amongst themselves amidst the sound of pool balls clacking together.

"I'll have a cold draft," Blaze told the barmaid and motioned towards Todd.

"Sounds good," Todd said. "I'll have the same."

"Did you hear about Dr. Perez?" Blaze asked, as the barmaid hurried away.

"Yeah I did, Maria mentioned something about it. Will that have any effect on the project?"

"No, his involvement was pretty much centered on the fertilization phase...which, of course, was the first step to be completed. Still, his contribution was enormous."

"What exactly went on?" Todd said.

"I'm not sure what happened. I know he was killed somewhere in Texas and that he had a head-on crash with a semi-truck. What he was doing in Texas has been a matter of speculation—I'll just say—it looks like our Dr. Perez wrestled with his own hidden demons."

"What do you mean?"

The barmaid returned, placed the glasses of beer in front of the two men and hustled away. Blaze smiled slightly, took a drink of his beer and sat it back on the table. "There were...improprieties."

"What sort of improprieties?"

Blaze chuckled. "Todd—I'm not gonna gossip."

"Oh come on, I'll know all about it a gnat's second after Maria hears anyway."

Blaze sighed and piously raised his eyebrows. "Let's just say...oh what the hell, the guy was shackin' up."

"No..."

"Apparently...yes."

"His poor wife," Todd said, looking into his beer, "but—I'm not all that surprised."

"What do you mean?" Blaze said. "I was very surprised. Why

aren't you?"

"He sort of—came on to Maria one time—right in the hospital."

"That's a real problem for you, isn't it?" Blaze said.

Todd glanced around the bar. "I know. It's just that—I find I'm very possessive of her. I can't help it."

"There's nothing wrong with being possessive—over your possessions. You don't really think of Maria as one of your possessions do you, Todd?"

Todd looked back at Blaze. "I suppose you're right."

"There were a few times when your jealousy stood in the way of real progress, do you know that?"

"How's that?" Todd said.

"Well, for one thing, there were times when Dr. Donahue felt quite impeded by your behavior."

Todd leaned back in his chair. "Are you gonna' try and tell me Donahue wasn't sniffin' at my wife's haunches?"

Blaze grinned and looked down at his beer.

"That's what I thought too," Todd said, responding to Blaze's silence.

"I suppose it's true. Jim was attracted to her. After all, she's an incredibly beautiful woman and, you two weren't married at the time. The point is, she's not with him. She has chosen to be with you."

"For now."

"Yes," Blaze said, "for now. Look Todd..." he leaned forward, "you do understand that any...hold or claim you think you have on Maria is just an illusion. The only bond holding you two together is your mutual love. I've counseled many a marriage and I'm here to tell you, one of the major causes of divorce is plain ol' jealousy. It's like a disease. Desperate people fight and struggle to hold on. More often than not, the struggle itself ends up being the final straw..."

"I understand what you're saying," Todd said, "and I appreciate it, but you don't understand our relationship."

"I understand your jealousy could eventually end it...unless you learn to control it. Even you have to admit that, right?"

Todd decided it was time to change the subject. "How's Mrs.



Perez holding up?”

“I’m sure it devastated her,” Blaze said.

They both stared into their glasses for a time.

“So...what is it you wanted to talk about?” Blaze said finally.

Todd thought about it. “You know, to tell you the truth, it all seems a little puny now.”

“Really?” Blaze said. “It sounded pretty serious when we talked earlier. Is it the Vincens? Is someone bothering you?”

“No, that’s not it. It’s just...well ...it’s kind of a spiritual nature.”

Blaze curled an eyebrow. “Really? of a spiritual nature....Well you’re lucky because that’s what I do. How can I help?”

“Father Jenkins,” Todd said grinning. “Why is it I feel you’re not taking me seriously?”

“Blaze...call me Blaze, and yes it’s true, I’m a little surprised. I never took you for someone who tilted that way, that’s all.”

“And I never have. I always been a bona fide atheist.”

“I read that in your bio,” Blaze said. “We covered this the day of your wedding...so...why the change of heart now? Is it the asteroid?”

“No, not at all, I started questioning at school, when I figured out evolution was just another religion.”

Blaze picked up his beer and chuckled. “What brought you to that conclusion?”

Todd looked at Blaze, a little confused. “whose side are you on?”

“I’m on your side,” Blaze said. After a pause he continued. “Tell me about your newfound spirituality.”

“I don’t think I’d call it spirituality, just a... feeling I get sometimes. Maybe it’s because of the baby being who he is.”

“So it’s true, you’re leaning in that direction now?”

“What direction? Like I said, it’s just a feeling.”

“I can tell you one thing,” Blaze said. “True religion will have very little to do with feelings.”

“I don’t know if I could ever be...you know...religious. I think I sort of....”

“Sort of what?”

“You’re gonna’ think I’m crazy.”

"I don't think so. Try me."

"I sort of, get the feeling that...God is with me...sometimes. I mean...sittin' right next to me."

"Interesting," Blaze said. "How often do you feel that way?"

Todd began to feel defensive. "Not often. Haven't you ever felt that way? I mean...being a priest and all?"

"I haven't," Blaze said.

Todd shifted in his chair.

"My religion is a way for me to serve my fellow man. It's a good way to live. The morality makes a lot of sense. And it's a noble, people-centered profession. But I'm still a scientist at heart and to be perfectly candid, the religion opened the door to this project, which is profoundly important to me."

"But you—"

"Oh, don't get me wrong," Blaze said. "I suppose I believe in God. I just don't believe He interacts with us quite the way you are describing."

"But, what about what went on with your friend Dr. Donahue?"

Blaze leaned back in his seat, raised his eyebrows and shrugged.

"Oh hell no," Todd said frowning. "You never believed Donahue!"

"It was never important for me to believe Doctor Donahue. The important thing was that he came on board. But we are discussing you and frankly, what you're describing sounds delusional to me. What you're describing sounds like some sort of ongoing buddy-buddy relationship with God Almighty. You have to admit, it sounds more than a little strange. Honestly Todd, you sound like someone about to start setting up a revival tent...doing a little bible-pounding."

"How did I give you that notion?"

"C'mon Todd, how would you have reacted even a few months ago if you heard someone talking the way you're talking now?"

"But the baby, I thought you were waiting for the second coming and all that."

"Todd, let's not be naive. A large part of my duties was, and remains, public relations. We needed vast amounts of funding. The

religious card was necessary to acquire that funding. My interests have always been scientific.”

“Hmm,” Todd said finally. “I guess I should have known—”

“How is Maria responding to this new development?”

“Not so good.”

“Yes, well...that can be expected.”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you mind if I speak frankly?” Blaze said, becoming serious.

“You haven't been?” Todd asked.

“Part of the agreement was the understanding that the parents of the baby wouldn't influence the child with respect to religion. That's one of the reasons Maria was chosen. She didn't appear to have any religious bias which could eventually contaminate the child.”

“Contaminate the child?” Todd repeated loudly.

“I just mean...”

“Maria had you boys figured, didn't she,” Todd said, staring at Blaze. “The baby and Maria are lab rats...a science project...A sample in a Petri dish to be protected from outside contaminants.”

Blaze held his hand up. “That isn't at all what I meant.”

“You do understand that everyone knows Maria is pregnant,” Todd said. “There's no way now to just change your mind. You people need to realize, Maria, the baby and I are people. You and the Vinces have no real power over us.”

“Wait a minute, Todd,” Blaze said quietly, “that's not what I'm saying at all. It's just that if you continue down this path Maria will leave you.”

Todd jumped to his feet. “What do you mean, Maria will leave me?”

Blaze slowly rose from his seat. “Maria called me, and you need to settle down...you're making a scene.”

Todd slowly sat back down. “When did she call you?” he demanded.

“A while ago...seems you asked her if she had a Bible.”

“I was just curious about the baby. I was only trying to find a hint somewhere about who Jesus was...physically...genetically...”

“I'm telling you right now,” Blaze said, “Maria is not one who will

accept a...religious man. At least, not the kind you're describing."

"Why would Maria call you?" Todd said. "And what makes you think you understand Maria?"

"Maria is a very important part of the project. We screened her extensively. There's very little about Maria Rose we don't know. And one thing I can tell you...she will not tolerate a man who doesn't have both feet squarely planted on the ground. I think it would serve you well never to bring this subject up again."

"Too late," Todd said, softening, "we talked about it just before I came here."

"How did she take it?"

"She blew a geyser...I've never seen her so upset."

"She really needs the old Todd back and she needs him back very quickly."

Todd took a long drink from his glass and returned it to the table.

"Yeah," he said thoughtfully, "I s'pose you're right."

Blaze smiled. "I think it's a good thing we had this little talk. Maybe we've avoided a major disaster."

"I'm sorry boys, but we're closing the place up tonight." The barmaid was suddenly standing over the table.

"Closing up?" Todd asked. "What time is it?" He looked around the dimly lit bar and noticed everyone was gone except for a few people huddled around a television set at the end of the bar. "It's still early," he said. "Why are you closing up?"

"You haven't heard?"

Todd noticed she had tears in her eyes. He and Blaze looked at each other.

"Heard what?" Blaze asked.

"It blew up," she said. "Go home to your families. That's where I'm going."

Blaze stood. "Young lady, I'm a priest. What blew up? Why are you so upset?"

"A priest huh? I'm a Sunday school teacher...so what?"

Blaze reached for her arms. "Miss, what's—"

"Why don't you ask your God what blew up?" she said, pushing his arms away. "And while you're at it, ask him why he's gonna' sit

back and let us all die. Then...maybe you'll be able to come back and explain it all to my six-year-old son." She pulled away from Blaze and walked back towards the bar. "You heard me," she hollered over her shoulder, "get out of here...we're closing!"

Todd jumped to his feet and walked to the television. He pulled back when he saw the image of the president filling the screen.

"Our deepest condolences and the undying gratitude of the entire nation go out to the heroes and their families who gave their lives defending so many," the president droned.

*Maria, she's got to be out of her mind.*

He whirled and ran for the door.

~~~

Pete and Barney drove north through the tiny New Hampshire town of Newmarket, where Brother Michael had led them four months earlier. Neither of them knew why, and Brother Michael wasn't telling.

They turned left on Elm Street and proceeded towards River Bend Road.

Within a week of moving into this tiny community, Brother Michael had insisted both men find jobs. Pete happily found a job within a few days working in a boot factory. He also found a job for Barney. Barney yelled at Pete—told him he'd been put on the spot, that he couldn't very well refuse a perfectly good job—right there at the dinner table in front of Brother Michael.

He stayed angry for a time, but Pete could tell he was starting to get used to it. Both men gave their paychecks to Brother Michael and they always seemed to have whatever they needed. Even Barney seemed to have accepted this arrangement, although he probably wouldn't have said so.

"We need to get gas," Pete said, as a small gas station came into view. Barney pulled in, parked the van next to a gas pump and stepped out. "Get the gas. I'm going to the can." He quickly disappeared into the tiny gas station.

Pete pulled the gas nozzle out of the pump, stuffed it into the van's gas tank, pulled his card through the reader and turned to flip the handle. The pump was on, but it wouldn't clear of the last

transaction. He flipped the lever a few times.

Nothing.

He began motioning towards the window.

Still nothing.

He left the pump nozzle in the gas tank and made his way towards the door.

“What do you mean you’re closed?”

Barney was yelling, this time at an older lady standing behind a counter. Pete wasn’t sure, but it looked like she’d been crying.

“Mister,” she yelled, trying to interrupt Barney’s tirade.

“Mister...didn’t you hear about the rocket?”

“What rocket, I don’t care about rockets...I need gas!”

“The rocket they were sending to get the asteroid...it blew up!”

“So?”

The woman stared at Barney. “You don’t care that the asteroid is gonna’ hit us now?”

Barney stood silent, his eyes wide. “The asteroid’s gonna’ hit us?” he asked, shocked.

“Where you been?” she yelled. “You don’t know about the asteroid?”

“Well yeah, but I thought they were gonna’ do something about it.”

“They were...They did...It blew up...That’s what I’m trying to tell you!” She sat down hard on a stool.

“But we still need gas.” Barney managed to say after an uncomfortable pause.

“Here,” the woman yelled, “get your damn gas!” She quickly locked the cash register and reached and reset the pump. “And take one of these too,” she yelled, throwing a candy bar at him. “Hell, this ain’t my store...I’m going home.” She stood, walked around the counter and moved out the front door.

“Where she going?” Pete asked, watching her leave.

“Home,” Barney said, “She’s going home, like she told you.”

Barney filled his pockets full of candy bars and cigarettes while Pete topped off the tank. When they finished they slowly pulled out of the unattended gas station and continued on their way. They

drove east on River Bend Road, to River Bend Circle and made a quick left into the parking lot of the sprawling apartment complex they were calling home.

"I hope Brother Michael isn't mad about the thick-crust on the pizzas."

"Of course he's gonna' be mad." Barney said, "He hates thick-crust. I'd hate to be in your shoes right now."

"Hey, maybe we could say they didn't have any thin-crust...only thick-crust today 'cause of the asteroid—"

"You idiot," Barney yelled, "crust is crust...They can make it thin or thick!"

"Oh yeah, Pete said, lowering his head, "then how 'bout we..."

"How 'bout we tell him you're stupid....He'll believe that."

They made it to the front door and were fumbling for the key when Brother Michael opened it. "That pizza smells wonderful," he said, reaching for the one on top, "I'm hungry....Thick-crust? You bought thick-crust?" Michael scanned Barney's and Pete's faces. His jovial mood turned dark.

Barney grinned sarcastically and slowly shook his head. "Pete's the one that bought the pizza. I told him you'd be mad."

Pete stared at the floor.

"Peter," Michael said, "how can I ever trust you with important things when you can't even accomplish a task as simple as this?"

"The guy at the store was mad at Barney," Pete answered quickly, "He was about to kick us out of there. I didn't dare say nothing."

"Oh yeah," Barney bellowed, "it's all my fault now!"

"Peter," Michael said, staring into Pete's eyes, "We aren't talking about Barnabas. He's an idiot. We'll address that in due time. We're talking about you. Both of you need to realize that someday, very soon, we'll turn the whole world around. You need to understand, when you let people push you around like that, you're hurting the cause. You have to convince the world that you are superior—"

"Why am I an idiot?" Barney said, Interrupting Michael. "What's wrong with me?"

"How about your unwarranted, undirected anger," Michael said quickly, "your total self-absorption, your complete lack of social

skills, your ongoing antisocial criminal behavior in the form of petty theft.” Michael reached, pulled a candy bar out of Barney’s shirt pocket and let it fall to the floor. “Should I go on?”

Barney stared at the floor.

“Why do we have to be superior?” Pete said quietly.

Brother Michael turned his attention back to Pete. He smiled and put his arm over Pete’s shoulder. “Peter,” he said, his mood lightening, “have you ever watched a shepherd?”

“You mean the guy who takes care of sheep?”

Barney snorted and rolled his eyes.

“Yes, Peter, the man in charge of the sheep....Do you think the shepherd is superior to the sheep?”

“Uh yeah.”

“In what way?”

“Well...I guess he’s smarter.”

“And, do you think it’s good for the sheep...that the shepherd is smarter than they are?”

“Uh...yeah, I suppose so.”

“That’s right,” Michael said, smiling. “The shepherd has superior intellect, knowledge and common sense. That’s why he’s able to lead the sheep to the greenest pastures, protect them from predators and see to it all of their basic needs are met. We’ll soon lead the entire world out of this present darkness. But the world won’t follow us unless we first convince them that they’re the sheep and we are the shepherds...understand?”

“Yes,” Pete said, nodding his head, “I understand.”

Brother Michael focused his attention on Barney. “Now let me guess, the gas station was abandoned because of the explosion in Florida and you took the opportunity to ransack the place.”

“She gave it to me,” Barney yelled. “Ask Pete.”

“Who gave it to you?”

“The lady at the gas station, she told us to take what we want and...and then, she said she was going home and just walked out...Ask Pete.”

“Yeah Brother Michael,” Pete said quietly, “that’s what happened, just like Barney said.”

Michael shook his head and walked to the kitchen table. He opened a can of black olives, sprinkled them on his pizza and quietly began eating. Barney and Pete joined him in the kitchen.

“So...what do you think about the asteroid, Brother Michael?”

Barney said after a long pause.

Pete stared, anxiously anticipating a response.

“Don’t know,” Brother Michael said, wiping his face with a paper napkin.

“You think it’s gonna’ hit us?” Pete asked.

“The father hasn’t revealed much about this to me.”

Barney took a chair next to Michael. Pete quickly joined them at the table.

“But he has revealed this much to me,” Michael continued. “This will be a time of great testing. If you pass through the fire, the father will reward you greatly... He gives his word.”

Pete frowned. “Does that mean we’re gonna’ die?”

“I know there’s a reason for all of this,” Michael said. “We’ve been called to prepare the way for the son. It wouldn’t make sense for the father to call on us, only to have our mission snuffed out prematurely.”

Pete was hit by the unsettling realization that even Brother Michael was afraid of the asteroid.

“As I said,” Michael continued, reaching for another slice of pizza, “We will all be tested in the very near future.”

“What sort of rewards are we talking about?” Barney said.

Michael looked up quickly. “What did you say?”

“What sort of rewards will the father give us if we do what he says?”

Michael glared at Barney a moment and softened. “Good food, nice place to live, great company...What more could you ask for Barnabas?”

Barney looked around the room and softly said, “come on now, Brother Michael, we work for the money to pay for the food and the roof.”

Pete winced as Michael pushed back his chair and stood up. “I suppose you’re right....Peter!”

Pete jumped in his seat. "Yes, Brother Michael?"

"Barnabas wants to know what sort of rewards the father will give us if we do what he says. Do you think we should put the father to the test?"

"No!" Pete said soundly.

"Too late for that, I'm afraid. The time has come. The father is finally going to reveal his awesome power to the unbelieving Barnabas." As Michael talked, he never took his eyes off Barney.

"Go to the door, Peter." Michael commanded.

"Uh, no...Brother Michael...I don't think Barn—"

"Go to the door, Peter!" Michael said.

Pete paused and moved to the apartment's door.

"Come in here!" Brother Michael yelled.

The door handle began slowly turning from the outside. Pete jumped away and quickly moved close to Brother Michael.

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"So...one guy has a hold of his foot and Hansen is just...dragging him along, when this other guy hits him from behind."

Dr. Paul Stony was telling his tale, using animated hand gestures for the benefit of the two somber women dating the two doctors for the last time.

"Hansen, as big as he was, is going down hard, when out of nowhere Blaze appears."

Jim Donahue howled with laughter, jabbing his date in the ribs with his elbow.

"Blaze grabs Hansen by his pants," Stony continued, red-faced and laughing, "and drags Hansen...the two guys...and the ball across the goal line!"

Jim yelled and threw his arms in the air. "I tell you," he said, "I've never seen anyone play football like Blaze. I can't believe he didn't go pro."

As the conversation lulled, the two women took the opportunity to powder their noses.

"Don't ever set me up again," Jim said under his breath as his date disappeared around the corner. The two young doctors found themselves alone in the spacious, wood-leaden lounge of the ultra-

exclusive Green Valley Country Club. "The woman can't golf," Jim said, "She had no idea what a handicap was, thought that's why everyone was driving those little carts around."

"I know, I know," Paul said, quickly. "Tina is nice...but...there isn't any connection."

Jim leaned back in his chair and shook his head. He sat silently spinning his red Roa drink within its dewy glass. "Why didn't you ever get married?"

"Why didn't you?" Paul said.

Jim smiled, sipped his drink and slowly returned it to the table. "I met the most beautiful woman I've ever seen in Nashville a couple of months ago."

"And?"

"And...she's married."

"So?"

"She's pregnant."

"Oh."

"Still, I tried."

"Oh?"

Jim smiled.

"How did you meet her?" Paul said.

"We were involved in a...project together."

"A doctor?"

"No...she was more of a subject...patient. We had a great conversation in a bar across the street from where we were staying. I tried but—she wasn't interested."

"Hmm," Paul said, lifting his own glass to his mouth.

"Yeah, Jim said softly, "but you know...there was something strange about her, couldn't ever put my finger on it...still...I find myself holding her up as some sort of standard these days."

"She was that pretty, huh?" Paul said.

"Movie star pretty...supermodel pretty...prettier than that...prettiest girl you've ever seen." He resumed pushing his glass in a circular motion on the tabletop for a moment and continued.

"If you ask me, I think marriage is just too risky a business anyway. People don't want to stay together anymore. You remember Tommy

Platte, the kid with pigeon toes? He's been married three times already. Cost him a fortune; had to start over every time." Jim put his drink down. "Look at Perez."

Paul pointed his finger at Jim's chest. "Perfect case in point."

"I can't believe Perez was having an affair," Jim said. "I met his wife. I thought those two were inseparable." Jim signaled for another Roa while readjusting himself in the plush leather chair. A half-consumed log popped and crackled in the warm, glowing fire.

"Believe me, it was a shock to everyone," Paul said, "Why Texas? So far away?"

"How did they find out about the affair in the first place?" Jim said.

"The police found out I guess. Apparently there was a little investigation. No one knew why he was in Texas. Pictures of Perez and his lover surfaced."

"Why would the police care about those?"

"Oh, now I remember....Her bag was found in Perez's rental car. That's where they found the pictures, I guess. They looked her up and found out she and Perez not only had an affair, but had been involved in some sort of lovers' squall at a hotel that day. He was most likely despondent. They think it probably had some bearing on the crash."

"Perez?" Jim said, "That's so hard to believe. How do you know all this?"

"A friend of a friend works for Channel Eight News. They did a little story."

"They didn't include the affair, did they? I mean...how could that be news?"

"Oh no," Paul said. "That's just what the news team stumbled over when they were getting the story."

Jim frowned. "Why would Perez's death be news anyway?"

"His work with in vitro fertilization made him a fairly good hit in a few circles." Paul said thoughtfully.

Jim reached for his drink. "How is Hillary Perez taking it? Anyone seen her?"

"She's a mess, from what I hear, never suspected a thing."

The two dates appeared.

"One of the rockets in Florida exploded," Jim's date said.

"One of the asteroid rockets?" Paul asked.

"Yes," she said gravely, "it just happened."

"When?" Jim said.

"About four hours ago."

"So...what does that mean?" Paul's date asked.

Jim looked at her and back at Paul. "I...I'm not sure. Weren't they sending five rockets?"

"That means four of them went up," Paul said, looking at Jim.

"So...eight boosters made it into orbit?"

"Will that be enough?" Paul asked.

"I don't know."

"I think we should go," Paul's date said, "I have kids."

"Ok," Jim said, reaching for the check.

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Todd pulled into his driveway and raced into the house.

"Where have you been?" Maria asked softly, as he walked in the door.

"Maria," Todd called into the dark, "Are you all right?"

"WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?" Maria shrieked.

Todd covered his ears. He had never heard anyone scream like that before. "I was with...Father Jenkins."

"What were you doing with Father Jenkins?" she said, returning to a normal decibel level.

"I...ran into him, we had a few beers."

The room was dark. She was standing in the hall, silhouetted against the faint bathroom night-light. Todd moved to the lamp, switched it on and stopped mid-step. It was obvious she'd been crying. Her makeup was smeared and running down her cheeks. Her hair looked...strange. "Maria," he said softly, moving towards her.

She pulled away, then fell into his arms sobbing. "We're gonna die...We won't have our baby."

"No...No...Maria, that's not true," he said, holding her. "There are still eight of those rockets up there. They're still going after it. Nothing's over. The baby *will* be born...just calm down."

He pulled her to the couch, gently laid her down and drew back, shocked. Hair was everywhere, Jet-black hair in piles on the couch and floor. "Oh no, Maria," Todd moaned, lifting her face.

She had pulled huge locks of hair out of her head. He could see jagged bits of hair, still clinging to bloody scrapes on her scalp where she had been clawing and tearing moments before.

She wrapped her arms around Todd's neck. "I can't die now, not this close." Her convulsive sobbing was so intense she could hardly catch her breath.

"Maria," Todd said softly, "I'm here. You gotta' settle down now."

"You don't understand," she yelled, "this baby is the reason I was born, and now all of that is over." She collapsed back on the couch.

"I'll be right back Maria, I'm gonna' call the Doctor...I'll be right back!" He rushed to the phone and dialed 911. To his amazement, the line was busy. He slammed the phone down and called again...still busy. He dialed Maria's doctor, no answer. He threw the phone across the room, ran into the bathroom and began rifling through the medicine cabinet. He spotted a small green bottle of Demerol he had kept for years. He could only hope it was still potent.

"Maria!" he said, running back into the living room. He reached and pulled her into a sitting position. She was still softly sobbing. He put a pill to her lips and pushed a glass of water into her hand.

"What's this?"

"It's Demerol. It'll help."

"I can't."

"Maria, you have to settle down, you're too upset—"

"I can't take Demerol. It'll hurt the baby."

"Oh, that's right. What am I thinking?"

"It's all right," she said, "I'll settle down...You're here with me now."

Todd sat down beside her. "Yes, I am."

She rolled and lay across his lap.

"What did you hear that upset you so badly," he said, moving his hand over her shoulder, "something on the news? What are they

saying?”

It took Maria a few tries before she was finally able to speak.

“The...rocket blew...up.”

“I know. Have you heard anything else?”

“Th...they’re saying they won’t have enough...to keep the asteroid from hitting us now.”

“That’s not what I heard,” Todd said.

Maria quieted. “What did you hear?”

“I heard everyone is overreacting, that everything is going forward as planned.”

“You’re just saying that,” she said, sniffing.

“No, it’s true. It was a senator. He said they had prepared for just such a thing as this and that...they had planned on overkill anyway...just in case.” Maria was silent. Todd gently pulled her hair away from her face and continued. “The senator said everything is fine.”

“Really? That’s what he said?”

“Damn straight,” Todd said, “Let me turn on the television. I bet they’re talking about it right now.” He leaned and switched the TV on.

The face of the President of the United States flickered to life. He was standing in front of a podium. Large easels stood behind him, holding charts and diagrams. Aides were helping as he presented the final details of the revamped Operation Dante’s shield.

“The boosters are currently in a close orbit with earth,” he said, pointing at the chart. “As we speak, Atlantis is moving to intercept them somewhere over Iceland. The boosters will be moved to the international space station where they’ll be processed and assembled into one large rocket motor called the Main Propulsion Assembly. When that is completed, the orbiter Endeavor will tow the engine to Dante657, where it will be attached.”

Maria lay across Todd’s lap, silently watching the television.

One of the aides stepped forward and moved to the microphone. “The president will take a few questions,” she said. The room exploded with the voices of reporters, screaming over the top of each other. The president looked the group over for a moment

before pointing at one of the reporters. "Terry."

"Mr. President, everyone wants to know...if the asteroid does manage to get through, where will it hit?"

"You know I can't answer that, Terry.... John?" He pointing to the other side of the room.

"Yes, Mr. President, are you certain the remaining eight boosters are enough to get the job done?"

"I'm glad you asked that question John," the president said, "This is something I want everyone to understand. This asteroid is big, but it's not that big. It's only about seven miles wide and nine miles long. We are going to strap enough thrust to that thing to launch four space shuttles. To illustrate the kind of power I'm talking about...understand...each one of these eight solid rocket boosters produce about 3.1 million pounds of thrust for two minutes. Together, they produce 25 million pounds of thrust...for two full minutes. Preventing an impact only requires that the orbital velocity of Dante be altered by a small amount, less than one centimeter per second. This is a tiny velocity increment. All we need to do is deflect the thing...move it a little...Hell, I wouldn't be surprised if we didn't launch it right back to where ever the damn thing came from.

"Dante657 is not going to hit the earth. There's no danger of that happening. The asteroid is not the danger we face here...but let me assure you...we are in grave danger."

The cameras moved in for a close-up.

"Our society is a very interconnected one. The only food reserves most American families have are the contents of their cupboards and refrigerators. The great heroes who are risking their lives, implementing Operation Dante's shield, will complete the job they were trained to do. But they will not be the only heroes in this great endeavor. I understand that this is a time of great terror. We all want to stay close to our families but we are at war now...a war more threatening than all the other wars combined. The nation...and the world, will depend on you, the American people...just as we depended on you during the first and second world wars, Korea, Vietnam, Desert Storm, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and now...Operation Dante's Shield.

We need heroic volunteers who will move to protect and preserve our great way of life. Heroes who are truck drivers, without whom, there would be no food on the grocery store shelves. Heroes who are our police officers, without whom, there would be no peace or security in our streets, heroes who keep our gas, electricity and communication lines intact. Thousands and thousands of individual tasks our people perform on a daily basis, tasks that are vital to this great nation; Jobs that must continue...just as they always have.

Without this commitment, the nation will almost certainly grind to a stop. And the brave men and women in space who are risking their lives at this very moment will return to a world they have gallantly saved, only to find it destroyed by mindless fear and paranoia.

I need a commitment from you, our great citizenry...the American People. Get up tomorrow...go to work. Work hard, just as you always have. Do your jobs, and we, in government...and those at NASA, solemnly promise to do ours. Together, we will protect our citizenry and build a stronger nation than ever before.

When we finally pass through this time of great trial, this heroic generation will be remembered long after this asteroid has been completely forgotten.”

The crowd of reporters slowly stood one by one and began to applaud.

“See, I told you.” Todd said, shaking Maria’s shoulder.

She didn’t respond.

“What do you think?” he said, still fidgeting with her hair.

She ignored his question. “I had a dream the other night,”

“Huh?” Todd said, wondering if she had heard him.

“I had a dream,” she repeated. “We have to move.”

“Move...move where?”

Maria looked up at him.

“Omaha, Nebraska...”

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The door began opening.

Barney backed away until the wall blocked his retreat. Pete quickly

whirled and ran to Michael's side. Both men had seen what Brother Michael was capable of doing. They had seen him confuse his adversaries, sicken and terrify people with a thought. He knew intimate details in the lives of people he had never met. Brother Michael had told Barney the father was about to deal with him personally. Both men could only imagine what was on the other side of that door.

"Brother Michael," a woman's voice sounded from behind the door, "is he here?"

"Barnabas is here," Michael said. He smiled, reached for the hand of the beautiful creature, gently guided her through the door and into the apartment.

She gasped, the moment she saw Barney. He was still pressed against the wall. "Is that him?" she said, her voice soft and feminine.

Michael motioned towards Barney. "That's him."

"He's gorgeous," she said softly, moving towards him.

She wore slim-fitting jeans and a white shirt, unbuttoned just enough to scarcely cover an ample cleavage. She was small, around five feet five inches tall. The loose-fitting shirt hinted of a voluptuous, perfectly proportioned body. Her small face was astoundingly beautiful, framed with long, thick blond hair. As she moved towards Barney, he found himself instantly fixating on her moist blue-grey eyes. Never in Barney's life had he seen anything so beautiful.

"Barnabas," Brother Michael said, still grinning, "This is Mallory. "Mallory, this is..."

"Barney," Mallory said, interrupting Michael. "This is my Barney."

As she drew near Barney an entire lifetime of inadequacies boiled to the surface. He looked at her, then up at Michael, and then to the floor. He dared not smile. If he smiled she would see his bad teeth. He held his breath as she drew nearer. What if he had bad breath? People with bad teeth always had bad breath...Couldn't she see he was ugly? He reflexively turned away.

The beautiful woman reaching out to him dropped her arms. "He doesn't like me, Brother Michael."

Barney turned and looked down at her, amazed.

Michael laughed. "He likes you Mallory."

Barney hesitated and gently touched her shoulder. Instantly, those flashing grey eyes were looking back up at him. Once again her beauty took his breath away.

"Barnabas, you like Mallory don't you?" Michael said.

Mallory's soft, needy eyes stared up at Barney. No woman had ever looked at him this way...not in his wildest dreams. Barney shrugged. "Yeah...I guess so."

Mallory's eyes dropped.

"No..." Barney said softly, reaching for her shoulders, "Very much...I mean I...like you very much."

Mallory smiled. "I like you too Barney," she said softly, "Very much." She gently laid her head against his chest. Barney looked up, bewildered.

His attention was pulled away to a figure standing in the darkness just outside the open living room door. He jumped. "Who's there?"

Everyone in the room turned to look.

She was standing just outside of the light that illuminated the landing in front of the apartment door.

"I...I'm with...I'm with Mallory," the shadow said, slowly moving into the light. A shy, small figure of a girl appeared with one hand over her stomach, the other hand covering her chin. She was staring at Pete.

"Come in." Michael said.

The girl slowly walked into the apartment, never taking her eyes off Pete. Pete stared back, confused.

"Yes, this is Peter," Michael said.

The girl's dark, unblinking eyes, huge and oval, stared up at Pete. A quivering hand covered her mouth. She was slight of figure, small and petite. Her flawless, olive skin and black hair suggested an Indian, possibly oriental background.

"Peter, this is Sarah."

Pete mechanically offered to shake her hand.

Michael laughed, put his hand on her shoulder and gently nudged her towards Pete. "This is Peter."

She dropped her eyes and shook his hand. "I can't believe I'm

finally meeting you.”

Brother Michael continued laughing at Pete’s bewildered face. Finally, he said, “I can see you two are a little confused by this sudden turn of events...let me explain. The reason these ladies are so enamored with the two of you, and vice versa, is that you have all been made that way. The father has altered them from birth for you and you alone. And, you’ll find that you have been altered in such a way that these women find you irresistible as well. This is the way it was with Adam and Eve. They were specifically made for one another. For instance, when I look at you, Barney, I see a big, odd-looking man with rotten teeth and a big nose.”

Mallory whirled and flashed a black look at Michael.

“But Mallory thinks your big nose is incredibly sexy. She never understood why, but she’s been attracted to large noses her entire life.”

Mallory looked up at Barney, apparently looking for flaws.

Michael turned his attention to Pete. “To me, Peter is a small, unassuming man with big ears. Sarah, on the other hand, thinks Peter looks like Jessie Espinosa.”

Sarah looked up at Pete. “Jessie Espinosa wishes he was as handsome as Pete.”

Pete flushed.

“These two girls have been looking for you their entire lives,” Michael continued, “and you’ve been looking for them...you just didn’t know it. You’ll find you are all perfectly suited to each others’ needs.”

Pete put his hands in his pocket and glanced at Sarah. Mallory gently reached and took hold of Barney’s hand.

“Well, I’m spent,” Michael said. “It’s off to bed for me.” He turned, walked to his bedroom and closed the door.

Mallory smiled up at Barney and squeezed his hand. Barney glanced at her then fixed his eyes back on the blank wall in front of him.

Mallory finally spoke, breaking the long uncomfortable silence. “I can’t believe I finally found you.”

Barney looked at her, bewildered. “How *did* you... find me?”

“Brother Michael got in touch with me and explained it all. It was so strange...I spent my entire life missing you, yet I hadn’t even met you. I knew exactly what I wanted in a man and no one out there was even close...until now.” She smiled.

“Me too,” Sarah said, standing close to Pete. “Brother Michael found me too and here I am. He set us up in an apartment on the other side of the complex a little less than a week ago, then invited us over this evening...told us to come at exactly 6:47, not a minute sooner or later...Isn’t that strange? It’s funny,” she continued, looking into Pete’s eyes, “I knew who you were the moment I saw you.”

The bedroom door opened. Michael appeared at the door, dressed in a white bath robe. “Remember this, brothers, the father is capable of wonderful things. He knows how to take care of his children. But never forget, the father has given, and the father can just as easily take it all away....”

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The Delta IV rockets had pushed the payloads into space two days earlier. Now, all eight remaining solid rocket boosters floated precariously in eight separate orbits.

Two days prior, about 45 minutes after launch, Atlantis’s orbital maneuvering engines fired to round out the orbit at about 350 miles. During the first 48 hours following the launch, the shuttle commander executed a series of maneuvers designed to slowly close in on the orbiting solid rocket boosters. At around fifty miles apart, they were traveling relatively close to one another, considering each SRB carried over a million pounds of solid rocket propellant.

One of the last two boosters launched was trailing all of the others and was currently floating just aft of Atlantis’ port bow. Shuttle Commander John Lee Gunnarson was at the helm.

About an hour earlier he had crossed within 600 feet directly beneath the SRB, crossing an imaginary line known as the R-Bar running from the solid rocket booster towards earth. He then flew a half circle around, crossing its direction of travel. This dangerous maneuver was necessary to reach a point about 250 feet directly above the SRB. Gunnarson then slowly moved down the R-bar

towards the SRB. He completed the rendezvous by placing the edge of Atlantis' payload bay within 10 feet of the explosive packed missile.

Just prior to the rendezvous, Payload Commander Elisabeth Jiang had opened the 60 foot long, 15 foot wide payload bay doors and was preparing to unfold the Shuttle Remote Manipulator System known as Canadarm, a fifty foot long robotic arm.

At Jiang's prompting, the Canadarm's upper arm boom slowly rose up and out of the bus-sized payload bay. Once the upper arm boom had reached optimum pitch, she maneuvered the shoulder yaw mechanism, rolling the Canadarm's elbow boom into perfect alignment with the adjacent orbiting SRB. She slowly edged the elbow boom within a dangerous four feet of the floating bomb. This allowed her to maneuver the pitch of the wrist boom into place directly in front of, and within two feet of the missile.

The end effector, a specially designed grapple fixture consisting of a three-wire snare mechanism, located at the end of the Canadarm, was then used to snag one of three pre-placed Curvic couplings installed in the nose of the SRB.

At NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center Mission Control, the onboard camera recorded the completely successful, expertly orchestrated docking of the first SRB. Cheers went up worldwide.

The crew of Atlantis would now tether the SRB and tow it on to the next one in line where the entire process would start all over again. If all went well, Atlantis would be safely towing the entire group of solid rocket boosters towards the international space station within its scheduled sixteen days....

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### **Three days later**

Blaze had done exactly as the president asked and showed up at his office early on the morning after the explosion had taken place. He'd done it all again the next morning and the next.

The morning traffic jams had returned, suggesting that everyone else had taken the president's plea to heart as well.

The entire Patch Rankin building was abuzz with talk of the mission. Blaze had settled into his routine, which mostly consisted

of keeping everyone up to date on the latest news regarding the Vincens cloning project. Very little took place that Blaze wasn't aware of, and he had recently become aware of an especially troubling piece of information.

He had just taken a sip of coffee when his secretary buzzed him. "Yes, KaLee?"

"Father Millyard is here to see you."

"Send him in," Blaze said, moving to straighten his desk.

Father Randall Millyard's principal function was that of liaison between Blaze and Bishop Hickie. The Pope had condemned human cloning early on and although Father Millyard, Blaze and Bishop Hickie were all still officially clergymen, the church itself was completely unaware of their involvement. If something went wrong and the church discovered their association with the Vincens, the three men would all but certainly be excommunicated and their illegal activity exposed. The public would be informed that elected officials and even a Supreme Court justice had been involved. The scandal would rock both the religious and political worlds. As a result, the entire project was covert, to say the least.

"Father Jenkins," Millyard said, offering his hand. "How have you been holding up under these extraordinary circumstances?"

"I was very comforted by the President's press conference," Blaze said. "I'm confident everything will work out...please have a seat," Blaze motioned without standing, "and how about you?"

"Me and mine are coping," Millyard said. "Did you know my sister went to school with Elisabeth Jiang?"

"From the shuttle?"

"Yes, they're still close friends. In fact I've met her little daughter Emily personally."

"Really?" Blaze said. "You probably couldn't get near the poor child now."

"Yes, that's true, poor little thing. The press and paparazzi keep her and her family completely under siege these days."

"I wonder if her mother knows," Blaze said.

"I doubt it. I think she's pretty intent on the mission at hand."

Blaze reached for his coffee cup. "How's your family? Didn't you

have a Niece in med school?”

“Yes...Birdie... but she’s run off, I’m afraid.”

“Run off?”

“She left school. I think she had difficulty dealing with the pressure. At any rate, the family is looking for her.”

“She’ll turn up and probably return to school,” Blaze said.

“Chances are, she just needed a little time to re-group.”

“Yes, I suppose so.”

After a pause Blaze said, “so...any news from the Bishop?”

“Oh yes.” Millyard reached for his brief case, opened the latch and produced several printed pages along with a check. “The Vincens have approved your request for additional funds, and the Bishop sent you a personal note as well. Do you think the extra funds will be necessary?”

“I certainly hope not,” Blaze said. “Despite my objections they both seem to be good kids in their own way—”

The phone buzzed and Blaze reached for it. “Yes, KaLee?”

“There’s a young man here who insists on seeing you, father.”

Blaze shook his head. “Father Millyard and I are in the middle of a very—”

The door pushed open and a teenage boy entered the room with KaLee in pursuit. Blaze jumped to his feet. He felt the blood drain from his face.

“Father Jenkins,” KaLee yelled, “I tried to stop him!”

“Father Jenkins,” the kid said, animating his words, “bet you didn’t expect to see me.”

“Nathan...what...what are you doing here?”

Nathan leaned over Blaze’s desk. “We need to talk right now!”

Blaze stared down at the young boy.

“Right now!” Nathan repeated.

Blaze looked around the room at the startled faces of his secretary and Father Millyard. “I... I have to talk to this boy. His family... he’s... having problems with his family... I’m sorry, could we continue at another time?”

Father Millyard glanced at the boy, who was staring back at Blaze. “Yes...yes,” he said, “I’ll come back later. Would tomorrow



morning be all right?”

“Tomorrow morning sounds terrific!” Nathan yelled, turning on Millyard.

“Hey!” Blaze said, glaring down at the boy, “I don’t care if you’re having problems! You’ll show respect for Father Millyard and KaLee! Do you read me?”

Nathan glared back at Blaze who stood towering over him. His eyes shifted away. “Fine,” he said, defiantly, “...sorry.”

“That’s better,” Blaze said. “People, could...we be excused?”

“Oh yes... I’ll... be back tomorrow,” Millyard said as he promptly walked out the door. KaLee followed, closing the door behind them.

Nathan grinned at Blaze, turned and moved to the chair Father Millyard had occupied moments before. Blaze stood speechless as the kid sat down and threw his feet on his desk.

“Lucyyy,” he sang, “you got some splainin’ to do.”

“What are you doing here?”

Nathan grinned. Blaze waited for an answer, none came. “How did you find me?”

“How hard do you think it was for me to find a ten foot tall priest named Jenkins?”

Blaze sat down in his chair and slowly pushed a few papers around on his desk. “Ok, you found me. What do you want?”

“Five hundred dollars,” the kid said quickly.

“Oh I see. You’re blackmailing me?”

“Pretty much.”

“Don’t you think that might be dangerous?”

“Dangerous, how?”

“How do you know I won’t just kick the hell out of you?”

“I thought of that,” Nathan said, dropping his feet from the desk. He leaned towards Blaze. “But, I don’t think that’s gonna’ happen.”

“And, why not?”

“You think I’m making trouble now? Go ahead and beat me down, I’ll be telling everybody. Even the... what’s his name...the Pope.”

“What makes you think anyone would believe you?”

Nathan quickly sobered. “Those people who were just here, they

saw me!”

“They saw a troubled young man. One who just admitted he was being counseled because of his dysfunctional family.”

“I didn’t say that... you did!”

“Look Nathan,” Blaze said softly, shifting in his chair. “I’m not stupid. I know if I give you five hundred dollars now, you’ll just be back for more later.”

“Probably,” the kid said, scratching his nose.

“What can we do to take care of this situation permanently?” Blaze asked.

Nathan propped his feet back on Blaze’s desk. “I’m listening.”

“How about... say... ten thousand dollars. Then you go away for good.”

Nathan sat up straight. “Ten thousand dollars?” he said, his voice squeaking. His poker face quickly returned. “Hmm...ten K?”

“Ten thousand dollars,” Blaze said, pulling his checkbook out.

“Oh, what ya’ gonna do, gimme’ a check?”

Blaze raised the palms of his hands. “Ok... ok, let’s go to the bank. I’ll get a certified check.”

“That’s still a check!” How am I supposed to cash a check? What’s to stop you from putting a stop on it as soon as I walk away?”

“Ok, fine Nathan, I’ll get you cash.”

“Cash is good,” Nathan said, fidgeting in his seat.

Blaze could see young Nathan’s excitement building. “Understand though,” he said, “if you ever try this again, I’ll press charges against you... you know that don’t you? Things like this happen to counselors all the time, and it’s always the word of someone like you against the word of someone like me and they always believe someone like me...get it?”

Nathan sat silent in his chair.

The two stood and made their way out the door. KaLee, sitting at her desk, looked up as they approached. “Everything all right, Father Jenkins?” she asked.

“Yes KaLee, everything is fine. I’m taking Nathan home now.”

“All right,” she said slowly, staring at Nathan.

Blaze and Nathan drove to the bank where Blaze withdrew ten thousand dollars and put it into the hands of the excited fourteen year old. He drove him into the city of Nashville and dropped him off with the promise that they'd never lay eyes on each other again.

Blaze had been shaken to the marrow. Vowing never to indulge in this sort of activity again, he slowly drove back towards his office. Even if Todd, Millyard and KaLee believed his stories, it wasn't going to last forever. He also knew the chances of Nathan staying away were slim. But at this point in time, he had precious few options.

He finally arrived back at his building and returned to his office. He wasn't sure if KaLee was looking at him oddly, or if it was just his imagination.

He sat down heavily in his chair and immediately noticed the check from the Vincennes Millyard had dropped off earlier. He looked around for the letters that accompanied them...nothing. He looked under his desk. They weren't there. He looked in the trashcan. They were nowhere to be found.

*Nathan!* He growled under his breath. He lunged for the phone and called Father Millyard. "What was in those letters?" he demanded the moment Millyard picked up.

"Who is this?" Millyard asked.

"This is Sterling Jenkins... it's very important. What was in the letters accompanying the check?"

"Well," Millyard said slowly, "they were primarily summarizing your request for more funds and the reasons the Vincennes had granted them to you."

"No!" Blaze yelled. "Be more specific!"

"Ok... uh... basically, they said that...in light of recent events, your request for extra funds for additional surveillance, equipment and manpower had been approved. They reiterated, how important it was that the host couple not be allowed to leave the area—"

"Is that it?"

"Oh wait," Millyard said, "I think there was something from the Bishop; something personal, concerning the baby."

"Personal? In what way?"

“I think the Bishop said something about how the thought of the baby affected him personally, how incredible it was that he’d live to see the clone of Christ himself—”

“Wait a minute!” Blaze said. “Did he specifically say ‘the clone of Christ Himself?’”

“Uh...yes I think he did—”

Blaze jumped to his feet. “What in God’s name would he put something like that in a letter for?”

Millyard, obviously shaken by the sudden outburst, slowly answered. “It was just a personal observation I guess—”

“You guess?” Blaze yelled. “Did anyone guess what would happen if the letters fell into the wrong hands?”

“That’s why I always deliver them personally,” Millyard said. “Why...they aren’t missing are they?”

Blaze realized how badly he had tipped his hand. He might just as well have told Millyard he lost the papers and they were most likely in hostile hands. Why hadn’t he thought this thing out before he made this stupid call?

“No... no,” Blaze said, his mind completely blank. Finally he continued. “It’s just that, we shouldn’t give specifics... when we communicate... from here on.”

“If the letters aren’t missing,” Millyard said, “why are you asking me about their contents?”

“No... they’re not missing... KaLee left for home and took them with her before I had a chance to read them, that’s all.”

“I’ll tell the Bishop of your concerns,” Millyard said, after a long pause. He hung up the phone.

“No, wait!” Blaze yelled. It was too late. Millyard was off the phone.

*I’m so stupid!* He sat down hard in his chair. *This is catastrophic.* As he sat staring at the wall his predicament began to settle in. Those letters told of the illegal surveillance of the host couple, about the cloning of Christ. If that kid had those letters and had any idea what they were, and what they meant...they could all be in very serious trouble.

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Father Millyard hung up the phone. The odd appearance of the young man in Jenkins' office was finally starting to make sense. Sterling Jenkins might be turning into a security breach.

He decided to make the call....

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### Four months later

"This is incredible," Maria said, stepping out of her car.

Todd walked to the front of Maria's yellow Volkswagen and retrieved a bulky picnic basket from the trunk.

The spot was shady and cool, surrounded by thick forest. Just in front and below them, was an ancient asphalt road that disappeared into the vast cool waters of the Cumberland River. A dilapidated old sign read, 'Public Boat launch,' but no one else was around. The wide, slow moving river made a soft, hypnotic trickling sound as it leisurely meandered on its way.

Off in the distance birds sang as Todd searched for the perfect spot for lunch. He threw a blanket and a couple of enormous, over-stuffed pillows under the shady canopy of a prehistoric looking ash tree. Maria followed him but he wouldn't let her sit down.

"One minute," he said, holding his hands out, "hold up just a sec." He bounded off towards the car and quickly returned with a couple of small folding chairs.

"Oh you are so sweet—"

"No, wait," Todd said, "just one more sec." He turned, and sprinted back to the car, returned with a small table and pushed it in front of the chairs. "Go on ahead, and sit down. I'll be right back." He ran off again towards the car.

"What are you doing, you nutcase?" Maria yelled, laughing.

"I'll be right there!" he yelled back. "Go on now... sit down."

He returned with a vase filled with softball sized yellow carnations in a green fern bed, highlighted with clouds of tiny, white baby's-breath sprouts. Under his arm, he carried a tablecloth and candelabra, complete with two sky-blue candles. Maria giggled as he threw the tablecloth over the table, placed the flower arrangement

just so, and found the perfect place for the candelabra. “Where did you find room in the car for all this stuff?”

“Be right back.” he said, ignoring her question.

“Hey,” she called after him, as he disappeared in the direction of the car, “when are we gonna’ eat—” She erupted with laughter mid-sentence.

He had returned with a bottle of Merlot and two sparkling wine glasses. It was the black tux top, thrown over the tee shirt and knee-high shorts, together with the small white towel, strategically placed over his left forearm, that struck her so funny.

He moved stoically to her side and placed the glass in front of her, wrapped the towel around the wine bottle, tilted his head slightly to the left and filled her glass half full. Maria was laughing so hard she could hardly breathe. Todd stood by disapprovingly with one eyebrow piously raised. Finally, she pulled it together enough to sit up straight, lift her glass, roll it in a counterclockwise circle, and sniff. She all but laughed again when she looked up into Todd’s intensely serious, crooked face but instead managed to produce her most bored expression.

“Waiter,” she said, monotone, “I think you misunderstood me...I ordered wine. You must have thought I said anti-freeze.”

Todd lost control of his face and started grinning.

Maria laughed so hard she spilled her wine. “You are sooo crazy.”

Todd pulled out an overgrown wicker-looking lunch box, complete with two latching doors.

“Where did you ever find that?” Maria said. “It looks like Toto’s little thingy in that Wizard of Oz movie.”

Todd smiled and pulled a bucket of Lucky Fried Chicken from deep within the basket.

Maria laughed again.

He fished around, until he had found, and placed, the entire meal of fried chicken, biscuits, mashed potatoes, corn and coleslaw on the table.

As he busied himself, Maria smiled at him. A soft summer breeze gently swirled her hair around her face. “This is wonderful,” she said quietly. “I love this place...but—”

"But what?" Todd said.

"I'm sorry, you're being so sweet..."

"What is it?"

"I can't drink the wine, in case you haven't noticed..." She leaned towards him, rolling her hand over her noticeably protruding belly, "I'm great with child."

"Oh," Todd yelled, slapping his palm against his forehead, "I'm the worst dad."

"It's ok," Maria said. "I have my bottled water."

"I blew it—I wanted it to be perfect."

"No... it's wonderful—"

"Oh, but wait," Todd said, looking up, "now I remember." He reached for the wine bottle and pointed at the label. "Check it," he said, grinning, "It's non-alcoholic."

Maria smiled and put her hand on Todd's arm. "This is perfect. You are the sweetest person in the world."

Todd flushed and looked away. "I just wanted to celebrate our viability. Seven months...if the baby were to be born now, chances are good he'd survive."

"I've never been this happy," she said.

Todd's eyes widened. "Don't move."

"What?" Maria asked, frowning.

"Shh...turn around...slowly."

"Wha..."

"Quietly turn around," Todd whispered, pointing behind her.

She slowly turned. Just over her left shoulder a large grey squirrel clung to the trunk of their shade tree. Maria gasped. "It's beautiful." It was so close Maria could have reached out and touched it.

"Maybe it's hungry," Todd whispered. "Give it some of your chicken."

"Squirrels don't eat meat, do they?"

"Oh yeah, give him some of your bread."

Maria broke off a piece of bread and gingerly pushed it towards the squirrel. It looked at her warily, reached out with its front paws and took the bread from her hand. It jostled the bread and quickly bounded up the tree.

"That was awesome," Maria said. "Have you ever seen a squirrel do that before?"

"It probably gets fed here a bunch," Todd said, before sipping his wine.

Maria picked up a piece of chicken and began pulling the meat off the bone with a plastic fork.

"Do you remember the night you were so upset?" Todd said, after a short pause.

"The night the rocket blew up? I sure do, my hair is only just getting back to normal."

"You remember what you said?"

"Honestly I really don't remember much about that night. When I saw that thing blow apart on TV—I thought it was all over for us."

"A lot of folks did," Todd said, reaching for a chicken wing. "The roads were...practically empty that night. The traffic lights weren't even working."

"What were you and Father Jenkins talking about?"

"Oh let's see... us mostly."

"Us?"

"Well, sort of..."

"You never told me how you happened to run into him."

"I was... just driving around and saw him sitting in a car parked on the side of the road."

"What were you doing driving around? I thought you had gone for snacks?"

"Uh... I just, felt like taking a little drive."

Maria studied his face for a moment. "You don't have to lie."

"No, it's true. He was just sitting there—"

"It doesn't matter."

"Don't be mad," he said. "I'm sorry I wasn't there for you that night."

"I know. It's just that.... That was such a strange night. I remember going out on the front lawn hoping to see you drive up at any moment. It was so odd. There wasn't a soul... no cars, no dogs barking anywhere. Even the crickets were quiet that night. To be honest," she continued, shrugging, "I thought you had left the baby



and me.”

Todd reached for her hand. “Not a chance.”

She smiled. “I was kinda mean to you that day.”

After a moment, she returned to her meal.

“Now that you mention it,” Todd said thoughtfully, “Father Jenkins did say something sort of out there.”

“He did?” she said, biting at a chicken leg. “What about?”

“He said something that bothered me a little.”

She looked up from her chicken leg and raised an eyebrow. “What did he say?”

“If there was something that really bothered you—about me, you’d just tell me, wouldn’t you?”

“Of course,” she said.

“There wouldn’t be a need to go through a third party would there?”

“Of course not, Todd, what are you talking about?”

“Father Jenkins told me... well, he told me, you told him, you were afraid I was becoming a...religious freak.”

“A what?” she asked, confused. “Who told him that?”

“Father Jenkins told me you called him, way back...when I asked you if you had a Bible.”

Maria squinted at Todd. “He said I called him?”

“He said you were flipping out...You did call him, didn’t you?”

“I haven’t called Father Jenkins since before we were married.”

Todd glanced down, swirled the mashed potatoes on his plate and looked back. “That’s weird. Why would he tell me something like that if it weren’t true?”

“Why would something like that come up in the conversation?” Maria said. “What were you two talking about?”

Todd’s face went blank.

Maria leaned forward. “You’re lying about something.”

“Why do you think I’m lying?”

“Todd, listen to you. You’re telling me instead of going for snacks, you just decided to go for a drive, came upon Father Jenkins who just happened to be parked on the side of the road, and the two of you have a conversation about me calling him because you’re a

religious whacko—”

“Freak,” Todd said, softly scratching his head. “I said freak.”

Maria stared at him for a moment then pushed the palms of her hands out. “No—you know what...I’m sounding like a wife.”

“Ok...look,” Todd said, glancing into the forest, “The truth is, I wanted to talk to Father Jenkins about...” he stopped and shook his head. “I’m afraid to say.”

Maria felt the blood leave her face. She sat silent for a time, reached into a bag and pulled out a roll. “I can’t get enough of these rolls,” she said, shaking her head. “This chicken place makes the best rolls. They’re always warm. I wonder how they keep them so warm...for like two hours, and their mashed potatoes... are you getting tired of me?”

Todd looked up, shocked. “Of course not, you gotta’ know by now how much I love you. You are...” he fumbled for the right words, “the most beautiful—”

“I know,” Maria said. “You think I’m beautiful. I KNOW! But, are you getting tired of me?”

Todd stopped talking and stared at her.

She put her face in her hands.

He moved from his chair, knelt next to her and spoke softly. “What’s wrong?”

“You wouldn’t understand. No one does.”

He ran his hand down her arm. “Give me a chance; I might surprise you.”

Maria looked up at him, reached for a napkin and wiped the tears from her face. “I’ve always been pretty,” she said softly. “I know how that sounds but... it’s true. I always have been. Back at UCLA I constantly had offers to model. I was even offered a few movie spots.”

“I know,” Todd said quietly, “we all knew. One of your offers came from Hefner personally.”

“How did you know that?” she asked.

“We all knew.”

She sighed. “But then, there was always this other thing.”

Todd reached and pulled his chair next to her.

"Men would find out I didn't know how to feel...sexy..." She blushed, staring into her glass of wine. "Know what I mean? I... couldn't—"

"I know what you mean," Todd said, finding her a new napkin.

"They'd find out," she continued, "and then they'd leave. I always imagined it was like winning the lottery and because of that you attract people around you. But when they find out they aren't gonna get anything from you, they lose interest and move on."

"You're not thinking that'll happen to us, are you?" Todd said.

"That's just it. You're the only one who ever lo—" Her voice trailed off. "I mean...I know you were the one who broke up with me but...somehow I always knew, sex wasn't all you wanted from me."

"It was you," Todd said. "All I ever wanted was you... and whatever came with that."

"Todd," Maria said, looking deep into his eyes, "when I tell you this, I'm gonna feel vulnerable, but I'm gonna tell you anyway. Every man I've ever known, my entire life, eventually left me. You left me too but... you're the only one who ever loved me."

"You're kidding," he said.

"Of course I'm not kidding," she said, tearing up again. "But for how long? How can you love someone who can't love you back?" She began crying. "And now—"

"Baby...it don't matter," Todd said softly, gently pulling her to him.

"And—" she interrupted, "I look in the mirror and I'm...and I'm fat. I found a... varicose vein and I think I'm getting stretch marks. And I'm so...needy. Do you think I like being like this? So... needy and scared... all the time."

"Sweetheart, we're all getting older. Life is constantly changing us all, but those things don't really matter."

"They do if that's all you are. Sometimes I feel like I'm just...a...mannequin. I look good, but I'm not a real... person. I'm incomplete, and when I'm not pretty anymore...what will I have then?"

"Maria," Todd said, "I could never leave—"

“And now...even you are starting to change, and it terrifies me...because...I... I have this... b... baby and then the... asteroid. I can't do it alone—”

“Maria...Maria...” Todd said, gently shaking her shoulders, “I will not leave you and the baby, never, nada...can't happen. And as far as you getting fat, you've never been more beautiful—”

“TODD!” Maria yelled. “Tell me I'm a good person! Tell me I make you laugh, you enjoy my company, you love me just the way I am. Tell me... I tell great stories... Whatever... but don't say I'm beautiful. Please!”

“Ok... Ok, I see your point,” Todd said. He reached and took hold of her hand. “I'm sorry I made you so upset. I wanted this day to be special.”

“And it is,” Maria said, sniffing. “It's all just perfect.” She smiled and put her hand on his arm.

Todd reached for another napkin and handed it to her.

“It's a hormone thing...I guess. I'm not used to being pregnant.”

Todd gently pulled her out of the chair and onto the blanket he had thrown on the ground. “Don't bother me any,” he said quietly. “I hope we can always talk to each other this way.”

“What way is that?” she asked, softly.

“You know... open up to each other... I figure it's what we're supposed to be doin'.”

“Says who?”

We need to be like...two horns on a goat.”

Maria smiled. “And that means?”

Todd shrugged and pushed a twig around the blanket. “I don't know,” he said finally. “My dad told me that once. He meant that...we need to tell each other how we feel all the time.”

“We do?”

“Yeah, and we always got to be on each other's side.”

“Hmm,” she said quietly, “are you on my side?”

“Always.”

“What if I'm wrong?”

“Always—and I want you to know,” he said, kicking his shoes off, “I'm fond of those hormones of yours. I think you have good ones,

and being a med-school drop-out—I know ‘bout them hormones.” He moved to the tree and propped himself against it.

“Thank you,” she said, as she curled up to him.

They sat listening to the soft sounds of the forest. From time to time, they could hear the sound of trout leaping out of the water.

“Did you do your own nails?” Todd asked, chewing on a piece of grass, “because, I’ve always thought you were a great hand at doing nails.”

“Thank you,” she repeated, throwing a pillow onto his lap. She lay with her head on Todd’s lap looking up into the soft white clouds floating slowly over the forest canopy. “Look,” she said, pointing at a cloud, “it’s a ship.”

“Where? I can’t see no ship.”

“There’s the bottom and there are the sails.”

“You see what I’m saying?” Todd said, “I can’t see a ship. You have a great imagination. Have I ever told you what a great imagination you have?”

“Stop it!” she yelled, punching him in the side.

“You got a hell of a punch. You could be a prizefighter!”

“Oh you wanna’ fight?” she yelled, jumping on top of him, “You want some of this?” She began tickling him.

“I didn’t say you were good lookin’!” he hollered.

“Shut up—shut up—shut up,” she growled.

“Stop!” he yelled. You’re too good at tickling—you’re killing me!”

She took hold of his arms and pinned him to the ground. “What ya’ gonna do now smart guy... I’m squashing you with my big fat belly!”

“Oh no,” he groaned, “it looks bad—no normal man could withstand this kind of pressure and live! Lucky for me I’m no normal man!” He pushed her hands behind her and gently rolled her off him. She squealed and giggled. Her laughing face was so intensely beautiful he nearly said something but caught himself just in time. He lay there, looking down into her amazing emerald green eyes. After a moment had passed, he softly asked, “Can I still say I love you?”

“Yes,” she said, “you can say that.”

He gently pushed the hair away from her face and slowly pressed his lips to hers. She responded the best she could. Todd sat back against the tree and found another blade of grass to chew on. He sat thoughtfully staring off in the direction of the slow moving river. "Omaha, Nebraska," he said, finally, breaking the stillness. "You said you wanted to go to Omaha that night; you haven't said much about it since."

"Yeah," she said, "the baby has to be born in Omaha Nebraska."

He turned to look at her, "Why Omaha?"

"I don't know...I just—"

She shifted her gaze, looking past Todd into the forest. "Todd! There's a man up there on the hill!"

"What?" Todd said, looking up.

"There's a man up there crouching down like he's hiding or something!"

Todd turned to look. "Hey!"

The man stood up quickly and began leisurely walking away.

"Hey, what are you doing up there, dude!" Todd yelled, jumping to his feet. He began running up the hill towards the intruder. The man saw him and dashed into the underbrush.

Maria stood up. "Be careful!"

Todd reached the top of the hill and blew into the clearing. He made it to the road just in time to see the man speed away in a small blue car....

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It was summertime in New England and Prescott Park, stretching along the Piscataqua River from lower State Street to Mechanic Street, downtown Portsmouth, New Hampshire, was in full bloom. Pete and Sarah's hard-soled shoes clicked softly as they leisurely strolled hand in hand down a wide cobbled walkway.

Twin embankments bordering both sides of the walkway were lavishly covered with thick golden-green foliage, plentifully adorned with flowers of every shape and color.

Just ahead, a hearty patch of emerald-green fern flourished in the shade of an old gnarled moss-covered tree. Beneath the tree, shaded by a canopy of tiny silver-green leaves sat an inviting looking bench.

The two lovers meandered towards it and sat down.

Sarah pulled the hair away from her face as a cool sea breeze softly rattled the leaves and gently pushed a couple of popcorn kernels back up the path from where they had come.

“Ain’t this perty,” Pete said.

Sarah squeezed his hand. “Everyplace is pretty as long as you’re with me.”

Pete grinned and kicked at a pebble under his feet. He looked out into the sea for a time before turning his attention back to Sarah. “I used to stutter... real bad.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, you probably wouldn’t have been able to even understand me.”

“I’m sure I would’ve understood you, Pete.”

He blushed. “Why... did you say you like me again?”

“You have to stop acting this way. I love you.”

“But... nobody ever said stuff like that to me before.”

“Maybe it’s because they were shy. I once heard Elizabeth Taylor had a hard time getting dates when she was younger. She was so pretty she scared all the boys away.”

“I don’t think that’s the way it is with me.” Pete turned his attention back to the park. He began whistling strange disconnected notes, leaned back in the bench and threw his arm over her small shoulders.

Sarah grinned.

Pete blushed again. “Do you like Brother Michael?” he said.

“I like Brother Michael a lot.”

“He used to be cuckoo.”

“He used to what?”

“He was crazy... I mean for real.”

“He’s just a very deep man. I can see where he’d be hard to understand sometimes—”

“Use ta’ think he was Jesus,” Pete said.

“He seems better now.”

Pete leaned forward in the seat. “What time is it?”

Sarah looked at her watch. “Maybe we should go.”

“Oh no... what time is it?”

She stood. “It’s okay; we still have plenty of time if we leave right away.”

They made their way to the public docking space on the river. Once there, Pete checked for the familiar boat as they moved from space to space. By the time they finally found it, they had walked two-thirds the length of the wide wooden plank-way.

“What time is it?” Pete repeated. “Are we late?”

“No,” Sarah said, coming up behind him. “We made it here in plenty of time. Look, it’s only five o’clock.”

As they approached, a portly man dressed in an outrageously colorful Hawaiian shirt and cutoff Levis stepped off the boat and joined them on the pier. He stood looking them both over while chewing on a spit-saturated cigar butt. “Where’s Barney?” he said. His voice was raspy and he spoke with a heavy New England accent.

“Brother Michael sent me this time, Charlie.”

“He did huh? Who’s she?”

“This is Sarah. Brother Michael sent her too.”

The big man pulled the cigar butt out of his mouth. “I only do business with Barney.”

“But, I’m always with Barney when he picks up the package. Come on, Charlie...it’s me... Pete.”

“I only do business with Barney!” Charlie yelled as he rolled the disintegrating cigar in soy colored fingers.

“But this time Brother Michael told me to come and get the package.”

The big man wiped the sides of his mouth and pushed the cigar back between his stained teeth. “It’ll cost you more money.”

“Why?”

“This is a risky business. More risks, more money.”

“What risk, Charlie? It’s me—Pete.”

“If I have to do business with somebody else, it’s gonna’ cost more money.”

“I didn’t bring anything but the envelope Brother Mi—”

“That’s okay,” Sarah said. “Let’s just go tell Brother Michael Charlie here wouldn’t do business with us.”

The big man looked down at Sarah. "Who put the girl in charge?"

Sarah tugged at Pete's arm. "Come, Pete."

Pete looked back at her, confused. "But...Brother Michael—"

"Is gonna' be very upset," she said, "but if Charlie won't do business with us what can we do?" She turned to walk away, pulling Pete behind her.

"Hey, wait a minute," the big man yelled. "I didn't say I wouldn't do business with you. I just said it was gonna' cost you more money, that's all."

"I understand," Sarah said, walking away with Pete in tow, "and that's exactly what we'll tell Brother Michael the moment we see him."

"Hey, wait a minute!" Charlie yelled.

Sarah continued up the walkway moving quickly with Pete tagging along behind.

"What're we doing?" Pete whispered.

"Just keep going," she said, smiling. "I want to see this guy run."

"Hey!" Charlie said, running back towards his boat. "Hey...here's your package...where ya' going? Hey, stop!"

Sarah and Pete continued walking back towards the park. Charlie quickly retrieved the package from inside the cabin of his boat and was moving at a full run towards the couple. "Hey, here it is. What ya' in such a wicked big hurry for?"

Sarah smiled up at Pete before turning to greet Charlie who was coming up quickly from behind.

"Hey, you want the package or what?"

Sarah reached out without speaking and pulled the brown box out of Charlie's hands.

"Hey!" Charlie hollered. "The Money...THE MONEY!"

Pete pulled a white envelope out of his back pocket and pushed it into Charlie's hand.

"Man, what's with you two?" Charlie said wheezing. "What if somebody sees us out here in the open doing business? There's probably a million bucks worth of rocks in that box."

Pete looked up, shocked. "What?"

Charlie frowned and backed off. "Is he in the loop?"

"Yeah, he's in the loop." Sarah said, staring up at Charlie. "Are we gonna' do this again?"

"No," Charlie said. "We ain't gonna to do this again."

Sarah turned to leave. "Good."

"And, uh... don't tell Brother Michael about this ok? We got a good thing going."

"You *had* a good thing going," Sarah said over her shoulder. "I wonder if Brother Michael will want to continue the partnership now that you tried to rip him off."

"Look," Charlie said, stammering, "I was just kidding about the money! You got to have a sense of humor in this business. You know what I mean? I would've said the same thing to Barney. He'd a gotten a big laugh."

"Who knows," Sarah said, momentarily turning back, "Maybe Brother Michael will think it's funny too."

Pete stood next to Charlie, looking befuddled.

"Cripes," Charlie said quietly. He turned around to face Pete. "You'll fix it won't you? Tell Brother Michael I didn't know who she was... I was just fooling around with you—Ok?"

"Uh yeah," Pete said, "I'll try." He turned and raced up the path, eventually catching up with Sarah. When he finally reached her he was surprised to find her laughing.

"Did you see what I did?" she said. "I've never been that bold before."

"Yeah, you were something."

"I had him pretty scared, didn't I?"

"You had *me* pretty scared. I thought we weren't gonna' be able to get the package."

"I could tell he was bluffing the minute I saw him."

"Really? How could you tell that?"

"I don't know... I could just tell."

"Did you hear what he said about the box?" Pete said.

"Yeah, what do you think is in it?"

"He said rocks. What kind of rocks could be worth a million bucks?"

She lifted the box and shook it slightly. It wasn't much bigger than

a shoebox. "Sometimes they call drugs rocks," she said. "Could be drugs in here but... they must be awfully small."

"We been pickin' up these packages ever since we got here," Pete said. "Must have picked up a hundred of them by now. If each one is worth a million bucks, I wonder how much money we got."

"Maybe Charlie was exaggerating," Sarah said.

Pete walked along beside her. Sarah took his hand and began swinging it as they walked back through the park.

"Don't you care?" Pete said.

"About what?"

"That we might be carrying dope around in a box?"

"No, I think it's exciting."

Pete fell back for a moment. "You're different than I thought."

"Different, like in...better or worse?"

"Stronger—smarter. Makes me wonder even more, why you want to be with a dumb guy like me."

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Pete and Sarah wandered back from where they came, found the old van, and began the short trip back to Newmarket. Pete meticulously obeyed the speed laws just as Brother Michael had told him.

"Do you think that's dope in there?" Pete asked Sarah.

"I don't know...It doesn't feel very heavy."

"Let me see," Pete said. He took the box in his hand, gently shook it and handed it back to Sarah. "Yeah...It's not very heavy."

They drove along Highway 95, heading southwest through the town of New Hampton, found Hampton road, and turned west towards Newmarket.

"It's hard to believe there could be a million bucks in there," Pete said, breaking a long silent spell.

"Yes, it is," Sarah said, smiling.

"I wonder what a million bucks looks like."

"I don't know."

Pete kept glancing at the box as they drove. "I wonder if Brother Michael would mind if we look in the box?"

"I...don't know if we should," Sarah said quietly.

"Yeah, we best not risk it."

They reached Portsmouth Avenue and turned north. "Hey...you ever seen a million bucks before?" Pete asked.

"No, I'm a school teacher. We don't earn very much money."

"Really...a teacher? That's funny...I didn't know that. Hmm, a schoolteacher...with a dummy like me."

"Stop it!" she yelled.

"That's probably not a million bucks worth of drugs anyway," Pete said, rambling. "It's not big enough to hold a million bucks worth of—" He reached and knocked the box out of her lap. "Oops," he hollered, as it hit the floor.

"Pete, you deliberately knocked that box on the floor trying to break it open!"

"No, I didn't!"

"Yes you did...what if it isn't drugs. Maybe it's something fragile."

"Oh no," Pete said, I never thought of that. We better make sure. We better open it."

"I'm not gonna open it," Sarah said.

"But you said something might be broken in there."

"I didn't say that!" she said laughing. "You're not gonna' be happy 'till you look in the box."

She picked the box up off the floor, carefully pulled the lid off and looked at Pete. Inside the box was a light green bag pulled tight at the opening by a pull-string. She untied the string and pulled the bag open. It had been filled with packing paper. She pushed her hand into the paper as Pete impatiently looked on. "What's going on?" she said, pulling another small bag to the surface. "Pete, it's another bag."

"Keep going," Pete said.

"This is crazy. How are we gonna' explain this to Brother Michael?"

"Brother Michael doesn't have to know," Pete said, glancing back at the road. "It's not like we're gonna' take anything. We just want to know what's going on. We got a right to know what's going on."

"Ok," Sarah said smiling, "but I'm telling Brother Michael you made me."

She gently opened the pull-string and peeked inside. "Pete, look at this!" She tipped the bag. Sparkling green gems fell into her hand. "Beautiful," she said softly.

"What are they... diamonds?" Pete asked.

"They look like diamonds, but they're green."

"That can't be worth a million bucks," Pete said.

Sarah rolled the jewels back into the bag. "Don't be so sure. Some gems are worth a fortune."

She had just finished putting the package back together when Pete rolled into the parking lot of their apartment complex. "Mum's the word," she told Pete as she opened the door and stepped out with the package under her arm.

"Huh?" Pete said, rounding the back of the van.

"What? oh, mum's the word means don't tell."

"Oh...you mean, keep my mouth shut?"

"Yeah," Sarah said, smiling, "keep your mouth shut, Pete."

Pete grinned.

She shook Pete's arm. "I think Brother Michael is gonna' be very happy to see us. Someone's about to make a great impression on Brother Michael."

"Really? Who?"

"You, silly."

They moved up the stairs and walked into the apartment. The couple was surprised to find Barney sitting on the lounge chair. Mallory sat sidesaddle on one of his legs, her arm slung over his shoulders. They were supposed to have been on a delivery. "What time is it?" Pete asked.

"It's time for you to get your butt kicked," Barney said.

Pete turned to see Brother Michael standing in front of the TV. He was obviously angry. Pete and Sarah exchanged nervous glances.

"Peter..." Brother Michael said softly, "Why don't you tell us what you two were up to while you were poking around in our package?"

Pete quickly looked at Barney and back at Michael. Fear swelled in his chest. He had never seen this look on Brother Michael's face before.

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The docking of the space shuttle Atlantis had been tricky. The Mission docket called for Atlantis to tow eight fully loaded SRBs, tethered together on a thirty-five mile long string, directly toward the space station at 17,500 miles per hour.

En route to the station, the crew had the extraordinarily delicate task of turning the shuttle and its volatile string of cargo one hundred and eighty degrees. The SRBs had to be swung around early in the mission to allow for braking at just the right time. And once aimed, there would be no way of steering.

It was imperative they keep the tethers taut. The only way to achieve that goal, once the procession had been swung around, was for Atlantis to execute an extraordinarily gradual deceleration. But if they slowed too quickly, they could fall behind the space station's orbital speed. And if that happened, in the same way a chain is easy to pull, but impossible to push, they would become dead in the water. They also didn't want to come in too fast because rather than pulling in forwards, they would be backing the string of bombs directly past the space station, fifty feet off its bow...and the caboose of this train was thirty five miles behind the locomotive.

The confines of the physical size of the only available crane, the Canadarm 2, dictated that the flyby be within fifty feet. The maneuver would be so precise, onboard radar would not be able to accurately monitor at what margin the first SRB would miss, or not miss, the station. The whole thing came down to a single mathematical equation.

By the time the first SRB finally reached the station, Atlantis had dramatically slowed the colossal procession down. Those aboard the international space station watched anxiously as the first missile whistled past, moving at around three hundred miles per hour. Onboard laser-ranging devices would later report that the string of SRBs missed the station by exactly thirty-eight feet, seven and one half inches.

At the end of the day, Atlantis had successfully completed her mission and had arrived on schedule. The string of SRBs had been

securely tethered to the space station and the shuttle was now safely docked at Unity, opposite Endeavor.

Never before had both been docked at the Unity node at the same time. Desperate times call for desperate measures and the space station, designed for a seven-member crew, was teaming with two shuttle crews of seven, along with the multinational crew of three assigned to man the station itself. The unprecedented size of the crew had been necessary in order to man five three member teams, working four point eight hour shifts, twenty-four hours a day. It was imperative that the propulsion assembly unit be completed and on its way to Dante no later than six days from start up.

Shuttle commander Lieutenant Colonel Andrea Lange, payload specialist, John Palm and payload commander Colonel Joyce Shipley had arrived at the space station two weeks prior aboard Endeavor and had spent the night in the confined Joint Airlock Module in preparation for the first scheduled EVA.

Lieutenant Commander Arno Bosley, operating from the flight deck of Endeavor, officially turned attitude control over to RS MCS. Moscow command and control activated Tranzit-B suit communications on schedule and the COM systems within Lange, Palm and Shipley's spacesuits quickly came online.

At 1300, Lieutenant Colonel Lange stepped out of the crew lock and onto the Crew and Equipment Translation Aid known as the CETA. She was now officially outside the relative safety of the station.

Payload commander Elisabeth Jiang would be controlling the specially built, fifty-five foot long, Canadarm 2 from inside the station. She was busily typing commands into her computer, checking and re-checking the monitor screen for confirmation of changes. She clicked on the affirmative box corresponding with 'operational on redundant string, off on prime.' The computer confirmed the command had been implemented.

Next on the list... MBS: KA power on both strings...

Again, she clicked affirmative.

"Flight, be advised, SRMS is go."

"Copy that ROSO. EVA and PHALCON confirm...all clear to

go when ready.”

“Copy Flight, going to GPC for manual control.”

Lieutenant Colonel Andrea Lange stood alone on the CETA, gazing at the panoramic scene looming before her. What she saw overwhelmed her. Silhouetted against the massive blue marbled earth, the thirty-five mile long string of mighty SRBs stretched out into what seemed like infinity. The sun was rising over the eastern hemisphere and patches of cloudless skies clearly revealed junctions of brown land and blue water. From this unique perspective, the entire earth appeared to be displayed out for her like a masterful painting.

It occurred to her for the first time that she truly belonged to this vast family of man, that the family of man belonged to her. The sobering reality pressed on her...She, and this little handful of people inhabiting this tiny space station...a speck of dust floating in an ocean of space, was the only hope for her kind. She could tangibly feel the men, women and children of the earth watching her, hoping and praying that she, and this tiny group, would be able to do what they had come here to do.

A lump grew in her throat. She found herself fighting off tears just as Colonel Shipley stepped onto the CETA.

“Look at this.” Shipley spoke through the intercom, pointing at the spectacular sunrise, “It’s like looking through the eyes of God.” She turned and looked out at the cyclopean string of SRBs surreally floating on and on, as far as one could see.

Lange managed to pull herself together. “It’s incredible, isn’t it?” she said.

The Canadarm moved to life just as payload specialist John Palm stepped onto the CETA.

The big arm slowly swung towards a tactically placed Power and Data Grapple Fixture, known as PDGF, where it methodically attached itself. Once attached, Jiang ordered it to detach from the original PDGF and pivot to the next one down the line.

The arm flipped end on end and attached itself to yet another PDGF like a herculean inchworm.

The three astronauts watched in awe as the mammoth robotic arm

began surrealistically crawling along the length of the station towards the first SRB in line.

At the scheduled time, Lange, Palm and Shipley maneuvered the CETA into position. They slowly began making their way to the other end of the space station.

With the aid of Canadarm 2, the five multinational crews would begin the arduous task of pulling each SRB to a designated spot near the station, assemble each one, one after the other, into a single titanic rocket motor. They had six days...

~~~

"It's time for you to start coming in every two weeks," Dr. Yates said, peeling off his rubber gloves.

"Is everything ok?"

"Everything is fine. The pregnancy is coming along nicely."

"Good," Maria said, reaching for Todd's hand.

"It's just customary for all patients to increase their appointments when they move into the last trimester."

Maria rubbed her belly. "Okay, we'll be here."

Todd helped her sit up. She pushed off the examination table and slowly moved to the adjoining bathroom. Moments later she returned fully clothed. "Ready?"

"Ready," Todd said moving to the door.

It had become an uncomfortable time for Maria. The humid Tennessee summer heat was starting to take its toll on her. They made it to the car Todd had parked too far from the hospital entrance for Maria's liking. "Hurry," She said as Todd helped her into the car. "Get that air conditioning going before I die."

Todd ran around, jumped in, and fired the car up as ordered. "It'll be cool in a minute."

"Do you think the heat hurts the baby?"

"No," Todd said. "Your body regulates its own internal temperature."

She fanned her face with her hand. "It hurts me."

"Here it comes," Todd said, feeling the cool breeze blowing from the AC vent.

"I was reading an article in the waiting room," Maria said. "What's

the number one cause of death in infants, do you know?"

"Same as for everybody I think...birth."

"No, smart guy, SIDS...sudden infant death syndrome."

"You worry too much," Todd said smiling. "The baby's gonna' be fine."

"I know...still...I worry."

"I think that's normal, especially for the first baby."

"First and last. It's time to move to Omaha."

Todd turned to look at her, "huh?"

"Omaha... it's time to go." Maria fidgeted with the air conditioner controls. "Doesn't this thing get any cooler?"

"When?"

"Right away."

"How soon, right away?"

"Right away, right away."

Todd reached and turned his vent towards her. "But, what about your appointments?" Shouldn't we leave after the baby's born?"

"No, the baby has to be born in Omaha."

"Ok," Todd said slowly. He silently drove for a time. "Are you sure?" he asked abruptly, breaking the silence.

"Very sure."

"How can you be so sure?"

"I'm sure."

"Maria, could you open up a little? I mean, you're talking about pulling up and moving off. You're round about eight months pregnant now and since the Vincens have set us up with everything, we won't have food or a place to live once we get to Omaha. I don't have a job. We don't have any insurance...Have you thought this thing out?"

Maria turned and looked at Todd. "We *have* to go. We'll be fine; I'm sure of it."

"But Mar—"

"Please, Todd trust me."

Todd looked at her thoughtfully and turned his attention back to the road. "Does that mean we have to start packing right off?"

"We have to start packing now."

“Ok,” Todd said, “but if we’re gonna’ do it, we shouldn’t draw it out. I’m not sure how the Vinces will take it if they find out we’re takin’ off.”

“But Father Jenkins said they wouldn’t interfere with things like that.”

“I know,” Todd said, “but things have been sort of strange lately.”

“What do you mean?”

“Like that business with Father Jenkins, when he told me you called him. Turns out you never called him at all...So how did he know we ever discussed religion in the first place? How did he know about the time I asked you if you had a Bible? I think there’s more to this Father Jenkins business than we know.”

“And that guy,” Maria said. “What about that guy watching us at the picnic?”

Todd nodded, “yeah, what was that all about?”

“I’ll call a moving company this afternoon,” Maria said.

“No, wait, If we have a moving van parked square in front of the house, the Vinces are sure to see it.”

“But what about our things?” she asked.

Todd thought about it. “Do we have to live in Omaha, or will we be there just long enough for the baby to be born?”

“I don’t know.”

“Either way,” Todd said, “we can always come back for our things once the baby’s born. That’s only a couple months away.”

“Do you think the Vinces will keep our things in the house that long?”

“Once we get there we’ll call them.”

“No,” Maria said, “I don’t think that would be a good idea. We should keep our location a secret ‘till the baby’s born.”

“Ok,” Todd said after a moment. “We’ll call them using one of those disposable cell phones, tell them everything is all right and ask them to hold on to our stuff till after the baby’s born.”

“They can’t track us?”

“No, not with one of those throwaway phones, and when we call, we won’t be calling from Omaha.”

“Ok,” Maria said, “sounds like a plan.”

“When do we head out?” Todd asked.

“Tonight.”

“Really...tonight?”

“Why not? let’s get it over with.”

“But...I don’t have any money,” Todd said. “I just have this debit card they gave us. I couldn’t very well draw out a bunch of cash.”

“I have enough money,” Maria said, “don’t worry.”

They drove another mile and Todd asked, “what should we take with us?”

“Just the essentials.”

“What do you consider to be the essentials?”

“You know... clothing, food, blankets, pillows. Think of it as a short trip.”

“Oh it’ll be a trip all right,” Todd said, pulling into their driveway.

~~~

It was 0300 on the fourth day from startup and team three, consisting of shuttle commander John Lee Gunnarson, Lieutenant Commander Arno Bosley and payload specialist Robert Bouchard were on duty. The project had been proceeding on schedule and it was beginning to look like they’d easily make the six-day deadline. Only four of the SRBs had been assembled, but progress was expected to accelerate once the inner grouping was completed.

Gunnarson was busily working on one of the Power and Data Grapple Fixtures used to physically and electronically link each SRB into a single network. This allowed the entire assembly to fire as one when the remote signal was sent. Each PDGF had to be installed, meticulously checked and rechecked. Failure of one of these fixtures would cause the assembly to fire unevenly. If that happened, the main propulsion assembly would all but certainly somersault out of control like an immense fourth of July firework display.

Payload commander Joyce Shipley had taken over for Elisabeth Jiang on the Canadarm controls. Commander Gunnarson finished up his last continuity check and turned to signal Shipley via the mobile service system external cameras, placed on the Canadarm’s end effector. “ROSO, be advised that PDGF alpha zero, zero eight is in place and fully functional.”

“Copy ODIN,” commander Shipley said.

“Roger ROSSO, flight confirms good to go.”

Shipley, operating the Canadarm 2, began hoisting SRB number five into place. She closely watched the cameras as the mammoth solid rocket booster slowly closed in on the fragile PDGF.

Gunnarson stood by, waiting to feel the familiar click signaling a successful interlock. “ROSSO hold!” Gunnarson ordered.

Shipley jumped and took her hands away from the Canadarm controls. She waited a moment and asked, “ODIN, what’s your status?”

“Hold ROSSO...don’t do anything.”

“Roger ODIN.”

“ODIN, what’s your status?” This time flight control was asking.

“Flight, we may have a malfunction. The SRB is not lining up. It’s off just enough to keep the PDGFs from coupling.”

“ROSSO, you copy?” Flight asked.

“Copy flight, getting a visual off camera nine.” Shipley paused a moment, studying the image on the monitor. “ODIN, I’m not seeing an obstruction from here. Can you see anything?”

“Negative ROSSO, looks like it should slip right in.”

“ROSSO, do a check on all cameras. Let’s be sure the SRB is free floating and not up against anything.”

“Roger Flight, checking now.” She switched from camera to camera, making sure the SRB wasn’t resting against anything, finished her check and hit the COM button. “Flight, I’m not seeing any obstruction.”

“Roger ROSSO...ODIN, did you copy that?”

“Roger Flight,” Gunnarson said, “I guess we could try backin’ ‘er out.”

Commander Joyce Shipley would spend the rest of her life wondering why she hadn’t noticed camera six clearly showing SRB5 resting against a small eyebolt located on the aft section of the Unity Connecting Module.

“ROSSO, pull back a little. Let’s see what happens.”

“Roger flight...pulling back.” The Canadarm began slowly pulling the SRB away from the coupling.

“ROSSO hold!”

Commander Shipley stopped.

“I think I see something between the interlock.” Gunnarson said,
“I think I can reach it.”

“Negative ODIN, don’t put anything in there.”

“Flight, I think I can reach it.”

“Negative ODIN...do not—”

At that moment, the SRB slipped off the eyebolt. In an instant it slammed against the Main propulsion assembly smashing the two PDGFs together. The two units coupled directly through shuttle commander John Lee Gunnarson’s right hand.

“ODIN, what’s your status?”

No answer....

“John, what’s going on?”

“Flight, be advised,” Gunnarson said slowly, “the damn thing has coupled, but my hand is in there with it.”

Commander Shipley, watching from her vantage point at the Canadarm controls, felt the blood drain from her face.

Lieutenant Commander Arno Bosley, working just above Gunnarson, quickly dropped to his side.

“This is flight control. ROSSO get to GPC and uncouple that damn PDGF...and somebody wake up Jiang!”

“What...Wait, I can do this.” Commander Shipley said.

“Negative ROSSO, Jiang is senior.”

“Roger flight,” Shipley said softly as she turned to man the general-purpose computer. She quickly scrolled to PDGF alpha zero, zero eight.

“ROSSO hold!”

What now? she wondered.

“Flight, be advised, Commander Gunnarson’s suit is losing atmosphere.”

The COM went silent. After a few moments, it crackled back to life. “ROSSO, hold for orders.”

Payload commander Elisabeth Jiang appeared in the module. She punched the COM button. “Flight, this is Jiang...be advised, I’m in SRMS operations.”

“Roger ROSSO.”

Shipley moved to leave. “No, no, stay and man the GPC,” Jiang said smiling. Shipley quietly moved back to her seat.

“ROSSO, this is Bosley. We can’t uncouple; it would probably open up John’s suit.”

“Affirmative ODIN,” Jiang said, “standing by.”

Payload specialist Robert Bouchard had managed to make his way to Gunnarson’s side.

“This is flight control...We read John’s suit atmosphere at three point three and dropping.”

“That’s affirmative flight,” Bosley said. “Clear for tether interlock.”

“Roger ODIN, go for tether interlock.”

Bouchard was already on his way to the CETA.

“Are you all right John?” Bosley asked.

“I’m having a little trouble breathing...”

“Hurry up Bob!” Bosley yelled into the COM.

Bouchard had made it to the CETA and was snaking a lengthy, metallic hose behind him. Bosley moved to help. As they pulled the hose up Gunnarson began gasping for air.

“Hurry!” Bosley yelled, yanking on the hose. He pushed the hose receptacle into the interface on Gunnarson’s suit and felt the click of interlock. Gunnarson was bent over, wheezing for air. “GO, GO, GO!” Bosley screamed.

Shipley smashed the controls and pure oxygen flooded Gunnarson’s suit. Gunnarson gulped in great heaving gasps of air. Bosley bent over, catching his breath.

“This is flight control. We’ll need as much PSI as we can get once we uncouple.”

Bouchard had returned with a roll of silver duct tape. “Oww!” Gunnarson yelled as Bouchard began wrapping it tightly around his injured wrist.

“This is flight control...I’m going off COM for a moment.”

“Copy that,” Jiang said from SRMS operations.

“Roger that,” Bosley said still panting.

~~~

Flight control went off COM and channeled directly into Gunnarson's COM link. "John, this is flight."

"Go ahead flight," Gunnarson said.

"John, we've cut suit communications...It's just you and me talking now."

"Ok, Cody...what's on your mind?"

"Well, John...when we uncouple, it's probably gonna' tear your suit...you know that don't you?"

"Yeah Cody, I sorta' figured that."

"We're seeing down here that the heaters in the suit, around the hand area, aren't functioning."

"My guess is they're smashed into my hand, sir."

"Yeah, John they're smashed...see here's the deal, when we uncouple it's gonna' tear that thing wide open." Flight control paused a moment and continued. "John...your hand is gonna' freeze and crystallize in a matter of seconds."

"I understand," Gunnarson said.

"We're all here with you, John. Everyone is watching. The whole world is watching."

"Thanks, Cody," Gunnarson said.

Moments later, flight control broke COM link with Gunnarson and Moscow command re-activated Tranzit-B suit communications.

"ROSSO, this is flight. We are go to disengage PDGF alpha zero, zero eight."

"Copy flight...clear to disengage."

Jiang moved the Canadarm to begin pulling the SRB away from the main propulsion assembly.

Gunnarson screamed as the Herculean missile shifted against his crushed hand.

"Easy, John," Bosley said, holding on to Gunnarson.

The SRB groaned as the pressure mounted.

"Disengage." Jiang ordered and Shipley hit the controls.

The PDGF disengaged and the SRB swung away. Just as predicted, it tore a gash in Gunnarson's suit as it uncoupled. Gunnarson gasped and screamed as his crushed hand blackened and froze solid in front of his eyes. He arched backwards and passed



out.

Bouchard had taped the suit as tightly around Gunnarson's wrist as he could, but it was still losing atmosphere at an alarming rate. The tether interlock was managing to pump enough oxygen in, replacing the oxygen going out, but just barely.

Bouchard and Bosley managed to get Gunnarson onto the CETA where he was quickly transported into the crew quarters of the shuttle Atlantis. Doctor Vladimir Nikolaevich was waiting when he arrived. Not surprisingly, Gunnarson had completely lost his right hand and forearm.

As the crew inspected the damage to PDGF alpha zero, zero eight, it was clear that both couplings would have to be replaced. Together with the time lost responding to the accident, it was going to postpone the rendezvous with Dante a full six days. This meant that Dante657 would be allowed to travel two million, eight hundred and eighty thousand miles closer to the earth than was originally planned.

~~~

"No, Brother Michael, we didn't do nothin'," Pete said, "and besides, it fell on the floor...ask Sarah!"

Michael looked at Sarah.

"The package fell on the floor Brother Michael," Sarah said quickly. "We just looked inside to make sure nothing was broken."

Michael turned and glared at Barney. "Give it to me."

"Oh come on, Brother Michael." Barney said.

"Give it to me now."

"That's what I get for betting against you." Barney pulled twenty dollars out of his shirt pocket and handed it to Michael.

Pete looked at Barney and back at Michael. "You're not mad?"

"Mad?" Michael said. "Why would I be mad? I just won twenty bucks."

Pete shook his head, "huh?"

"It was a bet, dummy," Barney said. "Brother Michael bet you'd look in the box and I bet you'd be too stupid."

"And I bet you're a moronic baboon!" Sarah yelled, glaring at Barney.

“What—what did you say?” Mallory hollered, jumping off Barney’s lap.

Barney took hold of her belt, and pulled her back down. “Don’t worry about it babe,” he said laughing. “She’s Pete’s broad; what do you expect?”

“I agree with Sarah,” Brother Michael said. “I think you’re a moronic baboon too...one who’s twenty bucks poorer.”

“How’d you know we’d look in the box?” Pete asked.

“Oh, that,” Michael said. “Charlie called. You and Sarah scared him pretty badly. He said you acted a little too shocked when he mentioned what was in the box. Said he came up with a little story to test you. He wanted to be sure you were...how did he put it...in the loop.”

“But that still doesn’t explain how you knew we would look in the box,” Sarah said.

“I’ve known my little brother Peter for a while now,” Michael said. “I knew when Charlie mentioned the value of the box his curiosity would get the best of him. Barnabas bet he wouldn’t, that he’d be afraid, so we made a little wager.”

“You’re really not upset?” Sarah said.

“Of course not, we’re all in this together. As a matter of fact, I think we should have a little meeting, a little business meeting.”

Barney and Pete exchanged glances. Pete immediately sat down next to Barney.

Barney slapped Mallory on the bottom, “get me a beer.” Mallory jumped from his lap and returned with a cold beer.

Sarah moved and sat next to Pete.

“First off,” Brother Michael began, “I think it’s time for all of you to know what kind of business we’re in.”

Pete and Barney leaned forward.

“We’re in the pharmaceutical business.”

“What’re pharmaceuticals?” Pete asked.

“Drugs.” Michael said.

Barney frowned, “we sell drugs?”

“Illegal ones.”

“But, Brother Michael,” Pete said, “don’t the father hate drugs?”

"In the right hands, Peter, all drugs are healing medicines. We're about to heal a dreadfully sick world."

"Is that what was in all those boxes we picked up?" Barney said.

"Yup, Ecstasy, PCP, coke, meth...we do it all."

"Cripes!" Barney yelled. "All this time we been walkin' up, plain as my face, and transporting illegal drugs...through a public park no less. Do you know how close they watch those docks?"

"Of course I know!" Michael yelled.

Barney quickly backed down.

"That's our job," Michael continued. "We do the most dangerous part of all...we transport the drugs from the dock to the warehouse."

"You mean Pete and me do the most dangerous job of all!" Barney said, apparently unable to control his mounting anger.

"You're pushing it Barnabas!" Michael said.

Barney pulled back again.

"Did you have any problems out there?" Michael asked.

Barney shrugged and shook his head.

"How about you Peter?"

Pete glanced at Sarah and looked back at Michael, "no."

"No...of course you didn't, and that's how we can be sure the father is protecting us. As long as we are doing the father's will he'll protect us."

"What are those green diamonds in the pouch?" Pete said.

Michael reached for the box in Sarah's lap. "Oh yes, the demantoids." He opened the bag and poured them into the palm of his hand. "This is our payment for last week's shipment." He held one of the gems up for everyone to see. "This, my family, is one of the most brilliant gemstones in the world."

"Is it a diamond?" Mallory asked quietly.

Barney grimaced and clicked his tongue. "Does it look like a diamond?"

"Actually Mallory, it's a green garnet."

"Anybody could see it's not a diamond!" Barney said.

Mallory blushed.

"They call them demantoids, Barnabas." Michael said. "That's

Dutch for diamond like.”

Barney snorted and mumbled under his breath.

“Of course,” Michael continued, “that doesn’t matter to us. The important thing is...it’s worth about a hundred thousand dollars.”

“Those little things are worth a hundred thousand bucks?” Pete asked.

“No,” Michael said, “this one is.” He picked it up higher and held it out in front of his face.

Barney’s mouth dropped. “How many are in there?”

“These little rocks are so rare, this bundle represents approximately a fifth of all known demantoids in the entire world.”

Barney glanced around the room before returning his attention to Michael. “So...how much money we got?”

Michael shook his head and slowly turned to face him, “patience Barnubus.”

“Charlie said there was a million bucks worth of rocks in the box we picked up today,” Pete said.

“No, that was a little above target I’d say more like six or seven hundred k.”

“So how much money do we got?” Barney repeated.

“Barney!” Mallory yelled, jabbing him in the chest with her elbow.

“What? Is this a meeting or not?”

“That’s all right,” Michael said. “We’re worth around...” he put his hand to his mouth and began tapping his lips with his forefinger. “Today I’d say...oh...around five hundred million dollars.”

“Cripes!” Barney yelled, jumping to his feet, “five hundred million dollars?”

“Give or take a hundred million,” Michael said. “Of course that’s today. Tomorrow it will be more like seven hundred million.”

Barney went to his feet. “We moved seven hundred million dollars worth of drugs in those little boxes?”

“Of course not,” Michael said. “That was just the capital. I turned it into real money.”

“And all this time, Pete and me been working in a shoe factory, runnin’ after stupid little boxes and here we are sittin’ on seven hundred million buck—”

Barney stopped mid-sentence and projectile vomited ten feet into the kitchen. He fell to the floor and continued heaving, writhing in his own slime.

Brother Michael slowly rose and moved to where he lay on the floor. "You're starting to make me angry, Barnabas."

Barney returned to normal. "S...sorry B-Brother Michael. I won't do it again."

"I believe you," Michael said, reaching down and helping him up from the floor.

Barney returned to his seat and looked around at the shocked faces. "Sorry...I won't do it again."

"The money we've earned is not for our personal comfort, Barnabas," Michael said. "There's a specific void we must fill. Do you understand?"

"Yeah, yeah...I understand," Barney said, staring at the floor.

Mallory ran to the bathroom, found a towel, moved back to Barney and began wiping his face. "Are you all right Baby?" she asked, brushing the towel against the front of his shirt.

"He'll be fine," Michael said.

Mallory glanced up at Brother Michael and stood. "I'll clean this mess up."

"Don't bother," Michael said, "we haven't the time; we're leaving."

Pete looked up, "we're leaving?"

"We're going back to Nashville tonight."

~~~

"Are you absolutely set on this?" Todd said, fidgeting with the key.

Maria sighed and looked up at him. "I'm absolutely set on it, just like I was when you asked me five minutes ago."

"Maybe we should stay for a few more days, just to be sure. It's the middle of the night."

"Todd," Maria said, getting agitated, "The car is packed, the house is locked up, and we've been sitting in this car, in the driveway, for half an hour. We should be screaming towards Omaha right now."

"I just thought we might want to wait for a spell—"

“Wait for what?”

“I just thought if we hung out here long enough you might forget we’re moving to Omaha and go in the house and build me a sandwich.”

“I won’t forget...let’s go!”

“I’m sorry Baby, but this is just nuts. I wish you’d think this thing over....”

Maria smiled and put her hand on his arm. “Todd,” she said softly, “if we don’t start driving soon I’m going to choke you to death.”

“But what would be wrong with waiting ‘till tommor—”

“GO!”

“I just thought we should talk—”

“GO!”

Todd started the car and began slowly backing out of the driveway. “One more night in our soft, warm bed would—”

“GO!”

They backed out, drove north towards the interstate silently passing through the neighborhood and on out into the main road heading east. They cruised by all the familiar stores and shops they had grown accustom to.

“Why Omaha?” Todd said, breaking a long silent spell.

“I have no idea. I just know we have to go there.”

“What if we go there and you start having problems with the pregnancy?”

“I’m positive everything is gonna’ work out.”

“But...how you know all that?”

“It’s hard to say how I know,” Maria said. “It’s kinda’...It’s like a nesting instinct...sort of.”

Todd shrugged. “Who am I to argue with instinct?”

Maria reached and turned on the radio.

“What sort of impact will the loss of Commander Gunnarson have on the mission?” a woman’s voice asked.

“None whatsoever,” the president’s familiar voice answered. “The accident was tragic, but the mission is still right on schedule; nothing has changed.”

Todd and Maria looked at each other and yelled in unison, “what happened?” Maria reached and quickly turned up the radio.

“Will Commander Gunnarson receive proper medical care prior to the shuttle’s return?”

“The best; they are as equipped up there as a well-stocked hospital emergency room.”

Todd was suddenly forced to brake narrowly missing a metro police cruiser. “Whoa,” he yelled. “You get a load of that? That cop pulled right in front of me.”

Maria seemed too involved in the radio to notice.

“NASA announced that the accident would postpone the rendezvous by a week. Could you comment on that, Mr. President?”

“You have to realize that Dante657 is sixty billion miles away. We still have plenty of time.”

Maria looked up at Todd. “He’s lying.”

“How you figure that?”

“All politicians lie.”

“It’s just one guy,” Todd said. “There’s a bunch of astronauts up there.”

“Still, I don’t trust them.”

“Damn,” Todd said, watching another police cruiser pass traveling in the opposite direction. “There are a lot of cops out tonight.”

“Maybe they’re expecting trouble because of the space station thing.”

“I wouldn’t blame them,” Todd said. “The night the rocket blew up everything went haywire.”

“Ohh,” Maria said, shifting in her seat, “the baby is active tonight.”

Todd put his hand on Maria’s belly and smiled as the baby kicked. “He wants out of there.”

“That’s ok with me,” Maria said. “I want him out too—”

“What the...!” Todd yelled.

Maria glanced up as a kaleidoscope of red and blue flashes of light illuminated the interior of the car. “What’s happening?” she said as a police cruiser pulled close to the driver side.

Two squad cars had taken up position in front and two had pulled

up tight behind them. They all slowed in formation as the cruiser alongside forced them to the side of the road.

"It's cool," Todd said. "We haven't done anything wrong. This must be a mistake."

The procession came to a stop. Suddenly, two glaring white lights illuminated the interior of the car.

"Todd, I'm scared," Maria said, pressing herself against him.

"They've made a mistake," he said, "just do as they ask. We'll straighten it all out in a minute."

"Driver!" A voice echoed through a PA system. "Put your hands out of the window where we can see them!"

Todd smiled at Maria. "They must think we robbed a bank or something."

"Do what they say," Maria said anxiously.

Todd put his hands out the open driver's side window. "I think you boys made a mistake—"

"Driver, shut up. Open the door and step out of the vehicle!"

Todd shook his head, reached down, opened the outer door latch and stepped out. From this new vantage point, he could see the car was completely surrounded by officers pointing their weapons at him.

"Driver, put your hands on your head and turn around!"

Todd obeyed.

"Slowly walk backwards, keeping your hands on your head!"

Todd walked backwards until he was violently jerked onto his back. Someone rolled him over and he found himself face down on the blacktop with an officer's foot on his head. Another officer dropped one knee into the center of his back and snapped handcuffs on his wrists. "Hey!" Todd yelled. "What are you doing?"

"Shut up!" the cop growled, increasing the pressure on Todd's back.

"You're making a mista—" Without warning, Todd was viciously jerked to his feet. "Damn it!" he yelled, wincing.

"Passenger!" the voice on the PA boomed. "Put your hands out the window!"

"She's pregnant!" Todd yelled.



“Step out of the vehicle!”

“It’s all right Maria!” Todd hollered. A swift uppercut to the solar plexus forced the wind from his lungs. He dropped to his knees gasping.

“Passenger, put your hands on top of your head and slowly back toward us!”

“I, I’m coming,” Maria said.

Todd could hear the terror in her voice. “Pregnant,” he groaned, still trying to catch his breath, “she’s pregnant.”

She backed into a small crowd of officers who turned her and pushed her face down on the hood of a patrol car. Todd was thankful they hadn’t slammed her to the ground as they had done with him.

“Todd!” she cried as the handcuffs clicked onto her wrists.

“If you morons hurt her,” Todd yelled, “we’ll sue you for everything we can! We’ll own this city!”

“Is that right?” the cop on his left said.

“Yeah that’s right Officer...” he looked down at the cop’s name plate, “...Officer Tate. You don’t have any idea what you’re into here. That lady over there...the one you shit-heads are groping, is eight months pregnant with a very, very special child!”

The officer pulled him to the back of a police cruiser, opened the door and pushed him in.

“Am I under arrest?” Todd yelled, “on what charge?”

The officer slammed the door.

“I want to see a lawyer!” Todd hollered through the closed back window. “I haven’t been read my Miranda rights!”

No one was listening....

~~~

“This is Mimi of the Holy Way Astrology Clinic. How may I help you?”

“Hi Mimi, is Meredith in?”

“Yes, she is. May I ask who’s calling?”

“Tell her Terrance is calling from the wind.”

“Please hold...”

“Terrance, is that you?”

"Hello, Meredith."

"I can't tell you how good it is to hear your voice again. How is Stephen?"

"Mean as ever, I'm afraid."

"Oh, you two....You boys simply thrive on melodrama. What, pray tell, is he doing to you now?"

"It's not what he's doing to me, Meredith. It's what he's supposed to be doing with me."

"Stop right there, Terrance. I need not hear another word. One of these days he's gonna' stop putting up with your bitching and run off with some stud-muffin, then where will you be?"

"What am I, Meredith....a codfish? I'm perfectly capable of getting any man I want."

"Yes, that's true, but the man you want is Stephen...Am I right or am I right?"

"I don't want to talk about this, Meredith. Believe it or not, I called you for a reason."

"And what would that reason be, sweet prince?"

"I need your council."

"How may I help?"

"Do you remember little Gwen Freed?"

"Yes...I think so."

"She's with child."

"Oh, isn't that sweet?"

"She commissioned me to chart the child's horoscope based on its due date, about two months from today, as a matter of fact."

"And?"

"I did as she asked...but, I found something very strange. I'd appreciate it if you'd check it out for me to be sure I'm not having a computer meltdown or something."

"Of course I will, Terrance. Send the chart over."

"Yes, well, this is the thing, the chart I want you to see doesn't belong to Gwen Freed's child."

"I'm sorry, Terrance...I'm not following."

"Uh...Meredith...thirty-three days from today...Aries...go to the first house cusp, Jupiter is 13° Libra, which would place Jupiter in

the 12th house, right?”

“Hold on, Terrance, let me check... Yes, Terrance. I see Jupiter being in conjunction with the Ascendant.”

“Right, that’s what I have, but look at the first house.”

“I’m not seeing...wait...that’s strange.”

“Do you see it dear? Tell me you see it.”

“Yes, I see it.”

“That’s what has me so freaked, Meredith.”

“That is very strange.”

“The thing is, Meredith, I’ve seen this before. It was so odd I remembered it.”

“And, when was that?”

“Do you remember my mentor, Benjamin Nesbitt?”

“Of course I do. He was a great teacher.”

“Yes, he was, and one of the things he had me do as a student, was to find and read the horoscopes of historical figures. He wanted us to check their accuracy against individual life stories. It was amazing how accurate the charts turned out to be. At any rate, there was one chart in particular that was very strange, as a matter of fact...It was identical to this one, Meredith.”

“And whose chart was that?”

“I had to go back two thousand years.”

“Whose chart was it, Terrance?”

“Jesus.”

“Who?”

“Jesus Christ, Meredith. It was Jesus Christ’s chart.”

“So, what are you saying, Terrance?”

“One of the things Benjamin always told us is the planets modify the tone of affairs told by the sign on the cusp of the house.”

“Yes...I agree.”

“Look at the cluster of planets in the northwestern quarter.”

“Yes, I see them.”

“Sit down, and truly study them, Meredith.”

“Why don’t you just tell me what you think they’re telling us, Terrance?”

“That’s why I need a second opinion. What I’m getting simply

can't be right."

"What are you getting, Terrance?"

"Oh Meredith...you'll think I'm crazy..."

"Just tell me what you're getting, Terrance."

"It doesn't make any sense but I think the charts indicate that...Jesus Christ...the Messiah...will be re-born thirty-eight days from today..."

~~~

"**Riley!**" a morose voice yelled through the tiny barred window, "front and center!"

After considerable effort Todd stood. He had been occupying a corner of the fifty by thirty foot cell. Earlier, he had discovered that each of the twenty-four bunks had been staked out and vigorously defended. "It's about time," he said. He stomped on the floor, trying to revive his numb legs and staggered to the cell entrance.

The guard opened the steel door. "Somebody wants to see you."

"It's about time," Todd repeated. "I was afraid I might have to spend the night in here."

The guard chuckled and grabbed his arm.

He was led down a long corridor of cells and into a small room where he was pushed into a metal folding chair. The guard turned and left the room, locking the door behind him. Todd sat staring at the walls, wondering what was happening to Maria. He couldn't wait to talk to his lawyer. After a few moments, the lock on the door clanged and the guard walked into the room followed by a towering priest.

"Father Jenkins," Todd yelled, "thank God! These people just threw me in here. There were no charges, no Miranda rights, nothing. I don't even know where Maria is."

"Maria's in the hospital," Father Jenkins said.

"What? What happened?"

"She's in the psychiatric hospital at Vanderbilt."

"What do you mean? Why is she in the psychiatric hospital?"

Father Jenkins didn't answer.

Todd's eyes narrowed. "Father Jenki...Blaze...what's going on?"

"Did you really think you could just go?"

Todd stared in disbelief. "The Vinces...they did this?"

Father Jenkins glanced at the guard and turned his attention back to Todd. "Officer, could we have a little privacy please?"

"Of course," the guard said. He opened the door and walked out.

"You made a big mistake trying to leave," Blaze said the moment the door slammed shut.

Todd raised his hand to his forehead and sat staring back at Blaze.

"Did you think we'd simply let you go on about your merry way?"

"But the police...how...what charges?"

"The charge is kidnapping, and I told you, the Vinces are well represented."

"Kidnapping...who did I kidnap?"

"Maria," Blaze said. "She filed charges against you."

"You're crazy!" Todd yelled. "You're a damn liar. You've always been a liar. You said the Vinces wouldn't mess with our personal lives. You had our house bugged. That's how you knew everything we talked about."

"The Vinces had *their* house under surveillance."

"Ok," Todd said, "you made your point. I think I could talk Maria into staying here. It was just a whim anyway."

Father Jenkins held out his palm. "It's too late for that, I'm afraid. Another couple has been chosen to raise the child."

"What do you mean another couple?" Todd said through his teeth.

"Once Maria has given birth, the child will be adopted out to the other couple. I'm sorry, but you and Maria have proven yourselves irresponsible."

"No, wait." Todd said stammering. "We'll stay here. I promise you....We didn't know we weren't supposed to leave. Let me talk to Maria. We can straighten this whole thing out."

Blaze stood to leave.

"Wait!" Todd yelled, "I want to see my lawyer....You can't do this!"

Blaze rapped on the door. The guard appeared and Blaze moved to leave.

"Wait Blaze...Father Jenkins...Please give us another chance!"

Blaze walked out the door and it slammed shut behind him.

"Wait!" Todd screamed. "You can't do this...This is America...I want to see a lawyer!"

The door burst open and the guard reappeared.

"I need to see a lawyer," Todd said softly, breaking into tears.

The guard wrestled him to his feet and dragged him back to his cell, opened the door and pushed him in...

~~~

"How you feeling, John?"

John Gunnarson opened his eyes. Commander Joyce Shipley was standing over him. "I'm afraid I might live," he said, still groggy.

Shipley smiled. "We finished the main propulsion assembly. We're leaving soon. I wanted to check up on you before I left."

"Did we make it in time?" Gunnarson said.

"We made it a day earlier than we thought we would. It's been five days instead of six."

"Yeah," John said, "but I still wonder if we made it in time."

Shipley hung her head. "I can't tell you how sorry I am for not catching the obstruction on camera."

"Was that you?" Gunnarson asked. "Is all this your fault?"

Shipley swallowed hard. "Yeah, I was running the Canadarm...It's my fault."

"Good," Gunnarson said.

Shipley glanced up at him, surprised.

"I thought it was the idiot who stuck his hand in the PDGF."

Shipley smiled. "No...I should've seen—"

"Joyce," Gunnarson said, "it was the hand slush that mucked up the PDGFs. If my hand hadn't been there, the PDGFs would've coupled and you would have been standing on that damn asteroid right now."

Shipley smiled and began quietly fidgeting with the blanket covering Gunnarson's legs.

"What does it look like?" Gunnarson asked finally breaking the silence.

"The main propulsion assembly?"

"Yeah."

"It's big," she said, "real big. It makes the space station look like a toy."

"I wish I could see it."

"Yeah, I wish you could too, but we're leaving within the hour."

"Will you make it in fifteen days, do you think?"

"As far as I know, everything is still on schedule."

"I think we've pushed it to the limit. We better get that thing moved soon or it'll be too late."

"I know," Shipley said.

"First the two SRBs explode and now this," Gunnarson continued. "It's getting down to it."

The two astronauts stopped talking for a moment.

"I bet you'll be glad to get back to the world," Shipley said, finally. "I think Atlantis is scheduled to leave for home tomorrow."

"Yeah, it'll be good to see the wife and kids."

Shipley glanced around the tiny cubical. "Well, I better go. As I said, we leave within the hour."

Gunnarson reached out with the only hand he had left and gently took hold of Commander Shipley's arm. "God speed... it's up to you folks on the Endeavor now. You have a lot of people to save."

"I promise you," Shipley said, her eyes glimmering with tears, "we'll move that thing, one way or another."

~~~

Hector, Madrid and Tacoma had been loitering uncomfortably close to Todd's bunk for some time. Todd had been pretending to read a book, trying his best to ignore them.

"Agua," Hector said, just within Todd's earshot. "Juan said there's going to be bust tonight."

"What should we do?" Madrid asked quietly.

"Juan said, if we get busted he could get us our kits back but we have to use a catcher."

"Hey... Billie is listening," Tacoma said, glancing at Todd.

Madrid turned to face Todd. "Bounce Guero!"

Todd wasn't sure what was being said but he sensed the conversation had just shifted to him.

"Wait a minute," Hector said.

Todd glanced up and noticed Hector was staring at him.

Hector looked back at Madrid. "¿Quién es ese vato?"

"No sé," Madrid said, looking at Todd.

"¿Qué debemos hacer con él?"

"No importa."

"¿Qué hizo?"

"¿alomejor es un molester del niño," Tacoma said.

Madrid grinned menacingly at Todd. "nodie piensa que él es un secuestrador,"

"¿Él secuestró al niño?"

"No, su esposa."

"¿Qué?"

"No seas menso," Hector yelled "eso es lo que escucheí!"

"Hey Guero...you a cho Mo?" Hector said, leaning over Todd's bunk. "Madrid here thinks you are a cho mo. Are you?"

Todd didn't answer.

"Hey Guero, do you even know what a cho mo is?"

"The Guero don't even know what a cho mo is," Madrid echoed, laughing.

Hector leaned down. "cho mo means child molester, Guero.

Madrid here says you are a child molester. Are you?"

Again, Todd didn't answer.

"I guess you don't got nothin' to say, huh?"

Truth was, Todd had been trying to avoid Hector since the day he had been transferred into the Correctional Work Center. But avoiding someone locked in the same cubical was all but impossible.

Hector was not overly tall, but he was muscular. Twenty years of hand-fashioned tattoos decorated his dark skin. Todd knew he was captain of a small Hispanic prison gang known as the Northern Mexicans, though no one ever openly spoke of it. Now, Hector was looming over Todd's bunk like a huge bird of prey. He wore a doo-rag; a blue cloth tightly wrapped over his forehead and tied in an intricate knot at the back of his shaved head.

"Maybe he's shy," Tacoma said, flashing a wide grin dominated by a single gold tooth.

Madrid rounded the foot of Todd's bed. "Maybe he doesn't like



us.”

Todd looked up, trying not to appear terrified. “Uh...it’s just that I...read a lot...I guess.”

“Oh, he reads a lot,” Tacoma said. He had moved up to lean menacingly against a bed across the way from Todd’s bunk.

Hector pulled the book out of Todd’s hands. “Oh, you won’t like this book. I read this book...and I don’t think you’re gonna’ like it.” He threw the book at Tacoma.

Tacoma ripped the last twenty pages out of the book and tossed them in the trash can. “No,” he said, “that’s a bad book. You shouldn’t be reading it.”

“Ok,” Todd said, “what do you dudes want?”

Madrid moved closer and sat on Todd’s bunk. “What do we dudes want? What do we want? ...We want you to be our friend.”

“Yeah,” Tacoma said, “we want you to be our friend.”

“Ok...I’m your friend.”

Hector grinned. “Good...that’s good,”.

Madrid sat down on the bed sandwiching Todd between him and Hector.

Hector threw his bulky arm over Todd’s shoulders. “We have a new friend.”

“Oh, you know what though?” Tacoma said, still leaning against the bunk. “How do we know that he is really our friend?”

“Oh yeah, that’s true.” Hector said, looking very serious. “He knows that we are his friends, because we saved him from wasting time reading a bad book, but how do we know that he is our friend?”

Tacoma rubbed his chin. “Yeah, since we did him a favor, when we kept him from wasting time reading a bad book, he needs to do us a favor or else how will we know that he’s really our friend?”

“Yeah, that’s true,” Hector said, thoughtfully.

Madrid’s eyes widened. “Hey, I know what. Let’s let him hold our kits.”

“Good idea,” Hector said. “He can hold the Clavos.”

The three men began piling paraphernalia and small bags filled with multi-colored powder on Todd’s bunk.

“Don’t be smokin’ my bones!” Madrid yelled, throwing an illegal pack of Marlboro cigarettes down.

“Hey,” Todd said, “what...”

Hector stopped what he was doing and stared at Todd. “You want to be our friend don’t you?”

“Well...Yeah...” Todd said, “but...”

“Good,” Hector said. “Take care of our hooch or be ready to catch a square, punk!”

Todd wasn’t sure what that meant but he didn’t like the sound of it.

The three men laughed and banged their fists together.

“Don’t be blazin’ on our kits!” Madrid yelled over his shoulder as they slowly moved away.

Todd lay on his bunk for a time, trying to process what had just happened. He realized he had to hide the drugs. Surrounding convicts snickered as he struggled to corral the drugs into the center of his blanket. He looked around for a convenient place to stash them. There was no place to put anything. The only personal items he was allowed were the clothes on his back. Finally, he settled for an open corner under his bunk. He pushed the pile out of sight and lay back on his bed.

“That’s a good place!” one prisoner yelled. “They’ll never find them there!”

Laughter rose from some of the bunks.

“Hey Ding,” another convict hollered from across the room, “time to be plexin!”

The cell rocked with laughter.

“Ding goin’ do six weeks in the go-slow,” another prisoner yelled, as still more people laughed.

Todd couldn’t imagine what language these people were speaking, but he could clearly see that he was the evening’s entertainment.

All that remained was for the lions to enter the arena...

~~~

“What are we doing here?” Barney yelled as they pulled into the underground parking garage.

“He wants us to—”

"I know what he wants!" Barney hollered at Mallory. "I mean why did we have to be the ones to come to this God-forsaken little Podunk town! Why didn't Brother Michael send Pete and his broad?"

"He wants us to—"

"I know what he wants! Shut up and drive! And another thing, why did Brother Michael tell me to let you do the talking? I'm the one with the street smarts!"

Mallory pulled the rental car into a convenient parking stall. The two stepped out and walked into the first national bank.

"You're supposed to wait here in the lobby for me, muffin," Mallory said, looking up at Barney.

"I heard him. I was there too...remember?"

"I know, but Brother Michael wanted me to be sure you—"

"Just go do what you have to do!" Barney said. "I'll sit here and read magazines all day long! The important thing is that Brother Michael is happy."

Mallory smiled and rolled her eyes. "I'll be back soon, muffin...This shouldn't take long."

She turned and walked into the lobby area of the bank. Just before she turned into the hall, she glanced back at Barney. He was still sitting in his seat. She turned again and made her way to a loan officer sitting at her desk. "Would it be possible for me to see the bank manager?"

"Certainly," the loan officer said. She stood and accompanied Mallory towards a large office located just to the right of the teller booths. He'll be right with you...Ms.?"

"Mallory Lefler."

After a short pause, a lanky, middle-aged man appeared at the door sporting a tailored grey suit and navy blue tie. He moved to sit down, caught himself, stood, and pushed his hand towards Mallory. "Nelson...Curtis Nelson and you are Ms. Lefler...Am I correct?"

"Yes, Mr. Nelson. I'm happy to meet you."

The bank manager sat down heavily in his seat. "How can we help you, Ms. Lefler?"

"I represent the firm of Jeckle and Hidesman—"

"Is this some sort of a joke?" the bank manager said, looking up from his desk.

"I'm sorry, sir, I don't understand—"

"Jeckle and Hidesman?"

"Yes, sir, I represent—"

"The company you represent is named Jeckle and Hidesman?"

"Uh...yes, sir is there a problem?"

"No, no never mind....The name, it's a little odd, don't you think? You know, like the guy who turns into a monster...Jeckle and—"

Mallory stared at the bank manager, puzzled.

"Forget it," the manager said, obviously irritated. "What is it, some sort of law firm?"

"No, sir, an investment group...real estate mostly, based out of London England...I'll get right to the point, Mr. Nelson. My company is prepared to buy out all of your outstanding and ongoing real estate loans at 5 percent of their present value."

"Excuse me?" Nelson said snickering. "Is that supposed to be some sort of an offer?"

"My firm is anticipating a significant change in the local market within the next year. We aren't expecting a response right away."

"I see," Nelson said grinning. "I'm afraid there would have to be a very large change in the market for us to be interested in your offer...Armageddon maybe... but we do appreciate you coming in. Now if you'll excuse me, I have some real business to attend to." Nelson stood curtly and thrust out his hand.

Mallory reached into her case and pulled out a business card. "Give us a call when you're ready," she said. "We are prepared to do business at any time and under any circumstance."

"Yes, well, I'll certainly keep you in mind." He put his hand on her back and gently nudged her out the door.

"Remember," she said turning, "under any circumstances."

The bank manager winked. "Gotcha."

She turned back and made her way to Barney, still sitting in the lobby.

"Back already?" he said.

"Yes, muffin, I told you it wouldn't take long."

“Yeah, yeah, let’s get out of here! Where we going next?”

Mallory checked her schedule. “Let’s see, next, we go to the...Miramar bank and trust...”

~~~

Todd was still asleep when his feet reflexively hit the floor. The lights were on, and people were screaming. “Get out of bed, convicts! Get up! Get up, you maggots!” Todd squinted against the bright lights. Lieutenant King was moving through the rows, banging a baton against the metal bunk frames as he went. Convicts grumbled as they slowly took up position in front of their bunks. Todd was finally coming around just as Lieutenant King moved by.

“This is an inspection!” he yelled. “All convicts will stand at attention at the foot of their bunks! Do not interfere with the officers! Do not interfere with the dog!”

The cell fell silent for a short time. A German shepherd appeared, dragging an officer behind him. He ran, frantically pushing his nose into the bunks and belongings of the inmates. Behind the dog, guards riffled through the convicts’ possessions, throwing them on the floor as they went. The dog searched until it reached the end of the cell, where Todd had been housed. The dog leapt forward, towing the officer behind. He pushed his nose under Todd’s bunk, sat down and began barking.

“We got something Lieutenant.” the officer yelled.

Convicts began snickering as King methodically made his way towards Todd’s bunk. By the time he arrived, eight other officers had joined him. “Let’s take a look-see,” King said. He was staring at Todd and ominously slapping the palm of his hand with his baton.

One of the officers fell to his knees, pushed his way under the bunk and came up laughing. “You’re not gonna’ believe this,” he said, going back under. He returned with a handful of small bags and paraphernalia. The officers broke into laughter.

Lieutenant King managed to keep a straight face as he moved closer to Todd. “We have a bad, bad man here,” he said.

The convicts joined in the laughter.

“Hector!” King yelled, as the laughter lulled, “get over here!”

Again, the cell rocked with laughter.

Hector slowly stirred in front of his bunk. "What!"

"Get over here," King yelled again.

"Why?"

"You got two seconds to get over here or you're gonna' get a tune up, big time!"

"Oh, man!" Hector moaned as he slowly swaggered towards Todd's bunk. "What you wan'?"

"You dropped your dope under this kid's bed."

"What?"

"You don't think we know whose kits these are by now?"

"I never seen this stuff before," Hector whined.

King turned towards Todd. "We know this isn't your dope kid. When did Hector give it to you?"

"Hey home," Hector yelled, "this ain't my llello. Don't be trying to say this is my llello!"

Todd didn't respond.

"It's ok, kid," King said, moving close to Todd. "Hector used you as a mark. We know that. These guys want you to get busted because they have people on the inside. They're betting they'll have their kits back before the week is out."

"Why you always movin' on me, man?" Hector howled.

Todd still didn't respond.

King stared at Todd. "But you understand, if you don't speak up, you're going down for the dope."

"This guero is a psycho!" Hector yelled, "If he says this junk is my llello....he's loco man!"

Still, Todd didn't respond.

"So you're saying these drugs are yours, is that it?" King asked.

"Oh man!" Hector yelled, "he's a liar..."

"Shut up Hector, you idiot!" King yelled. He stood close to Todd and asked him one more time. "Are these your drugs?"

Todd didn't answer.

King shrugged and produced a can of mace. Two officers took hold of his arms as King methodically sprayed the Mace into Todd's face. He took great care, making sure Todd's eyes and mouth were thoroughly covered. He continued spraying the mace in Todd's face

for a full minute until he collapsed into a gasping, retching heap on the floor.

King finally stopped spraying the mace and the officers yanked Todd up from the floor. Moments later he was being dragged, still retching, down a long corridor. He tried opening his eyes. He wanted desperately to rub them, but the officers had him firmly by the arms. He couldn't take a breath without coughing, but the feeling of suffocation was finally starting to abate. They came to a stop. Todd could hear the sounds of a metallic lock clanging open. He was tossed into a tiny cell. The door slammed, and he was left alone in total darkness....

~~~

“Not since February 7th, 1964, when the Beatles landed at JFK International Airport, has anyone seen anything quite like this,” the stoic news announcer droned. “The historic return of the space shuttle Atlantis attracted unprecedented crowds this morning, here at the Kennedy Space Center in Florida.”

The camera panned the tumultuous crowd of screaming spectators, pressed tightly against a ten foot chain link barrier. Tiny American flags fluttered over their heads as the shuttle glided in for a perfect landing.

The picture quickly changed to a tight close-up of payload commander Elisabeth Jiang's face. She was being helped from the shuttle by two white-suited medical assistants. They moved her to a waiting wheelchair. She and her shipmates had spent a month in space. It would take some time for them to re-acclimate to earth's gravity.

Next off was payload specialist Robert Bouchard, who managed to walk to his waiting wheelchair unassisted. Lieutenant Commander Arno Bosley followed. At the end of the line of departing astronauts, shuttle commander John Lee Gunnarson was carried off in a gurney to the thunderous applause of the screaming crowd. The newscast was interrupted by a knock at the door.

Blaze stood, turned his TV down and walked to the door. He looked through his peephole. “Great,” he said under his breath, “Jehovah's witnesses.” He thought about pretending he wasn't

home, but decided it would be rude. He shook his head and slowly opened the door. "Yes?" he asked, looking down on two small men dressed in black suits and ties. They were obviously twins, identical down to the frowns. They both stood about the same height, around five feet ten inches. One of them began to talk and Blaze was instantly mystified by his non-moving lips.

"Sterling Jenkins?"

"Yes, I'm Father Jenkins."

"My name is Apollo Moody. This is my brother Achilles."

Blaze had to suppress a smile.

"We're with the Vincens. May we come in?"

"By all means," Blaze said.

The two men stepped into Blaze's apartment.

Blaze motioned towards the couch. "Have a seat."

The men sat down as Blaze moved to the lounge chair. "I've been watching the shuttle footage," he said. "They must have played it ten times in the last few days."

The two men didn't respond.

Blaze considered them for a moment. "Well then," he said finally, "what can I do for you?"

"We have reason to believe there may be a problem with respect to papers lost or taken from your office a few weeks ago," one of the men answered.

"What?" Blaze said, "oh that, yeah...that's been taken care of. It turns out my secretary took them by mistake—"

"There's also some concern about a certain young man whom you have been keeping company with of late."

Blaze glared down at the man. "Are you implying something?"

"We think the boy might be a security problem."

Blaze glared at the mousy little man sitting across from him.

"Forgive me, but I don't see how missing papers have anything to do with one of the many boys I've been counseling."

The little man smiled slightly. "The boy's name is Nathan Turnbow. He's a fourteen-year-old runaway from Houston, Texas and you have been having a homosexual relationship with him."

"What did you say?"

“He discovered your identity and now he’s blackmailing you.”

Blaze jumped to his feet. “Get out of here!”

The small man glared back.

Blaze moved forward. “I told you to get out!”

In an instant the small man was up from the couch. His right palm came at blinding speed from below, catching the six foot seven priest squarely under the jaw. Teeth shattered as the blow violently blasted Blaze’s face upwards towards the ceiling. The small man then took hold of the priest’s collar with his right hand and pulled him forward, driving his right knee into the midsection. Blaze buckled forward but the small man had already rotated his right leg behind and now he was being smashed violently backwards to the floor. Blaze was unconscious.

As the haze slowly lifted, he realized he was lying on his back. Blood was pouring from his mouth. The small man was on top of him, holding his windpipe between his thumb and forefinger. The other man was pushing the barrel of a pistol into his left cheek.

“We don’t have time for this,” the man holding Blaze’s throat said. “We need to talk to the boy...now.”

~~~

Todd wasn’t sure...it might’ve been a week since he had been thrown into his tiny cage. The only hint had come from his daily feedings by way of a small notch in the heavy steel door. He had been thinking about Maria. Where was she? Would he ever see her again? Before, he’d hoped someone would find out he’d been imprisoned illegally. They couldn’t keep him from a lawyer forever. At some point, someone would find out about him and Maria, but now... he was a drug smuggler...or worse, a dealer. It was open and shut. The drugs were under his bed. Everyone knew the drugs weren’t his, but if he had told the guards the truth, he would’ve been dead by now...or something worse.

During the day, a little bit of light managed to filter through, but it seemed pitch black most of the time. It had taken him forever to get the mace out of his face and eyes. When they first threw him in there, he couldn’t find the sink. He was able to flush his eyes out

using water from the stainless steel toilet placed in the middle of the six-by-eight cell.

The second day he had spent crying. It seemed like years since he and his beautiful Maria had spent the day picnicking on the Cumberland. At one point, he thought about the angel...or whatever he had seen, and decided to cry out to God, but God didn't have anything to say. Now he just lay on his bed in the dark, thinking dark thoughts. He didn't think he wanted to live anymore. He was looking at ten years or more for drug possession. That was, if the asteroid didn't kill him. He didn't think he could find the strength to live with people like Hector, Madrid and Tacoma and he knew he didn't want to live without Maria. The trap in the door flew open. He jumped. It was breakfast, lunch or dinner...he wasn't sure.

"Hey!" a voice sounded from outside of the door. "Get on the phone!"

Todd didn't have any idea what that meant, but he was amazed to hear a voice again. "Huh?"

"Get on the phone," the voice repeated. "Somebody wants to talk to you."

"What...what do you mean?"

"Take your paper cup," the voice said, "and empty your toilet. Somebody wants to talk to you."

"Empty my toilet?"

"Don't say that too loud, it's against the rules."

"Ok," Todd said. "Should I do it now?"

"I don't care when you do it!" the voice on the other side of the door boomed.

Todd heard the guard turn and walk away. He sat on his bunk for a moment eating one of his two pieces of warm bologna. He felt around and found something gooey on his paper plate, tasted it, and decided it was probably potato salad.

When he had finished licking his plate clean, he felt his way towards the toilet and began bailing water out onto the floor. It didn't take him long to empty the tiny toilet bowl. He was able to reach deep into the plumbing and pull water out with the cup of his hands. Finally, when he was sure he couldn't get any more water out

of the commode, he put his face in the toilet and yelled. "Hello, anyone there?"

No one answered.

"Is anyone there?"

Still no answer.

He waited a few minutes. "Is anyone there?" he asked, louder.

"Hey bro'." A husky African-American voice came from the commode. "Don't be yelling now, we'll both be doin' more time in the go-slow."

Todd smiled. He couldn't believe it was working. "Who is this?"

"This is Leland. Who are you?"

"My name is Todd."

Todd sat staring into the commode, waiting for a response. "Are you the one who wanted to talk to me?" he said finally.

"Yeah," Leland said, his voice echoing in the plumbing, "that be me."

"What do you want to talk about?"

"Well," Leland said softly, "that's why they call this place the go-slow. It gets sort of lonely sometimes. It's good to have somebody to talk to. You down?"

"Yeah I sure do know what you mean. Where are we?"

"We're in the shoe...security housing unit, the go-slow."

"How long have you been here?"

"Long time...maybe three weeks."

"No," Todd said. "Can they keep you here that long?"

"They can keep you here as long as they want."

The two men were silent for another moment. "Have you heard anything about the asteroid?" Todd finally asked.

"No, I think they're still on their way to it."

Todd stood, pulled the pillow off his bunk, threw it on the floor in front of the commode and sat on it. "I guess I probably shouldn't ask why you're in the go-slow."

"A little misunderstanding...and you?"

"Drugs...they found them under my bunk."

"I thought that was you," Leland said.

"What?"

"You're the ding Hector played."

"How do you know that?"

"My whodi pulled your card."

"Huh?"

"Everybody knows you were played, homes...good thing you didn't wheeze." You got a little tune up, but it's better than bein' wetted."

"Sorry," Todd said. "I got no idea what you just said."

"What part?"

"All of it...what does ding mean? How come I'm a ding?"

"Oh yeah," Leland said chuckling, "you're a Ding. That means you're new... un-tested."

"What does wetted mean?"

"Gittin' wetted means going flat...or...you know...getting killed."

Todd paused a moment. "What's a tune up?"

"That's when you get beat down by the hacks...or the...what-you-call-em...guards."

"I'm guessing wheezing means ratting on somebody," Todd said. "Even I know better than that."

"Yeah, that's what that means."

Todd took a moment to rearranged his legs, then said: "So...what you're saying is, around here, I'm all hat and no cattle...and I need to keep my holler hole buttoned, or wind up tuggin' a polecat on a short rope.

Todd grinned at the sound of Leland's hearty laughter echoing through the plumbing.

"The go-slow got itself a full-up cowboy," Leland said, still laughing. "All hat and no cattle... that's some funny..."

The go-slow settled back into relative silence.

"Why are you in prison?" Todd asked finally.

"Murder."

"Whoa," Todd said, under his breath. They stopped talking for a time. Todd was hesitant to ask for details but remembered it was Leland who wanted to talk in the first place. "Who'd you kill?"

After another pause Leland answered, "Lotsa' folks."

Todd leaned away from the commode, stared into the darkness

and returned to his place in front of the toilet. "So, what do you do in here all day long?"

"I'll tell you what I do," Leland said. "I talk to the Lord."

"Who?"

"I talk to the Lord, from whom all my strength commeth."

Todd wasn't sure what Leland had said until he began speaking in seventeenth century English. "Oh," he said, a little disappointed. He was hoping for a normal, stimulating conversation.

Again, there was a pause.

"Does the Lord ever answer?" Todd asked finally.

"Every time."

"How come He won't answer me?"

"What makes you think He don't?"

"Cause I'm still here in this funky dark little closet."

The two inmates stopped talking again. "I guess you're pretty religious?" Todd said finally, breaking the silence.

"I'm a Christian, if that's what you mean."

"Have you always been that way?"

"No, I haven't always been a Christian."

"What were you...like a Buddhist or something?"

"You gotta understand, my friend, being a Christian isn't just being religious. Being a Christian isn't something you inherit from your parents...know what I'm sayin? Heaven is a kingdom and Jesus Christ is the king. Christians are people who have chosen to be a part of His kingdom, that's all."

"How did you wind up a Christian?"

There was a short pause before Leland finally spoke. "I grew up in Calliope."

"Where's that?"

"Uptown New Orleans...the projects. There were only two types of people around the way, strong and victim and I learned real quick to be strong. I was hard when I was a kid but when I finally grew up I rocked the project...you down? I was the buckest in my building...maybe even the hood. Around the way, being buck didn't mean you had muscles. You had to kill folks to be buck in my neighborhood." Leland fell silent for a time before he continued.

"It wasn't long before I'm in Joliet, and it didn't take long before I'm the buckest cat there. They finally wound up putting me in a maximum-security prison. I was the buckest there too. Finally...it was a cage by myself. That's when I realized, the only thing being buck ever got me was a private cage. Turns out I wasn't buck at all...you down. Turns out, I was no more than a mangy junkyard dog...see what I'm sayin? I was just too mean to be free."

Leland took a moment and continued. "I tried checkin' out a couple times back then ...know what I'm sayin'...but thank God I didn't get it done. I finally cried out to my creator. At first, I was pissed off at him, you down? But somewhere in all that yelling and cursing I guess I asked him to help me. Without even realizing it, I opened the door and Jesus Christ walked through. There was no question; I felt him...I felt his love."

Todd was surprised to hear Leland's voice trail off. He listened closely. He thought he could hear the man sobbing.

Finally, Leland returned. "The lord taught me that hating folks was easy...loving was hard, that tearing down was easy, building up was hard, that...any ding with a cap could kill, but it took a lifetime of learning to help people heal...you down? Everything I thought I knew...my whole world was upside and backwards. But the Lord came in and straightened me out. Praise be to his Holy name."

Todd rolled his eyes. Why did these people have to get so...carried away? He thought about Leland's words in silence. "The damn asteroid is probably gonna' kill us all anyway," he said, after a long pause.

"You two knock it off!" The voice coming from just outside Todd's cell startled him. The guard wrapped his stick against the metal door of the cell. "Andy's starting his shift. You two shut up now!"

~~~

Father Jenkins pulled to the side of the road. "This is where I met him, but I have no idea if he's even still around."

"Have you contacted your Internet resource?" Apollo Moody said from the back seat.

"I tried. He wasn't sure the boy was still here."

"We'll see."

"What are you gonna' say to him?" Blaze said.

"We hope to convince him that further attempts at blackmail would be...unwise."

Blaze glanced at the mirrored reflection of the two men in the back seat. "But he hasn't even tried to contact me."

"He will."

Blaze sat quietly for a time before speaking. "How do you plan on getting the Bishop's letters back?"

"Leave that to us."

"How do you know he hasn't already shown them around?"

"We don't."

The car fell silent. "What do you want me to do now?" Blaze said finally.

"We'll wait..."

~~~

Payload commander Joyce Shipley strained against a shelf partially blocking a shuttle portside window. "I can't see it yet. I guess I'll have to wait 'till we come around a little more."

"You should... anytime now," shuttle commander Andrea Lange said, as she carefully checked and rechecked system data.

"Look at that thing," Palm said quietly.

Shipley pointed out the window at MESSENGER, still orbiting the asteroid. "Smile for the camera."

"I wish we'd had more time," Commander Lange said softly. "It's really gonna' be tough fastening to that surface. No one has ever done anything like this before. How are you supposed to train for something like this?"

Palm glanced at Lange. The tension in her face was obvious. "You ok?"

"Huh...of course I'm ok...Why do you ask?"

Palm looked at Shipley and back at Commander Lange. "It's ok, you don't have to be so tough all the time."

"What in the hell are you talking about, Specialist Palm?"

"I'm just saying—"

"You'll shut up and attend to your duties, that's what you'll do!"

Mission Specialists Aubrey Clawson and Tony Higbee looked up in response to Lange's sudden, uncharacteristic outburst.

"Yes, sir," specialist Palm said, returning his attention to the control console in front of him.

Lange glanced around the crew quarters. "Sorry, John," she said finally.

"I understand, Commander...The responsibilities must be overwhelming."

"You're not alone in this," Joyce Shipley said softly. "We're all here with you."

Lange looked away. She returned to her console and made a move to check the SVS but slowly slumped in her seat instead.

Shipley quickly moved to her side.

"Damn," Lange said softly. "Look at me. I'm crying like a little schoolgirl...right here in front of this great crew."

Palm glanced nervously at Tony Higbee, who was looking back at him.

Aubrey Clawson moved to join Shipley at Lange's side. "Go ahead and cry," Clawson said, softly. "It doesn't mean a thing." Lange quickly sat up straight and continued monitoring her console.

The crew went about their duties for a time before Shipley finally broke the silence. "You have doubts about the mission?" she said, looking at her commander.

"No, of course not! Why would you ask that?"

"I have doubts about the mission. I think it's crippled. I think we may be too late—"

"I think you should keep your opinion to yourself," Lange said.

"It's ok, we all feel the same way."

Lange looked around the crew quarters. "Is that true?"

Each of the crew members glanced up and nodded before returning their attention to their duty stations.

"Then why the hell are we here?"

"We lost two of the SRBs right from the start," Shipley said. "It crippled the mission. And...because of my bungling at the Canadarm, we're late."

"How long are you gonna' kick yourself around about that? What



makes you think you're at fault anyway?"

"I was manning the controls. Of course it was my fault."

The crew quarters became silent.

"We're late," Shipley continued finally. "There's nothing we can do about that, but we don't have to be crippled."

"What are you talking about?" Lange asked.

"I think you know."

Commander Lange looked at her crew. Each member smiled at her and nodded. "Ok," she said, "I think it's time we have ourselves a little talk...."

~~~

"I think that's him." A young man was walking up the street towards them. "How did you know he'd be here?"

"We didn't," Apollo Moody said from the back seat of Blaze's car.

"What do you want me to do?" Blaze asked.

"Get him in the car."

"Why? What are you gonna' do?"

"We just want to talk to him."

"What are you gonna' say?"

"We just want to scare the boy," Apollo said.

Blaze stared at the reflection of Apollo's eyes in the rearview mirror. "You're not gonna' hurt him, are you?"

"Of course not. He's just a kid."

"How am I supposed to get him in the car?"

"Tell him we are potential clients...Johns...whatever you people call yourselves."

Blaze cringed at the sound of it. It was true...He was a John. How could it have ever gone this far? Here he was, Sterling Jenkins, football hero, scientist, priest...pedophile. He truly hated himself.

From the moment Nathan made eye contact, he never took his eyes off Blaze. He continued making his way up the street towards them. He probably would have walked on by, but Blaze opened the door and stepped out. "Nathan!"

"You got some cahonas!" Nathan said as he passed by.

"Nathan, come here. I need to talk to you."

"What do you think those cops are gonna' do?"

"They're not cops, Nathan!"

"Right...and you ain't a big nasty queer!"

"No Nathan, really, I'm telling you the truth."

Nathan ignored Blaze and continued moving up the street.

"Nathan! NATHAN, I...we have something to show you!"

Nathan turned around and grinned. "You're finally learnin' ain't ya." He made his way back to the car and poked his head in the passenger side window. "What do you guys want?"

"We want...sex," one of the small, grim men sitting in the back seat said.

Nathan laughed. "Let me see what you got."

Apollo's eyes shifted between Nathan and Blaze.

"Pants," Blaze said, under his breath, "pull down your pants."

"What?" Apollo growled.

"It's the only way," Blaze said softly, "If you pull down your pants and expose yourself, he knows you're not a cop...They can't do that...it's entrapment."

Apollo glared at Blaze, quickly unzipped his pants and pulled them down to his ankles.

"Gotcha!" Nathan said. He opened the passenger door and jumped in the car. "What did you do?" Nathan asked, staring at Blaze's battered face, "get in a car wreck or something?"

"Something like that," Blaze said softly.

Nathan looked into the back seat. "You dudes want more guys, or what?"

"No," Apollo said, "just you. Do you have a place we can go?"

"Yeah, up the street and to the left, it's an alley...Jenkins knows."

"Go there," Apollo said, staring at Blaze.

Blaze started the car and moved up the street.

"What you guys into?" Nathan asked, turning to look at the men in the back seat.

No one answered.

"Man, where did you find these dudes, Jenkins? They look like missionaries or something."

Blaze found the alley and turned into it. He slowly moved to the back of the alley and stopped the car.

The moment the car came to a stop Apollo threw himself forward and wrapped his arm around Nathan's neck. Nathan's scream was quickly cut off as Apollo's arm compressed his windpipe. He violently dragged Nathan backwards into the back seat, bringing the boy's body into a ninety-degree angle with his own. He then rolled Nathan's head forward, using his shoulder as leverage.

Blaze watched in horror as Nathan stiffened, his neck grotesquely extended. He heard the pop. Nathan's muscles contracted and went limp.

"No!" Blaze screamed. He reached back and took hold of Apollo's collar. Using his massive strength, Blaze drove Apollo's head upwards into the corner of the back window. Apollo was instantly unconscious.

Nathan's body fell into a heap on the front seat of the car. The barrel of a gun was pressing hard against Blaze's right cheek. He winced, expecting the bullet to pass through his head. Finally, he opened his eyes. He stared trancelike into the pupils of Nathan's wide eyes as they slowly dilated into great black voids. Nathan was dead.

"Oh my God, oh my God. What did you do?" Blaze moaned.

Achilles Moody leaned forward until his face was next to Blaze's face, his gun still pressing into Blaze's right cheek.

"This is your doing, priest. You created the problem...we fixed it. That's what we do. If you ever become a problem again, we'll fix you...kapesh?"

~~~

"I can't believe I've found you," Maria said softly. She leaned over Todd, pulling her hair away from her face.

Todd stared intently into her exquisite emerald green eyes.

"Maria?"

"Shhh," she whispered, "they'll hear us."

Todd reached out and touched her cheek. She'd been crying.

"I love you Todd. I always have and I always—"

"Riley!"

Todd sat up in the darkness. "Wha—"

"Riley, get on the phone!"

Todd heard the grub shoot open, the tray being pushed in and the clanging of the hinged flap. Despair overwhelmed him again.

"Another damn dream," he whispered.

He sat staring into the darkness for a time, slipped off his bunk and began feeling around for his meal. He narrowly avoided spilling his paper cup filled with Kool-Aid but was able to keep it from toppling over. In the middle of the meal he remembered the guard had told him to get on the phone. The thought of talking to Leland lifted his spirits a little. He quickly finished the meal and began bailing water out of his commode using the paper cup, just as he had done before. "Hello!" he said. "Leland...you there?"

"What up, dun?" Leland's husky voice echoed.

"Leland...how ya doin'?"

"Doin' straight up bro. Word up, I'm geese today."

"Huh?"

"I'm getting out of the go-slow today."

"No foolin'?" Todd said, feeling a pang of sadness. He had no idea how long he'd be there. The thought of talking to someone once in a while was about the only thing that made it bearable.

"You'll be outa' here soon," Leland said, obviously sensing Todd's distress.

"I'm not so sure. Have you heard anything about the asteroid?"

"Not really," Leland said.

"I thought you had all the connections."

"I got a few."

"How about trying to find out when I get out of here?"

"I'll try."

"Any way you could find out where someone is?"

"Inside the prison?"

"No, outside of the prison."

"Now you're pushing," Leland said, laughing.

"Yeah...just thought I'd run it past you. How about the asteroid...Can you find out about the asteroid?"

"Yeah, probably."

"But you're getting outa' here soon," Todd said after a pause.

"I'll have the hack give you the 411."

"You know the guard?"

"We go back."

Well, I gotta' go," Leland said after a quiet spell. "They might be coming to let me outa' here soon, you down? I don't want the hacks catching me on the phone... know what I'm sayin'?"

"Yeah, I know," Todd said, already feeling the loneliness.

"You'll be fine, little brother," Leland said softly. "You'll be out of the go-slow soon."

"Yeah...I sure hope so."

"You will... and stay away from Hector. He'll be clockin' you."

"That's likely not a good thing," Todd said.

Leland laughed. "No, he'll be watching for you. But don't plex...God's got your back."

"Thanks, Leland."

"One love brother," Leland said, finally.

A moment later he heard the toilet flush on the other end. "I hope he's right," he whispered in the darkness. "I don't think I can take much more of this...."

~~~

"No, not that door." The young doctor turned to look at the nurse. "You can't go in there," she said.

"I'm supposed to be making rounds on this floor—"

"You're new here, aren't you?" the nurse said, impatiently. "You can't go in there unless you have written permission from the hospital administrator." She looked the doctor up and down.

"That'll be Dr. Rossetti if you don't already know."

"But, I'm the attending physician on this floor."

"As of when?"

"As of this morning."

"Doesn't matter."

The young doctor glared at the two hundred fifty pound nurse. She shifted uncomfortably where she stood. Her eyes involuntarily diverted from the doctor's gaze.

The doctor stared at her ominously, then slowly smiled. "Wait here with the key," he said, turning to make his way down the hall towards the elevator. He stepped on and pushed the first floor

button. The elevator door closed, cutting off the big nurse's curious gaze.

On the first floor the doctor turned to the left and quickly made his way to the administrator's office. He stepped in and approached the administrator's secretary. "I'm Dr. Oliver. I need to speak with Dr. Rossetti."

"I'm sorry," the secretary said. "Dr. Rossetti is busy—"

"Tell him Dr. Oliver is here. He'll make room for me."

The secretary dropped her chin and looked over her glasses. "I'll try, but as I said, he's very busy right now." She lifted the phone. "Dr. Rossetti...Dr. Oliver is here...He says he needs to talk— Right now?" The secretary hung up the phone, looked up at the young doctor and shrugged. "He says he'll see you now."

"Hmm," Oliver grunted, moving towards Rossetti's office door.

"Be easy on him," the secretary said. "You can't stay long. He's been feeling under the weather lately."

"So I've heard."

~~~

The secretary sat at her desk listening to the soft voices flowing from the administrators office. She couldn't hear what was being said, but it sounded sharp and intense. Her curiosity roused, she quietly stood and moved closer, charily placing her ear against the door.

"I'm telling you, it won't happen again." Rossetti said.

"I certainly hope not!" young doctor Oliver yelled back. "I was beginning to wonder if I had made myself clear!"

"Yes, yes you have...perfectly clear."

"I need full access if I am to help my patient. Full access, do you understand?"

"Of course I understand. It was just a mix-up...that's all."

Rossetti's secretary all but fell forward into the office when the door blasted open. Oliver looked down at her, quickly sidestepped and moved into the reception area. He walked briskly through the office and disappeared into the hallway.

The secretary turned to look back and saw Dr. Rossetti sitting in a chair across from his desk. He was wiping his forehead with a

handkerchief. "Dr. Rossetti," she said, "are you all right?"

Rossetti stared into space for a time. "Uh...no Penny," he said finally, "I'm not all right....I think I'll go home for the afternoon."

"Is there anything I can do?"

"No...I just need to get out of here for a while."

"Who was that?" she asked.

Rossetti looked up. "If you see him again, give him whatever he wants."

"Of course, doctor," the secretary said slowly.

Rossetti stood and moved to his office closet. He retrieved his suit jacket and walked out the door.

~~~

Dr. Oliver wasn't surprised to find the big nurse waiting at the forbidden door.

She looked at him curiously. "Sorry," she said, leaning forward to unlock the door. She turned and made her way down the hall leaving Oliver standing alone.

He stared at the door, his heart pounding in his chest. For weeks, this moment had been all he could think of. The time had finally arrived. He reached for the handle, paused and pulled his trembling hand back. He turned and looked up and down the hall once more. Finally, he sighed and pushed the door open.

He could hear the TV softly chattering as he moved past the room divider. A young woman sat staring out the window. She turned to look at him as he approached. Her startling beauty took him completely by surprise. He narrowly avoided tripping as he kicked one of the legs on the bed. The loud clang unnerved him even further. He felt panicky.

She looked him up and down before returning to the window. "Who are you?" she said, her back towards him.

"I...I..."

She looked back at him. "You're new here, aren't you?"

"I...yes, I am...Dr. Oliver." The young doctor stopped and breathed deeply. "I'm sorry...Let me try that again." He looked up to see her radiant, cherubic face smiling back at him.

“Cat got your tongue?” she asked.

Dr. Oliver silently stared into her eyes.

Finally, she raised her eyebrows and leaned forward. “Can I help you with something?”

“Mrs. Rose?”

“Yes, I’m Maria Rose and you are?”

“I’m Dr. Oliver, the new attending physician—”

“I won’t need attending,” Maria said. “There’s nothing wrong with me. But you know that already don’t you.”

Oliver didn’t answer.

Maria slowly turned and resumed her vigil at the window.

The young doctor reached and began nervously fiddling with Maria’s chart left hanging at the foot of her bed. Finally, he squared his shoulders, silently commanded his hands to stop trembling and spoke. “Mrs. Rose,” he said, a little louder than before.

Maria ignored him.

“Mrs. Rose, I’m here to help you.”

“Good,” she said quickly. “When can I leave?”

“Well...I mean...you can’t leave...I just mean...”

“If I can’t leave...there’s nothing you can do for me.”

“How have you been feeling?”

“Like an imprisoned pregnant whale,” she said. “Why have you people put me in this place?”

Again, Oliver didn’t answer.

She looked back and sat glaring at the young doctor.

“Uh...” the doctor stammered, “I think they had you committed...so they could—”

“Keep me locked up!” Maria said.

Oliver nodded slightly. He shifted his weight, reached again for the chart but stopped himself.

Maria turned back towards the window.

“If you’re not into this right now I can...check you tomorrow.”

“Wonderful,” Maria said, returning to the window.

Oliver turned to leave.

“Are you with the Vincses?” Maria asked.

Oliver turned back. “Yes.”

“Why have you people done this to us?”

“Uh...as I understand it, you and your husband were about to leave the area—”

“So...” Maria said, “you commit us to a psychiatric hospital? You think you can do that? You think you can get away with that?”

“You need to understand,” he said. “Most of the people involved with the organization are... good folks, but there are a few who are... obsessed. They’re...paranoid, dangerously powerful people. Most of our group aren’t even aware of them and those of us who are, don’t always agree with their methods.”

“You don’t agree with their methods but you’re here.” Maria said.

Dr. Oliver looked down at the floor.

“Where’s my husband?”

“I...I’m not sure.”

“Why don’t you guess?”

“Honestly Ma’am, I don’t know.”

“Is he here?”

“Is your husband here in this hospital?”

“Yes!” she demanded, “Is my husband here in this hospital?”

“I don’t think so...”

“THEN WHERE THE HELL IS HE?” she shrieked.

Dr. Oliver jumped. “I...I just don’t know.”

Maria glared at him for a time then returned to her window.

Dr. Oliver stood behind her silently looking into her raven hair. He quietly backed away and left the room. Once outside he collapsed against the wall, tears flowing from his eyes.

~~~

The spacecraft Messenger floated above Endeavor, transmitting live video feed into a record number of televisions back on earth. Its unblinking eye watched Endeavor’s Canadarm buck and heave against its monstrous custom-built hydraulic drill.

Dark, coruscant clouds of iron dust billowed surrealistically into the surrounding void as the diamond-clad drill-bit pushed its way deeper into the outer shell of Dante657.

Extravehicular Activity Officer Tony Higbee’s voice crackled in the orbiter aft flight deck crew station’s COM speaker. “Hold

ROSSO, it's time."

"Roger EVA," Payload Commander Joyce Shipley said. She shut down the drilling mechanism and began readjusting the Canadarm's rotational and translational controllers until the big robotic arm pulled up and away from the surface of the asteroid. When the end effector had finally reached a point far enough away from the surface, she maneuvered the shoulder yaw mechanism into alignment and shut down. She reached for the COM button. "Flight, SRMS is clear."

"Roger that, ROSSO."

Tony Higbee made one last visual check from his lofty vantage point within the shuttle payload bay. "EVA clear."

"Roger EVA," flight said. "TOPO, you got a copy?"

"Copied it," Trajectory Operations Officer John Palm answered from the flight crew station. "Looks like we're good to rock."

Shuttle Commander Lt. Colonel Andrea Lange hit the COM button. "Ok boys and girls...let's do it again." She checked her monitor for any possible system malfunction and ordered the computer to readjust the orbiter's pitch and yaw.

The constant maneuvering needed to compensate for the asteroid's rotating orbit slowed the operation down to a maddening pace but was painfully necessary. They had successfully cleared a docking sight and drilled three holes in the surface of the asteroid. This would be the last hole needed to complete the four-point tether by which the main propulsion assembly would be attached to Dante657.

Days earlier, the main propulsion assembly had been set in place. Its four elephantine platform legs had been unfolded to the amazement of the worldwide television audience. Three of the four Herculean tethers had been attached to the truck tire sized eyebolts, installed on the surface of the asteroid and secured in place within the drilled holes by means of a small but effective built-in blasting cap. The four colossal outstretched arms served two purposes. To insure a good steady pull for the two full minutes the main propulsion assembly would be firing, and hopefully insure that the white-hot plume of the engines wouldn't burn the tethers when they

fired.

On Lange's command, steering signals from the shuttle's four computers activated the Trajectory Control Sensor and quickly computed range and closing rate. Within seconds, thirty-one of the thirty-eight steering jets realigned and began firing in a Terminal Phase Initiation Burn. A laser-ranging device mounted in the shuttle payload bay provided additional range and closing rate data to the onboard navigation systems. Endeavor began slowly realigning itself with the asteroid. Several small successive engine firings fine-tuned its final approach until the realignment had been achieved and all engines shut down. The shuttle slowly drifted the last few feet and bounced against the shock absorbing springs in the docking mechanism.

Tony Higbee quickly unstrapped his security belt and moved to secure the docking bay. He drifted to the adjoining mechanism and began methodically checking each of the twelve automatic latches. When he was certain all was secure, he hit the COM button. "Docking secured...SRMS is clear to resume...I think we can finish this time."

"Roger EVA," flight said. "ROSSO, you copy?"

"That's affirmative Flight," Shipley answered.

"Let's make it snappy kids," Commander Lange said. "Tony thinks we can get it done this time."

"Aye, aye Cap'n," Shipley answered, moving back to SRMS control, "Makin' it snappy."

She moved the Canadarm back into position and quickly resumed drilling. The familiar shimmering black dust billowed into the void, as the rotating drill dug ever further into the iron surface of the asteroid.

Within a short time, Tony Higbee's voice crackled on the COM. "Hold ROSSO."

Shipley switched the in-flight monitor to the view from a centerline camera fixed in the center of Endeavor's docking mechanism. The crew fell silent, all eyes fastened to the monitor. The figure of Tony Higbee moved in and out of the camera's view as he precisely went about measuring the depth of the hole. After a

few agonizing minutes, he slowly turned and gave the camera thumbs up. "That's it," his voice sounded on the COM, "we're there."

"Yes!" John Palm yelled, slapping Shipley's raised palm.

"We're there!" Shipley hollered.

Tony Higbee was attempting a victory dance in his space suit within the shuttle cargo bay as Mission Specialist Aubrey Clawson shook her fists in glee. Commander Joyce Shipley laughed at the antics of her crew. After a moment, she motioned to Aubrey Clawson who was sitting next to her. "You can finally suit up now."

"Yes sir, ma'am," Clawson answered. She released her belt and floated out of her seat.

"This'll be the last time," Shipley said. "Once we tie down this last tether...we'll be ready to drag this damn asteroid to hell."

~~~

"Riley, wake up!"

Todd's eyes flew open in the darkness.

"Shower in one hour!"

Todd sat up on his cot. "Shower?"

He slowly moved off his cot and crawled towards the only point of light in the cell, a small hole just above the grub trap. He moved towards it and did his best to cover the hole with his mouth. "Hey," he yelled. "Am I getting out of here?" The guard had come and gone.

He didn't know how long he had been in the go-slow, but he hadn't showered since he was thrown in there. He was pretty sure a shower meant he was finally getting out.

Todd had discovered earlier that a small shadow fell over the grub hole light twice each night shift. He realized it was the shadow of the guard passing by. This new information allowed him to calculate the time that passed since Leland was let out...eleven night shifts...three and a half days. Leland had connections. Todd was hoping he had pulled some strings and one of the guards would fill him in on what was going on, but so far, he hadn't heard anything. But now...it looked like he was getting out. Excitement overwhelmed him. Maybe now he could finally talk to a lawyer.

He realized he probably needed to try to find the clothes he had worn when he was thrown in the hole. He checked to see if he had anything on. No...he was completely nude. He crawled around on the floor till he was sure he'd found everything and put each article of clothing on one by one. His shirt still smelled of mace but the odor had dissipated.

Finally, after what seemed like a millennium, the door clanged. Todd stood in anticipation. Nothing prepared him for the intense light that flooded the tiny cubical as the door flew open. The guard laughed when Todd threw his hands over his face and all but fell backwards onto his bunk.

"It's always a hoot to watch you maggots duck for cover when the lights came on," the guard said, still laughing. His expression morphed to stern and resolute. "Hurry up, Riley. It's time to wash your stinky ass."

"Am I gettin' out?" Todd said, blinking against the blinding light.

"Not if you don't hurry up!" the guard yelled.

Todd closed his eyes, pushed one hand in front of him and began hobbling toward the door. The guard took hold of his arm and pulled him into the corridor.

They turned right into another corridor and pushed through a swinging double door where he was jerked to a stop in front of a desk. "Put your cloths there," an angry sounding male voice said.

He uncovered his eyes and could barely make out a pair of black shoes on the floor in front of him. He quickly closed his eyes again and began taking his clothes off.

"Hurry up," the voice yelled. "You stink!"

Todd threw his clothes on the desk.

"Get him out of here!" someone else yelled.

Another door opened and he was pushed into the showers. He stopped where he was pushed, and grimaced once more into the light, finding he could tolerate the light if he squinted most of it out. Two convicts were showering in the back of the room.

"Whoa!" one of them yelled. "You stink man!"

Todd squinted in their direction.

"Let me guess," one of them said. "You just got out of the go-

slow.”

“Yeah,” Todd said.

“Here!” the other convict said, pushing a bar of soap into Todd’s hand. Hurry up and wash...you’re killin’ us here!”

Todd felt for a spigot and turned it on. He gasped and jumped away from the cold water.

One of the convicts walked over, adjusted the temperature and turned away. “Hurry up!” he repeated.

“Thanks,” Todd said as he slowly moved into the shower stream.

“It’s ok kid,” the convict answered, “I been there.”

Todd felt the warm water roll over him. He hadn’t felt that feeling in a long, long time. Goosebumps rippled over his body like waves as the gentle warm stream enveloped him. He turned up the hot water, inducing yet another wave of euphoria. After a while, he noticed his eyes were finally acclimating to the light. One of the convicts was just finishing up and had turned his shower off.

“What’s going on in the world?” Todd said as he passed by.

“What do you mean?”

“Did they get the asteroid?”

“They’re just now getting ready to move it.”

“They haven’t moved it yet?”

“Nope, not yet.”

“Have you seen it?”

“Seen what?”

“The asteroid.”

“Oh yeah, it’s on TV all the time.”

“Is it big?”

“Yeah, it’s big.”

“How big?”

“You’ll see.”

“You think they’ll move it?”

“Look, I gotta’ go kid,” the convict yelled.

“Yeah...ok,” Todd said.

As the convict left the shower, a guard looked in. “Hurry up Riley...you think this is all I do?”

Todd quickly rinsed off and moved out of the shower. The guard

threw a towel at him as he entered the room. "Get dressed!" he yelled, as another guard pushed a clean set of country blues towards him. He put the clothes on and the guard led him out of the room and into another hall.

"Remember me?" Todd said, as they walked.

The guard glanced at him.

"Didn't you work at the county jail for a while?" Todd asked.

"Still do," the guard said.

"Remember that big priest? He came to see me the first night I spent in jail. You took me to see him. Member that?"

The guard looked at him again. "Yeah, I remember. So what?"

Todd fell silent for a moment. "I haven't talked to a lawyer," he said finally.

"You'll see your lawyer soon enough," the guard yelled. "You just got out of isolation a few minutes ago."

"No, I mean, I ain't seen a lawyer at all."

"Dude," the guard grunted, "you think this is my first game?"

"Seriously," Todd said. "I ain't seen a lawyer yet... at all."

"Ok kid, whatever you say."

"Look," Todd said, "check it out. When I was arrested, I was never read my Miranda rights, never had a chance to talk to a lawyer, never got a phone call...nothin'."

"Look kid," the guard said, yanking him to a stop, "I don't care whether you've seen a lawyer or not. How do you like that?"

They continued down the hall, made a quick right and Todd found himself back at his old unit. They stopped at a desk in front of the door. "Riley," the guard said.

The guard sitting at the door spoke without looking up. "You got a new bunk...number eighteen." He reached under his desk and the double doors slid open.

Todd slowly walked into his old barracks. In all the excitement of being released from isolation, he had completely forgotten about Hector and his thugs. He walked gingerly down the hall till he came to bunk eighteen deliberately trying not to look in Hector's direction.

After a moment of silence, he lay down, slowly, carefully looking

around. It didn't take him long to notice something was different, more subdued. The constant chatter emanating from Hector's area seemed to be all but gone. He sat up slowly, trying to look over a shelf, hoping to see if Hector was still there.

Tacoma noticed him. He reached, punched Hector in the arm and pointed at Todd. Hector quickly turned and grinned.

Todd fell back on his bunk waiting for the inevitable confrontation, but it never came. After a time, he casually stood and looked around the cell. Within moments, it became clear why Hector and his cohorts were so sullen.

In the back of the cell, near Todd's old bunk, a new group of convicts were ominously milling around. They were obviously a prison gang, all African American. Todd counted six in all. In the center of the group sat a terrifying looking man. The most terrifying man Todd had ever seen. He was massive. His arms looked big around as Todd's waist. Reflection from the overhead lights glistened off his pitch-black, wraparound sunglasses. His head had been recently shaved, revealing gang graffiti tattoos up and down both sides of his neck. Tattoo-laden muscles bulged in his tight t-shirt. They were all quietly playing cards.

The giant in the middle looked up and fixed his eyes on Todd. Todd slowly looked away and sat down on his bunk. If only he could disappear. *How could he survive in this God-forsaken place?* he asked himself. Panic overwhelmed him.

To his horror, Tacoma appeared at the foot of his bunk. He looked up and Madrid was standing at the top. Around the corner, Hector swaggered threateningly, until he was standing in front of Todd's bed. He sat on the bunk across the aisle from Todd's. "Hey Guero," he said. "You finally come back to us."

Tacoma sat on Todd's bunk and wrapped a heavy arm around Todd's shoulders. "We missed you, Bro. We missed our friend, didn't we?"

Madrid laughed and nodded. "Yeah, we missed our friend."

"Hey look," Todd said, quietly, "I just got out of the go-slow."

"The go-slow!" Hector howled. "He said the go-slow! The Guero's been schooled...watch out for him....He's very hard now."

“Why don’t you dudes leave me alone?” Todd said. “I didn’t rat. I went to the go-slow for you. Why you clockin’ me now?”

The three convicts roared with laughter.

“Clockin’ him he,” Hector said laughing. “The ding learned a lotta’ new words.” finally Hector quieted. “Hey Guero, you got us all wrong... We want to be your friend.”

“I ain’t gonna’ hold your drugs,” Todd said.

Hector’s grin melted into an ominous frown. “Who said anything about drugs, ding?”

“I’m not gonna’ hold your drugs,” Todd repeated.

“I guess you don’t want to be our friend now, huh Guero?”

“Guess not,” Todd said, his face red and bristling.

Hector glared at Todd and pulled a small bag from his left shoe. He pushed it forward. “You’ll take what we give you, Guero.”

Todd stared at the bag and took it from Hector.

Hector grinned a slow wide grin.

Todd tossed the bag into the trash.

Hector jumped to his feet. “Hey Guero, that’s disrespect!”

Tacoma and Madrid stood to their feet.

“You’re a dead man!” Tacoma said through his teeth.

“Bring it!” Todd yelled, standing up from his bunk.

Hector pushed his face towards Todd. “You disrespect me, you die! I’m gonna’ kill you! Really... kill you my—”

A black hand the size of a catcher’s mitt wrapped around Hector’s shoulder cutting off his words mid-sentence. He turned to face the colossal black man with the sparkling sunglasses. Madrid and Tacoma jumped back and were immediately set upon by two other black men.

“Slow your roll vato,” the big man said softly. “Homeboy’s with me and the crew.”

Hector immediately backed off.

“Hey rev,” Tacoma whined. “This Guero tried to steal our kits.”

Todd glanced at Tacoma and back at the giant, now ominously staring at him.

“He’s a weez,” Madrid said. “We were just talking’ to him... that’s all.”

Todd blinked, trying to control his terror.

The huge black man seemed to lean in his direction.

"No!" Todd yelled. "I'm not a rat, and I didn't steal anything! I swear to God, man...I don't know what they're talkin'—"

"Bro," the huge man said, still staring at Todd. "It's me...Leland."

Todd stared up at him. "Leland?"

~~~

Dr. Stalder sat up in his bed. "Are you certain?"

"Well, I can't be positive," the nurse said, "but it looks like she's in labor."

"How far along?"

"Five."

"You called me at three A.M. and she's only five?"

"I thought you'd want to know...considering who she is."

"Five centimeters..." the doctor repeated, scratching his chin.

"She could go either way at this point. She's still a month away from her due date."

"Dr. Rasmussen told me to let the team know if there were any changes," the nurse said. "That's what I'm doing."

"Any other signs? Has her water broken?"

"No."

"Keep an eye on her. Call me if anything happens."

"OK, Doctor, will do."

Stalder pushed the phone back onto the receiver and turned to see if the call had disturbed his wife.

"Wh...where ya' going?" his wife muttered from her side of the bed.

"The hospital called. The baby may be coming."

She rolled over and squinted against the light. "What baby?"

"*The* baby."

She sat up in bed. "Really?"

"It looks like it."

"The baby could be born today?" she asked. She held her hand up, shielding her eyes from the lamplight.

"She's only five centimeters," the doctor said as he pulled his pants on. "She's almost a month early. I think there's a good chance

it's a false alarm."

"You'll let me know, won't you?"

"Of course I will."

"Has anyone else been notified?"

"I don't know. They just called a few moments ago."

"Can I go with you?"

"Why would you want to go with me?"

"I'm a nurse. I could help."

"I'll let you know if anything happens," he said, pulling on his suit jacket.

"Can I tell my sister?"

"Of course not."

"Why not? Her husband's in the organization?"

"Because, you're not supposed to know anything about this, remember? Besides, we don't even know if it's gonna' happen or not. Go back to sleep. I promise I'll call you if it looks like the baby will be born."

"Right," she said, "as if I could sleep now."

Stalder smiled, sat on the bed and fumbled with his sleeve button.

"It is exciting, isn't it?"

"I can't believe it might happen today," his wife said quietly.

The doctor stood and began making his way out of the bedroom.

"Well, that remains to be seen."

He pulled out of the driveway, pointed his car east and began making his way towards Jackson Valley Memorial Hospital. *All these people*, he thought as he drove past a row of sprawling apartment complexes. *If they only knew what was about to happen, who was about to be born.*

He arrived at the hospital within half an hour, went straight to the women's center on the sixth floor and stepped out of the elevator. Something was strange. The nurse's station, directly in front of the elevator door, appeared to be completely abandoned. "Hello?" he called, as he approached the desk.

No answer.

"Anybody here?"

Still no answer.

A commotion down the hall caught his attention. He quickly walked around the corner. At the end of the hall, two familiar-looking doctors stood in front of room six-seventeen. Concerned-looking nurses darted in and out of the door. Dr. Stalder made his way down the hall towards them.

"She's not doing very well," Dr. Kimberly Harkee said as he approached.

"What's wrong?"

"She's in full labor but isn't dilating. She also appears to be suffering from Orthostatic hypotension...possibly dysautonomia....Has she been tested for diabetes?"

"Yes, of course she has," Stalder said. "Why?"

"Diabetic neuropathy...possibly."

"What symptoms?" Stalder asked.

"Numbness... pain in the hands, feet and legs...general weakness. She's been in and out of consciousness."

"What?" Stalder said. "Why wasn't I informed?"

"These symptoms only appeared within the last hour or so."

"So, stop the labor."

"We can't."

"Why not?"

"We have orders not to interfere with the labor process unless the fetus is in immediate danger."

"You don't think the fetus is in danger?" Stalder yelled.

"We've been watching the fetus closely. No sign of stress yet—"

"We need to do a cesarean immediately," Stalder said, interrupting Harkee.

"No, not at this time. Management says it's too early in the pregnancy."

"Who's in charge here?"

Harkee raised an eyebrow. "Are you thinking of making some sort of stand, Doctor?"

Stalder grunted and looked down the empty hospital corridor.

"Where is everyone?"

"Everyone on the team is here," Rasmussen said.

"No, I mean where are all the other patients?"

“Oh them, they’ve been diverted elsewhere.”

Stalder stared at Dr. Rasmussen. “They emptied the entire floor? They can do that?”

“If you have the clout, you can do anything.”

A long moan came from the room.

“She’s in a lot of pain,” Stalder said, dodging a nurse as she darted through the door.

“No drugs,” Harkee said. “We are not to take chances with any drugs that could threaten the fetus in any way.”

“What about the mother?”

“Our priorities are clear,” Harkee answered.

Dr. Stalder raised his eyebrows and stood for a moment staring. “Excuse me,” he said finally, moving around her. “I’d like to see my patient now.”

~~~

“I’m sorry to wake you at this hour, Mr. President, but you’re the only one who can stop the video feed.”

“What’s happening? Why do you want me to stop the video feed?”

“It’s the crew of Endeavor sir; they’ve deviated from the schedule.”

“What do you mean, ‘deviated from the schedule?’”

The aide gulped, looked down at a notebook and back at the president. “They appear to have an agenda of their own sir.”

“Damn it man, do you know how to speak English?”

“We’ve set up a videoconference with NASA, and the shuttle crew, sir,” the SECDEF said.

“Good,” the president said. “Maybe we can all get back to bed sometime soon.”

They moved to a conference room and took their places around a table. At the far end of the room, two high definition screens the size of small road signs took up a good part of the wall. One screen was filled with the crew of Endeavor. Carl Waddington’s face filled the other.

“What’s the problem, people?” the president said after sitting down.

“Sir,” Waddington began, “Commander Lange and the crew are in direct violation of orders. We need the video feed from MESSENGER shut down until we can resolve the problem.”

The president reached for his cup of de-cafeinated coffee. “What *is* the problem, Commander?”

“Sir,” Commander Lange said from aboard the shuttle. “The crew and I feel that it’s possible the propulsion unit will not have the power needed to get the job done.”

The president glanced at the SECDEF and back at the screen. “And?” “Well sir, we want to use the shuttle engines to add thrust to the propulsion unit.”

“Sir...” Carl Waddington said, pulling The President’s attention to the other monitor, “what they’re talking about is suicide. If they use the engines, they’ll use up the fuel they need to return to the station.”

“Everyone here disagrees with you commander,” the president said. “Everyone here thinks the main propulsion assembly will have more than enough power to move the asteroid.”

“With respect, sir,” Shipley said, “that’s a load of bull. We lost two boosters and nearly two weeks time just getting here. This is our one and only chance.”

Aubrey Clawson standing beside Shipley moved forward slightly. “We all agree. This is something we have to do.”

“Sir,” Waddington yelled, “this is not necessary. The engines they’re talking about are used for steering. They won’t have enough thrust to make a difference.”

“That’s not true sir,” Commander Lange said. “We feel we can generate enough thrust to compensate for the loss of at least one of the missing boosters.”

“It’s simply not worth the sacrifice, Mr. President,” Waddington said.

The president pushed his palm out and nodded. “I agree Carl...Permission denied.”

“Sorry sir,” Commander Lange said softly. “We’re already rigged to go.”

“I just gave you a direct order, Commander!” the president yelled.

“Sir...In all my time with the military, I have never disobeyed an order. But this time...I...we...have no choice. Commander Shipley had it right; we only have one chance at this and we have to play all of the cards available to us.”

“Permission denied,” the president repeated.

“Sorry sir,” Lange said, “We’re scheduled to fire at 1800 tomorrow.” She reached to the top left of the monitor and the screen went blank.

“Sir,” Waddington said after a pause, “they’re grandstanding. We have to stop this.”

The president looked at the SECDEF and shook his head.

“Carl,” the president said, leaning back in his seat. He sat staring into his coffee cup for a time, looked back at the screen and continued. “Very soon this gallant crew is going to pull that asteroid out of the earth’s path, and...while all of us back home are dancing in the streets, they will be waiting in the lonely silence of space for their oxygen to deplete. They know this, and they have accepted it. They’re not grandstanding Carl. These men and women are the highest caliber of hero. There’s nothing we could say or do to change their minds now.”

“What about the video feed, sir?” the Secretary of Defense asked, “The way they’re set up, the ignition sequence might just blow them to hell. We can’t let the world see the shuttle crew die out there.”

The President sighed. “The whole world will be watching this thing,” he said finally. “They’ll have my head if I cut the video for no reason.”

“Imagine what would happen if the shuttle ignited right before their eyes,” the SECDEF said solemnly. “Remember how the world reacted the day of the Florida explosion?”

The President stared into his coffee. “I suppose that’s true.” He glanced up at the SECDEF. “Wait until we’re sure the asteroid is being moved, then kill the feed...”

~~~

“He wants to see you now.”

Dr. Stalder looked up and slowly put down his magazine. He had been sitting on a hard couch, just outside Santana’s office, listening

to him scream at one staff member after another. Now it was his turn. He walked into the office and found Santana standing, his wide back towards him, in front of a spacious wall-to-wall picture window, forty-eight floors above downtown Manhattan. Stalder approached and timidly took a seat in front of Santana's sprawling oak desk. Santana made no attempt to acknowledge Stalder's presence. Stalder considered clearing his throat loudly.

"What the hell happened?"

Santana's sudden outburst made Stalder jump. "We don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know? Aren't you a doctor?"

"We simply don't know what happened, Ben."

"You're one of seven doctors brought in on this case, Stalder. The best medical team money can buy. The patient dies and not a single one of you knows what happened?"

"It was completely unexpected, Ben. Almost as if...almost as if it wasn't meant to be."

"I don't want to hear mysticism from you, Doctor. I want the facts. Now I'll ask you again...what happened?"

"Well, Ben the truth is, the mother's body simply refused to respond properly. During the birthing process, certain physical things have to happen in sequence for the birth to be successful. Her body just didn't want to participate. To put it in laymen's terms...no sooner would one system kick in, another would go down. She just died. Her heart simply stopped beating. An autopsy is being performed as we speak, but at this moment, it's all a complete mystery."

"Why the hell couldn't you have at least saved the fetus?" Santana yelled.

"We were prepared to do just that, Ben. We performed a cesarean within minutes, but the fetus died with the mother. There wasn't anything anyone could do."

Santana seemed to soften. He moved his considerable bulk to the plush chair in front of his desk. "How did it look?"

"Excuse me?" Stalder asked.

"What did the baby look like? Was it normal? Anything...unusual."



"A beautiful child," Stalder said, "completely flawless, as far as I could see."

Santana hardened. "Did you put it on ice?"

"Yes, it's being preserved as you asked."

Santana silently stared at his desk for a time. "That'll be all!" he said finally.

Stalder stood. Before he reached the door, Santana was on the COM. "Send in Tanner!"

A large man in a blue suit passed Dr. Stalder on the way out and entered Santana's office.

~~~

"Yeah boss?" the large man in a blue suit asked as he entered the room.

"The kid died!" Santana said. "Can you believe that, after all that money?"

"Yeah, I heard. What happened?"

"Damned if I know. That college kid...Birdie Hardman, or whatever her name was, just up and croaked on me. I tell ya', it's impossible to get good help these days."

Tanner chuckled.

"What?" Santana yelled, sending him a black look.

"Uh...nothing boss...so what now?"

Santana stared out the window. He stood rolling a bloated hand over his protruding belly for a time. "We go after the primary fetus," he said evenly.

"Mr. Santana, you gotta' lot of money and all that but, are you sure you want to take on the Vincs?"

"I ain't afraid of the Vincs!" Santana yelled.

"But sir, they got half the government."

Santana didn't respond.

"Why do you want this thing so bad, Mister Santana? I mean, where's the money in it?"

Santana grinned and sat on his desk top. "Do you have any idea how much people pay to be inseminated by your common ordinary genius...movie star...president? Can you imagine what we could get for the genes of Jesus Christ himself?"

Tanner snorted. "Wow, I never thought of that. But you can't do that till he grows up...What if he doesn't want to?"

"That's the beauty of cloning," Santana said. "No birth certificate, no records, no parents...no person....He'll belong to us. We can do with him as we damn well please."

"But, the Vinces will have records of the primary fetus, won't they?"

"I'm sure they will, but they'll wanna' get rid of 'em right off. Can you imagine the scandal if word of what they were doing got out?"

"Sounds like you've thought of everything boss."

"Of course!" Santana yelled. "You think I'm the only one? You think J and H and that...Patch and Rankin are involved with the Vinces because they want peace on earth?"

"But how are we gonna' get to the primary fetus? The Vinces watch that girl like she's gold."

"I thought of that to." Santana grinned and winked.

"That's why we have a man on the inside."

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"Going on six months ago, news of a great killer asteroid bearing down on our planet overshadowed nearly everything else. We learned an asteroid larger than the one that destroyed the dinosaurs, an asteroid that could threaten the very existence of all life on earth was coming directly at us at close to sixteen thousand miles per hour. The world has come to know this planet killer as Dante657."

Ominous sounding music blared as an animated logo, bearing the name Dante657 appeared to be falling out of the sky in a fiery spectacle.

"This is Hugh Brolley, and I'm your host for this historic television special. The time has come at last. The gallant crew of the space shuttle Endeavor has completed her many tasks. All preparations have been made. Soon, the mighty Main propulsion assembly...an enormous rocket motor made up of eight individual solid rocket boosters, will fire in unison, exerting an unprecedented twenty five million pounds of thrust.

"When it fires, it is expected to pull Dante657 a full nine hundred thousand miles off its present collision course with earth.

“With us in studio are the heroes...Commander John Lee Gunnarson and the gallant crew of Endeavor’s sister ship Atlantis. In approximately fifteen minutes, they, along with the rest of the world, will be witnessing this astonishing event first hand.

“The images we are seeing are being brought to us live from the ever-vigilant spacecraft MESSENGER.”

An animated picture of MESSENGER, floating serenely in space, appeared on the screen.

“A spacecraft, originally designed to study Saturn’s moon Titan, it has been encircling Dante, sending back vital information, from the very beginning.”

The image of MESSENGER disappeared and was quickly replaced by live video. As the cameras aboard MESSENGER panned back, the enormity of the task became apparent. The main propulsion assembly, tiny by comparison, looked like a bird perched on the back of a slowly spinning water buffalo.

Two members of the Atlantis crew jumped to their feet as the tiny specter of Endeavor came into view. It appeared to be tethered to the center of, and about five hundred yards away from the Main propulsion assembly.

“What the...” Commander Gunnarson whispered. He glanced at his fellow crewmates and slowly turned back to the studio monitor....

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Commander Lt. Colonel Andrea Lange jumped slightly as the shuttle Endeavor came to a sudden halt. “All stop!” she ordered.

All engines shut down.

“I think we have it,” she said.

Payload Commander Joyce Shipley checked the cameras. “I’m not seeing any problems here Commander.”

“Roger that. Flight, be advised, all systems are go here.”

“Houston, you got a copy?”

“Roger flight, checking visual on cam niner five niner.”

~~~

Assembly and Checkout Officer, Michael Spoor at the Space Shuttle Flight Control Room at JSC's Mission Control Center turned

his attention to Camera nine five nine aboard MESSENGER. Using extreme close-up capability, he carefully checked each tether at both points of rigging. When he was satisfied all tethers were taut and unobstructed he hit the COM. "All go flight."

"Roger ACO."

"Endeavor, you got a copy?"

"Affirmative flight." "All systems...instigating countdown for final ignition..."

T minus one hundred and counting..."

"What the hell is going on?" Elisabeth Jiang whispered. "Why isn't Endeavor a hundred thousand miles away like she's supposed to be?"

"I don't know," Gunnarson said, "but I have my suspicions."

T minus eighty-six and counting...

Maria pulled her feet onto the bed, her knuckles turning white as she stared into the television. She wanted to be with Todd. She wondered where he was...If he was watching...If he was thinking of her.

T minus sixty-seven and counting...

At the Space Shuttle Flight Control room in JSC's Mission Control Center, Assembly and Checkout Officer Michael Spor continued to scan the tethers for signs of trouble. He noticed something strange at the base of T4. He commanded CAM niner five niner to close in.

T minus twenty and counting...

As the camera zoomed in, he noticed something strange at the point of rigging he hadn't seen before. He needed to close in further.

T minus fifteen...

T minus ten...

T minus nine...

The camera zoomed in further. "Oh my God almighty!"

T minus eight and counting...

"Stop!" he yelled. He realized he hadn't hit the COM button.

T minus seven...

T minus six...

He mashed the COM button. "Stop, stop!"

T minus five...

T minus four...

He jumped from his monitor and blasted down the hall. "For God's sake, stop the countdown!"

T minus three...

"What is it?" Nyal Stai yelled, jumping to his feet.

"The tether!" Michael Spor yelled, "It's slipped... It's pulling out! We have to stop the countdown!"

T minus two...

T minus one...

Ignition...

At T minus one, Endeavor fired all engines just ahead of the main propulsion assembly.

Payload Commander Joyce Shipley grabbed at the sides of her console as the main propulsion assembly roared to life.

The crew quarters began shaking violently as the shuttle engines pulled against the undulating rocket. Tony Higbee grabbed at his ears in response to the deafening noise.

At mission control, operators stood and cheered as the long white plume appeared from the Main propulsion assembly. The rigging at T4 held for a brief moment but the herculean eyebolt continued pulling loose. When it finally gave way completely, the main propulsion assembly, along with the shuttle, lurched forward. It reached the limits of the remaining three tethers and crashed to a halt. The crew of Endeavor was killed instantly.

Operators dropped their hands and stared intently as the enormous rocket surrealistically rolled onto its side. Within moments another tether broke free. The violent shaking brought about by the sudden unbalance severed the connectors on one of the SRBs and it broke free of the group. The hot plume of the solid rocket booster turned in on itself and the entire main propulsion assembly ignited in one horrific blast. It took only microseconds for shrapnel to reach MESSENGER.

The video feed went dead...

Chapter Five

Dante657

**The sun shall be darkened and the moon shall not give her  
light  
Mark 13:24**

~~~

Maria stared into the TV screen listening to the soft whirring white noise. "What...what just happened?" She rolled her pregnant body to the side and rifled through the loose blankets for the remote. She found it and quickly pointed it at the TV. Her panic mounted as she clicked through one channel after another. Every channel was offline.

After some effort, she was able to roll off the bed and shuffle awkwardly to the hospital room door.

It was locked.

She pounded.

"What's going on?" she screamed. No one answered.

She turned, stumbled back to her bed, and pushed the nurse call button. She waited but no one came. She was on her way back towards the door when the TV sprang back to life. The face of the president of the United States appeared. Maria gasped, and threw her hand over her mouth. Tears filled her eyes as she slowly sat on the bed.

~~~

"What happened?" Pete said, looking around the room.

No one answered.

"Did they move it?" he asked, looking down at Sarah.

"Is it gone then?" he asked, looking at Barney.

"Shut up Pete!" Barney yelled. "How we supposed to know?"

Pete glanced around nervously. "Where's Brother Michael?"

Sarah looked up at him. "He should be home anytime. Maybe he'll know what's going on."

The president's face appeared on the TV.

"Oh no," Sarah droned. She turned and stared at Mallory, who was sitting on the floor at Barney's feet.

~~~

“Hold up,” Leland said. “How long has the TV been dead?”

Todd looked at the TV mounted high in the corner of the small rec. room.

“Weren’t they just getting ready to move the asteroid?” Leland’s friend Tyrone asked, looking at Leland.

“Yeah, I think so...I wonder what’s going on.”

“Try turning the station,” Leland’s friend Anthony said.

The guard reached for the remote and began switching channels. All channels were offline. The guard stood and moved towards the TV. It flickered back on. The president’s face filled the screen.

Leland glanced at Anthony and looked at Todd. “What just happened?” he asked.

“My fellow Americans,” the president began. “I can’t begin to describe the depth of my sorrow at having to announce to the world that the heroic crew of space shuttle Endeavor has been lost. All efforts to deflect the asteroid have been defeated and the perilous outcome has become real and imminent.”

The constant racket permeating the prison went silent.

The President looked at his notes for a long moment before returning his gaze to the camera. “Thirty-two days from today, Dante657 will impact the earth. Efforts to evacuate the North American continent will begin immediately.”

A collective groan rolled through the room and quickly hushed.

“The point of impact will be in the close vicinity of Omaha, Nebraska at approximately eleven o’clock pm on the twentieth of October.”

Todd turned to look at Leland. “Did he say Omaha, Nebraska?”

The president looked at his desk, pulled his glasses off, and looked back at the camera. “Anyone within a radius of two hundred miles from the impact site will be killed instantly. Anyone left within the continental United States can expect devastating molten debris to fall from the sky as far away as both the Atlantic and Pacific coasts.

Our sources indicate that the impact will immediately precede a global winter that will significantly block out the sun’s light and

darken the skies for up to five years.”

The president paused and continued. “I’m not gonna play with words, ladies and gentlemen. We may not survive this impact as a species. If we have any chance at survival it will be because we, as a species, take care of one another, work towards the common good. Watch over the small and the weak, the young and the old.”

He paused, becoming emotional. “Do the right thing,” he said finally, his voice faltering. “In all we do from this day forward...Let’s do the right thing.”

Again, the President paused to collect himself. He sat up straight, and looked back at the camera. “As of this moment, I am placing the United States of America under martial law. The military will be placed on full alert under the authority of the office of Homeland Security. All National Guard and Reserve units will be activated. During the evacuation, lawbreakers will be subject to swift and just punishment and any and all looters will be shot on sight.

Any threatening behavior, by any sovereign power or group...any attempt at taking advantage of our calamity...any moves to undermine our efforts, whether on the mainland or abroad will be regarded as an act of war.”

He paused a moment. “Within an hour, instructions pertaining to your local evacuation efforts will begin broadcasting in your area. It is imperative that everyone remain calm. Goodbye for now my fellow Americans...and may God bless the United States of America.”

The TV fell blank again.

Todd looked around the rec. room. Everyone sat motionless, staring at the television. “I’ve got to get to Maria,” he said, slowly rising to his feet.

Leland reached for his arm. “Slow your roll, cowboy—”

Todd pulled away, and began sprinting out of the rec. room. He made a quick right and pushed his way through several convicts as he rushed the guard stationed at the front.

The guard immediately pulled his baton and pointed it at Todd. “Back up!”

“I got to get out of here!” Todd yelled, pulling to a stop. “I’ve got

to get to Maria!”

Leland, Anthony and Tyrone moved up behind Todd.

Leland took hold of Todd’s arm and began pulling him away from the panicked guard. “It’s ok, hack. He’s with us.”

A convict moved forward. “Let us out of here man! We have family too, we gotta’ gettem out of here too!”

“Come’ on hack!” another convict yelled stepped up. “The world’s coming to an end, dude! Let us out of here...now!”

The guard glanced wildly around the mob of convicts, now ominously pushing its way towards him. “S-stop, hold it! Hold it right there!”

One of the convicts snatched the baton out of the guard’s hand. Another went low, grabbing the guard’s legs and wrestling him to the floor. The guard screamed as the convicts advanced towards him.

The guard in the Plexiglas cage on the other side of the door stood up from his desk and watched timorously as his comrade began to be buffeted by the rampaging inmates. Leland used his considerable bulk to push forward into the fracas. He began pulling convicts away from the guard and flinging them off to the side. Anthony and Tyrone immediately took up position and prepared to run interference.

Leland managed to take hold of the screaming guard’s collar and jerk him to his feet. Anthony and Tyrone set up a formidable human shield, as Leland pushed the bloody guard towards the closed Plexiglas door leading out of the cell. He pushed him against the glass and hollard at the ashen-faced guard on the other side. “Open the door!”

The guard didn’t move.

“Bill, for God sakes, open the door!” the bloody guard yelled.

“I-I can’t. They’ll get out!”

Leland crashed his huge shoulder against the glass causing the entire wall to shudder. “Open the door! I won’t let anyone out!”

“Please, Bill,” the bloody guard cried, open the door...please!”

“Rev!” one of the inmates yelled in Leland’s ear, “We can use him as a hostage! We can get out of here!”

Leland glared at the guard on the other side. "Open the door now!"

"I can't!" Bill hollered from behind the Plexiglas. "He knows I can't!" Bill pointed at the bloody guard.

"I swear to you," Leland hollered over the clamor, "in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, nobody but the hack is goin' out this door!"

Bill shook his head and slowly shrunk away.

"Open it," the bloody guard pleaded, sobbing.

Bill stepped forward, reached under the desk and hit the button. The door opened. Inmates pressed against Anthony, Tyrone and Leland, but the sobbing guard was the only one who popped through the door. The door quickly closed behind him.

The bloody guard staggered to his feet and disappeared down the corridor. The other guard nodded at Leland, turned and moved away down the same hall.

Leland stared through the glass for a time before turning to face the row of angry faces. Slowly, the crowd began to dissipate.

Hector, Tacoma and Madrid loitered for a time. "I used to look up to you," Hector said softly, looking at Leland. "That Jesus stuff made you crazy, man."

Anthony leaned forward forcing Madrid to pull back. "You should thank God," he said, glaring back at Hector. "If it weren't for the Lord Jesus, Leland would've just now killed you where you stand...and you know that."

Hector shook his head in disgust and slowly turned away. Tacoma and Madrid followed.

~~~

It had been hours since the president's announcement. As far as Maria could tell, no one had even approached the locked hospital room door. She'd been lying on her bed crying, wondering if she might've been forgotten, left to starve. She had banged on the door relentlessly. She had pressed the nurse call button until it became painful. Still, no one had come to the door.

Finally, she thought she heard a slight commotion outside in the hall. She moved from her bed as fast as her advanced pregnancy would allow and pressed her ear against the door. "Todd," she

whispered, "Is that you?" She jumped back when the lock clicked. The door slowly pushed open. Steph, the big nurse, stepped through. "Oh thank God." Maria moaned. "Where have you been? I've been trying—" Maria noticed the streaked mascara on Steph's face.

"You've got to go!" The nurse said. "Everybody's gotta' go! We're evacuating the hospital."

"Where are we going?" Maria asked.

"I don't know where you're going. I'm going home!"

"But I don't have—"

"Just get your things together!" the nurse yelled. "We gotta' go...now!"

Maria backed away slightly. "Ok," she said softly. "Let me get some things from the bathroom. I'll be right back." She moved towards the bathroom and quickly turned back. "Oh but...I don't have any clothes. All I have is this hospital gown."

"I don't care!" the nurse yelled. "If you don't hurry I'll lock you in here and this is where you'll stay. Do you understand?"

Maria turned back, moved to the bathroom door and closed it behind her. She found a bedpan and began collecting her personal things from the cabinets. She heard a commotion just outside the bathroom door. The nurse screamed. Then her scream was muffled as if someone had put a hand over her mouth.

"Where is it?" a man's voice yelled.

"Where is what?" the nurse yelled back.

"The medicine...the drugs!"

"I don't know."

The nurse screamed in pain.

"Tell me or I'll break it!"

"In the infirmary!" she yelled.

"Where's the infirmary?"

"Behind the desk, at the nurse's station."

"Anyone else here?"

Maria quickly moved to the switch and turned the light off.

"No," the nurse said.

Maria heard a loud pop, followed by the sound of a heavy body

collapsing to the floor. She jumped and pressed herself against the wall next to the bathroom door. After a short time the doorknob began to move. She held her breath as the door slowly swung open against her. She heard the man step into the room, pause and quickly close the door behind him.

Maria held her breath as long as she could. She stood in the darkness, pressing herself against the wall. She waited in silence till she was relatively certain the intruder had left and gingerly pulled the bathroom door open just enough to peek out into the hospital room. She gasped when she saw the puddle of blood. She finally pushed the door open enough to see the nurse's body lying face down on the floor.

She mustered the courage, stepped out of the bathroom and slowly made her way towards the door. She was relieved to see that it had been left slightly opened. She heard a new noise just outside the door and ducked behind the curtain. She jumped as two men burst into the room.

One of them pushed Steph's body over and shoved his hands into her pockets. "She's got nothing. Let's get outa' here!"

The man jumped to his feet and ran out the door. The other one quickly followed.

She heard them sprint down the hall towards the stairway. Slowly, she made her way towards the door but hit the floor when she heard the unmistakable sound of automatic gunfire erupting down the hall. What's going on? she groaned, as she lay on the floor. She crawled towards the door and peeked out. Something passed by. She quietly moved to a spot where she could look out. A soldier was moving in the hallway. She jumped to her feet and pushed the door open. "Thank God you're—"

Without warning, the young soldier whirled, brandishing his automatic rifle. Maria screamed and hit the floor as a volley of gunfire blasted the door to pieces just above her head.

"Hold your fire!" a voice rang out over Maria's screaming. "That's a patient, you idiot! Look, she's even pregnant!"

Maria looked up at the three soldiers standing over her.

"Wow, she's a pretty little thing," one of them said.

“You a psych patient?” the sergeant asked.

Maria stared up at them gasping. She nodded, unable to speak.

“You better stay right here till morning,” he said. “Things are really crazy out there right now.”

The three soldiers turned and began moving away.

Maria pushed herself up to her knees. “Wait! Take me with you!”

“We can’t take you with us, lady,” one of the soldiers said over his shoulder. “If you stay here, you’ll be fine. You can leave tomorrow.”

“Wait!” she said. “There’s a nurse...She’s dead!”

The three soldiers turned when they reached the doors leading into the stairwell and were gone....

~~~

“What are we supposed to do now?” Todd asked Leland. The small group of men had made their way back to the rec. room.

“We’re stuck here in prison. Ya’ figure they’ll let us out, or what?”

“I don’t know,” Leland said. “I don’t see ‘em letting us out....I guess it’s in the Lord’s hands now.”

Todd frowned. “In the Lord’s hands? We’re about to be annihilated and you say it’s in the Lord’s hands?”

Leland didn’t answer.

Tyrone sniffed and flicked Leland’s arm with the back of his hand. “Yeah, Bro, why would the Lord let this happen?”

“The Lord works in mysterious ways,” Leland said. “We don’t know what He is, or isn’t, letting happen, we just know that all things work to the best for those who love Him.”

Todd glanced up. “Dude,” he said softly, “I’ve heard that before.” He looked around at the men. “Everyone here is Christian, Isn’t that right?”

“Aren’t you?” Tyrone said.

“I’m not sure why I’m telling you this...but there’s something I think every Christian should know....”

~~~

Maria had just fallen asleep when a noise outside her hospital room made her leap from her bed. As the door slowly opened, she made an attempt to dive behind the curtain.

"Mrs. Rose? Mrs. Rose, are you in this room?" Dr. Oliver gingerly peeked into the room.

Maria rushed forward and embraced him. "Oh, thank God you're here!" She pulled back when the doctor slowly ran it down the back of her long black hair. "So glad to see you," she said. "I forgot myself...sorry."

The doctor blushed. "Th-that's...that's quite all right."

Maria noticed two men standing just outside the door. "Who's this?" "They're Vinces," the doctor said looking around. She sent them a black look. "Oh...of course."

"We have to get you out of here to a safe place."

"Do you know where my husband is?"

"Yes I do."

"You do?"

"Yes, he'll be joining us shortly, but first let's get out of here. There's a lot going on outside."

"You know where Todd is?" Maria asked, breaking into tears. "Is he ok? Where has he been?"

"He's been right here in the hospital. He's waiting for you in the car, but we must hurry."

Maria raced out of the room with Oliver in tow. As they moved, she turned and hollered over her shoulder. "I had to move out of my room because the army shot the door off and there's a dead nurse in there."

"Yes," Oliver said, glancing back at one of the men trailing behind, "we noticed."

She stopped at her original room, darted in and returned sporting a bedpan full of odds and ends. "Ready to go."

"But, what about your clothes?"

"This is them," she said, shrugging. "Can we go now?"

Oliver glanced at one of the men now standing at her side and back at Maria. "Oh...ok then, let's go."

Maria immediately took the lead. Despite her advanced pregnancy the three men sent to escort her had to run to keep up. She moved to the stairway and began making her way down the three flights of stairs. "I can't wait to see Todd," she said. "I've been so worried!"

“Be careful Mrs. Rose,” Oliver yelled after her. “You mustn’t slip and fall in your condition.”

“Yes, you’re right, doctor. I’ll slow down....when I see Todd,” she said giggling.

They finally reached the main landing and moved into the reception area where they slowed to a stop. A body lay on the floor. It looked like one of the men who had gone through the nurse’s pockets earlier. Maria was glad he was dead. The three slowly moved around the body and continued out the front door.

“Oh, is this our ride?” Maria said, looking at the glistening black stretch limo waiting at the curb.

Oliver moved ahead to open the door. “This is it.”

“Todd!” Maria said, as she looked inside. A fat little man sat staring at her from across the limo. She stood and faced Oliver. “I don’t see my husband.”

Without warning one of the two men violently pushed her into the car.

“Hey! HEY!” Oliver yelled over Maria’s screams. “Be careful. You hurt her and I’ll file the skin from your writhing body!”

“Ouch!” the fat man said chuckling. “Sounds painful.”

Oliver turned his attention to the fat man. “Sorry Mr. Santana, it’s just that, she’s pregnant and—”

“Yeah, yeah, shut her up!”

Maria was screaming as Tanner wrestled her into the seat. Santana rapped on the window. “Let’s go!” The limo lurched forward, turned left at the end of the parking lot and moved west towards Downtown Nashville.

~~~

Leland twisted his head like a curious puppy. “Are you telling us they found some of the Lord’s blood and made a clone of him?”

The group of men sat quietly contemplating what they had just heard.

Anthony spoke up breaking the silence. “That can’t be true, can it? God wouldn’t let that happen, would He?”

“This...priest,” Todd said, “pulled a verse out of the Bible. It said ‘In the last days, the messiah’s own blood would re-new him.’”

Leland shook his head. "I haven't seen anything like that, and I've read the Bible boo coo, but maybe this explains the asteroid. Maybe we've gone too far this time with this cloning business. Maybe this is judgment."

"The priest said it was from a papyrus they discovered recently."

"We believe in the second coming," Tyrone said thoughtfully, "but that don't sound like the way the bible tells it...does it Leland?"

"No, no it don't, that don't sound like nothin' I ever read." The group sat in silence for a long time. Eventually, Leland stood to leave.

"blowin' out?" Anthony asked.

"Going to the white house... Why; why you all up in my business?"

"Goin' with you," Anthony said, standing up. "You tried em. They'll be clockin' you."

"So?" Leland said. "I'm a man. We been here before, how ya gonna get funny now?"

"Not the same," Anthony said. "It's different...I'm watching your back this time... you down wit?"

Leland smiled. "Whatever makes you feel better, brother."

The two men pushed their fists together and disappeared around the corner.

Todd sat for a while, looking at Tyrone. "How long you been in here?" "Long time," Tyrone said smiling, "about seventeen years."

"How long have you known Leland?"

"Seventeen years."

"Leland's been here seventeen years?"

"Longer than that...in other prisons before he came here."

"I been wondering," Todd said. "Leland being a Christian and all...why was he in the go-slow with me?"

Tyrone raised his brows and smiled. "That was me. He stepped up and caught a shiv for me, got him in the arm. Those homeys ain't here no more. Got transferred. Hacks probably thought we'd wet 'em, which we wouldn't...Leland wouldn't 'a let us."

"What was it like when you first came here?"

"Same as you," Tyrone said. "I was just another ding from Juneway... Chicago, probably just as scared as you. There was some bad men here in the day. The week I clocked in, I saw a man kill another man because he woke him up playing his guitar...killed him with his own guitar string."

"No kidding," Todd said. "You saw that?"

"Close as me to you. There was one homey in particular, nobody messed with him. You didn't talk to him unless he spoke first. If he didn't like you, for any reason...you got on the other side of dirt... know what I'm sayin'? He'd either wet you, or a ding would do it for him. He ran the house...undisputed. He finally got so mean they put him in a boxcar cell at ADX Florence. You think the go-slow is bad? The go-slow is a Caribbean cruise next to Florence. He was there a couple months. I talked to one of the hacks put him in there. He said it took ten of them to put him in the cell. When he came out...he was a different man."

Todd smiled. "You're talking about Leland."

Tyrone nodded. "That's when he became the Rev. At first, everybody thought he'd gone crazy in that isolation cell, but it didn't take long for people to see the Lord in him. He didn't act different; he *was* different...you down wit'? It was so radical man... half the prison turned their lives over to Christ...me included."

"It's hard to figure Leland being that way," Todd said, quietly.

Tyrone grinned. "Believe it."

Todd's attention was drawn to a commotion coming from the sleeping section. "What's going on?" he said, looking around. "Sounds like a riot out there." He stood just as Anthony walked around the corner.

"Hey, check it." Anthony said, pointing at the Plexiglas front door. "We got company."

~~~

"Who is this?"

"Who is this? You called me, remember?"

"This is Doctor Rossetti."

"Who?"

“Doctor Rossetti—from the Vanderbilt Psychiatric hospital. Is this my secretary, Penny Lehman’s, residence?”

“Yeah, hold on....It’s the hospital!”

The secretary came on the phone. “Hello, Doctor.”

“Penny, why aren’t you at the hospital?”

She didn’t answer.

“Penny, are you there?”

“Yes, I’m here, Doctor.”

“Why aren’t you at the—”

“Have you been to the hospital, sir?”

“No, I just got in...I’ve been in Branson—”

“Do you know about the asteroid?”

“Of course I know about the asteroid!”

“Doctor Rossetti...no one is at the hospital.”

“Why not?”

Again, no answer.

“Do you have any idea how long I’ve been trying to call you?”

The doctor said. “The phones aren’t working, and I’m on a satellite phone.”

“Listen, Doctor,” the secretary said. “I don’t work for you anymore. My family and I are gonna try to make it to the coast as fast as we can—”

“Where’s the girl?”

“What girl?”

“You know what girl!”

“Uh...that doctor, what was his name...Oliver...said he’d take care of her.”

“You let Oliver take her?”

“Of course!”

“Why?”

“Listen, Doctor, the last thing you told me was to let that little jerk have anything he needed...”

“Not the girl!” Rossetti yelled.

“Doctor, have you been to the hospital lately?”

“I told you...I just got back—”

“The hospital no longer exists. Families came and removed the

patients by force. Hoodlums broke in and took all the food, drugs...anything they could get their hands on. They had guns. Trust me Doctor, there's no more hospital. What you need to do is get your family out now...that's my advice to you."

The secretary paused a moment and hung up the phone.

~~~

Todd leaned forward so he could see through the window dividing the rec. room and the sleeping quarters. Standing just outside the cell, behind the Plexiglas, armed soldiers were milling about.

Tyrone stood up. "Do I hear dogs?"

Todd listened. He could just make out the sounds of barking dogs over the racket coming from within the cellblock.

Leland poked his head around the corner. "Looks like trouble."

Todd, Leland, Anthony and Tyrone moved into the dorm area.

"Look at those idiots," Tyrone said.

Inmates were pressed against the Plexiglas, taunting the armed troops. Some were spitting on the glass. Lieutenant King was standing just outside the Plexiglas door. He turned and motioned for the dogs to be brought forward.

"This is it," Tyrone yelled. "Find a mattress...now!" He jumped to the first bunk and ripped off the mattress.

"Grab a mattress, kid!" Leland said.

Todd did as he was told.

The four men pushed their way to the back of the cell and lay against the wall, covering themselves with the mattresses. Lieutenant King gave the order and the door opened. The dogs leapt forward, barking and snapping at the first row of inmates. As the inmates fell back, soldiers quickly entered and began firing tear gas canisters. The soldiers and dogs retreated and the door closed again. Tear gas flooded the cell.

Todd pushed the mattress against his face trying to keep the choking gas out of his lungs as long as he could. He could feel his heart pounding in his ears. It didn't take long for the burning sensation to begin. He could hear people choking and gagging all around. He peeked over his mattress. Gas masked soldiers were

pushing their way into the cell, swinging the butts of their rifles at the choking inmates. Todd heard the sounds of fans coming on and the gas quickly dissipated. Snapping dogs reappeared, driving everyone to the floor. Finally, the only sound left was crying men and the incessant barking of the dogs.

After some time, the dogs were systematically removed. Soldiers stood over the prone inmates, pushing the muzzles of M-16 rifles against the back of their skulls.

Lieutenant King walked heavily towards the front of the room. "You will lie on the floor until your name is called! Then I want you to stand where you are...do you understand?"

"Yes, sir!" the inmates yelled.

"If you stand, and your name wasn't called, you will be shot. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Inmate Bellacomo...Tony, stand up!"

An inmate in the front of the room stood up.

"Inmate Vasquez...Pedro, stand up!"

Todd dared not look up. He heard another inmate jump to his feet.

King continued calling names until he reached the end of his list. "You men stand over there!" he said, pointing at the wall.

The men did as they were told.

"Everyone else, stay put!"

Once the men had lined up against the wall, King turned his attention to them. "Recent circumstances have made it impossible for the citizens of this state to continue babysitting you maggots. So by order of Judge Judith Owens, you men have been set free."

The men standing at the wall looked at each other. They began yelling and slapping palms.

"Shut your holes!" King hollered. "You ain't gone yet!"

"They're gonna let us go," Todd whispered.

"Don't be too sure," Leland said quietly.

"Hey man," Hector yelled, still lying on the floor, "What about me?"

"Shut up, Hector!" King yelled.

Hector slowly stood up “No man. Why you always doggin’ me, man.”

King stepped forward, pulled a handgun from its holster and fired a round into Hector’s forehead. Hector fell into a heap on the floor.

Todd felt the blood drain from his face.

Silence fell over the line of men standing at the wall.

“Get out of here,” King said, turning back to face them, “And watch yourselves. The streets are full of police and military. They’ll shoot you for no reason at all...got that?”

The pale faced men standing in line nodded in unison. One of the soldiers stepped forward taking hold of the first inmate in line. He pushed him out the front door. The others quickly followed.

“What’s going on?” Todd whispered.

“Those were the short-timers,” Leland said, “the non-violent felonies...misdemeanors.”

“What does that mean?”

“We’ll find out soon enough,” Leland said.

“You men shut up!” King yelled, pushing his side arm into Todd’s face.

Todd quickly quieted.

King turned and looked around the room. “The rest of you, get up on your feet!”

The remaining inmates slowly stood.

“You men will follow Captain Paige!” He pointed at one of the soldiers. The captain turned to leave. Another soldier pushed the first inmate towards the Plexiglas door with his rifle. The next inmate fell in behind. Todd, Leland, Anthony and Tyrone made up the back of the line.

As the line began snaking out the door, one of the inmates screamed and bolted towards the rec. room. Automatic weapons fire tore him to pieces before he reached the entrance. The inmates in line hit the floor but were yanked to their feet and pushed out the Plexiglas door.

They were led through a maze of halls and outside into the vast outdoor recreation area. There, they were lined up against the fence and told to turn to their right.

King paced nervously in front of them and stopped. "You men are the violent felons! We can't afford to turn you loose on an unsuspecting public and we don't have anywhere to keep you...The United States of America is in a state of emergency and has been placed under martial law. By order of Judge Judith Owens, you men are to be executed."

The men in line looked at each other and back at King. Two men in line broke free and tried to run, but were immediately cut down. One of them lay on the ground moaning. King moved forward and finished him with a shot to the temple. "If you don't run," he said, looking at the remaining inmates, "it'll be quicker. It's up to you."

Todd glanced over his shoulder at Leland. "Is this it? We're gonna' die now?"

"If it's God's will," Leland said.

"Aren't you mad at God, Leland...even a little bit?"

"Kid," Leland said softly, "I've been in prison a long, long time. I'd'a never got out. I done things only God can forgive...I always knew I'd die in this place. Now it's time for me to finally go home."

"Amen, my brother," Tyrone said.

"Right on," Anthony echoed, "I'm ready."

Leland put his huge hand on Todd's shoulder. "It's time to make a decision kid. Are you ready to give your life to the Lord?"

Todd jumped as he heard King's sidearm pop. He heard a body fall to the ground. Men all around began softly praying, some crying. Another pop and another body fell in a heap.

"Are you ready?" Leland asked.

"It's too late." Todd said. "You can't wait till the last minute then expect God to save you."

"Yes you can." Leland said. "The thief on the cross did."

Another pop, closer this time.

"Yes, yes," Todd said as loud as he dared. "I want to be saved."

Leland smiled, dropped his hand away from Todd's shoulder and began softly singing. "Ah..ma..zing grace, how sweet..."

Anthony joined in, just as King reached him.

"To...save...a...wretch...like me...."

King put his pistol to Anthony's temple and fired. Anthony fell to

the ground.

"I...once was lost...but now...am found...."

King put the pistol to Tyrone's head and fired. Tyrone's body fell into a heap on the ground.

"Was...blind but now...I see...."

King moved to big Leland and put the pistol to his temple.

"Sorry, Rev," he said in Leland's ear. "Put in a good word for me with the man, will you?"

Leland smiled, nodded and continued singing. "Though we've...been there...ten thousand years...bright shining as the sun...."

King pulled the trigger and shot Leland in the head. His giant body crumpled at Todd's feet.

Todd gritted his teeth. He gently drifted away to a little house in a Nashville suburb, to a smolderingly beautiful raven haired girl... tender smiling lips... emerald green eyes glimmering in the soft glow of the fireplace....

King put his pistol down, pulled out a new clip and reloaded.

Todd felt the barrel against his temple.

"Thank God, this is the last one," Lieutenant King said. He hesitated for a brief moment and pulled the trigger.

~~~

The limo pulled in behind a row of small office warehouse units. It soundlessly glided to the end of a parking area and stopped at the entrance of one of the units. The automatic door was already responding to a wireless signal given by the driver. The limo pulled in and the door closed behind them.

Dr. Oliver glanced around nervously. "What are we doing here?"

"We have a little business," Santana said. "This won't take long." He looked at the man sitting beside Maria. "Untie her, Tanner!" With considerable effort, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a handkerchief. "Gag her."

"What...what are you doing?" Oliver said.

Tanner ignored Oliver and stepped out of the limo. He reached back in and violently pulled Maria out the door.

"Be careful!" Oliver yelled, his face, contorted.



Tanner smirked and pushed Maria away from the car.

Santana chuckled. "Why do you care about her?"

"Sorry Mr. Santana," Oliver said. "The...baby, they might hurt the baby."

The limo driver stepped from the limo. The two men pushed Maria face down against the hood of the car and began untying her hands from behind her back. As Oliver stepped out of the vehicle Maria turned towards him.

"Why are you doing this?" she said sobbing.

Oliver winced and moved towards her only to be pushed aside by Tanner. "Don't worry Miss," Oliver said softly. "Everything's gonna' be all right." Tanner yanked her head back and tied the handkerchief tightly over her mouth.

"Don't, don't...do that," Oliver said grimacing. "You don't have to hurt her."

Santana turned and began walking towards the small office at the front of the warehouse "Oliver, come with me. We need to talk."

Oliver hesitated and followed.

Santana stopped, whirled and yelled at the two men holding Maria. "Tie her face up on the table! Tie her arms and legs to the legs of the table...Got it?"

"Got it." Tanner said.

Maria screamed through the gag as the two men began dragging her towards the center of the storage area.

Dr. Oliver stood staring at the ominous looking table in the center of the floor. "What is that? What are you doing with an autopsy table?"

Santana stopped and turned. "You coming?"

"Uh...yes sir," Oliver said.

He turned and fell in behind Santana. The two men opened the door to the office and stepped inside. Santana moved to a chair behind a small desk and motioned for Oliver to take a seat.

"I...I'm sorry mister Santana," Oliver said. "I just have to stand."

Santana flipped a hand. "Fine!"

Oliver eased back towards the door leading into the warehouse and charily peeked out.

Santana stood, moved to the door and closed it. "I need your attention Oliver...do you understand?"

Oliver slowly sat down in a small chair and began nervously drumming his fingers on the desk in front of him. Santana returned to his seat and began nonchalantly thumbing through paper work.

What are we doing here?" Oliver said, breaking the silence.

"What do you think we're doing here?"

"I'm not sure I want to know," Oliver said, holding his breath.

"C'mon Oliver, you don't really believe we had any intention of taking her with us do you?"

"You're gonna...kill her?"

"No, don't be ridicules. Of course I'm not gonna' kill her. What do you think I am...a monster?" He pushed back from the desk and pulled a plastic wrapped scalpel from one of the drawers. "You're gonna' kill her." he said, throwing the scalpel on the desk.

Oliver jumped to his feet. "No! There's no way in hell I am gonna' kill that girl...you can forget it!"

"Oliver," Santana yelled, "sit down!"

Oliver slid back into his seat.

Santana leaned forward. "She's gonna' died soon anyway. Besides...it's not like you're gonna' KILL her, kill her...You're just gonna perform a simple cesarean section...piece of cake."

"I refuse to do it...I, I can't do it. I'm a psychiatrist not a gynecologist."

"Psychiatrists are medical doctors," Santana said, "and you were a gynecologist before you went into psychiatry, am I right? That's why you were there at the hospital taking care of the girl in the first place. You were doing double duty for the Vines."

Oliver glared at Santana.

Santana chuckled. "Never let it be said that Benjamin Santana doesn't do his homework." He became serious. "Damn it, Oliver, be reasonable. The damn asteroid's gonna' kill her anyway."

"Then let the asteroid kill her," Oliver yelled back.

Santana became silent and leaned back in his seat. "But then...I suppose the asteroid is gonna' kill everybody...Unless of course, you're like me and own a private Jumbo Jet."

Oliver's eyes slowly dropped.

"It's gonna' be a brave new world once the asteroid business is over," Santana continued, "Plenty of room at the top for the right person. I'm not stupid; I know how valuable a good doctor could be at a time like this." He shuffled the few papers scattered haphazardly on top of the desk. "I hope you don't mind but I've already made arrangements for you and you're family to be on board when we leave for Australia tomorrow morning...That is, if you're still with us."

Oliver remained silent.

"All flights away from the mainland were completely overrun within minutes of the president's announcement," Santana continued. "Traffic leaving the city is so backed up, people are already abandoning their automobiles and setting out on foot. They'll starve of course. The idiots didn't think to stockpile. Marauding murderous gangs have already raided the food. It's amazing how fast it all happened....No hope of leaving the city, let alone the country...This could be the last chance you have to save yourself, and your family."

Oliver's eyes slowly moved to the floor. He sat silent for a moment. "Why do you need to do this?" he said, looking up.

"We need the baby," Santana said quickly. "We need the baby now."

"Why can't you keep the girl alive and allow her to give birth naturally?"

"No, no, I've been down that road...I want that kid, and I want him now."

Santana tilted his head to one side. "Come on Oliver, think of the nightmare of having to drag a hostile, pregnant hostage around with us everywhere we go. The Vincs would move heaven and earth to find her if they had the slightest hint she was still around. It's bad business...and besides, there's only enough room on the jet for us. Me and my family, you and your family, my staff, and of course, the kid...that's all the room there is."

Doctor Oliver's eyes drifted back to the floor.

"It won't be that bad," Santana said after a pause. "Just find an

artery or whatever...cut it. It's that simple."

"What about anesthesia?" Oliver said quietly.

Santana smiled. "Everything is sterile. You have all the medical supplies you'll need."

"That's not what I asked!" Oliver said through his teeth. "What about anesthesia?"

"I planned on picking some up but...well you know...under these circumstances...I don't think we'll find any anesthesia. You saw the way things were at the hospital."

Oliver stared at Santana. "My God! What kind of man are you?"

"A damned rich one," Santana said, grinning.

"Why can't we break into a drugstore, find some chloroform or something...anything!"

Santana leaned forward, shaking his head and pointing the scalpel at Oliver. "No can do. I'm no doctor, but I know chloroform would probably kill the kid...as a matter of fact, any anesthesia is dangerous for the kid...am I right? I'm just not willing to take the chance...sorry."

"An epidural block is especially—"

Santana leapt to his feet. "THE GIRL'S GONNA DIE ANYWAY!"

Oliver jumped in his seat.

"Besides," Santana continued, "we gotta' do it now if we are to have any hope of getting your family together in time for the flight."

Oliver sat a long time staring at the floor. Finally, he reached for the scalpel on the desk and stood.

"Now you're being reasonable," Santana said, grinning.

Oliver brushed by him and walked out of the office. He quickly made his way into the warehouse with Santana close behind. He could hear the muffled sounds of Maria crying through her handkerchief gag. As he approached, he could see that Maria's hospital gown had already been pulled up exposing her belly. A tray of medical tools had been placed at the side of the table.

"It's ok, Little Miss," he said as he approached. He reached for her hand. She took it. The fingernails of her trembling hand bit into his. He looked deep into her terrified eyes. "Everything is gonna' be

fine, Little Miss...you'll see. It will all be over very soon."

He slowly lifted the scalpel, trying to keep it out of Maria's view but she saw it anyway. She screamed and began writhing on the table. "Missy," Oliver said quietly, gently stroking her forehead, "trust me, I'll make it as quick as I can."

Maria arched her back and screamed as Dr. Oliver's trembling hand lifted the scalpel to her stomach....

~~~

Lieutenant King pulled his pistol back and looked at it closely. "Hmm, that's never happened before. Must 'a misfired.... Bad primer I guess."

Todd's knees gave way and he slowly sank to the ground. Two soldiers pulled him back to his feet as King continued inspecting his pistol. "Looks OK to me," King said, turning the weapon over in his hand. He returned the pistol to Todd's temple.

"Wait a minute, sir," one of the prison guards said. "I've been looking at the VF list—"

King turned and looked at him. "Why?"

"Something weird about this kid," the guard said, looking at Todd. "I was moving him back into population the other day and he kept claiming he hadn't been charged with anything, said he hadn't even seen a lawyer. I checked it out just for the hell of it and he was telling the truth."

King dropped the firearm to his side. "So there's a mix-up somewhere, so what?"

"Well here's the thing, Lieutenant. This kid isn't on the non-violent list."

"Of course not," King said. "If he'd been on the non-violent list we'd 'a let him go."

"That's what I'm trying to tell you, sir. He's not on the Violent Felon's list either."

"What's he charged with?"

"He was brought in for kidnapping his wife, but he's never even been to court. There isn't any charges, no records...nothing."

"What the hell is he doing in prison?" King said.

The guard shrugged. "Don't know, sir." We just pulled him out

with the violent offenders assuming he was on that list, since he wasn't on the non-violent list.... Check it out for yourself....He isn't on either list."

King grabbed the clipboard from the guard. "What's his name?"
"Riley, Todd."

King read down the violent offenders list and quickly checked the non-violent list. "This is one lucky kid," he said, after scanning the papers. "You're right, he's not here."

He stared at Todd thoughtfully. "I'm gonna' let him go."

Todd looked up at the soldiers holding him up. "What did he say?"

The soldiers let go of him and he fell to the ground. "Looks like we'll have to help him," a soldier said. "He's in shock or something."

The two soldiers lifted him and walked towards the door leading back into the prison. "How do you get out of here?" one of the soldiers hollered back at King.

"Better go with' em Blake."

The guard quickly moved towards them. "This way," he said, passing them by.

The men moved down several long corridors until they were outside the prison walls. They reached a thirty-foot tall gate within a chain link fence topped with rows of swirling razor wire. Less than twenty feet away stood another gate, a copy of the first. The men pulled Todd to a decorative rock in the center of a large round flower garden just outside the gate. They sat him down on the rock.

"You'll need this in case you get stopped," the guard said, pushing a printed certificate of pardon into Todd's hand. He turned to leave. "Find a place to hide for tonight," he said over his shoulder. "They're shooting everything that moves."

The guard and soldiers moved back through the prison gate and were gone. Todd found himself sitting alone on a rock in the middle of a beautiful flowerbed. Maybe this is heaven, he thought.

Slowly the fog began lifting and memories of recent events began to re-emerge. "*Oh my God! Leland...*" Suddenly, he remembered....

Maria!

Where was Maria?

He could go now.

He could find Maria.

He leapt to his feet. *Where am I going? ...The Vanderbilt psychiatric hospital...Maria's there.* He looked around, trying to get his bearings. It was a beautiful summer evening, but no one was out. He ran towards a small, softly lit building in the distance. When he reached it he recognized it as one of the guard stations. No one was there. He carefully pushed the door open and walked into the tiny room. On the floor he spotted what looked like a map. He reached down and picked it up. It was a map the prison gave visitors. He fumbled with it, trying to find some point of reference.

"Hey, what are you doin'?" a stern voice said.

Todd jumped.

"What are you doin' in there?" the voice said again.

Todd could scarcely make out a figure standing in the darkness just outside the door. He reached into his pocket for his certificate. "I, I'm a pardoned inmate."

"Hold it Guero!" the voice yelled. "Keep your hands where I can see them!"

"I'm j-just getting my pardon out of...my pocket."

"Ok Essey," the voice said. "Show it to me... slowly."

Todd gingerly reached into his pocket and pulled the certificate out.

"That loo's just like this one!" the man yelled, pushing an identical paper into the light.

The man standing outside the door began laughing. Todd squinted, trying to make out the face. The man moved forward. Todd stared in horror as Tacoma stepped into the shack.

"We meet again, guero," he growled, his gold tooth sparkling in the soft light.

Todd instinctively glanced around, looking for Hector and Madrid.

Tacoma grinned. "Just you and me, guero."

Todd felt the moment of overload. He felt his face harden as he moved towards Tacoma. Tacoma backed away, trying to brace

himself against the unexpected attack but it was too late. Todd fired a fast right jab into Tacoma's nose, smashing the cartilage into his face. He followed with a left cross to the right side of Tacoma's chin. Tacoma threw his arms up in an effort to fend off the sudden pounding. Todd took advantage and fired a well-placed snap kick into Tacoma's groin. Tacoma stumbled out of the shack and went down. Todd ran from the shack, looked around wildly, and spotted a large rock. He ran to retrieve it and raced back.

"Oh no!" Tacoma groaned, as Todd lifted the rock up over his head. "I give up Essey!" He lay fetal on the ground, blood pouring from his nose. One hand was covering his groin, the other, pushed out in front of him, anticipating a rock crashing down on his head. "I give man. You don't gotta' beat me down, essey!"

Todd, horrified at what he was doing, quickly tossed the rock back onto the gravel road.

"Hey Essey," Tacoma groaned. "I'm just a short-timer. I'm in for bad checks, that's all...first time I ever been in Essey...ya gotta' believe me. I was just like you, Bro, trying to survive...I had to move with Hector to survive. That's all, man, I swear."

Todd fell against the shack and sat down on the gravel.

"You s'pose to be movin' with the Rev, Bro..." Tacoma said. "You're s'pose to forgive, Essey. Not s'pose to beat people down."

Todd sat on the ground panting, trying to catch his breath.

"Bro"...Tacoma continued, "Rev says forgiveness is nine tenths of the law."

Todd looked at Tacoma and shook his head.

"No...possession...possession is nine tenths of the law."

"No, Essey, I told you. I'm in for bad checks."

"No..." Todd said, still panting, "you just said...never mind."

Tacoma fell silent and lay quietly at his feet. After a time, Todd stood. "Where are we?"

"Huh?" Tacoma said.

"Where is this place?"

"Do you mean the prison?"

"Yeah, how far are we from Nashville? Do you know where Vanderbilt campus is from here?"

Tacoma was finally ready to sit up. Todd glared at him warily. He held out the palm of his bloody hand. "Peace Essey. You made your point. I don't want any more trouble with you, Bro."

"How do I get out of here?" Todd said.

"Just' go down that road. I can show you if you want."

Todd rolled his hand over his chin, looking around him into the darkness. "Can you show me where the psych hospital is at Vanderbilt?"

"No, bro, I don't know where the psych' hospital is, but the campus is just over there, on West End."

"Where?"

"Over there," Tacoma said, nodding his head in the direction.

Todd squinted into the night. "The city is over there?"

Tacoma wiped the blood from his nose and inspected it in his hand. He glanced back up at Todd and pointed a bloody finger.

"Yeah, Bro. It's right over there."

"Shouldn't we be see'in lights or somethin'?"

"Oh yeah, essey, you're right." Tacoma painfully stood and turned in a slow circle trying to get his bearings. "Yeah, Bro," he said finally. "Iss there, I'm possible."

Todd stared at him. "You mean positive?"

"Huh?"

"You just said 'It's there, I'm possible....I think you meant to say, 'It's there, I'm positive.'"

"Huh?"

Todd gave Tacoma a long look, shook his head and stood. "Let's go. Can you make it?"

"Yeah, just' give me a minute. Where did you' learn to fi' li' that, bro?"

"UCLA middleweight kickboxing champ two years in a row."

"It's my luck," Tacoma said softly.

"Do you mean just my luck?" Todd asked.

"Huh?"

~~~

Maria stared into Dr. Oliver's eyes, tears streaking her beautiful face. Oliver's hand, still holding the scalpel, trembled uncontrollably.

He slowly pulled it away.

Santana leaned in. "What are you doing now?"

"There's something that should be done first," Oliver said, his face pale and clammy.

"What do you have to do, go to the John?" Santana yelled.

"No," Oliver said quietly. "I don't have to go to the John."

"Then hurry up. We don't have all night."

Oliver wiped the sweat from his forehead with his arm. "I know. I just have something to do before I can start."

"What!" Santana yelled. "What do you have to do?"

Oliver didn't answer.

Santana stepped forward. "Do you want me to start? Is that it? I'll tell you what," he said. "I'll make the first cut. That way we can get it over with; ok?"

Oliver lowered his eyes and shook his head. "You don't understand Mr. Santana. There's something that has to be done first."

"Tell me what's so damned important you have to do it right now!" Santana bellowed, losing his temper.

Oliver raised his face and locked eyes with Santana. "Judgment," he said.

Santana screamed and recoiled. Oliver's eyes had become black, like two ghastly holes in his head. Tanner, who had been standing at Maria's feet, screamed and wrapped his hands over his face. The other man standing at the head of the table clawed at his face and fell to the floor writhing. Within seconds, the screaming turned into strangled gags. Both men began gasping and grunting as they wildly kicked and squirmed on the floor.

Santana stood horrified, watching Tanner's eyes and tongue swelling in his face like balloons. Blue streaks shot throughout his bulging eyes as the pressure mounted. His tongue, enormous and purple, expanded till it looked like a basketball protruding from his ghastly deforming mouth. His jaw, snapping and popping, finally gave way and collapsed against his chest. Santana yelled as Tanner's face burst, spraying blood ten feet in all directions. Another blast of blood sprayed the room from just behind the table. The men on the

floor fell silent.

Maria screamed hysterically. Oliver, floating inches from the floor, moved around the table towards Santana. Santana whirled and yelled. Making no attempt to shield himself, he ran face first into a wall twenty feet away. The impact broke his nose and all but knocked him unconscious. He slowly slid to the floor. Wild with terror, he pressed his bloody face hard against the concrete floor. Oliver hovered so close behind him he could feel him breathing on the back of his neck.

“Did you really think the Father would allow you to gut his handmaiden like a pig?”

Santana winced at the sound of the horrifying voice. No longer able to resist, he slowly rolled onto his back and faced what was once Dr. Oliver, now floating horizontally just inches above him. Santana’s eyes widened, his face turned purple, the veins in his neck bulged as he stared up into the face of the horror. He shrieked, rolled out from under the aberration and pressed himself against the wall.

“Did you really think the Father would allow you to use his only begotten son as property for gain? He has returned you to your knees!”

The thing that once was Dr. Oliver pushed the scalpel forward. Santana wailed.

“You know what to do!” the thing said.

Santana screamed again and seized the razor-sharp scalpel by the blade. Blood spurted from his hand.

“You know what to do....”

Santana screamed and pulled the scalpel from the gash in his hand. He turned it over and pressed it against his fat, writhing belly.

“You know what to do....”

Santana’s shrieking reached a crescendo. He began raking the scalpel across his own abdomen. Within moments, his screams were replaced by insane maniacal laughter as he began ripping his own belly to pieces.

Maria stared in horror as the thing hovered over Santana, now inexplicably cutting himself wide open with the scalpel meant for

her.

"Everything is all right now, little Miss."

Maria squealed and whirled in the direction of the unexpected voice coming from her immediate right. Dr. Oliver was standing over her, smiling gently. She whirled again, looking back in Santana's direction. Santana was now sitting alone against the wall, laughing maniacally and ripping at the steaming mound of bloody intestines now pouring into his lap. She whirled back around and stared, horrified, at Dr. Oliver.

He leaned forward and gently pulled the gag from her face.

"Who...who are you?" she breathed.

"I'm the champion of the only begotten son, little miss. I am the servant of the child you carry in your blessed womb."

"Are you really Dr...Who are you...really?"

"I'm not Dr. Oliver, if that's what you're asking, Miss," he said softly. "My name is Michael...Brother Michael...."

~~~

Todd and Tacoma managed to make their way east until a wire fence stopped them. They had inadvertently stumbled onto the outskirts of an airport. Ever mindful of the guard's warning to stay out of sight, they cautiously followed the fence towards the terminals.

As they reached one of the first buildings in sight, the beam of a flashlight suddenly strafed them.

"Hit the ground!" Todd yelled, diving into a thick patch of weeds. Tacoma quickly followed just as the beam returned.

"Who's there?" a man's voice yelled from behind the building. Todd and Tacoma lay motionless in the brush.

"You better come out whoever you are. I'm sending the dog."

Tacoma turned his head towards Todd. "What should we do?"

A yelping dog appeared from around the building pulling a soldier behind him. Another soldier followed. The dog scrambled towards the fence, barking viciously. The soldier coming up from behind

pulled his M-16 rifle to the ready.

"Let me do the talking," Todd whispered as the soldiers approached.

The wildly barking dog reached the fence and began darting back and forth along the fence line.

"I'm getting out of here," Tacoma said.

He braced to run but Todd reached and pushed him back onto the ground. "If you run they'll probably shoot you, and if they don't shoot you...you'll never be able to outrun the dog. Just lay still."

Something sprang to life in the thicket just in front of them. Todd jumped as the thing broke free of the grass and sprinted noisily away. The dog hit the fence barking, violently snapping at the chain link.

"It's just a rabbit," one of the soldiers yelled. "Come on girl...let's go." He pulled the hopping dog away as it circled and barked in Todd and Tacoma's direction. The soldiers disappeared back behind the building.

"We have to get away from here," Todd said softly.

"I'm right 'behin' you," Tacoma said, still lying low in the grass. "We need to get away from the airport, Bro. Too much security here."

Todd crawled till he was reasonably sure he was far enough away from the soldiers. He lay motionless, catching his breath, before he slowly rose to his hands and knees.

"Where did everybody go?" Tacoma said.

Todd shook his head. "I'm not sure. My guess is they've posted some sort of curfew."

"If it's a curfew, bro, shouldn't we be finding a place to hide for the night like the hack said?"

"You can if you want to. I can't...I gotta get to Vanderbilt."

Tacoma fell silent for a time. "Ah why not," he finally said, shrugging. "I'll help you get there, bro."

Todd blew a breath out and slowly scanned the area. "I think I could find it from here. I've been there a lot with my wife. I'm just... having a hard time finding reference points...I'm not from around here."

Tacoma hesitated again, his expression turning serious. "The way I see it, this is a la' lie jail, you know? You got your good guys and you got your malos vatos. One side is trying to kill the other. I think we got to watch each other's neck, bro. You know what I'm sayin'? Besides, I owe you, man."

"Do you mean, watch each other's back?" Todd said.

"Yeah, Bro, we got to wash each other's back."

"No...you said..." Todd thought about it and decided to let it go. "Why do you owe me?"

"You know," Tacoma said shrugging, "two weeks in the go-slow."

Todd glared at Tacoma. "Oh yeah... that's right, yeah... I'm pissed off."

He turned into the darkness and continued crawling west as fast as he could. Tacoma followed till they reached a thicket of brush bordering a set of railroad tracks. They followed the tracks till they reached a small knoll where they could look out over the airport.

"Look at that," Tacoma said quietly.

Todd turned to look.

Tacoma pointed into the night. "Who lined them all up like that?"

Todd could see rows of jumbo jets lined up in the moonlight filling the tarmac. Some of them looked like they were only just inches from each other. All of them appeared abandoned on the unlit runway.

"You'd think all of those planes would be flying away from here," Tacoma said.

Todd nodded. "You'd think, it's hard to figure what's going on here."

Tacoma turned and motioned once more into the darkness. "We should go tha' way. I'm pretty sure Vanderbilt iss over there."

The two men moved into the brush lining the railroad tracks and began pushing their way west. It wasn't long before they stumbled into a clearing.

"Wha's that?" Tacoma said. "Iss that the freeway?"

Todd stared into the darkness. "It's the freeway all right, but why is it so quiet?"

"That's what I was wondering. Damn, bro, that's creepy."

“Yeah,” Todd said, slowly moving forward.

Tacoma hesitated and followed.

They made their way up the embankment until they reached a tall chain-link fence.

Todd interlinked his fingers in the link and gave it a yank. “Now what?”

Tacoma looked around them, quietly turned and disappeared back into the brush.

“Where ya’ goin’?” Todd yelled as loud as he dared.

“Tacoma...where’d you go?” He stood looking out into the night. “Tacoma?”

No one answered.

“Well, if that don’t shake the rag,” he said, still staring out into the night. He shook his head, turned, and carefully made his way back towards the brush. “That’s it?” he yelled over his shoulder into the darkness. “One little fence and you do the quick step on me? Thanks compadre, for all the help.”

He spotted a moonlit rock and sat down. He listened to the crickets chirping amidst the hush of nearby trees being gently pushed around by the warm evening breeze. The wail of a far-off cat rose and fell. A dog barked repeatedly in the distance.

“Think,” he said out loud. “How do I get around this fence?” He found a chew-stick, pushed it into his mouth and began chewing.

Tacoma’s sudden unexpected departure had left him feeling strangely vulnerable. He had been completely open to Tacoma’s directions...without question. Tacoma had insisted they were traveling in the right direction. But now, Todd wasn’t even sure where he was, or for that matter, where he had to go. “Take control, dammit,” he said out loud. “Tacoma said Vanderbilt was on the other side of this fence. All I need to do is get on the other side of the fence. How hard could that be? There has to be an entrance to the freeway somewhere... Maybe I should walk along the fence. Sooner or later, I’m bound to run into some sort of opening.”

“Tacoma!” he barked one more time. He sat listening for a response.

nothing.

“A goodbye would’ve been nice,” he told the wind. “See you later, kiss my butt... something.” Finally, he stood and looked around himself, walked to the fence and tried to pull the bottom out enough to allow him to crawl under. It was no use. The fence was pulled too tight.

He decided to try to follow the fence and see where it led. A sound just in front of him and slightly to the right stopped him mid-step. He glanced around for something, anything he could use as a weapon. Another noise made him duck into the brush but it was too late. A dark figure, silhouetted against the moonlit sky, moved from the brush and was now towering over him as he crouched in the grass.

Todd yelled. The shadowy figure jumped back, brandishing a board. Todd threw his arms over his head, anticipating a crushing blow.

“When we get out of here, bro,” Tacoma said, stepping around Todd, “you should consider some serious cowsling.” He moved back up the embankment toward the fence.

Todd lay in the grass, his heart pounding. “You scared the hell out of me!” he yelled, finally catching his breath.

“You scared me too, man!” Tacoma yelled back. “Look, I brought a board for us to use—“

“Shut up!” a crusty voice yelled from somewhere in the thicket.

Tacoma ducked and moved back towards Todd. “Who was that?” he whispered.

“Who’s there?” Todd hollered.

“Somebody who’s gonna’ git killed, if you two don’t shut up!” the raspy voice answered. The thicket fell silent for a moment. “Is that you Tacoma?” the voice asked finally.

Tacoma looked at Todd and back out towards the dark brush. “Who’s that,” he said cautiously, “who’s askin?”

“It’s me, Paisley.”

“Paisley, how did you get here?” Tacoma said as a figure appeared from behind a bush.

“Same way you did I’m thinking.” Paisley gradually made his way towards Todd and Tacoma.

“How long have you been there?” Tacoma said.

Paisley snorted. “Long enough.”

Todd recognized him as one of the inmates at the prison.

“Ain’t you Hector’s fish?” Paisley said, looking at Todd.

Tacoma pointed at his own face. “You might’ wan’ be careful.”

Paisley frowned when he saw Tacoma’s recently broken nose. He looked at Tacoma for a moment, then at Todd, then back at Tacoma. “He do that?” he said cocking his head towards Todd.

Tacoma shrugged and nodded.

“Well there ya go,” Paisley said, grinning. “It’s always the quiet ones.”

“What are you doing here, bro?” Tacoma asked again.

“I got let out, same as you,” Paisley said, sitting down next to Todd. “Me, Talbot and Bill Pandit took out towards the city just like most the boys. We got to the freeway and found all the cars sittin’ in their tracks, all lined up for miles in all directions...and not a soul around. It was damn scary I tell ya. It’s like the world just come to an end...Not a soul in sight. Anyways, we got to the other side and ran head on into the National Guard armory of all places. I guess they had to protect their guns or something cause right off, they start shootin. Then these dogs come a runnin after us. Talbot and Bill Pandit run off one way and I went the other. I made it here. I don’t know if they made it or not. The dogs didn’t come after me so I figured they musta’ took out after them.”

Paisley pushed his feet out in front of him, leaned back on his elbows and continued. “The way I’m seein’ it, we need to stay right where we’re at till daylight. If we don’t move around, or make a lot of noise, nobody’s gonna’ bother us. It’s when you come up on em out of the dark, it freaks em out I’m thinkin.”

Paisley turned and quickly looked Todd over. “You didn’t git out with the rest of us, did ya?”

Todd glanced back at him and turned his eyes away. “No.”

“They let you boys out after us so’s there wouldn’t be too many of us out here at one time, that’s what I’m thinkin’.”

Todd looked at the ground and shook his head. “No,” he said softly, “that’s not it.”

Paisley stared at Todd. "What ya mean?"

Todd stood. "I gotta get out of here. I have to get to Vanderbilt."

"Vanderbilt...the school...why?"

Todd turned, and began making his way back towards the fence.

"Why's he gotta' go to Vanderbilt?" Paisley asked Tacoma.

"I don't know, Bro," Tacoma said. He turned to face Todd. "Hey essey, why are we going to Vanderbilt?"

"I gotta meet somebody there," Todd said as he moved away.

"Whoever it is, ain't there now, I'm thinkin'," Paisley said, scratching his bald head. "Nothin's the same as it was."

Todd continued moving up the embankment.

Tacoma ran up behind. "Here, that's why I got this board, bro."

He moved to the fence and quickly lay face up on the ground, his head facing the fence. He laid the two-by-four horizontally over his body and pushed the top end under the fence. After considerable effort, he was able to wiggle himself under the chain link using the two-by-four as a shield. He stood up on the other side, brushed himself off and pushed the board back under the fence for Todd.

Todd glanced at Tacoma's bleeding knuckles. "That looks painful."

"It hurs', but it works, bro," Tacoma said, still brushing himself off.

Todd lay down, positioned the two-by-four over his body and pushed the board under the fence. "Like this?"

"Yeah, bro, like that," Tacoma said. "Now jis' push yourself through, under the board."

"Ouch!" Todd yelped, as the board pressed against his face.

"No essey," Tacoma said, laughing. "Turn your head, man."

"This is messed up," Todd grunted, struggling to get under the jagged chain-link. "This is painful."

"Keep going, bro," Tacoma said. "You'll be out very fast."

Todd stopped to catch his breath. "I think my shirt is caught on the fence. I have to pull back out and try again."

Paisley stepped up to the fence. "You want me to pull on yer legs?"

Uh, yeah...I s'pos, but not too hard."

Paisley reached down, took hold of Todd's legs and gave them a pull.

"Easy, easy!" Todd yelped, turning his head to keep the chain-link from pulling his nose off. "Let me do this myself."

Paisley backed off and stood back watching.

Todd finally managed to get out from under the fence. He stood for a moment, brushing himself off. "Is my nose bleeding?" he asked Paisley.

"Don't think so...can't really tell...too dark."

"What did you all do to get under the fence?" Todd said.

Paisley frowned and shook his head. "Oh us? We went through the hole."

"What hole?" Tacoma yelled.

Paisley pointed south. "That hole. It's about fifty feet that a way I'm thinkin'."

"Tu eres una persona tan mensal!" Tacoma yelled. "Why didn't you say to us this before?"

Paisley shrugged.

Todd, still brushing himself off, glared at Paisley.

"What?" Paisley asked.

"Where's the hole?" Todd yelled.

Paisley grunted at Todd indignantly and gestured down the fence. "Just go that-a-way," he said. "No need to get motional."

Todd left paisley and moved down the fence until he found the gaping hole. He easily stepped through and was on the other side.

"Aren't you coming with us, bro?" Tacoma said, looking back at Paisley.

"No, I'm stickin'," Paisley yelled back.

"Ok, Bro, if that's what you say," Tacoma said over his shoulder as he and Todd made their way up the steep incline. They stopped when they reached the waist-high concrete embankment bordering the freeway.

Paisley was right... Highway 24, a six-lane freeway, was now gorged with haphazardly abandoned automobiles pressed against one another as far as could be seen in both directions.

Tacoma and Todd exchanged glances. "I'ss so quiet," Tacoma

said. "I'ss weird. Where are all the lights?"

"That night the rocket blew up in Florida," Todd said, "everybody just walked off their jobs and went home. I figure that's what happened here. There ain't any lights cause nobody is at the power plant."

Tacoma shook his head. "How could it be like this already, bro? The Presidente made his speech only this morning. All this has happened just since this morning, bro."

"Everybody's flipped out," Todd said. "They all know if they don't get out of here now they won't be able to later...Once everyone hits the coasts. There just ain't enough ships and planes in the world to get everyone out, not even close."

"So, what does that mean, bro? Are we jus' gonna die?"

Todd turned to look at Tacoma. "Yeah, we're gonna' die. I thought you knew."

Tacoma stared back.

Todd thought of Maria, how she had reacted that night. "I gotta get over there," he said, pulling himself to the top of the concrete embankment. He stepped into an open car window and onto its roof. Tacoma followed. They made the short leap to the roof of another car and to the hood of an abandoned eighteen-wheeler. They looked out across the freeway and quickly ducked down. Paisley had been right again. The brightly lit National Guard armory lay just beyond the freeway.

"We can't go that way," Todd said. "We'll have to double back somehow."

"Where did they get all those lights, bro? Everywhere else iss dark."

"They must have a generator," Todd said, silently sliding off the hood of the semi.

Tacoma joined him and they quickly made their way back. By the time they reached the fence, Paisley was gone. They moved back into the brush and found the railroad tracks overlooking the airport.

"Which way now?" Todd said. "It feels like we're moving in circles."

"I think we are Essey," Tacoma pointed west. "Tha' way, bro, we

gotta' go tha' way." He turned and began following the railroad tracks. Todd fell in close behind.

The sounds of the barking airport dogs soon faded into the distance as they made their way into the dark night. As they moved through the trees bordering the tracks, Todd thought about the day he and Maria had spent on the Cumberland. He wondered if he'd ever see that beautiful smile again. She would be over eight months pregnant now. How was she holding up? He wondered if she ever thought of him.

He looked up into the glowing full moon and imagined Maria doing the same. "Tell her not to worry old moon," he said softly. "Tell her I love her enough for the both of us and not to be afraid..."

"Tell her I'll find her...even if it takes me forever."

~~~

Maria sat looking out the window onto a parking lot surrounding a sprawling apartment complex. "Where are we?"

"This is where we've been living," Michael said.

Maria turned back towards Michael. "Why did you allow it to go that far? I've never been so terrified in my life." She was sitting in the back seat of Santana's limo.

"I'm sorry, little miss," Michael said from the extended port-side seat. "It had to play itself out. It was necessary for those men to complete their atrocity. Their special place in hell is awaiting them."

"There is such a place?"

"Oh yes, more horrible than anyone can imagine."

"If there is such a place as hell then..."

"There's a heaven," Michael said quietly.

Maria was silent for a time before speaking. "So it's true then? It's all true about the baby?"

"Yes," Brother Michael said, smiling. "Your son is the only begotten of the Father. He will be the greatest man who ever lived."

"I thought he already was...when he was...you know, Jesus."

"This time, he will fulfill his destiny. This time, his life will be even greater."

~~~

Barney looked at Mallory and whispered. "Who is this broad?"

"She must be important," Mallory said.

Barney and Mallory had been sitting at one end of the limo for an hour, watching Brother Michael gush over this pregnant girl.

"Look at that," Barney said, trying not to be heard. "He's holding both her hands like she's some kinda' queen or something. Look at the way he's looking at her. I think he's in love."

Michael looked their way. "Shhh." Mallory whispered.

~~~

"Look at that moon," Maria said staring out of the limo window. "It's hard to believe the world is about to end." She looked at Michael and leaned forward slightly. "Or is it?"

Michael smiled. "I can't understand how the Father could allow such a thing to happen now...but he hasn't revealed these things to me, at least, not yet."

Maria sat back slowly and looked out at the moon. "Any chance that...has the Father told you where my husband is?"

"No," Michael said softly.

"Is he...alive?"

"I don't know, miss, but I do know we can't wait for him. We must go now."

A tear slipped down Maria's cheek. "He'll look for me. If he's alive he'll look for me."

"Yes I know, but we must think of the baby. I have... acquired a jumbo jet. We can leave now, but I don't know for how long."

"Do we have to leave tonight? Can't we wait a little longer? Maybe Todd will—"

"It won't be good if people find out about the plane," Michael said. "Everyone wants to leave. If they see the plane, they'll try overtaking us and take it by force."

Maria wiped tears from her eyes. "With you around, I'd like to see them try."

"I only do as the Father instructs me. I have no strength of my own."

Maria began crying. "I'm so confused. I know my baby is supposed to be born in Omaha, Nebraska, I just know it. And I

know we are supposed to be a family, me, my baby and...Todd...Todd—”

“It just can’t be, little miss. Maybe there’s an explanation. Maybe the Father was warning you not to go to Nebraska knowing it would be the point of impact. Our finite minds can so easily be confused.”

“I suppose you’re right,” she said, looking out the window at the moon.

Brother Michael signaled Barney, who turned and rapped on the driver window. The window immediately went down.

“Yes, Brother Michael?” Pete said.

“Try to get us to the plane.”

“Ok, Brother Michael.”

The window went up and the big car silently began moving out of the parking lot.

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“**El es un menso!**” Tacoma yelled. He and Todd had stumbled into a moonlit clearing. Stretching out before them was a mammoth railroad yard with acres of tracks lined up side by side. Countless rows and clumps of darkened old railroad cars littered the yard like monstrous scattered toys. The two men silently moved through the ghostly train cars, finally re-emerging fifteen minutes later on the other end of the yard.

“Is that what I think it is?” Todd said.

“I think iss that stupid Army place again, essey.”

“We have to be traveling in circles,” Todd said, getting irritated.

“How are we gonna get out of here?”

“We should keep going, bro. Maybe we’ll find a road before we get to the Armory.”

“I hope so,” Todd said. “We’ll never get to Vanderbilt at this rate.”

They looked for a promising set of tracks and began working their way west towards the armory. The light of the moon glistened off the worn rails winding out ahead of them before disappearing into the distant shadowed forest. A quarter mile up the tracks Tacoma stopped “Look, essey, there’s a road.”

“Good,” Todd said. “Which way do we go now?”

“Wes’, always wes’,” Tacoma said over his shoulder.

After some time, the two men reached the moonlit road. They left the tracks and moved west till they found a road sign that read...“Armory Drive.”

“Damn it,” Todd groaned. “We’ll never get away from that Armory.”

Tacoma was making his way further up the road and had stopped to wait for Todd to catch up. “Look at that, Bro,” he said as Todd moved up towards him.

Todd looked up the road in the direction he was pointing. “Oh come on, that’s that freeway again!”

“No,” Tacoma said. “Tha’s a freeway, but I’ss a different one. Tha’s Highway 65 and wes’ bend is right ower there....We’re almost there, bro!”

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“We can’t move on this road,” Pete said from the driver’s seat of the limo. “All these parked cars are blocking the way.”

“Maybe we should try to back out and find a way around,” Sarah said, looking concerned.

“I don’t think we’ll be able to. I think we’re stuck.”

“Maybe we should ask Brother Michael,” Sarah said quietly.

“I’m not asking him; I hate asking him stupid stuff.”

“This isn’t stupid stuff,” Sarah said smiling. She sat for a time grinning up at him. “Ok silly...I’ll ask him then.”

Pete had been able to push several abandoned cars out of the way using the immense power of the limo but they had finally reached their limits. The last car he tried to clear had become wedged behind a truck and was now completely blocking the way.

Sarah reached for a button and the window into the passenger compartment of the limo quickly slid down. “Brother Michael?”

“Yes, Sarah?”

“We can’t move any further. It looks like we’ll have to back out and find a new way. We may have to turn the headlights on for a few moments so we can—”

“It’s ok,” Michael said. “Help is on the way.” Sarah paused a moment. “So...what should we do now?” she said finally.



“Turn on the headlights and honk the horn.”

~~~

Maria stared into Brother Michael’s eyes. “How do you know help is on the way?”

“Ppfff,” Barney snorted. “Some people don’t learn so good.”

Michael whirled and glared at Barney.

Barney glanced at Mallory and looked back at Michael. “What?” he asked, shrugging.

“Barnabas,” Michael said, his dark eyes glistening in the moonlight. “Mrs. Rose is the mother of our Lord, the most blessed woman to have ever been born. The child in her womb will be the master of all things. If you ever disrespect her again, I’ll kill you. If I don’t kill you... the father will kill you. This is the only warning you will ever receive from me.”

“Wh...what did I say?” Barney stammered.

“Shut up!” Mallory whispered, her fingernails digging into his arm. “Don’t say another word.”

“You too?” Barney said, staring at Mallory. “Ok, ok,” he said softly. He looked across the limo at Maria. “I’m sorry Mrs. Rose. I didn’t know who you were.”

“That’s all right,” Maria said, smiling back at him. “No offense taken.”

~~~

Pete, sitting in the driver’s seat, had turned on the car lights and was honking the horn as he had been instructed.

Without warning, the car door blasted open and someone was dragging him from the seat. Sarah’s door was yanked open and she was pulled face down on the asphalt, the muzzle of a rifle pressed against the back of her head.

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“Hey...” Barney yelled, just as the passenger door flew open. A soldier appeared in the limo, violently grabbing at Maria’s arm. Maria screamed.

Michael reached for the soldier. “STOP!” he commanded.

The soldier yelled and fell backwards, blocking the limo door. Michael pushed him aside and stepped out. Fifteen soldiers had surrounded the limo under the cover of darkness. At the sight of Michael stepping from the limo door all fifteen men dropped their weapons and staggered backwards, some falling to the ground. Michael stood in the moonlight glaring back at the terrified soldiers.

Finally, one of the soldier's softly spoke. "S...sir, you are in violation of the...uh...the...curfew and—"

"I am Special Agent Brothers, with the NDE," Michael said. "I carry an envoy from the governor."

He put his hand into his jacket, pulled it back out and pushed his open palm towards the soldiers.

~~~

The soldier, who had been talking, carefully moved towards Brother Michael. Maria, still sitting in the limo, leaned forward, pushed the button and rolled down the window trying to get a better look at what Michael was doing. To her amazement, the soldier was holding a flashlight, intently staring into the palm of Michael's hand, his eyes darting back and forth as if he were reading.

"I'm sorry sir," she heard the soldier say. "If only we would've known you were coming we would—"

"I understand," she heard Michael interrupt. "We need to get to the airport as soon as possible."

"Sir," the soldier said. "The airport is down. They were trying to get too many people out too soon. People swamped the tarmac. They had to abandon the whole thing and chase everyone off. Even if we could get you there, you wouldn't be able to move."

"Leave that to me. We just need to get there."

The soldier looked at Michael thoughtfully. "We can get you to the armory," he said. "Once there, Colonel Shannon can arrange for special transportation to get you onto the tarmac. That's probably the best we can do for you under the circumstances. Will that work?"

"That'll work just fine, Sergeant."

"You folks stay put," the soldier said. "We'll bring up a Humvee."

~~~

“Sorry, Ma’am,” one of the soldiers said as he opened the passenger side limo door and gently placed Sarah back into the seat he had dragged her from.

Pete stared wide-eyed as another soldier helped him back into the driver’s seat and closed the door.

~~~

Michael moved back into the limo and sat next to Maria. She grinned, staring up at him. Her mouth hung slightly open in the moonlight, her tongue flicking the inside of her upper front teeth. She was so unearthly beautiful Michael could hardly breathe.

“What is a Special Agent for the NDE?” she said.

Michael shrugged. “Don’t know. I think it means I work for the near death experience people.”

Maria giggled.

“What can I say?” Michael said blushing. “It was on the fly.”

“Ok,” Maria said, “but how did you get them to believe you had something in your hand?”

He hesitated before speaking. “It’s a gift; and speaking of gifts, I have one for you.” He reached behind him and pulled out a small bouquet of three white roses wrapped with green fern. “This is for you,” he said, smiling.

“Those are beautiful,” Maria said, her eyes sparkling. “Where did you...” She reached for them and they were gone. She gasped and looked up into Michael’s eyes.

He grinned back at her. “Sorry. I couldn’t help myself.”

Maria sat back in her seat, cupped her hands over her mouth and laughed. Her mood darkened. “All this...magic,” she said, her eyes filling with tears. “Todd is out there somewhere and we can’t find him...even with all this magic.”

Michael looked out the window for a time before returning his attention to Maria. “I’m sorry,” he said, reaching for her hand. “He could be anywhere by now.” He reached and pulled a tissue from a nearby box and handed it to her. “Maybe the military has some sort of records we can check. Maybe they can help us.”

Maria’s face brightened. “You really think so?”

“Here they come,” Mallory said, looking out the limo window.

Two Humvees were making their way up the freeway embankment. Three soldiers stood behind, holding a large piece of the fence they had cut to accommodate the vehicles.

"Very good," Michael said. "It looks like our ride has finally arrived."

~~~

"What's going on out on the road, bro?" Tacoma asked.

"Don't know," Todd said. "It looks like some rich folks are stuck in their limo."

"They must really be rich," Tacoma said. "The army's helping them. If that was us...they would shoot firs' and tell us questions later." He looked at Todd thoughtfully. "We should stay here, essey, a' leas' till these people go."

"Not me," Todd said. "I've flushed enough time...I got to get to Vanderbilt...I'm not waiting." He moved off the road and began making his way towards an embankment. Tacoma followed.

They moved towards the city and found themselves on a freeway overpass leading into the old music row section of town. They stood for a time, staring out into the dark night. Occasionally, a faraway light would flicker. Headlights flashed in the distance and quickly disappeared.

"I thing tha's the army looking for people to shoot," Tacoma said.

Todd grunted. "Yeah, let's not oblige them."

They carefully continued making their way west into the city. The only sound that could be heard in the eerie silence of the moonlit night was their own footfalls clattering on the pavement beneath their feet. Unseen imaginary demons lurked in every dark alley as they passed by.

They had just reached the tiny storefront shops that lined music row when headlights strafed a side of one of the buildings. Tacoma pushed Todd into a small alley just east of Ernest Tubbs' record store and dove in behind him. Within moments, a military Humvee slowly rolled by, its spotlight darting up and down the shop walls and wide sidewalks. As fast as it had appeared, it left. Todd and Tacoma carefully left the alley and continued making their way west. They turned right at the corner of Sixteenth Avenue and began

walking north.

“Look, bro,” Tacoma said.

Todd jumped at the sound of it.

“I’ss wes’ bend. We’re here, essey!”

“Which way to Vanderbilt?”

“Wes’,” Tacoma said, “always wes’.” He pointed up the dark, abandoned street.

Todd quickly turned and began walking west.

The dark buildings on both sides of Westbend seemed to loom down upon them as they struck out towards the sprawling university.

“Here comes the army,” Tacoma said.

They could see headlights moving from the south, heading east.

Todd looked around. “This way!” he yelled, scrambling towards a dumpster.

They managed to hide in a gap behind the dumpster just as another bright spotlight swept the area. It lingered, then it was gone.

“What will you do if she’s not there, bro?” Tacoma said from the darkness. “What if she...already left or something?”

Todd was silent for a time before he finally spoke. “Then, I’ll look somewhere else I s’pose.”

“Who is she?” Tacoma said. “She must be your old lady, huh?”

“Yeah...she’s my wife...she’s pregnant.”

“You mind if I ask you something, bro?” Tacoma said softly.

Todd didn’t answer.

“Why is your wife in the psychiatric hospital?”

Todd pulled his eyes away from the dark night and glanced at Tacoma. “It’s a long story my friend. She’s not crazy, if that’s what you mean.”

Tacoma nodded. “But...even if you do find her, what are you gonna’ do, bro. Are you gonna get out of here before the asteroid hits?”

Todd returned his eyes to the night and sat silent for a time. “Honestly,” he said finally, “I haven’t givin’ that much thought. It’s just that...you’d have to know Maria. She’s like a little kid. She’s probably terrified right now...I just feel like she needs me. You

know what I'm saying? I keep picturing her hiding beneath a bed somewhere, or even worse. She's almost nine months pregnant now. I can't imagine what she must be going through."

Todd stopped speaking, stood and scanned the area. "Have they gone yet?"

"Yeah, I think so," Tacoma said.

They carefully moved from the dumpster, found their way back to West End and continued west.

"This is where we stayed when we first came here," Todd said as they moved past the shadowy parking veranda in front of the Nashville Hillshire hotel. "This is where the whole damn nightmare started." He paused a moment, looking up towards the dark foreboding tower.

Tacoma laughed. "You must have had a lot a money then, bro."

"Not really. I wasn't paying."

"There's Vanderbilt, bro," Tacoma said pointing westward.

Todd began moving faster. "Where's the Psych hospital?" he said breathlessly.

"I don't know. Maybe when we get there we can star' looking."

"No time." Todd said, glancing around frantically. He spotted a pay phone on the wall of an abandoned mini mart and moved across the street towards it.

"Where are you going now, essey?" Tacoma yelled as loud as he dared. "We gotta' stay outa sight, bro."

Todd pulled the tethered phone book from its pocket, pulled it into the moonlight and began thumbing through it.

"Vanderbilt...Vanderbilt...Ok, there it is...." He glanced up at the road sign and back at the phone book. "We need to go west, to Thirty First Avenue South, then...this is so messed up, dude....The map shows Thirty-First Avenue South becoming Blakemore Avenue then Wedgwood. It's all the same damn street! City folks... I swear to God.

He dropped the phone book and began moving west. Tacoma fell in behind.

"There it is," Todd said, pulling to a stop. "Thirty first...now we go south." He could feel the excitement building as he turned down

the dark, menacing road.

"Here they come again, bro!" Tacoma yelled as another set of headlights came into view. They scrambled towards a large group of shrubbery adorning the entrance to an abandoned three-story red brick building. Todd managed to dive into the foliage just behind Tacoma as the spotlight swept the area. A Humvee slowed in front of the building and quickly moved away.

"How long has it been since you seen your old...your wife?" Tacoma asked.

"Pert near a month."

"Maybe she already had the niño."

"Yeah maybe," Todd said pushing himself out from behind the shrubbery.

"T'ss funny she din' write to you, bro," Tacoma said.

"How do you figure she didn't?"

"Because...you don't know anything about her, wha's going on with her, stuff li' that."

"Why do you care?"

"I'm just wondering, tha's all."

"Why?"

"I heard you kidnapped her, bro...If we find her...are you gonna'...do something bad to her?"

"Don't believe everything you hear, and no, I wouldn't hurt Maria."

Todd quickly moved back out towards the street. There was a scarcely visible road sign in front of the building. He could hardly make it out in the moonlight...Blakemore Ave. He whirled and looked back at the dark building looming behind him.

"There it is," he said. "Vanderbilt Psychiatric Hospital."

~~~

"We have an envoy from the governor," the driver said as he pulled into the gate.

"Paperwork," the soldier demanded, not looking up. He was standing outside a small guard station.

Brother Michael leaned forward and looked through the Humvee window. The soldier glanced up, stared at him and stepped back.

“Go ahead,” he said.

As the Humvee pulled through the gate leading into the Tennessee National Guard armory complex Maria looked back at the bewildered looking soldier standing at his post and looked back at Michael who was sitting next to her. “Amazing,” she said.

The procession of two Humvees moved between several large buildings and past a vast parking area crowded with military vehicles of every size and description, dark, monstrous silhouettes, eerily resting side by side in the pale moonlight as far as the eye could see. At the end of the road the Humvees turned and began making their way south. They stopped at the back of a tall building. A towering door began sliding open and the Humvees entered a cavernous warehouse. Military vehicles and equipment crowded the area in various stages of disrepair. Huge, olive green engines hung from meaty hoists. Monstrous green trucks, cranes, bulldozers and an occasional Humvee sat motionless atop gigantic hydraulic hoists as grease-covered soldiers milled about beneath them.

“What is this place?” Maria said.

“This is where we fix the vehicles,” a soldier answered quickly. “Everything has to be in high speed no later than 0500 Sunday...Colonel’s orders.”

“What are they gonna do with all these vehicles on Sunday?”

“Not sure, ma’am. I just know we have a lot of people to move real quick. That’s all I know.”

Michael had already moved from the Humvee and was standing next to a Herculean bulldozer. “What’s wrong with this?” he said, not looking back.

The soldier who had been speaking with Maria stepped forward. “I’m not sure, sir. Whatever it is, the work on it hasn’t been started yet.”

“Hmm,” Michael grunted.

“This way,” a sergeant said, pointing towards the other end of the building.

The small group of people made their way through the cyclopean structure. The two soldiers led them past a double door and through a break room. They turned and moved down a hall, stopped, and



knocked on one of the doors.

“What!” a voice yelled from behind the door.

“Colonel Shannon,” one of the soldiers said, “we have the people from the freeway.”

“Come!”

One of the soldiers opened the door and motioned for the group to enter the room.

“Who are you people?” Colonel Shannon said.

He was a middle-aged, muscular man sitting behind a broad cluttered desk looking over a pair of reading glasses.

“Sir, they are a special envoy from the governor—”

“What the hell is that?”

The soldier stared back at the Colonel. “What is what, sir?”

“What’s a special envoy from the governor....What governor? Have you ever seen an envoy before? Does such a thing even exist? Have you been watching too much TV?”

“Sir, they had paperwork—”

“I don’t care what they had, sergeant. Does this look like a special envoy to you? Three civilians with a swarm of women. Look...one of the girls is even knocked up.”

Michael pushed the soldier to one side and leaned over the Colonel’s desk. “Listen up Rambo,” he said, pulling a sidearm from his jacket. He pressed the pistol against the Colonel’s forehead.

Within moments, Barney and Pete had pushed the two soldiers against the wall, the barrels of their own M-16 rifles pressing against their own throats. “We are in a state of martial law, Colonel Shannon,” Michael said. “If you even hint at impeding my mission in any way, you’ll be dead. Instantly...without hesitation...you copy?”

The colonel gasped, blinked his wide eyes and nodded.

“I’m gonna’ tell you this just once,” Michael continued. “I am Special Agent Brothers with the NDE. I have a special envoy from the governor. The President of the United States commissions me.” He reached into a pocket with his free hand, pulled out a badge along with a document and waved them in front of the Colonel’s pale, viscid face.

The colonel visibly struggled to catch his breath as his wide eyes scanned the letter Michael dangled in front of him. "OK...ok" Colonel Shannon said. "There's no need to get physical. I'm sorry...my mistake."

Michael quickly pushed the pistol back into his pocket. Barney and Pete let the two soldiers go, stared into their bulging eyes and passed their rifles back. The soldiers slowly reached for their weapons and turned to face the colonel.

"Get em..." the colonel said softly, "get um, whatever they need."

Michael glared at the colonel and turned to leave. Maria tugged on his arm. "Oh yes," Michael said. He looked back at the terrified colonel. "Do you have any way of accessing police arrest records within the last...say, month or two?"

The colonel stared back, blinking. "Uh yeah, I think so. Is it local?"

"Yes."

The colonel wiped the sweat from his forehead. "The police have been disbanded. They all quit. We're the law now. As far as I know, we have access to any government record generated within this area over a period of seven years or so."

Maria gasped. "Can you find Todd?"

The colonel stared back at her. "Huh?"

"We need to find the arrest record for a mister Todd..." Michael turned to look at Maria.

"Oh," she said, "Riley, Todd Riley."

"What about him?" the colonel asked. "What do you need to know?"

"Where he was held after he was arrested," Michael said.

Maria anxiously moved forward. "Where is he now?"

The colonel turned to his keyboard and began punching the keys. "Riley you say?"

"Yes," Maria sang. "Todd Riley, have you found him?"

The colonel turned and flashed a black look at Maria. An equally black look from Brother Michael sent the colonel's eyes back to the computer monitor. "Yeah, here he is."

Maria gasped and took hold of Michael's arm.

“He was arrested and placed in the Metro County Jail...then—”

“Jail,” Maria said. “Why was he sent to jail?”

The colonel ignored her question. “He was sent to the Correctional Work Center.”

“Is that near here?” Maria asked.

“If I were younger I could probably throw a rock and hit it.”

Maria squealed and tugged at Michael’s arm. “Todd’s there!”

The colonel paused for a moment, looking up at Maria. “Who is this guy to you?”

“He’s my husband.”

“It says here, he was arrested for kidnapping his wife...Is that you?”

“Yes, yes but that was a lie. The Vinces didn’t want us to leave so—”

“Where is he now?” Michael said.

The colonel looked at Maria and back at the computer monitor.

“You might want to sit down,” he said, looking back at Maria.

Maria’s smile quickly melted. She looked at Michael and back at the colonel. After a moment, she slowly stepped backwards into one of the chairs facing the colonel’s desk.

“Is he the kid’s father?” the colonel asked.

“Well,” Maria said softly, “sort of....”

The Colonel sighed, re-adjusted his reading glasses and turned back towards the computer monitor. He stared at the monitor and sat back in his seat. “Ok,” he said, glancing back at Maria. “This is what’s going on...the prison was disbanded along with the police. All of the non-violent felons and misdemeanors were let go—”

“So...Todd has been let go?”

The Colonel looked at Maria, sniffed and leaned back in his chair. “Not exactly,” he said. “He was arrested for kidnapping. That’s a felony... a violent one.”

“What did they do with the violent felons?” Michael asked softly.

The Colonel sighed, wiped his forehead with the back of his hand and continued. “Not good news, I’m afraid.”

Maria gasped. Her hand flew over her mouth as tears began welling in her eyes.

“What did they do with the violent felons?” Michael repeated.

“They were....” The Colonel hesitated a moment. “They were executed.”

Maria wailed. Michael reached for her just in time to prevent her from sliding off the chair onto the floor.

“They were executed at 1900 hours yesterday evening....”

~~~

Todd was surprised to find the door leading into the psychiatric hospital wide open.

“Nobody’s here, essey,” Tacoma said. “All the lights are out. The place is empty.”

Todd scanned the dark room. “I’m not so sure.” He began slowly making his way into the dark reception area.

“Whoa!” Tacoma yelled. “There’s a body over there.”

“Where?” Todd said. “Male or female?”

Tacoma looked. “I’ss bloody, tha’s all I know.”

Todd moved back to where Tacoma was standing. He could see a sprawling corpse lying in front of a moonlit interior door. He carefully moved towards it. “It’s a man.”

“What happened here, bro?” Tacoma said.

Todd sighed and went back to scanning the shadowy reception area. “This guy is shot up pretty bad. My guess is the army.”

“I thought the army wass the good guys.”

“Yeah well,” Todd said, gently pushing the body with his foot, “it’s hard to say what this guy was up to.”

“How you gonna’ know what room your wife was in, bro?”

“I don’t know,” Todd said. “Could be they have a registry or something.”

He guardedly struck out towards the dark, silhouetted reception desk and began rifling through the drawers. “Damn,” he said softly. “I can’t see anything...I’m sure this stuff is all on the computer anyway.”

“They’re coming back!” Tacoma yelled, diving behind a colossal synthetic houseplant. Todd dropped down behind the reception desk just as a spotlight illuminated the room. The vehicle slowed and stopped. Todd pushed himself as deep under the table as he

could. He heard doors open, and slam. *This is it*, he thought. *If they have dogs...*

He heard voices coming from just outside. He thought he recognized one of them. He carefully crouched down, trying to get a glimpse from under the desk. The moonlit figures of a huge man, flanked by two smaller men, obviously identical twins, stepped into the lobby. Rage swelled within him.

"You stay here and watch the door," one of the twins said. "We'll check it out. What room is she in again?"

"Three twelve," the big man said.

The twins moved towards the stairs, stepped around the body, opened the door and pushed their way into the stairway.

It took all the control Todd could conjure to keep from finding a weapon and smashing the big man's skull as he stood in the lobby waiting for the twins to return.

The stairwell door flew open and the two men re-appeared in the lobby. "She's dead," one of them said flatly.

Todd buried his face in his hands, desperately trying to keep from screaming.

"No," the big man said. "Are you sure?"

"Is she in room three twelve?"

"Yes... three twelve."

"Well then she's dead. There's a dead woman in room three twelve. The whole place is shot up."

"I don't believe it," the big man said. "Why would anyone want to kill Maria?"

For the second time in Todd's life he felt himself reach maximum-overload. He had a reason now; a reason to silently take the pain... to continue living, if only for a short time. He would wait for just the right moment and kill the big man before he had a chance to leave the lobby.

He slowly began rolling to the front of the desk. If only he could get a straight shot with a chair or something. He quietly pushed out from under the desk and slowly stood... The three men were gone. He looked at the door leading into the stairwell just in time to see it close. He jumped, and ran as fast as he could towards the stairwell.

"Where you going, essey?" Tacoma whispered, as Todd blew past him.

Todd reached the door and carefully pulled it open. He could hear the men talking in the stairs one flight above him. Moving to the center of the stairwell, he tried to catch a glimpse of the men as they moved upwards towards the third floor. The door slowly opened. Tacoma eased his way into the stairwell and quickly settled next to Todd.

"Shh," Todd whispered, his face contorted with rage.

"What are you doing, bro?" Tacoma said.

"I'm killing somebody."

"Huh...who?"

"The big guy."

"Why...what did he do, bro?"

"He's not dressed like a priest...but I'd recognize him anywhere."

"What?" Tacoma said, shaking his head. "You're gonna kill a priest?"

The door on the third floor slammed shut and Todd bounded up the stairs.

Tacoma waited before running up after him and joining him crouched against the third floor door. "Hey, bro," Tacoma gasped, trying to catch his breath. "What—"

"Duck!" Todd yelped as the beam of a flashlight flickered against the third floor stairwell window. Todd hit the wall adjacent to the door and pulled Tacoma towards him. The two men stood motionless against the wall. The door opened and the three men stepped into the stairwell.

Todd glared at the silhouette of Father Jenkins, standing inches from where he was hiding. *I can't kill him, he's too big and there are two others...maybe...maybe I could blind him...Yeah, that's it...I could blind him for the rest of his life. I could do it before they kill me.* He would make a noise, Father Jenkins would turn around and he'd explode. He'd push all of his fingers into the big man's face at once. He knew human eye sockets were natural funnels. The chances were good that at least two fingers would enter the eyes. He'd pop Jenkins' eyes like tomatoes." He slowly raised his hands.

"That's not her," Father Jenkins said.

Todd dropped his hands.

"Are you sure?" one of the twins asked.

"Of course I'm sure. That isn't Maria."

"Who is it then?"

"Who cares?"

"That's some way for a priest to talk—"

"I told you; I'm not a priest anymore."

The three men moved down the stairs leading back to the lobby.

"How could this have happened?" one of the twins said. "I thought you were supposed to be watching her."

Jenkins stopped and whirled. "Let's not go over this again. We were watching her every move. Can I help it if everyone scattered to the hills the minute news of the asteroid hit the airwaves?"

"Everyone but Oliver," one of the twins said.

"See now, that's another thing," Jenkins said, as he turned and resumed moving down the stairs. "Oliver was your man. You were supposed to be checking him out."

"It still isn't clear what Dr. Oliver has in mind. Maybe he's taken her into protective custody until all this blows over—"

"Right," Jenkins said. "It's only obvious he was working for Santana all along. You people should've spotted it. Now Santana has Maria and you know it, they're probably half way to New Guinea by now."

Todd heard the door slam and the stairwell become silent.

"She's not dead," he whispered. "Maria's not dead..."

~~~

Brian Mines hid behind one of the massive tires supporting an enormous Boeing 747, one of many that had been abandoned on the tarmac of the Nashville International Airport. Rays of sunlight had only just begun showing themselves over the horizon and he was only too aware that he'd soon have to abandon his hiding place in favor of one less conspicuous.

He hated to leave. It didn't take a rocket scientist to know something big was about to happen. If he had any chance of getting out of the country, he'd have to make a move. He wasn't sure

exactly what that move would be, but he wanted to be in position if the opportunity presented itself. That was his secret to success, being in the right place, at the right time. That was one of the reasons he was a bank manager instead of a teller.

The military had been working like bees for hours. Brian guessed they had started at around four AM. They had been using an enormous military bulldozer to drag the grid-locked aircraft into the grassy areas between the runways, creating a long narrow path down the tarmac. It was obvious they were clearing some sort of makeshift runway. He looked down at his wife. She had used his jacket as a bed and was sleeping soundly between the Mammoth tires.

Women are strange, he thought. A few minutes before, she was scared, cold, uncomfortable and hungry. Now she was sleeping like a baby...just like nothing ever happened. He knew she expected him to get her out of this somehow. Her faith in him was complete. How nice it would be to live in her naive little world. No matter what happened, someone would always be there to fix it for her. There was a time when that may have been true. He was good at fixing things. That's why she married him in the first place. He was a fix it kinda' guy. She liked that about him. And...the truth be known, he liked her being what she was...the little wife, the silent partner, the homemaker...one who always knew who was in charge, always more than happy to comply.

But things had changed. Society had regressed a couple hundred years in a matter of a few days. Who knew where it would go from here? A man was gonna have to learn to make his own way, to live off the land. He'd have to move fast and smart if he were to have any chance at all of getting away from the mainland before the impact. A whining, complaining, needy little wife could mean the end of them both. He needed for her to be strong and self-reliant...or...he needed to be on his own.

He looked up and down the tarmac. It had been a while since he'd seen any movement from the military. Maybe they were finished with whatever it was they were doing. He looked down at his wife and back out at the tarmac. He looked around him to see if the way



was clear and quickly sprinted to the next set of tires.

This is good, he said to himself. He could see both ways up and down the newly cleared path. He gingerly peeked around the tires looking north towards the airport terminal.

He was right. They had pulled a plane out of one of the hangers and were fueling it up getting ready to take off. He had to get on that plane no matter the cost. He looked back at the place he had been hiding moments before. His wife was still sleeping soundly. He hated doing this to her, but it was for the best. The military would pick her up and more than likely take care of her. They wouldn't leave a poor woman alone to starve...He was sure of it.

He quickly moved from tire to tire, closing the gap between him and the plane. At last he was close enough to monitor what was going on. The sun was finally coming up over the horizon and he could clearly see a small group of soldiers milling about under the plane. A little airport bus had left the terminal and was now making its way towards them.

He ducked down behind a tire and watched the bus come to a stop next to the plane. A small group of civilians stepped out. One of the women in the group appeared to be in her final stages of pregnancy.

I hope they aren't planning on leaving here with only six people on board, he thought, feeling the anger well up within him.

That's a jumbo jet. They could take a couple hundred people out of here in that thing. Probably some rich, self-centered jerk getting his own family out with no regard to anyone else.

The sun had risen to the point where he could no longer see the plane. He put his hand up, shielding the glare, but was scarcely able to see.

Damn, he said to himself. They could get aboard and I wouldn't even know...Wait a minute...If I could get to the other side...

There were people everywhere, but he had to take the chance. He waited until he was reasonably sure no one was watching and sprinted to a closer set of tires. If he could only reach one more plane, he could have a clear shot at getting to the other side...and if he could get to the other side...the glare of the sun would block him

from view. He could get close and still be completely undetected. He was sure of it.

He looked around again, and ran to the next set of tires. This time he could have sworn one of the civilians standing in the group spotted him. He hid behind the tire, half expecting the army to start yelling but they never did. He carefully looked over the tire and could see the young man casually talking to the pregnant woman. Apparently he hadn't been seen after all.

Strange, he thought, that guy looks familiar...He'd seen him somewhere before, probably a customer at the bank.

One more time, he said to himself as he braced for another dash. This time he was sure no one had seen him. Now, he knew he could move more freely. He could tell by the way everyone was shielding their eyes that he couldn't be seen. The glare of the sun at his back was completely hiding him from their view. He carefully pulled his shoes off.

This is it, he told himself as he began making his way onto the tarmac. He gingerly moved forward in plain sight, knowing they couldn't see him even though he could clearly see them. It was unnerving. He could only pray a cloud didn't suddenly appear blocking the glare of the sun. He quietly ran the last few yards and found himself hiding between the tires, only inches away from the small crowd milling about under the plane. He still had to move fast. The sun would rise in a few seconds and he'd be completely visible.

He looked up at the bottom of the wing. He could see a dark chasm just above the wheels where the landing gear was attached to the aircraft. He quickly climbed on the top of the tire and scrambled up the landing gear into the wing of the plane.

I did it, he said to himself. I can't believe I did it.

He scrambled into the darkness of the hole and sat back.

All it takes is a little ingenuity, he told himself as he made himself comfortable. You've got to use your noggin that's all. He was going to be well suited for this new world. It's gonna' be survival of the fittest. Only the smartest and most cunning will survive. He wasn't sure whether it was the euphoria of having beaten the odds, but he found himself looking forward to the future. He knew it would be

hard, but he felt up to the challenge....

~~~

Todd was sitting behind the shrubbery just outside the lobby of Vanderbilt Psychiatric Hospital, listening to Tacoma snore. He had been sitting there for well over an hour. The sun had finally come out, putting an end to the horrible night. He felt exhausted, but he knew sleep was not an option. Hope of finding Maria had driven him to this point and time. The horror he had experienced thinking she was dead, the euphoria realizing she was not, had all but driven him to the point of exhaustion, if not madness. Now, he was facing the realization that she was really gone. He'd never see her again. He'd never be a father to the child he had already grown to love. The life he thought he had was only a fleeting dream.

He remembered the picture of Maria he kept with him and cursed when he realized he had never gotten his wallet or wedding ring back from the prison...That damn Prison. Leland...Leland and his God. If there *was* a God, he decided, He obviously wasn't taking part in the affairs of men these days, that was for sure.

Tacoma stirred. He looked around and silently sat up. He sat quietly for a time watching Todd. "Where did you get the Cuete, bro?" he asked, gesturing towards the pistol Todd was holding in his hand.

Todd glanced down at it and looked back up. "I got it from the dead guy; thought it might come in handy."

Tacoma slowly nodded his head. "What you gonna do now, essey?" he asked, obviously sensing Todd's pain.

Todd stared silently into the day. "Don't know," he said finally.

Tacoma looked up at the sky and back at Todd. "Are you gonna be ok, bro?"

Todd didn't answer. Both men fell silent.

"I got a sister," Tacoma said. "She lives in Warez. It's a long far away but, maybe I'll try to go see her."

Todd glanced at Tacoma and back out into the distance. "Yeah, you should go find your family. I have a...dad. I wonder what he's doing these days."

Todd could hear the sounds of the city coming back to life. The hours of curfew were over and people would be moving about, trying to get out of the city any way they could.

"You gonna be ok, essey?" Tacoma asked, again.

"Yeah," Todd said. "I'll be fine...you go find your sister."

"You sure, bro?"

"Absolutely."

Tacoma stood, and looked back at Todd. "I hope you find your wife," he said, squinting into the bright morning sun.

Todd looked away trying to hold back the tears. "Yeah well, it doesn't look like that's gonna happen."

"You should never give up, homey."

"Yeah I should," Todd said, looking up at Tacoma. "I can feel it. She's gone. They've taken her away and time has run out for us."

"You really love her allot don't you, bro."

Todd nodded. "Everybody loves Maria."

"I'll be seeing you, bro," Tacoma said as he turned to leave.

"Tacoma?"

Tacoma turned back.

"Thanks for your help, brother."

Tacoma grinned. "Are we even, essey?"

"You mean the go-slow thing?"

Tacoma nodded.

"Absolutely."

Tacoma grinned, saluted, turned and walked north.

Todd watched him round the corner and disappear.

~~~

"You'll make a new life for yourself, just give it time."

Brother Michael was sitting in a plush leather-clad seat across from Maria. They had been parked on the tarmac for about fifteen minutes while the captain made a few last minute checks.

She sniffed and wiped a tear away. "You don't understand. Todd and I weren't ...normal. Todd loved me. I'm not sure anyone else could ever..." She buried her face in the handkerchief she still carried from the warehouse. "How could he have died like that?" she sobbed. "We were gonna be a family."

Michael moved to her and sat silently by her side. "Families are important. Do you have any family...other than Todd?"

"My parents died when I was young," Maria said, wiping her eyes. "I have a cousin somewhere, but I haven't seen him since we were little. I heard he was schizophrenic or something, a real helmet case. Last time I heard, he was living on the streets somewhere...that's all. How about you?"

Michael paused a moment. "I have a cousin too," he said finally.

"Really, where?"

Michael quietly leaned in, started to speak but was interrupted by the sound of the engines coming to life.

"I think you better find a seatbelt," Maria said, trying to smile. Michael moved back to the seat facing her and found his seatbelt. He pulled it around his waist and snapped it in place.

Santana was an extravagant man. The modified L 1011 Jumbo Jet had been fitted with all the comforts. The fuselage housed several large rooms, lavishly furnished according to their own theme. Maria and Michael had chosen to occupy one of the more modest office nooks adorning the single hallway running the length of the aircraft.

The plane began moving forward. Maria stared out the window. She could see the Nashville skyline from where she was sitting. "I like it here," Todd had said the night they tried to leave. She liked it too...back then. She thought about the tiny fast food restaurant near their home. She thought about the silly hat and apron Todd had magically produced the first night they had spent there. The nights in front of the fireplace drinking merlot and eating spaghetti, dreaming together of their brand new little baby...She remembered how hard she had laughed when Todd pulled the funny face and put his arms out when she asked what he thought the baby might look like...She thought about Lucky Fried Chicken on the Cumberland, slumped in her seat, pulled the handkerchief to her face and sobbed uncontrollably.

The plane was picking up speed as it rolled down the makeshift runway....

~~~

Brian Mines' initial jubilation had quickly turned to terror. He

realized he hadn't given this near enough thought. The mammoth landing gear he had been sitting on had initially started vibrating as they began rolling down the runway, but as the aircraft picked up speed, the vibration turned to wild, violent bucking.

How am I gonna breathe? This plane is gonna be flying at around thirty thousand feet...What the hell was I thinking? He considered bailing out, but the plane was moving too fast. He'd wind up under the tires. He was sure of it.

As the plane blew past, his wife Marge came into view. She must have heard the engines and woke up. She was wandering aimlessly around the tarmac looking for him. Poor little Marge...what had he done?

The violent bucking ceased. He looked down and watched the ground fall away beneath him. *I might still survive this. Skydivers jump from high places all the time. People climb gigantic mountains...It might get uncomfortable but I might still survive this.*

Suddenly, to his horror, the landing gear began folding in towards him. "The wheels!" he screamed. The colossal tires began drawing up into the wings. He felt pressure on his legs, then blinding pain. His bones popped and cracked as his legs folded into his chest. He screamed as the air rushed from his lungs.

Then, there was nothing....

~~~

"Somebody's getting out of here," Todd said, looking up towards the sound. A lone aircraft had made it out of the airport and was gaining altitude, leaving the city for parts unknown.

He had been sitting in the shade outside Vanderbilt Psychiatric Hospital, wondering what to do with the remainder of his short life. He thought about dedicating himself to the eradication of everyone involved in the Vincés, but he realized it would be a waste of time. The asteroid would more than likely do it for him. He wondered when he had last eaten. It must have been at the prison...He couldn't remember. Maybe he should go find something to eat. Where should he start...the dumpsters maybe?

He stood, and slowly began walking, wandering aimlessly, working his solitary way back from where he had come the long night before.

Within a short time he found himself in front of the Nashville Hillshire hotel. He slowed and stood silently peering past broken glass into the lobby. He could see her in his mind, her hand out, smiling that smile, reaching out to Donahue. *'I had to meet you,'* her voice echoed in his mind. *'I've been following your work very closely.'* Donahue...the great and powerful Doctor James Donahue...Nobel laureate Doctor James Donahue melted in her presence like flaming marshmallows. He swallowed the throbbing pain in his throat and turned away.

He glanced up the street and was shocked by what he saw. He whirled and looked in the other direction. Strange, he thought, He hadn't noticed it until just then. In the light of day, West End was a completely different place than it had been before. Practically all of the first floor windows of the buildings had been shattered. It was clear the area had been ransacked by who knows who. No wonder the army was so aggressive. He lingered for a short time before he listlessly crossed the street and sat on the curb.

A few souls wandered about the streets. He sat watching in disconnected indifference, trying to remember what it felt like when life was normal. Maria was so excited when they came here. He was so love-struck. Jenkins was a pile of puke but he was right about one thing, Maria had made her choice. She chose Todd Riley. She could have had anyone...but she chose normal old everyday Todd Riley. That cocky little doctor didn't have a chance.

He thought about how unhealthy it would be for him to spend the rest of his life dreaming of the way things could have been, but he decided to do it anyway. He probably should at least try to go through the motions...breathe, eat.... He made an agreement with himself to do those things, but only if they didn't interfere with his dreaming of the way things could have been.

He pushed himself up from the curb and wandered back behind the hotel, found a dumpster, and jumped in. Within minutes, he had found a partially eaten donut. He popped it in his mouth for safekeeping and went back to digging in the trash. A sandwich came to the surface. He picked it up and sniffed it. Whew, he wheezed, throwing it back.

He found a complete orange. It was a little squishy but it wasn't bad. As he continued to search, he realized he needed to find a dumpster that had been servicing a food store...a restaurant or something.

He jumped out and walked back towards West End. It wasn't long before he found a fast food restaurant, moved to the dumpster and hopped inside.

"Eureka." he said, pulling a full loaf of bread out of the rubble. He looked it over. It was a little moldy but he'd have to learn to make do. He was never all that picky anyway. He went back to digging and grunted when an entire box of chicken came into view. It had been hiding for who knows how long under a pile of slimy newspapers. He picked it up. The contents were still half frozen.

Suddenly, he was aware he was being watched. He whirled.... A child standing near the dumpster was watching him.

Todd glanced around him and returned his attention to the child. "Hi little girl. What are you doing there?"

The little girl didn't answer.

"Are you ok? Where's your mommy?"

"I'm not supposed to talk to strangers," the little girl said softly.

"That's right...that's a good idea." Todd looked up and noticed a woman standing near the building.

She timidly moved towards him. "We're hungry."

Todd looked at the box of chicken and back at her. He tossed the box towards her. She let it hit the ground and quickly picked it up.

"Come, Meagan," the woman said. "Let's go. We'll let the man find something to eat in peace."

"Wait," Todd yelled. "Here's some bread." He held the loaf up and tossed it in her direction.

"Thank you," she said. She pulled the little girl towards her, turned and began making her way back towards the road. Then, without warning, she turned back. "Are those prison clothes?"

"Oh," Todd said. "Yeah, I guess they are." He reached into his pocket for his pardon.

"Are you a criminal?"

Todd dug deeper into his pocket, found his pardon and produced



it. "No, I'm...not a criminal."

The woman turned towards her daughter. "You stay here, Meagan. I need to talk to the man." She left the little girl, moved back towards Todd and maneuvered herself close enough to the dumpster to be easily heard. "Will you take care of us?" she whispered.

"What?"

"Will you take care of us?" she repeated, looking back towards the child. "We don't have a man." She leaned closer to Todd. "I'll do anything you want."

Todd stared at her.

The woman blushed. "Never mind," she said. She whirled and quickly walked back towards the child.

"No...no wait," Todd said. "I didn't mean—"

The woman turned back.

Todd jumped out of the dumpster. "Why do you think you need a man?"

"Shhh," the woman whispered, looking at the child.

"Can we talk?" Todd said, motioning towards the back of the building.

The woman looked at her child. "Stay here, Sweetie. Mommy will be right back."

She walked ahead of Todd until they were out of the little girl's sight, stopped and began unbuttoning her blouse.

"Stop," Todd said. "I just want to talk to you. You don't need a man. All a man can do for you, at this point, is raid a dumpster or two."

"We need protection," she said, buttoning up her blouse. "At night it gets...bad. I don't know what tonight will bring."

"You don't need a man," Todd said, "You need to find a gun or something. Find a willow tree and make a bow and arrow...a big dog...if things don't work out, you can eat it. Find a place that can easily be defended. If anyone comes around at night...let em have it. I'm telling you, lady, there's nothing a man can do that you can't."

"Help me find those things," she whispered. "Please stay with us just a few days till we can find those things."

Todd squinted down at her. "What's your name?"

"Ashley...my name is Ashley."

"Ashley, I hate to be the one to tell you this, but you're on your own now. No one is gonna help you because no one cares about you. No one cares about your kid! It's up to you now. Stand up and take charge....Be a woman!" Todd was yelling.

Ashley backed away... "Fine...fine then," she sobbed. "I'm sorry we bothered—" She whirled and ran around the corner of the building.

"Stupid woman," Todd muttered under his breath. He paced back and forth behind the restaurant before pulling to a stop. "What's wrong with me?" he moaned. "Why did I say that? Ashley!" he yelled, rounding the corner. "I'm sorr—" She and the little girl were gone.

He sat down hard on the pavement, grabbed two handfuls of his own hair and yanked.

"What have I become?" he yelled through clenched teeth.

~~~

"You should try Santana's bed. It looks very comfortable."

Maria lifted her forehead off the tiny port window. For over an hour she had been staring out at the vast Atlantic Ocean, slowly moving away beneath them. She looked up at Brother Michael. "What?"

"You really should get some rest, little miss. You haven't slept in days."

"I've been thinking about you," she said.

"Really? Pleasant thoughts I hope."

"I'm not sure...I'm wondering if I should be afraid of you."

"Why would you be afraid of me?"

"You're not a normal man at all, are you?"

"Yes, little miss, I'm a normal man."

"Normal men don't do the things you do, and...please call me Maria."

Michael sat down next to her. "Maria it is."

She was silent for a time fidgeting with the handkerchief in her

hand. "How did you do that?" she said finally.

"How did I do what?"

"How did you fool the Army?"

Michael smiled.

"When the soldiers took us into that Colonel's office," she continued, "he wasn't buying it...then something happened."

"What did you see?" Michael said.

"He wasn't falling for it until you put your finger up to his head and started threatening him."

"What else did you see?"

"About the same time you put your finger up against his head the two soldiers in the office backed up against the wall and put the barrels of their own rifles under their own chins."

Michael smiled. "And then?"

"And then...one of the men traveling with you, the little one with the big ears, tried to run out of the room, but the other one...the grumpy one, grabbed him and wouldn't let him go."

Michael laughed.

"One of the women traveling with you told them both to be quiet. After that...everything was... normal. Except then, the Colonel was in your hip pocket." She paused a moment, looking deep into his eyes. "How did you do that?"

"It was the Father's will."

She sat quietly for a time. "Those men..." she said, breaking her silence, "the ones who were gonna take my baby....Was that real?"

"Some of it was real," Michael said.

"Are they dead?"

"Yes."

"I saw...terrible things. Did that really happen? Did they die the way I saw them die?"

"Yes, the Father killed them."

"When you say Father, are you talking about God?"

Michael smiled. "God is such a broad word..." He took a moment to collect his thoughts before continuing. "Yes, yes, I suppose the Father is God, but then again, so am I...so are you." Again he hesitated, carefully choosing his words. "We...human

beings are mere extensions of what we think of as God. We are God, exploring our own creation from every standpoint, every angle, and every plain. God is us.”

“I...don’t understand,” Maria said.

“Think of your five senses. Babies learn about life through their five senses. God is the same way. He...we, explore our own existence through the trillions of souls who have ever lived, or will ever live in this world or the other worlds. God is the collective experience of all these beings...”

“Why haven’t we heard this before?”

“Oh we have,” Michael said. “Every culture has its own man-god myth. The truth has always been out there but frankly, it hasn’t been important till now.”

“Why now?”

“The collective experience is becoming...bogged down, mostly due to the religious dogmas refusing to die. Very soon, these fundamentalist creeds will threaten the very existence of all life on earth. That’s why your son is returning to us. He’s the light who will lead us out of the darkness.”

“I thought that’s what he was doing when he came the first time.”

“He was...and he did, but through the centuries, his life and words have become so grossly misunderstood his own legacy threatens everything he ever stood for.”

She sat quietly contemplating.

“Does that trouble you?” he asked after a time.

“I...I guess it’s just not...quite what I had expected.”

She returned to her thoughts, fidgeting once more with the handkerchief. “You mentioned...before,” she said, softly, “that heaven was a real place. Do you think Todd is in heaven?”

Michael smiled. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say you really loved him.”

Maria stared curiously at Michael. “Yes...”she said softly, “I...did.” Oh my God... I do. I do love him... and he never knew...I never knew.” Her breath caught in her throat and she fell silent. She turned away and sat staring out the port window, her eyebrows pulled together in pain.

"I think Todd is exactly where he was meant to be all along," Michael said.

Maria turned to face him, her eyes welling with tears. "Do you think he's happy?"

"I'm sure of it."

She began sobbing. "Do you think he remembers me?" fresh, hot tears flowed down her face. "Do you think he ever thinks about me? Can he feel how much I love him now?"

Michael put his arm around her and pulled her close. "Who could forget you?"

"I'm so tired of crying," Maria sobbed. "I'm tired of crying over him, wondering where he is...if he's alright, wondering if we would ever be allowed to have our family back...I can't believe he's..." She pulled the handkerchief to her face and moaned between fitful sobs.

"Everything okay, Brother Michael?" Mallory said. She and Sarah had stepped out of one of the rooms and into the hall.

"Come," Michael said, gently pulling Maria from her seat. "Let's all help Maria find that bed."

Michael helped Maria to her feet and the four of them made their way down the tiny hall toward the cockpit of the aircraft. They found the room and Michael helped her through the door. He pulled the lavish blankets back, helped Maria into the bed, pulled the covers up and gently tucked them up under her chin.

"It's been a long time since anyone has done that for me," she said softly, smiling up at him through tear-filled eyes.

"I very much like doing that for you."

Maria yawned behind her hand.

"You go to sleep now. We'll be in Sydney in a few hours."

"Where?" Maria asked.

"Sydney, Australia...That's where we're going."

"It's funny," Maria said, smiling softly. "I never thought to ask. You're right...I am...very—"

Maria fell asleep. Michael looked down at her beautiful face. "She's so sad and exhausted. Isn't there anything we can do for her?"

“Not to worry,” the massive figure standing behind and to his right said.

“We must all do our part,” the other one said with a voice that sounded old as time itself, “but she remains safely in the Father’s hands.”

“When will my question be answered?” Michael asked.

“The question will answer itself,” both creatures said in unison as they moved soundlessly towards the door. Michael looked on as the mammoth beings returned to the familiar forms of Sarah and Mallory, stepped out and closed the door behind them.

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Since noon, Todd had been sitting on the curb in front of the house where he and Maria had lived. Occasionally he’d stand up, find a rock and bounce it off the wall. Her car was parked in the driveway. Everything was exactly as it was. He reasoned the Vinces were keeping it for the baby’s new parents. The next family whose lives they would invade and destroy. He stood and threw another rock.

He had been thinking about going in, but he wasn’t sure he could stand the pain. At first...back in the city when the notion struck him, he was even harboring the hope that Maria might be at the house, but of course she wasn’t. Only her ghost was there.

He slowly walked up the long, steep driveway towards the front door. He decided to turn and walk away but his hand involuntarily reached for the key above the door jamb instead. The door swung open. Everything was just the same as it was. He stepped into the living room. The emptiness of the deserted house filled his senses. He slowly scanned the dark room. The furniture, the pictures, everything was just as it was before their lives had been changed forever.

He looked at the dark, foreboding fireplace and remembered how it used to glow and crackle. He remembered its flickering flames, the soft dancing shadows on Maria’s beautiful face. How they cuddled together drinking Merlot in the warmth of the cozy fire.

“Todd, listen,” Maria said, from the couch. He turned into the darkness towards the distant, fleeting voice. She pointed at the black

lifeless television. "Todd, the asteroid..." the voice echoed, as the ghost vaporized into the gloom of the murky, lonely room. He made no effort to wipe the tears away as he slowly moved to the kitchen.

"I think I felt the baby kick," the ghost of Maria said meeting him at the kitchen door. "The baby..."

He turned and looked towards the dining room.

"Tell me one more time," Maria's voice echoed off the dark walls. "What does our baby look like now? What does our baby...our baby?"

The soft, sweet voice slowly dissipated into the nothingness that surrounded him. He wiped the tears away with the back of his hand, moved to the end of the hall and opened the bedroom door. The memory of Maria's lilting laugh sounded from somewhere far away. The sweet smell of her perfume still lingered in the room as he stepped in. He caught his breath at the sight of Maria's clothes, still hanging in the closet. As he slowly moved towards the closet, his sadness burst into his throat. He collapsed, dragging Maria's blue dress with him to the floor.

"We had each other!" he screamed, between sobs. "She was mine!"

He lay for hours on the floor crying, pressing his face into Maria's blue dress, until he had no more tears left. He sat up, wiped the tears away, moved back into the living room and dropped heavily onto the couch. He spotted the photo album he and Maria had started soon after they moved in and reached for it. The pictures seemed strange now. Who were these silly people looking so unconcerned? These naïve little people didn't have a care in the world. He found the eight-by-ten of Maria from back at UCLA, reached down and kissed her lips, pulled the gun from his pocket and pushed it into his mouth.

"You don't really want to do that, do you?"

The voice came from behind him. He turned. A man was standing at the open front door. "Don't I?"

"No, you don't."

"Ok," Todd said, pushing the gun back into his pocket. "And, who might you be?"

“My name is Manny...and you’re gonna’ shoot yourself the moment I leave, aren’t you.”

Todd thought about it. “Yeah...doesn’t matter though, we’re all gonna’ die anyway.”

Manny slowly moved into the house. “I’m the assistant pastor at the Church of Christ just up the street.”

“Oh Good,” Todd said. “Maybe you could give God a message for me...” He threw his hands up and pushed both middle fingers into the air.

Manny frowned. “You don’t wanna’ do that either.”

“Let me tell you what I do want, pastor!” Todd yelled. “I want you, to get the hell out of here, so I can blow my head off in peace!”

“I think you just want peace,” Manny said. “I don’t think you really want to blow your head off.”

Todd laughed and dropped his hands. “I can see why you dudes have started going door to door. My guess is business isn’t so good these days.”

“No, you’re wrong,” Manny said. “Our business is booming—”

Todd laughed animatedly. “Of course... what am I thinking? Calamity, despair...I bet you’re making a killing selling prayer cloths right now.”

“No, Mr. Riley, we’re reaching out to people who’ve abandoned all hope. We’ve gathered food from our own pantries and are feeding the hungry. We’re taking care of the lost and the lonely, the old and the sick. We offer sanctuary and lodging for anyone who needs it.”

Todd sighed and sat back down on the couch. “You do that,” he said softly. “Keep everybody well-fed till your God turns them all into asteroid dust.”

Manny stood quietly at the door before slowly moving forward. “Are you gonna spend the rest of your life feeling sorry for yourself?”

“Yeah,” Todd said. “I plan on cultivating and nurturing this pain...and do you know why? Because this pain is all I have left of my wife...that’s why! And...how do you know my name?”

“I’ve been the assistant pastor at the Church of Christ for a while



now. I always meant to come and talk with you folks. I guess I just haven't gotten around to doing it till now."

"Good timing," Todd said.

An uncomfortable silence fell on the darkened room.

"Ok, Manny, this is the deal," Todd said finally. "I don't care about God. He doesn't care about me, so... listen closely. I'm not interested....Can you understand? Look, read my lips...N-O-T I-N-T-R-E-S-T-E-D."

Manny smiled and lifted his hands into the air. "Ok, ok I understand, but there's something you should know. In all things, God works for the good of those who love him...who have been called according to his purpose."

"What did you say?" Todd yelled.

"I know you've been called according to his purpose—"

"Why would you use those words?" Todd yelled. "Why those words?"

"Leland was a friend of mine," Manny said. "He had connections, found out where you lived and knew I was the assistant pastor at a church near you. He was convinced from the beginning that you were called by God. He wanted me to check up on you from time to time when you got out.

Todd sniffed and glanced around the room. "Leland's dead."

"I know."

"How?"

"We had a Christian outreach at the prison. We were notified."

Todd softened. "He died singing Amazing Grace."

Manny smiled. "That sounds like Leland. He was a true man of God."

"Yeah, a dead one," Todd said. He looked away for a moment before returning his attention to Manny. "I'm still not interested."

Manny turned back towards the door. "The creator of heaven and earth is calling you, Mr. Riley. I wouldn't ignore him if I were you. At some point... he may stop." Manny stepped out the door.

"Manny!" Todd yelled.

Manny returned to the door.

"There's a woman and a little girl, they've been shadowing me

since I left the city. My guess is, they've figured out I won't hurt them and want someone to run to in case of trouble."

"Do you mean Ashley and little Meagan?" Manny asked.

"How did you know?"

"They're sitting on your front lawn. I talked to them on my way in."

Todd frowned and nodded. "Good," he said softly. "Can you help them?"

Manny smiled. "Ashley and Meagan are safe now..."

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"The coastal areas, for the most part, have been the hardest hit, the Atlantic coast in particular. Within an hour of the announcement the streets of New York City filled with people, everyone trying to get out of the buildings at the same time. We've known since the beginning of the twentieth century that, on any given workday, there are around seventy-five people in the buildings of New York City for every square foot of space in the streets. That's not taking into account the vehicles. It's been three days since the announcement...Most of the people are still in the streets, crushed together like worms in a can....People are dropping like mayflies."

"Boston...pretty much the same story...only they're having to deal with the massive onrush of people camping out on the beaches waiting for some sort of rescue. It's the same story up and down the coast from New England to Florida. The west coast has suffered the same calamity."

"Mexico and Canada have both sealed their borders and are shooting our people on sight. Both nations have their own hysteria to deal with."

"The country's airports were completely swamped from the outset. Within hours after the announcement, people flooded the terminals, demanding passage out of the country. The airlines weren't able to handle the onrush...The citizens swamped the tarmacs and runways, till it was impossible for anyone to leave. It's the same story everywhere."

The Director of Homeland Security paused a moment to adjust his reading glasses, looked up at the President and continued. "The

central states have pretty much given way to total lawlessness. The police and military, for the most part, are abandoning their posts, leaving the law-abiding citizens to face the marauding bands of criminals on their own. There are reports of some vigilante groups making halfhearted attempts at maintaining order but they haven't been particularly successful."

"The criminals seemed to have organized somewhat and have pretty much hoarded what's left of the entire food supply for themselves. The gasoline and heating supplies have been taken...They've taken the livestock..."

"Utah...all out war. Apparently, the Mormon leadership recommended its members keep a two-year supply of food on hand...word got out. A particularly nasty group took over the weapons stored at the abandoned Tooele Depot. They killed everyone who stood in their way..."

"The Mormons managed to re-group and mount a resistance...those who hadn't left the area...As far as we know, the fighting is still going on out there."

The President sighed and turned to the SECDEF. "I should've never made that damn announcement."

"What else could you do, sir?" the SECDEF said. "The whole world watched Challenger explode on TV. Your announcement only confirmed what they already knew—"

"What's the latest word from the European Union?" the President said.

The SECDEF sat up in his seat and snorted. "Well, sir, apparently we haven't reached the point of desperation they're hoping for. That will have to happen before they pull out their trump card. You can bet the wheels are spinning as we speak; big dealers negotiating in dark smoky dens all over Europe."

"Of course," the president said. "They finally have their tuff cousin in a headlock. What do they want now?"

"Well sir, at this moment, it's a game of numbers. To date, our population is estimated to be just under three hundred million souls...All twenty-six E.U. member states, with the exception of Malta, are willing to take up to a million of our citizens each,

providing reparations are met. Bulgaria is also willing to take some of our people, but that still leaves around two hundred seventy four million homeless Americans. Israel has tentatively offered to take some of our Jewish citizens but that isn't final. Hamas is standing firmly against it, of course."

The SECDEF paused for a moment and continued. "Even if all the nations of the world welcomed our people with open arms, we could never move that many people in the small amount of time we have left."

The president looked down at his desk. "I shouldn't have attempted such a risky venture. I should've spent the time working out a realistic plan of evacuation instead of wasting the lives of our brave men and women on such a chase."

The SECDEF glanced up from the floor, shifted his eyes around the oval office and turned his attention to the President. "I don't profess to have the wisdom or the knowledge to run our great nation but if it's any consolation, I'd have done the same damn thing as you did."

"As would I," the Chief of staff said, breaking his silence.

"Me too," the head of Homeland Security said.

"I would've too," the Secretary of State said, breaking his silence as well.

The President smiled. "Thanks people. That means more to me than you can imagine." He leaned back in his chair.

"This is what we're gonna do," he said after a moment. "We're gonna bring the battleships home. Wake up the mothball fleets, commission every ship we can find and commandeer every seaworthy yacht. Then we're gonna distribute them evenly on both coasts and park them five miles off our beaches. Then we'll find every Flying Crane and bulldozer in the armed forces and use them to clear the airports. We'll line the planes up in an orderly fashion and wait for just the right time. Charlie and I," he nodded at the SECSTATE, "are gonna find homes for our citizens. We will get our ducks in a row my friends...and we are gonna get our people to hell out of here...."

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The four identical SUVs rounded the vast circular driveway. They pulled forward and stopped at the curb. Dozens of dark-suited men quickly disembarked one by one onto the broad sidewalk. Behind the four SUVs and preceding three others, a long white limo, sporting a small Saudi Arabian flag on each fender, glided to a rest in front of the Embassy of Russia at Zagreb, Croatia. The men in black suits quickly moved to their respective stations. Most of them fanned out, diligently scanning each of their pre-arranged zones for signs of trouble. A few others moved to the rear of the limo and pulled the passenger side door open.

Prince Abdul bin Rahman Aziz Al Saud, the Saudi King's eldest son stepped from the limo. His loose, long-sleeved, ankle-length Thobe and Ghutra gently flapped in the warm late summer breeze as he moved towards the group of dignitaries who had gathered to greet him on the steps of the embassy. He greeted and kissed the familiar faces one by one, until he had reached the end of the line.

"Welcome to Zagreb, Your Excellency," Muhammad Al Sabah said, motioning towards the building behind them.

"It is truly a glorious day," the Prince answered, kissing the cheeks of the Deputy Prime Minister of Kuwait. "God has been good to us."

The procession began slowly moving towards the building. "We have much to do, Excellency," the deputy said, walking beside the Prince.

The Prince nodded in agreement. "Has everyone arrived?"

"Yes, Highness, they've been arriving all day. Now that you are here, the circle is complete."

The procession moved through a large double door, over warm, palatial carpet adorned with flamboyant circles and squares.

"Are your people prepared for the coming hard times, Your Excellency?" the Deputy Prime Minister asked, as they walked.

"We are Arabs," the Prince said. "We are accustomed to harsh living."

They strolled past four perfectly matching sitting stations decorating the peripheral walls, each containing two identical baroque arm-chairs the color of caramel. The chairs flanked a small

rosewood table supporting single grey lamps beneath glowing white shades.

Aides and security darted to and fro at the whim of their superiors as the group moved across the wide foyer, through a cream-colored walkway and into a spacious lobby. They meandered between rows of stout, ornately carved columns, beneath a powder-blue ceiling towering thirty feet above their heads. Dignitaries stopped and moved at their leisure, taking in the astounding scenery or simply stopping to properly gesture a point until they were finally led to a luxurious well-lit wood laden room. A large round table, thirty feet long, supporting water and coffee containers, mugs and decorative identification markers sat in the middle of the room, surrounded by plush, high-backed, blue-green velvet covered chairs. Rows of smaller, lesser chairs lined the perimeter of the room.

The Prince moved to his designated place and sat down. His aides quickly followed suit, taking up a large number of the small chairs directly behind him.

Small clusters and cliques fragmented as they entered the room, each dignitary moving along with his entourage until they had all been seated at their own place of distinction.

Piotr Vasilevich, the Russian Deputy Director, remained standing. He began to speak.

“Дорогие друзья и отличные сановники. Пожалуйста позвольте мне иметь честь приветствия Вас к Загребу.”

Translators, sitting in a room on the other side of the building quickly translated the Deputy Director’s words through inconspicuous earpieces worn by each of the representatives.

“Dear friends and distinguished dignitaries. Please let me have the honor of welcoming you to Zagreb.”

“Сидя за этим столом(таблицей), являются представителями наций Иордании, Сирии, Ирак ....”

“Sitting at this table, are the representatives of the nations of Jordan, Syria, Iraq...”

“Турция, Иран, Египет ....”

“Turkey, Iran, Egypt....”

Each of the dignitaries nodded as their prospective nations were mentioned. The Deputy Director continued until each country was dutifully recognized.

An aide moved up from behind and whispered in his ear. The Deputy Director acknowledged him, turned back and continued speaking to the group. “Президент Андрей Николаевич, пожелания расшпирять(продлевать) его самые теплые поздравления ....”

“President Andrei Nikolaevich, wishes to extend his warmest greetings....”

“И обещания заканчивают солидарность против оккупантов Сиониста, которые слишком долго растаптывали вашу родину!”

“And promises complete solidarity against the Zionist occupiers who have too long trampled your homeland!”

The men at the table stood and cheered.

Deputy Director Piotr Vasilevich grinned and put his hand out. The men slowly returned to their seats.

“Я теперь приведу к полу(этажу) Его Высоте, мусорное ведро принца Абдула Рахман Сауд.”

“I will now yield the floor to His Highness, Prince Abdul bin Rahman Saud.”

Again, the men stood and cheered. The Deputy Director took his seat.

"My friends," the Prince began stoically, remaining seated. "God has been good to us."

"God is good!" some of the men said enthusiastically. Others grunted and nodded.

"The protector of the Zionist invaders has finally been vanquished," the Prince said, standing to his feet.

The men stood and cheered.

"Allah, in his great wrath, has driven the Americans from their own land!" the prince yelled over the commotion.

"Now it is the Americans who have been driven forcefully from the land of their fathers!"

The men cheered and clapped wildly.

"God is Great!" the Prince yelled.

"God is Great!" the crowd responded, in unison.

"God is Great!" they chanted.

"Allah u Akbar!"

"Allah u Akbar!"

"With the help of Allah," the Prince yelled over the turmoil, "we will drive the Zionists out of our homeland and into the sea!"

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Like everyone else, the Wheeler family had tried to book a flight off the mainland the day following the President's announcement. Stacey Wheeler had a cousin living in Kassel, Germany and the family had hoped to find refuge there. When it was clear leaving the mainland was impossible, the family decided to go east towards the New England coast. They were forced to abandon the SUV ten miles east of Burlington, Vermont and had set out to make the journey on foot.

Eric Wheeler had managed to fashion a couple of bulky backpacks out of small limbs and rope. He strapped one of them on his wife Stacey's back and she did the same for him. The three girls carried what they could in outrageously colorful grade school book bags.

The family finally stumbled onto the coast nearly a week later, their food supply completely depleted. Within a day the crowds of

panicky clambering people forced the family back inland in search of food and water. They settled on the bank of a wide, slow-moving river somewhere west of Raymond, New Hampshire.

"Daddy, what are you doing?" six-year-old Sadie asked, her tiny face pulled up in a grimace.

Eric was fingering a pile of fish guts. He pulled a small portion of guts away from the pile and bound it tightly with a shoelace.

"Daddy what are you doing?" Sadie asked, again. She stood near him, stroking his arm as he knelt on the sandy shore.

"I'm trying to get us something to eat, honey."

She recoiled. "Are we going to eat that?"

"Sadie, leave your daddy alone," Stacey said softly, reaching out for the child.

"I'm starving," she cried, moving towards her mother. "We haven't ee-un fer ever!"

"I know, baby," Stacey said, holding her little girl. "Daddy will find us something to eat."

Eric stood and moved towards the river. He slowly lowered the shoelace into the water and sat down. Moments later, little Sadie rejoined her father and sat next to him.

"What are we waiting for?" she asked after a few seconds.

Her father didn't answer.

"What are we waiting for?" she asked after a few more seconds.

"Honey, go sit with your sisters," Eric said softly. "We have to be very quiet—"

Something moved in the river. Sadie squealed and jumped to her feet.

"Shhh," Eric whispered. "Sit back down and be very quiet."

"What is tha—"

"Shhh, be completely still."

She sat back down on the shore, her tiny knees pressed against her chest. She stared with great oval eyes as the creature slowly began making its way towards the fish guts hanging on the end of the shoelace. As it approached, her father gently pulled the bait back towards them just out of the creature's reach. It moved forwards, towards the bait. Her father pulled it out of the creature's pinchers

just as it reached the shoelace. The creature moved forward again, this time latching its tiny pinchers on the bait. Her father quickly pulled it on shore.

"What is it?" Sadie squealed, jumping away.

"It's a crayfish," Eric said. "We can eat it."

Sadie backed up. "No...."

Sadie's mother moved towards them. "Did you catch something?"

"A crayfish," Eric said.

"Are there any more?"

"I think so."

Eleven-year-old Ally and fourteen-year-old Kiara left their spot on the shore and joined them. "Did you catch something, Daddy?" they asked in unison.

"A crayfish," he said.

"Daddy, are we really gonna' eat that?" Sadie said whining, hanging tightly to her mother's leg.

"It'll be good, sweetie," her mother said. "What should we do? Should we cook it?"

"Yeah," Eric said. "We boil it I think."

"How....We don't have a pan."

"Do we still have matches?"

"Yeah, we have plenty of matches."

"Girls," Eric said, pointing towards the woods. "See if you can find a tin can or something."

The two older girls turned and scrambled away. Eric and Stacey moved up and down the shore, putting together a pile of kindling. Within moments a small fire was crackling in a circle of rocks.

"We found one, Daddy!" the girls yelled in unison. They plopped heavily to their knees in the sand beside the fire and pushed an old pop can towards their father.

"Perfect," he said, bringing smiles to their faces. He reached into his pocket, pulled out a pocketknife and quickly decapitated the pop can. "Put some water in this, will you sweetie?" he said, pushing it towards Sadie.

"I'll do it!" Ally yelled, scrambling to her feet.

"No, let Sadie do it," her mother said. "She wants to help. Don't

you, Sadie?”

“I’m not eaten’ any!” Sadie whined, still clinging to her mother’s leg.

“Oh, you’ll love it,” her mother said softly. “You just wait and see.”

“I don’t want to.”

“You don’t have to eat it if you don’t want it,” Eric said, smiling softly. Sadie seemed to relax a little. “But will you get us some water?”

She smiled a large, tooth bare grin, grabbed the can and ran towards the river. She quickly returned, sloshing water from the brim-filled container, very nearly tripping and extinguishing the fire in the process.

“Careful now,” her father said, laughing. He took the can, placed it in the glowing tinder and sat back joining his family staring into the fire. They watched intently, breathlessly anticipating the first sign of boiling bubbles.

“It’s boiling, Daddy!” the two older girls yelled in unison.

“Good,” Eric said, dangling the crayfish over the boiling water. “It’s about time.”

“What are you doing daddy?” Sadie said, as her father dropped the crayfish in the boiling water. “Don’t that hurt it?”

“No honey,” her mother said. “They don’t feel it... How long should we leave it in there?”

“I think it turns red.”

“Yeah, Daddy, look,” Kiara said breathlessly. “It’s turning red.”

“Yew!” Sadie moaned.

After a few moments Eric knocked the can over, spilling the bright red crayfish onto a flat rock. He tried to pick it up and snap off the tail, but it was too hot. The family stared at the creature.

“Is it cool yet, Daddy?” Ally asked.

He reached for the crayfish and popped the tail off. Everyone but Sadie moved forward in anticipation. Eric pushed his finger into the tiny tail and pulled out a thimble full of white meat. He put the morsel in the palm of his hand, divided it into four pieces and passed one of the pieces towards Ally, who immediately pushed it

towards her mouth.

"Wait," Eric said. "We have to say the blessing." He passed a morsel to Kiara and offered one to his wife. She stared at it longingly and slowly shook her head. Eric smiled softly at her. "We'll catch more," he said. He offered his wife's share to little Sadie, who immediately recoiled.

"No, I want something else!"

"Look, Sweetie," Eric said. "It's just meat. Pretend it's a chicken nugget."

Sadie looked it over closely.

"Smell it. It smells good, see."

Sadie sniffed at it.

"Hurry!" the two older girls yelled in unison. "We're hungry!"

She reached, and gingerly took the morsel into her hand.

"Dear Lord," Eric said, his eyes tightly closed. "Thank you for this crayfish...and if it's not too much trouble, let us catch some more." He opened his eyes. The two older girls quickly popped the pea-sized morsels into their mouths. Sadie eyed hers a moment before slowly putting it on her tongue. She grimaced and began chewing. Her face brightened. "It's good!" she yelled. "Can I have some more?"

"I knew you'd like it," her mother said, hugging her.

Eric divided the remaining morsel three ways and passed it around to his children. He then tore what was left of the crayfish into three equal parts and passed that around. "Chew on it," he said cheerfully, trying to ignore the desperation in his wife's eyes. "Maybe you can find more meat in there while I catch some more."

The children gobbled up the remainder of the crayfish, quickly moved to the riverbank next to their father and eagerly huddled around the baited shoelace. Two crayfish hovered over the shoelace for over an hour and decided to take the bait at the same time. Eric pulled the bounty onto the sand amidst squeals of happy children.

"I told you we'd catch more," he said triumphantly.

The family quickly rekindled the fire and within moments the two crayfish were boiling in the old pop can.

"This time, I want more." Sadie announced, grinning.

“Oh you do, do you?” Eric said laughing. “We told you you’d like it.”

“I love it too,” the two older girls said in unison.

“What ya’ got there?” a stern voice sounded behind them.

The family whirled.

Two filthy men were standing on a knoll just off the shoreline. Eric was surprised he hadn’t smelled their approach. The man on the left, the older of the two, stood around six feet tall, had a thick neck and flabby shoulders over a protruding pot belly. He wore blue denim bib overalls over a white sweat-stained tee shirt. A spray of wet tobacco flecked his teeth and gathered in the corners of his bearded mouth. His matted grey hair, looking like something pulled from a shower drain, clung to his greasy head. “Smells good,” he said. “What is it?”

Eric moved towards a large rock a few feet to his left.

The older man doing the talking saw him. “I wouldn’t do anything stupid. We got guns.”

A younger man stood beside him, obviously a son. He was tall and skinny, dressed in blue jeans too short for his spindly legs. A tattered red flannel shirt gathered in a bunch at his pants. He was wearing a stained Chiefs baseball cap and grinning stupidly. Both men had rifles slung over their shoulders.

Eric stopped and sat on the rock.

“Whatever that is...we’ll be taking it,” the older man said, leaning forward to spit on the ground.

Fourteen-year-old Kiara scooted behind her mother in obvious response to the lustful gaze of the filthy younger man.

Without warning Eric reached behind the rock and produced a high-powered deer rifle. The men jumped back but it was too late. Eric already had them in his sights. “Move on,” Eric said, evenly.

The shocked look on the older man’s face slowly melted into a menacing grin. “Fine,” he said. “Have it your way, but we’ll be back. You gotta’ sleep sometime.”

Eric hesitated, aimed the rifle at the chest of the older man and pulled the trigger. The force of the round folded him up like a jackknife. He fell to the ground kicking. The younger man yelped

and went for his rifle, but Eric had already pulled the trigger. Within moments the two men lay dead on the ridge. The three girls screamed and piled on their mother. Eric moved towards the dead men.

“Daddy had to do it,” Stacey told her children. “He was only protecting us.”

“I know,” fourteen-year-old Kiara moaned.

Eric moved back to his family, his face ashen. “I’m sorry,” he said, tears filling his eyes. The family jumped to their feet, crying. They ran to Eric and clung to him. “I’m sorry,” Eric repeated. “I didn’t know what else to—“

Stacey put her hands on his face stopping him mid-sentence. “Don’t you ever be sorry,” she said. “Thank God you were able to protect us!”

~~~

Todd had been following the slow-moving Cumberland River eastward for days. In the beginning, the river had been crowded with people desperately trying to snag fish with whatever make-shift tool they could devise but the supply had quickly dwindled. He had been managing a living chasing down frogs and an occasional mouse. The frogs tended to be a bit bitter but he hadn’t had any ill effects.

He taught himself how to start a fire using a couple of sticks and a string so he was able to at least cook his bounty. He wasn’t sure which plants were edible. An Eagle Scout badge on a resume would take a man far these days, he told himself.

At one point along the way he had inadvertently stumbled into a patch of poison oak. He wasn’t able to sleep for days afterwards, but the nagging, stinging sensation had finally abated to the point where it could all but be ignored. It had been a while since he had heard any birds or insects. He decided they had either been eaten or frightened away by the strange new mob of foraging humans.

Other than the obvious lack of wildlife, Todd was amazed at the general normalcy. The trees still waived gently in the soft summer breeze. The clouds still moved beneath the baby-blue sky, blithely unaware of the calamity about to befall them.

Todd was envious. What he wouldn't give to be unaware. Once, just before he left the city, he'd spent the evening in an old tavern dumpster. That night he had achieved unawareness. He had even been able to stop thinking about Maria that night. The next morning he decided to become an alcoholic, but others before him had made the same commitment and pretty much depleted that resource as well.

More than once, he had pulled the handgun from his pocket and pressed it to his head. One of these times, he told himself, he'd get up the nerve and it would finally be over with.

Damn, he cursed, tripping over a sharp stick, another attractive bleeding wound in my leg. He leaned against a tree, slid to the ground, wiped the blood away with his hands and moved to the water. Within a few moments, the wound had been cleaned to his satisfaction and could bleed till the cows came home for all he cared.

He stumbled back to the tree he had leaned against. "Wait a minute," he said out loud. He turned to the right. There it was...the old paved boat launch leading into the water. He stood to get his bearing. This was their spot. This is where he and Maria had spent that beautiful day so long ago. He stumbled around till he finally found the old tree he and Maria had lay under that day. He looked up. *That's where we parked the car!*

He sat down beneath the tree and smiled. Memories of Maria poured over him like the summer breeze. "This is where I live," he said softly. "I have no reason to ever leave this place." He quietly slid to the grass-covered forest floor. Within moments, exhaustion overcame him and he drifted off to sleep.

~~~

Even after Eric had pulled the bodies well out of site, it took over an hour before the family was able to eat the two crayfish.

After the children had eaten their tiny morsels Eric moved away into the woods. He motioned for his wife to follow. "I'm going to leave the camp for a little while. I'll be coming back with meat. Tell the girls I shot a deer or something, will you?"

Stacey slowly nodded.

Eric turned, hoisted one of the men's bodies onto his shoulder and disappeared into the woods.

~~~

"They've had their meeting, sir."

"Already? It's been less than a week."

"Yes, sir. It doesn't look like they plan on wasting any time. What are your instructions?"

Prime Minister Yael Ben Judah looked across his wide desk at the chief of the Israeli Mossad. "Keep watching."

"Should I recommend putting our military on alert, Mr. Prime Minister?"

Ben Judah smiled. "You want my advice on how best to council me?"

The Mossad chief grinned back. "I guess I wanted to...observe your reaction first."

The Prime Minister laughed and slowly moved to the window. "Do we have anything to worry about today?"

"No," the Mossad chief said quietly. "They wouldn't have time to attack us today."

"Then today, we won't put our forces on alert. No sense responding until it begins. If they make a move, will I know about it?"

"We're watching them with eagle eyes, Mr. Prime Minister. We know where they are, what they're doing and why."

"That's good. Maybe you should go home and spend time with your family today."

"That's a good idea, sir. Should I recommend the same for you?"

"My council for you, old friend, is to not tell your Prime Minister to go home. If you suggest it, he may be swayed to do so, and he is much too busy today."

"Yes, sir," the Mossad chief said. "I'll be sure not to suggest anything like that today..."

~~~

Something falling in Todd's face caused him to jump. He moved away and looked back over his shoulder. "No," he breathed. Just

over his head, a large grey squirrel was clinging to the old shade tree. He slowly sat up, careful not to make any movement that might scare it away. "You...might not want to be quite so friendly little feller," he said. "Things have changed out here." He carefully reached into his pocket and pulled out an old frog leg he had been saving for a snack. He gingerly moved forward, offering the frog leg to the squirrel.

"I don't think squirrels eat meat," Maria said softly.

Todd smiled and closed his eyes. This was his favorite dream. Sometimes after this dream, it would take him a few minutes to realize Maria wasn't really there. He lived for those moments when he thought Maria was there. Sometimes, He'd lay in the darkness, desperately trying to conjure up that dream.

He opened his eyes again. The squirrel was gone. "Damn," he said.

"I'm sorry," Maria said quietly. "I think I scared it away."

Todd turned in the direction of the voice. This dream seemed so real it took his breath away. There, on the grass, his beautiful Maria was kneeling just a few feet away. She was smiling up at him, tears flowing down her cheeks. She gently reached out to him.

He jumped back. "Wha—"

"Todd, what happened to you, don't you know me?"

Todd stared at her and slowly moved his hand to her face. He gently touched her cheek and quickly pulled his hand back.

"M...Maria?"

Maria moved forward. She reached out and cupped his face in her hands, pulled herself up to him and lovingly kissed his lips.

Tears filled Todd's eyes as he tried to speak. He rolled his hands over her beautiful face. "Maria...tell me it's really you..."

"Todd...sweetie," she said quietly. "It's me. I'm really here." She pushed her face to his.

"Oh my dear God," Todd gasped. He pulled her close, pressing his body into hers then pushed away and gazed into her limpid green eyes. He pulled her back into him and they clung together in the shade of their old tree. Finally she pulled away again and looked up at him.

"How...what?" he stammered.

"I have something to tell you," she said. "I need for you to listen to me, Todd, because you know me. You know what I'm saying..."

Todd stared at her, blinking back the tears.

"Todd," she continued, gently rolling the fingers of one hand over his lips. "I love you. I *love* you. When I thought I lost you..."

Hot tears rolled down Todd's bewildered face.

"I've never felt this way about anyone or anything," she said. "I didn't know I could..." She looked deep into his eyes. "We'll be together forever. No one or no...thing will ever separate us again."

Todd desperately tried not to break down but it was no use. He fell against her and gently rolled her to the soft grass. They lay holding each other, crying, until darkness finally overtook the forest.

~~~

The historic wood-walled chamber, with its lofty sky-lit ceiling and distinctive rows of upholstered green benches echoed with tension. Troubled members of parliament leaned from their places on the benches in tight groups discussing unsettling events. The usual morning bustle had been altered. No one chuckled. No backs were patted. No friendly idle chatter. This morning the members spoke in hushed tones, eyebrows pulled together, one collective eye on a forlorn looking figure sitting alone in his place on the Government minister's bench. His glasses hung on the tip of his nose. He sat thumbing through a handful of paperwork pulled from an attaché case held in his ridged lap.

The Labour MP for Liverpool Waveney finally looked up from his notes... the signal they had all been waiting for. A hush fell over the chamber. Men and women quickly pulled from their huddles and returned to sit stately in their seats. The little man rose, stepped to one of two lecterns on a table in front of the Speaker and spoke into a microphone especially placed by the BBC for this occasion.

"Mr. Speaker," his voice echoed, his eyes sweeping the room, "may I draw the attention of the House?

The speaker nodded stoically.

The small man reached, sipped a drink from his water glass and returned it to its place on the table. He then proceeded to address

the United Kingdom's House of Commons.

"Most of you are aware I have been designated chairman of the Dante<sup>657</sup> response task force...the DTF. I have been asked to brief the governing parties on the imminent asteroid impact and discuss what the United Kingdom can expect as a result."

Again, he paused for a sip of water. He rolled several papers around in his hands, making certain they were in order and continued. "The point of impact will occur in the American heartland rather than at sea which means we are in no immediate danger of a global tsunami as was feared. Of course, that doesn't take into account possible earthquake-generated tsunamis and landslides resulting from the impact."

"London is over two thousand, five hundred kilometers from the projected impact site, so the initial blast wave and ground shock may not affect us...However, at the time of impact, the electromagnetic pulse will result in loss of the electrical power grid. We can expect the grid to be restored within a few hours but it will remain unstable with intermittent blackouts and brownouts lasting for days. Most of our emergency back-up generators will remain functional."

"Ionizing Radiation will jam all communications for an unspecified amount of time."

The small man stopped, readjusted his reading glasses and continued.

"Within one hour after impact, we can expect the aerosols and debris ejected into the atmosphere to reach us. The debris will blot out the sun. The land will be plunged into perpetual night for an unspecified amount of time. People will panic. Low earth orbit satellites will be destroyed along with the ozone layer. Debris fallout and released aerosols will make breathing...difficult."

The small man paused again, looking out into the ashen faces of the shocked crowd, then continued.

"Acid and black rainfall will result in massive global fish depletion. Most plants and trees will die, the remainder...weakened. Virtually all the surface water will be contaminated.

Beginning at approximately five days after impact and lasting several months, huge storms will menace the British Isles. We can

expect tornadoes, large hailstorms, and violent lightning storms. This year's world food crop will be completely destroyed. Global food crops will be environmentally stressed for an unspecified amount of time. Temperatures worldwide will drop five to ten degrees. We can expect..."

The small man paused for a moment and continued. "Widespread starvation."

A collective gasp rose from the chamber.

"Grain transportation and processing will be seriously undermined. Starvation will weaken the survivors. Plagues, sickness and disease will ravage the world's population as a result of contaminated water and food supplies...stress and fear...The world will then undergo perpetual winter conditions for an unspecified amount of time."

The chamber rumbled with the murmurs of the crowd.

"Are we to understand, sir," a voice rang out, "that your committee is predicting the extinction of the human race?"

The small man leaned forward and spoke directly into the microphone.

"Yes."

~~~

Maria awoke to the soft sounds of the early morning forest. Her head was lying in Todd's lap. He was gently stroking her hair. The cool breeze felt good on her face. She looked down and noticed Todd had covered her with his jacket.

"Strange thing," Todd said, still gently stroking her ebony hair. "I dreamt you last night, but...you're still here."

Maria looked up into his face silhouetted against their old shade tree and smiled softly. "It's not a dream."

"I've been giving it some thought," he said, ignoring her. "It must be the frogs. I've heard eating frogs can cause hallucinations. Of course I didn't realize the local ones could—"

"Todd," Maria said. "This isn't a dream."

Todd looked down at her longingly. "It has to be. How could you have found me? How did you get here? Too many things just don't make sense."

Maria sat up and put her face against his chest. "So much to tell you. So much has happened."

"How is it that you happen to be here just as I show up?"

Maria pulled back and looked into his eyes. "That was no accident, buddy. I've been here looking for you every day for the last four days. I went back to the hospital, to the house—"

"You went to the house...when?"

"I'm not sure," Maria said, "as soon as we got back from Australia, I think. I was so excited when I found your prison clothes there. That's when I knew you were still alive."

Todd shook his head. "Australia? How did you get to Australia?"

"Brother Michael took me."

"Who?"

"Brother Michael....Well, I mean Dr. Oliver, at first...then he was Brother Michael."

"Huh?"

"Oh Todd...I was in the hospital and three men...oh I don't even want to talk about them. Brother Michael saved me...oh it was horrible...I don't even want to talk about that. Did you say frogs?"

Todd looked down at her, blinking.

"Did you say you've been eating frogs?" she repeated.

Todd looked away and shrugged. "Well yeah...sort of...."

She scowled. "And I let you kiss me?"

"I brushed my teeth."

"I must really love you," she said. "I've never kissed a frog eater before."

Todd scratched his head. "I was sort of hungry. The mini mart was closed...and see, that's another thing...Maria would never say that."

"No, it's true," she said wide-eyed. "I've never kissed a frog eater before."

"No, not that, Maria would never say she loved me."

She pushed her face back against his chest. "Maria just did."

Todd was silent for a time before speaking. "When do you suppose it will all go away?"

She pulled back and smiled sweetly. "Never. I will always love

you, forever and ever.”

Todd pulled her to him and held her. “Do you have any idea how often I’ve dreamed of you saying that to me?”

She smiled contently against his chest. They sat beneath the old shade tree awhile, listening to the sounds of the slow-moving river.

“That’s what’s different,” she said finally. “I don’t hear any birds.”

“Yeah...they either got away or got eaten.”

“Has it been that bad?” Have people really been eating the little birds?”

Todd sighed. “Everybody ran like jackrabbits after the president’s announcement. They took all the food and closed all the stores. People were eating anything that moved. Most of them took off a while ago. I guess they’re trying to get to the coast. You pretty much have to eat anything you can find.”

Maria pulled back and looked him over. “Have you been all right? Have you been starving?”

“Who me? No, I’ve been doing all right.”

Maria furled her brows. “You wouldn’t complain if you were on fire.”

Todd laughed. No I’ve...been okay.

Maria shrugged and began rolling her finger over Todd’s shirt. “I’m hungry,” she said finally. “I haven’t eaten in a long time. I’m really starving. Do you have anything at all to eat?”

Todd raised his eyebrows. “Hmmm,” he said. “What would you like?”

She sat silently contemplating, her lips working as if trying to decide on Poppet or Saks Fifth Avenue. “What do you have?” she said finally.

Todd piously pondered the question. “We have...tadpole, ala king...um...uh...French-fried grasshoppers, and our special today is root of unknown plant.”

Maria pulled her eyebrows together and sat for a time. “I think I’ll have...the chicken cordon bleu.”

“I’m sorry but we’re fresh out of chicken. Perhaps you’d like to try our rat?”

“No, I had that last night. let’s see, maybe...I’ll have the duck.”

“Sorry,” Todd said apologetically. “The duck flew away....The cook’s specialty is pond membrane soup with pollywogs. You really should give that a try.”

“Maybe I’ll just go with...whatever it is you can find for me my big brave hunter man.”

Todd smiled, stood and pointed towards the river. “Me go hunt buffalo, bring back meat and skin, maybe get big head to hang on tree.

“Don’t bring back any heads!”

Todd laughed and began moving away. “Don’t you disappear now.” he yelled over his shoulder.

“If I eat that stuff do you think it will hurt the baby?” Maria hollered as he moved away into the forest.

“It might work out,” Todd said. “Maybe he’ll develop a hankering for frogs and mice.”

“Oh yuck!”

“Think of the money we’ll save.”

“Shuddup!”

“No really, we can grind them up for baby food...oh yeah...we don’t have a grinder...you could squash them with rocks....”

“Shuddup!”

“Get it really soupy....”

“Shuddup, Shuddup, Shuddup!”

Maria watched Todd disappear, moving away towards the river. She looked up at the knoll just above the tree and waved. That was their signal.

Todd had finally left....

~~~

“We have reports of massive troop buildup here, here and here.”

The Israeli General was slapping a long stick against spots on a large map supported by an easel.

“This is the biggest buildup since ’67, people. As we speak, Hamas is moving to block the Straits of Tiran in the Gulf of Eilat. OPs reporting from the Sinai and the Gaza Strip confirm an Arab presence of some 800,000 troops, over 3,440 tanks and 910 aircraft. Egyptian forces have been deployed in fortifications at Damascus

and Amman. The OPs report 7 divisions with a total of about 700,000 troops, approximately 2,000 tanks and hundreds of artillery pieces. Syrian forces at the Golan Heights are preparing to deploy heavy artillery pieces here, here and here. Behind enemy lines here, here, here and here, the Russian Federation Air Force has been landing scores of ANTONOVs, dropping off tons of specialized cargo.”

The General stopped and looked out at the group of Israeli executive officers. “This specialized cargo has the Tactical Operations Center jumping, people. To date, the RFAF has offloaded over 100,000 crates of SKS Rifles. These are extremely low-tech bolt-action weapons. They have also offloaded hundreds of thousands of live horses to the LZs.

The TOC is taking this as a clear indication of what our enemy’s intentions are, and what our response will be. The enemy intends to use the electromagnetic pulse and ionizing radiation produced by the American Dante impact to disable our communications and destroy our mechanized military. When the airborne debris and gasses overtake us, they intend to sweep in out of the darkness on horseback and annihilate our people.”

The General put his hands behind his back and began pacing back and forth in front of the easel. “We have no choice but to pre-empt. We intend to hit them with everything we have while we still have it. This includes using our nuclear arsenal. The enemy has anticipated this of course....We have clear indications of a formidable Russian nuclear presence.”

The General paused, looking out at the group. “See to it that everything is in place, people. We have to be completely prepared when the Prime Minister gives the command to go....”

“Dismissed!”

~~~

Todd was beginning to feel anxious over how long this was taking. He kept finding himself staring into the forest grinning like an idiot. He had managed to run down three frogs and it had taken him at least an hour. He wasn’t real comfortable leaving Maria alone for that long. He decided to go back. She could eat and he could

find something later.

He simply wanted to sit and stare at her. He knew he should be worried. They only had a couple of weeks to live after all, if they didn't starve to death in the meantime. He couldn't help not caring about all that. He could worry about that tomorrow...He was just going to enjoy being with Maria today.

He inadvertently stumbled upon a couple more frogs as he slowly made his way back towards the old shade tree along the shore of the Cumberland.

He didn't envy her, her first taste of frog. He hoped she'd get used to it soon.

After some time, he made his way into a clearing.

Maria was gone.

He slowly moved down towards the shade tree, his desperation building. *Where could she be? She had to be here. It had to be real.*

"Not there, sweetie...over here."

"Maria?" Todd gasped. "Maria, where are you?"

"Come over here," she said from behind a group of trees.

Todd slowly moved around the trees.

Maria was smiling at him, sitting on a small chair in front of a cloth-covered table. In the center of the table sat a wide vase containing elegant multicolored flowers, adorned with sea green fern and clouds of baby's breath. Two flickering kings-blue candles, supported by matching silver candleholders, sat stately next to the flower vase. Dinner plates of China, gleaming silver utensils and sparkling high glasses adorned the perimeter of the table. Nearby, a glimmering gold container held a dewy bottle of non-alcoholic red merlot wine. Across from Maria, another small chair waited.

Todd stood off gazing at her wide-eyed. "Maria...how...."

Maria rose from her chair and slowly moved to him. She reached out and took both his hands. "Sit down with me," she said softly.

Todd slowly scanned the epicurean feast and looked back at her. "Maria, where did you..."

She put her finger on his mouth. "Shhh," she whispered. "Don't wonder, don't ask... let's just celebrate our first meal together again and think of nothing else."

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Sarah dabbed at her eyes with a cloth. "That is so sweet."

"That is the most romantic thing I've ever seen," Mallory said, hanging on Barney's arm. "Why don't you ever do things like that for me?"

"Yeah... romantic," Barney said as loud as he dared. "You weren't the one who had to pack all that junk down there."

"What's wrong with Brother Michael?" Pete asked.

Barney snorted. "I don't know. He's been acting weird ever since that girl come around."

Pete pulled his brows together, concerned. "He's over in the Humvee all by himself. Maybe we should go see if he's all right."

"He wants to be alone," Mallory said. "I wouldn't bother him right now."

Barney shook his head and scowled. "I think he loves her."

Pete glanced back at the Humvee before returning his attention to Barney. "If he loved her, why is he taking her all over the place looking for that other guy? Why did he help her get all this stuff for the meal and everything?"

"Do I look like Brother Michael?" Barney said. "How should I know?"

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Todd closed his eyes savoring the delicious food. "What is this?"

"It's army food," Maria said. "It's from an army base in Nashville."

Todd looked up at her, shook his head and returned to his food. "I said I wouldn't ask....This is so delicious. Do you know how long it's been since I've eaten food? The last time I ate food was at the pri—" He stopped talking mid-sentence.

"I know you were in prison," she said softly. "I thought they killed you. We heard they killed all the convicts—"

"You're right," Todd said, smiling across at her. "Let's not think about anything else except us and this delicious meal the forest fairies prepared for us."

Maria giggled.

His smile slowly faded as he looked into her eyes. "Maria" he said, "I'm so happy..." His eyes glazed with tears as he struggled to continue speaking. "I'm so happy you're here with me. You are...my life. Without you, there is no life...only...sad, dark, existence."

Maria smiled back at him. "I know," she said softly. "I know what you mean. I feel the same way."

Todd shook his head. "I can't lose the feeling that I have to fight to keep this dream going."

Maria smiled softly at him from across the table. "Todd, she said. "There's something I have to do."

She paused a moment, dabbing at her food with a fork.

"What is it; what's wrong?"

She pondered her words for a time. "When we were married..." she said finally, "I know you have always felt...it wasn't real, that...it didn't mean what it was supposed to mean—"

"It's ok," Todd said. "You've always been completely honest about how you feel. I've learned to accept it—"

"No, Todd wait, I need to do this...please listen to me."

She reached across the table and took Todd's hand. "It's true...When I married you, I did it because you loved me. Now I want to marry you because I love you."

Todd could scarcely believing what he was hearing.

She tenderly stroked his hand, looked towards the river and sighed. She turned back to face him, reached under the flower vase and retrieved a piece of paper she had placed there earlier. "I'm sorry," she said, shrugging. "I wrote this down...I thought I had it memorized; I've been working on it all week." She scanned over the paper one last time and put it back under the vase. She turned back towards Todd, quickly reached for her napkin and dabbed at her eyes.

"What is it?" Todd asked, noticing her trembling hands holding the napkin.

"I'm sorry, my love," she repeated. "This is hard. I want you to understand how...important this is to me. I want to...show you what's here in my heart." Her voice broke and trailed off.

“Sweetheart,” Todd said softly. “Is everything all right? The baby...Is the baby ok?”

She smiled. “We’re fine sweetie; it’s just that... there’s something I need to say to you.” She reached and took both his hands in hers.

“Todd,” she began, “I take you to be my husband, my partner in life and my only true love. I promise, sweetheart, to cherish our friendship and love you always, till the end of our days. I will trust you, my love and I will honor you. I will laugh with you and cry with you...I will love you faithfully, my beloved, through the best and the worst...the hard and the easy. No matter what happens, I will always be there with you. As I have given you my hand to hold...” She gently squeezed his hand. “I am giving you my life to keep.

Today, in this beautiful forest, under the eyes of God, I offer you my solemn wedding vow. I love you, my Todd, my dearest love, my treasure. I am yours forever.”

Todd sat motionless.

Finally, after a time, he was able to speak. “I love you too.” he said, tears flowing. “I have for as long as I can remember.”

Maria moved from her chair and knelt next to him.

Todd rolled his hand through her thick hair and gently pulled her to him. A sound from his right attracted his attention. Without warning Todd was on his feet. He was brandishing a pistol aimed at the knoll just over the campsite.

“Todd!” Maria yelled, rising to her feet.

“Someone’s up there!” Todd said.

She looked up.

“It’s just me,” Pete said, his hands high in the air. “Don’t shoot!”

Maria moved towards Todd and pulled the pistol towards the ground. “Todd, it’s ok. That’s my friend Pete.”

“What’s he doing here?” he said. He looked up at Pete. “What are you doing here?”

“Todd, sweetie, settle down, I told you, he’s my friend...look at you...your heart is pounding out of your chest.” She reached and pulled his gaze away from Pete. “Sweetheart, it’s ok...what’s happened to you?”

“Brother Michael wants to know if you’re ready,” Pete said

awkwardly. "He said you should get started if you want to get to Omaha. He said you only have a few days left and it's a long ways."

"Omaha?" Todd said.

Maria looked at Pete, then Todd, then back at Pete. "Tell Brother Michael we'll be there in a minute."

"Who are these people?" Todd said.

"These are the people who saved my life."

"I need to know what happened, Maria. I need to know what's going on. Why are we going to Omaha? Isn't that where the—"

"Yes...It's where the asteroid is gonna' hit. I don't know how, but I know the baby has to be born there."

"And your friends are helping you get to ground zero?"

"Please, trust me, Todd."

"I'm sorry, Maria. I won't let you go."

"I have to go."

"I can't let you go. I can't let you take our baby into the middle of ground zero."

"Todd," Maria said firmly. "I belong to you, but if you ever loved me, you'll take me to Omaha."

Todd hesitated, raised his eyebrows and shrugged. "I'll take you," he said softly.

Pete scampered up the hill.

Todd watched him leave and turned back to Maria. "Who's this...Brother Michael? Why does everyone call him that? Is he some sort of preacher or something?"

Maria smiled up at him. "Sort of."

"Is he a doctor?"

"No, he was pretending to be Dr. Oliver—"

"Wait a minute!" Todd said, interrupting her. "Now I know where I heard that name. He's with the Vincennes. I heard Jenkins talking about him in the hospital."

"Father Jenkins?" Maria said. "What hospital?"

"Your hospital...at Vanderbilt...the night after the President's announcement."

"You were at the hospital that night?" Maria asked. "What was Father Jenkins doing there?"

"They were coming to get you," Todd said breathlessly. "This Guy Oliver is in on it—"

"No sweetie, you don't understand—"

"Everything ok, Maria?" a voice sounded to their left.

Todd tried to pull his pistol up, but Maria stopped him. A young man was standing a few feet away. Obviously unencumbered by the sweltering Tennessee heat, he wore a black tailored suit and matching tie over a satin, royal blue shirt. His meticulous wavy hair was every bit as black as Maria's. His features, perfect. His smoldering black eyes were staring back at Todd.

"Yes, Brother Michael," Maria said nervously. "Everything's fine...Just a little confusion."

"So this is Oliver," Todd said, glaring at Brother Michael.

Brother Michael's icy cold black eyes returned the stare.

"No, sweetie," Maria said, "this is Brother Michael."

"I really think you should get started, Maria," Michael said. "If your...man here won't take you to Omaha, I'll be more than happy to."

Todd pushed forward, all but toppling Maria.

Maria frantically reached for his face and pulled it back towards her. "Todd...TODD! Trust me, you don't want to go there!"

Michael stood back, glaring menacingly at Todd, a microscopic smile on his lips.

"Todd's gonna take me," Maria said obviously trying to defuse the tension.

"You should learn to relax, sport," Michael said. "You and I are on the same team. We both love Maria."

Maria glanced at Michael before returning her attention to Todd. "No, Todd," she said stammering, "he didn't mean he loved me. He didn't mean it like that—"

"I think he did," Todd said, moving towards Brother Michael.

Brother Michael moved ominously towards Todd.

"Todd!" Maria yelled. "Stop, you don't understand!"

~~~

Pete and Barney had come down from the knoll with Sarah and Mallory following close behind. The pregnant girl was screaming.

"I think that guy is gonna try to fight Brother Michael," Pete said, looking down on the scene.

"You're crazy."

"No really, look."

"Cripes!" Barney said. "That dude doesn't have a clue."

Sarah and Mallory moved to their side.

"Look," Pete said glancing at Sarah. "That guy wants to fight Brother Michael."

Sarah and Mallory quickly exchanged glances.

~~~

Todd stepped forward and fired a right fist into Michael's forehead. Brother Michael went down like a stone.

Maria ran to Michael and held his head to her hands. "Todd, damn you! Why did you do that?"

Todd stared down at her. Michael began to regain consciousness.

"Brother Michael saved my life!" Maria yelled. "He rescued me from the asteroid and then...brought me back when I asked him to. He was the one who told me you were still alive. He helped me find you. He made the Army give us an army car and trailer full of food and guns so we could go to Omaha!"

"A what?" Todd asked. "An army car?"

Michael sat up rubbing his forehead. He looked up at Todd and grinned. "Good punch. I didn't even see it coming."

Maria stared at Michael. "Why didn't you...you know."

Michael smiled. "As I said, I didn't see it coming ...lesson learned." He pushed his hand out and Todd gingerly took it. Todd pulled as Michael slowly stood up.

"When did you become so violent, husband?" Maria said.

Todd remained silent.

Maria moved to him and brushed the hair out of his eyes. "What happened to you, my love? You've changed so much."

"I understand," Michael said, brushing himself off. "I was baiting him a little."

"Yes, you were!" Maria scolded.

"Sorry..." Todd said awkwardly. He looked up on the hill. Two men and two women were standing in a huddle staring at him, eyes

wide, mouths hanging open. "Who are they?"

"They're with me," Michael said rubbing his forehead. He glanced up the hill and turned his attention back to Maria. "You really should be off. You only have a few days."

"Come with me," Maria said, holding her hand out towards Todd. Todd took it and helped her climb the hill. When they reached the top, Todd saw two military Humvees parked at the side of the road. A military trailer loaded down with supplies was attached to the back of one of them.

"That one's yours," Michael said, pointing at the Humvee with the trailer.

Maria moved to Michael. "Why don't you come with us?"

"I'm sure Michael has other things to do," Todd said before he could stop himself.

Michael sent Todd a black look. "Actually there's nothing I would rather do than go with you to Omaha, but the Father has other plans. You two are on your own."

"You think she should be going off to Omaha?" Todd said.

"More importantly, the Father thinks she should be going to Omaha."

"Who is the Father?"

"Oh let's not get into that," Maria said. "We'll be here all day."

She took both of Brother Michael's hands in her own. "How can I thank you?" she said, smiling sweetly.

"Be his mother," Michael said. "That's all the thanks I need...and know I'll always be here if you need me."

Maria's smile melted and she looked deep into his eyes. "Has the Father told you anything about the asteroid yet?"

"Nothing," Michael said. "I'm as confused as you are."

They embraced and she moved away. "Goodbye," she said, waving in the direction of Barney, Pete, Mallory and Sarah. "I'll miss you." She moved to the Humvee and Todd helped her in.

"Goodbye," she said again, waving. "I'll never forget you."

Todd moved around to the other side as the small group of people standing in front of the remaining Humvee huddled around Brother Michael. After a little experimentation, Todd and Maria's

Humvee came to life. They made a U-turn, moved away down the winding road and disappeared.

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Before Todd and Maria's Humvee pulled out of sight Michael had already instructed Pete and Barney to collect their things and prepare to move out.

As they moved away, Mallory and Sarah approached Brother Michael. "Well played," Mallory said softly. "The boy has proven to be a good choice."

Michael glanced at her and turned his eyes back to the road. "Hmm, for now. I don't think he'll be running away from any fights...If that means anything."

"It means everything," Sarah said evenly, "because the fight is only beginning..."

## Chapter Six

### Into the flames

“Hello in the camp!”

“What do you want?”

“United states Marines...May we approach?”

Eric Wheeler peeked up over the rock. “Let me see you!” he yelled into the woods.

An olive drab Marine stepped out from behind a bush. He had a red cross on his helmet.

Eric stood. “Boy, are we glad to see you guys!”

Two more Marines stepped from behind the bush and all three made their way into camp.

“Boy, am I glad to see you,” Eric repeated, pushing his hand out. “We’ve been watching your helicopters fly over for days. We were hoping you’d come.”

“I’m Lieutenant Brent Wiens,” one of the Marines said, taking Eric’s hand. “Everything ok here?”

“We could sure use some food...other than that we’re ok.”

“Who all is in your camp?”

“Just me, my wife and three kids...daughters.”

Stacey and the girls timidly stepped out from behind the rock.

“Just the one family then?” the Lieutenant asked as the girls moved up towards him.

“Yeah, just us...you don’t have any spare food?”

“Yes we do,” the Lieutenant said. He nodded towards another Marine who quickly moved off into the brush and turned his attention back to Eric. “We’re gonna be picking folks up on the beach day after tomorrow at noon. What’s your name?”

“Wheeler,” Eric said, “Eric wheeler.”

“Wife and...three kids...daughters,” the Lieutenant repeated, writing the info down on a large notebook. “You’ll need to be in the Hampton Beach area at noon sharp, day after tomorrow.”

“Where is that?” Eric said. “We’re new around here.”

“Straight east, follow the river, you can’t miss it. But if you’re not

there, we'll leave without you."

"I understand," Eric said, nodding his head, "we'll be there."

The Marine returned carrying a large cardboard box. "You ever had an MRE?" the Lieutenant said as the Marine approached.

Eric stared at the box. "No, I don't think so."

Lieutenant Wiens opened the box and pulled out a brown metallic looking package. The word "Meal" was emblazoned on the front in bold letters along with a black moon-shaped crescent.

"What is it, Daddy?" Sadie said, looking up from between her father's legs.

The Lieutenant grinned down at the child. "It's an MRE; stands for meals ready to eat."

The family gathered around as the lieutenant went down on one knee, pulled the package open with his teeth and dropped several more packages out of the original. He made a move to throw the outer package away but pulled it back. "How does Beefsteak with Mushrooms sound?"

Eric looked at his wife and back at the Lieutenant.  
"Uh...sounds...wonderful."

The Lieutenant grinned, pushed the smaller package into a larger one and reached for his canteen. He poured a tiny bit of water into the outer package and leaned it against a rock. "This'll take about a minute," he said, smiling. He reached to pat Sadie's head but she ducked away behind her father's leg. The Lieutenant laughed and looked back at the Marine who had just returned. "Go get another one," he said. "This is a pretty big family."

The Marine smiled and left the camp.

"Oh good...it looks ready," he said as he reached and pulled the small package out of the larger one. Miraculously, the package came out steaming hot. Kiara and Ally's jaws dropped.

"It's a chemical reaction," the Lieutenant said. "Sweet huh... no fire needed." He bit the corner off the package and tore it open. The smell of steaming hot Beefsteak with Mushrooms drew the family forward. The Lieutenant reached into another package, pulled out a plastic spoon and handed it to Sadie.

The thick, hardy odor drove away all inhibitions. She moved from

behind her father's legs and reached for the spoon. "Careful with this, honey," the Lieutenant said. "It's hot."

Stacey reached down and held the package for her daughter as Sadie pushed the spoon deep into the steaming food. She quickly pulled it out and proceeded to push it into her mouth.

"Wait," her mother said, pulling the spoon away to test on her own lips. "It's still hot sweetie," she said, blowing on the steamy food.

Ally and Kiara stood by impatiently, their mouths watering.

Finally, following a quick blessing and considerable prodding, Stacey returned the spoon to her child, who immediately pushed it into her mouth. "Mmm," she moaned, her wide eyes glistening. "Mmm, it's yummy!"

A chorus arose from the two other Wheeler children.

"I want some!"

"Sadie...let me have some!"

"Can I have some?"

"Can I have just one taste?"

"Sadie let us have some!"

The lieutenant laughed. "Look, there's a lot more, twelve in each box." He reached in the box and began pulling them out one by one. "See, we have...Pork Rib—"

"That's what I want!" Kiara yelled.

"Beef Ravioli—"

"I want that one," Ally squealed.

"Country Captain Chicken—"

"No, I mean I want that one!" Kiara hollered.

"Chicken Breast—"

"Ooo that one, that one!" Ally yelled.

Sadie appeared to be much too busy with her mouthwatering Beefsteak with Mushrooms to have a care.

"Thank you," Stacey Wheeler said, tears in her eyes. "You don't know how hungry we've been."

The Lieutenant smiled. "You won't be hungry anymore. We're gonna' get you folks out of here."

"Can't tell you how much we appreciate this," Eric Wheeler said,

reaching for the Lieutenant's hand. The Marine returned with the other box of MREs and dropped them on the ground.

"You folks have a big hot meal tonight," the Lieutenant said. "We'll see you day after tomorrow on the beach."

~~~

All freeways and interstate highways had long since been rendered impassable by the hordes of people struggling to make it out of the major cities. Todd found a set of railroad tracks and pointed the Humvee west, northwest. He wasn't sure the trains had stopped running so he tried to steer clear of the tracks themselves. He found that, for the most part, the track bed was wide enough to easily make room for both railroad tracks and Humvee.

He was able to push the vehicle upwards of forty miles an hour and remain relatively comfortable. The ride was rough and Todd worried about Maria in her advanced stage of pregnancy, but she seemed to be managing.

Todd kept one eye on the onboard compass. He had no way of knowing which direction the tracks would lead. If they made any deviation from northwest, he'd have to leave the tracks and move out overland.

Maria had managed to find a vehicle owner manual under the seat. "It says here this high mobility multi-purpose wheeled vehicle is a one and a quarter ton truck...is that big?"

"What did they call it?" Todd said.

"A high mobility multi-purpose wheeled vehicle."

They both looked at each other as if on cue. "Hum veeeee," they said in unison.

"I think a ton and a quarter is pretty big," Todd said. "It feels big."

"It says here, the vehicle's top speed is sixty-five," Maria said. "It says it'll go faster but you won't like it."

"No, it doesn't say that, does it?"

Maria pushed the owner's manual in front of his face. "That's what it says, right here."

She continued silently reading the manual for a time and then pulled a map out from under the seat. "The first major town we

should see is Clarksville.”

“I’m not sure these tracks will go there,” Todd said. “We’ll stop when we see a town and check it out.”

Maria nodded and went back to reading the map. “Andrew Jackson lived in Nashville...did you know that? Wasn’t he the President once?”

“Yeah,” Todd said, “the Hermitage.”

Maria looked up. “What?”

“The Hermitage...that was his house.”

“Hmm,” Maria mumbled, looking back at the map. She scanned it for a time and pushed it back under the seat. She milled about momentarily and came back up.

“Did you say Clarksville?” Todd said.

“Yeah.”

Todd pointed at a sign just off the tracks. “There it is.”

“That’s funny,” Maria said. “Why would they have a sign next to the railroad tracks?”

“Maybe a passenger train passed this way.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right...we should try this.”

“Huh?” Todd said, watching the dirt-covered track bed pass by beneath them. They were making a little better time now.

“When the baby is finally born we should try this,” Maria said, pushing something in front of Todd’s face.

“Maria, that’s a porn magazine. Where did you find that?”

“Todd, you’re blushing!”

“Put that away! Where did you find that?”

“Todd, we’re married. Why are you blushing?”

“Please, Maria...put that dang thing back where you found it.”

“You are so cute when you blush.” She pushed it back in front of his face.

“Mariaaa!” Todd yelped.

Maria squealed with laughter and shoved the magazine back under the seat. She rearranged a few things and curled up under his right arm. “I think I feel sexy,” she said.

Dust and gravel spewed in all directions as the Humvee skated to a stop on the gravel-covered track bed. Todd turned and gently

wrapped his arms around her.

"Not now, stallion," Maria said, her hand pushing on his forehead. "I meant after the baby's born."

"Oh," Todd said.

He slowly moved back and silently sat behind the wheel. After some time, he re-started the Humvee and resumed driving northwest on the track bed.

Maria pushed herself back under his arm. "Are you mad at me?"

"No."

"Yes, you are."

"No, I'm not"

"You're pouting."

"No I'm not."

"Yes you are."

They rode silently over the track bed for a time.

"I'm sorry, sweetie," Maria said softly, breaking the silence. "I just wanted you to know how differently I felt about things now. I think falling in love with you has really changed me...I just wanted you to know that."

"Ok," Todd said quietly. "But, can I see the magazine again?"

"SHUDDUP!" Maria squealed, slugging him in the chest.

~~~

"**W**hy are you sitting here in the dark, old-timer? You should be in bed."

The President of the United States looked up to see his wife's form silhouetted against the brightness of the open door. He looked back into the darkness. "I couldn't sleep."

"Well, it's a wonder," his wife said moving forwards to switch on an antique lamp. The light revealed a weatherworn grey haired senior citizen slumped in a luxurious high-backed couch. She went to him and sat down at his side. "Any particular reason?"

The president looked up at her with raised brows.

"Well...ok," she recanted, "silly question."

He looked back at the floor. They sat together in silence for a time.

"Tomorrow," the President said after a long sigh, "the Congress

will convene for the very last time.”

The President’s wife gently patted him on the shoulder.

“The first and last item of business,” he continued softly, “will be to dissolve and disenfranchise the government of The United States of America.”

He glanced at his wife and back at the floor. “That damn European Union! Those were the only terms they would accept. How can they be so damn calculating at a time like this? How can they so brazenly close their borders to the very people who supported, sacrificed and died for them? If it weren’t for the United States, there wouldn’t be a European Union. It would be the European Third Reich!”

The President’s wife sat silently patting him. “You have to listen to your advisors on this one Chet,” she said, breaking the silence. “It isn’t the E.U. doing these things to us. They didn’t cause our trouble, the asteroid did. Honey...in a little less than a week, the United States of America will no longer exist. How could we hope to carry on a...transient government?”

She stopped patting his shoulder and looked at him. “Look at it this way, dear. Imagine things were reversed, the asteroid was gonna hit...oh say...Germany....Would you have let that government transport the bulk of their citizenry into the borders of the United States and then allow them a separate government? Of course not...It would still be the United States of America. The E.U. will be making a lot of concessions for us.”

The President looked up at the first lady. “The E.U. will be absorbing the greatest military power the world has ever known!”

“A lot of good it will do them,” she said quickly, “hunkered down in a hundred year nuclear winter.”

~~~

Todd and Maria had been traveling nonstop for two days. Exhaustion finally overtook them and they pulled off the track bed just west of Jefferson City, Missouri. Earlier that morning, they spotted a small caravan of off-road vehicles heading east near Poplar Bluff, just west of the Missouri line. They were traveling overland a few miles north of the track bed. The couple hadn’t seen any signs

of life since then. They knew as they neared Omaha, the population would drop to nil. They followed a dirt path till they came upon a wide clearing near a slow moving irrigation ditch. In the trailer they found a pup tent and two military style mummy bags. Within moments, a rock-rimmed fire popped and crackled beneath an old, gigantic cottonwood tree.

It seemed as though Brother Michael had thought of everything. Whatever they needed, they had. Todd had even found an M-16 automatic rifle and a crate of ammo. Boxes of military food rations labeled MREs filled the back compartment of the Humvee and lined the walls of the trailer.

"He set us up for months," Todd said.

They were sitting against a rock in front of the fire, cuddled together in a military mummy bag made for one. "I wonder why he sent so much food when we only have a few more days till the—" He stopped mid-sentence.

Maria glanced up at him. "It's ok."

"I can't believe I just said that."

"It's ok," Maria repeated, cuddling up to him. "I'm not worried."

Todd looked up into the crystal clear stars. "It's damn perty. Reminds me of home in Oklahoma."

They sat together listening to the sounds of the fire, feeling the soothing warmth against their faces. After a time Maria laid her head back on his chest and sighed.

"Why not?" Todd said.

She looked up at him. "Why not what?"

"Why aren't you worried?"

"I don't know."

"You *were*...worried...remember?"

"I know, but that was before."

"Before what?"

"Before I met Brother Michael."

Todd fell silent for a time. "Because of Brother Michael you aren't worried anymore?" he said finally.

Maria pulled away and looked into the fire. "He made me believe that nothing will stand in the way of this little baby being born."

"He's not worried about the asteroid?"

Maria looked back at him and shrugged. "He doesn't know anything about the asteroid. He says the Father hasn't revealed anything about the asteroid to him yet."

"And you're not worried about that?"

"You have to know Brother Michael to understand. He makes you believe."

"Tell me about this guy," Todd said. "Who is he?"

"If I told you, you wouldn't believe me," Maria said softly. "He's not like any man I've ever met before." She quickly glanced up at him and pulled away. "Not like that, my love; not like you."

Todd sat silently staring into the fire. After a time he asked, "different in what way?"

Maria smiled and shook her head. "Where should I start? When I first met him...he was such a...wimp."

"That guy...a wimp?"

"It was just an act. He was there because he knew I would need him."

"How did he know that?"

She shook her head again and looked up at him. "He said he was the champion of the only begotten son of the Father."

Todd sat pondering her words for a time. "The baby," he said finally, "Is that who he's talking about?"

"Yeah...That's what he said."

"So, he's some kind of preacher?"

"More than that," Maria said, looking back into the fire.

"Imagine...you went to church and heard a preacher giving a sermon about the fires of hell. Then imagine fire coming down from heaven and burning everybody in the front row up...He's that kind of preacher. With him there is no...*faith*. He just tells it the way it is and makes it happen. He's not just convincing, he leaves absolutely no room for doubt." She shuffled her position within the sleeping bag and continued. "I never told you because it's just too horrible but there were these three men...They came to the hospital to get me. He killed them with his...mind."

"He did what? Who did he kill?"

"No, you don't understand," Maria said. "They were gonna take our baby out of me. They had me tied down, and they were gonna take our baby out."

Todd leaned forward. "Oh my God...Maria."

"I really thought I was going to die," she said softly.

Todd pulled her in and held her. Maria laid her face on his chest.

"After he killed them," she continued, "he took their car and airplane. He convinced the Colonel at the army base he was a secret agent or something. They helped him...they gave him anything he wanted. We were in Australia and he told me he thought you were still alive...He told me I could come back for you and that the baby would be born in Omaha, Nebraska, just like I knew he would." She sat back and looked into the fire.

"How was he able to do all this?" Todd said.

"He said it was the Father...the Father gave him the power."

"Did he mean God?"

"Well, sort of...."

Todd stood, pushed a log into the fire and slid back into the sleeping bag with Maria. "Is this the guy I—"

"He's the guy you punched," Maria said, frowning.

"Whew," Todd grunted, staring into the fire. "Well then, why didn't he—"

"I don't know." She said quickly. "You were very, very lucky."

Todd sat silent for a time. "I've been working out..." he said finally.

"I don't think that's it."

"I've been in prison, you know...."

She grinned up at him. "I don't think that's it either."

He smiled back and returned his attention to the fire. "I saw this guy. He's quite a guy."

"Yeah, he is," Maria said softly.

"You two were together for how long?"

"A while."

"Do you think he's...you know, good looking?"

"Oh yeah." Maria said, rolling her eyes.

"Did you ever...uh..."

Maria frowned up at him. "What?"

"Did you ever, you know, like him...sorta?"

"Did I like him sorta?"

"Did you think he was a stud?" Todd said louder.

"Oh...absolutely."

Todd leaned back and silently contemplated the stars. "What's that movie star's name you used to date?" he said after a time.

"You mean Jessie?"

"Yeah, yeah, Jessie Espinosa."

"What about him?"

"Is this Brother Michael better looking than him?"

"Hmm," Maria said, looking into the fire, "Yeah...I think so. Brother Michael is very handsome."

"But...not as handsome as me, though?"

Maria pulled back and inspected his face. "Hmm," she said, frowning. She stared at him for a moment. "Turn," she said, spinning her finger.

Todd rolled his eyes and turned his face to the left.

"Hmm...turn the other way."

Todd grimaced back at her.

"You wanted to know!" she yelled.

He slowly turned his face to the right.

"Let me see your teeth."

He leaned forward and pulled his lips back.

"Hmm," she said, "I think...yeah, I think you are the most handsome."

"Get out!" Todd yelled, grinning.

"Yeah, it's true. You're the most handsome."

"I knew it," he said, looking back into the fire. He sat grinning into the fire for a moment then looked back at her. "Wait a minute, you're hiding your hands."

"What?"

"Let me see your hands."

"Why?"

"Just, let me see them."

"What are you saying?"

"Let me see," he demanded.

"Don't you think you're being a little childish?"

"Show me," he said, frowning.

"Ok, ok...it's not like I have anything to hide." She pulled her hands out from the sleeping bag.

"Why are your fingers crossed like that?" Todd said.

"What...where?"

"Right there!" Todd yelled, pointing at her hands.

"Oh that," she said. "I always do that. It keeps my fingers warm."

"You've never done that before."

"My fingers haven't been this cold before. Shouldn't we be getting some sleep?"

"Don't change the subject."

"I'm so sleepy," she said, yawning animatedly.

"Why are your fingers so cold all of a sudden? Let me feel your fingers."

She rolled over onto her side, dragging him with her.

"Sorry...gotta' get some shuteye."

He gently rolled on top of her.

"Night, night," she said, her eyes already closed.

He kissed her tenderly on the cheek.

She smiled and looked up at him. "You know you're my love, don't you? You're the only one I've ever loved, ever will love...except for the baby, and that's the truth." She pulled her hands out of the sleeping bag. "See."

Todd smiled, reached for her hand and kissed her fingertips.

"Todd," she said suddenly. "What's that?"

"What?"

She sat up quickly. "Todd," she said, her voice quivering, "What *is* that?"

"Maria, what's wrong?"

She pointed up into the night sky. "The moon...look at the moon!"

Todd looked up towards the huge glowing full moon. He stared at it for a moment and then he saw it. Silhouetted against the moon, in the top left corner, he could see a tiny black dot.

“Oh my God!” Maria breathed. “It’s the asteroid...I can see it!” She began panting, holding her hand to her chest.

“Maria, calm down.”

“Oh my God, why did we come here? We could have been in Australia!”

“Maria, you have to calm down.”

“It’s gonna hit before the baby comes!” she cried. She pushed herself out of the sleeping bag and jumped to her feet. “We have to go! We have to get out of here!”

Todd jumped to his feet and moved to her.

She put her hand out, stopping him. “No...no, we have to go back...right now!”

Todd sidestepped her hand and took her shoulders. “You have to calm down!”

She stopped, staring wildly at Todd and pushed her hand against her stomach.

“What’s wrong?” Todd said.

She began to sink. He held her and slowly eased her to the ground. She sat down panting. He knelt by her side, gently pushing the hair out of her eyes.

“Something’s wrong with the baby,” she moaned.

“Why...Maria...what are you feeling?”

“It feels so tight...It hurts.”

“It feels tight...like a contraction?”

“Maybe...I don’t know!”

“Baby, you need to lie down...right now.”

Maria looked at him, her face ashen. “What’s going on?” she said softly.

“I don’t know, baby. Lie down and let me look at you.”

They moved back to the sleeping bag. Todd gently helped her lie down and ran his hand over her stomach. “What are you feeling now?”

“Tight. It feels tight,” she said through clenched teeth. Todd pushed lightly on her stomach. “Ow...” she squealed. “It hurts there!”

Todd stopped pushing and began softly caressing her stomach. “I

don't think it's a contraction, sweetheart."

She looked up at him with terrified eyes. "Is something wrong with the baby?"

Todd shook his head. "I don't know, but I don't think so...He's moving a little."

"I know," she said. "I can feel him."

"He doesn't seem stressed. Do you still feel the pain?"

"Yes."

Todd rolled his hand over her stomach one more time. He found the place and gently pushed. "Is this it?"

"Yes," she yelped. "What is it?"

"I don't think it's a contraction. You're not tightening up, and it's lasting too long...The baby seems fine. I think you pulled a muscle."

"What does that mean?"

"You stretched or tore a muscle in your—"

"I know that!" she yelled. "But what does it mean? Will it affect the labor? Will it hurt the baby?"

"No," Todd said softly. "A lot of women pull muscles when they're this far along. It just means you have to take it easy, that's all." He looked down at her. Her jaw was set. She reached for his hand. He winced as her hand squeezed his fingers.

"Is it really gonna' happen, Todd?" she said, looking up at him. "Are we really gonna die?"

Todd looked down at her trying to speak but nothing happened.

She stared at him through tear-filled eyes, her small quivering hand covering her mouth. She turned her head and gazed at the tiny black dot silhouetted against the glowing moon. "Why?" she sobbed. "Why are you coming now...Why would the Father let you come now? Brother Michael....You said you'd be here if we ever needed you....Where are you? How could you let this happen to us?"

~~~

"Are they out of their minds? What are they thinking?" The head of the European Commission's delegation to the Middle East was pacing back and forth in front of his desk.

"I don't think we can ever overemphasize the depth of hostility

between the Arabs and the Israelis, sir,” the aide said. “The Russians have obviously anticipated the American European merge and are making a move to control the Mid-East oil.”

“We have to respond!” the Commissioner yelled. “We haven’t even formed a government yet. We can’t face a nuclear winter without oil!”

“The Russians are counting on that, sir,” the aid said. He paused and continued. “The commission is moving on the formation of the new European government, but it’s all so new.”

“We should never have taken the Americans in...It makes things so complicated. How do you absorb the world’s most powerful military machine and not have a government? The European Union has gone from a multi-national trade committee to the world’s only superpower overnight. Which plan are we considering?”

“Sir?”

“Which plan are we considering?” the commissioner repeated. “Which government?”

“Oh, the ten heads of state,” the aide said. “Each region will be represented by one of the heads of state. A prime minister will be elected to oversee the ten heads.”

“I know what the ten heads of state is. I drafted the plan.”

“Of course, sir,” the aide said.

“The Arabs and the Russians...” the commissioner raged, changing the subject. “They couldn’t have chosen a worst time. They know we can’t respond!”

“Maybe the Americans can?”

“The Americans are too busy getting their people off the mainland. They couldn’t possibly mount a response.”

“Sir, if the Israelis are true to their word—”

“I know,” the commissioner said, “the Masada complex. If they go down, they’ll take everyone down with them.”

The two men fell silent for a moment.

“Sir...” the aide said finally. “If the Russians and the Israelis start exchanging nuclear weapons...coupled with the fallout from the Dante impact...”

The commissioner stopped pacing and stood staring at his aide.



“What the hell are they thinking?” he yelled....

~~~

Todd had managed to sleep in short fits and starts. He would jump to Maria’s aid at the slightest hint of trouble. Each time he checked, he’d find her staring off into the moon. The long night finally came to an end and he had managed to get a small fire going. He had coffee brewing in a charcoal-covered military coffeepot.

“Here, baby, let me help you,” he said, jumping to his feet. Maria was hobbling painfully towards him. He gently took her hand, helped her sit on a rock next to the fire, pulled the sleeping bag up and wrapped it around her. “I’m glad you’re awake,” he said. “Breakfast is ready.”

Maria looked down at the omelet with bacon and cheese MRE heating up against a rock and looked away.

“Dig right in,” Todd said, biting at his package.

“I’m not hungry.”

He moved next to her and sat down. “You have to eat, baby. You need your strength.”

“Please don’t call me that.”

Todd silently pushed the plastic fork around in his MRE package. “I think I’m allowed one term of endearment,” he said finally.

“Really?”

“I think so.”

“Says who?”

“I think it’s in the Bible.”

“Which Bible...old or new?”

“Old.”

“Ok then, but why don’t you just call me Maria?”

“How about dear?”

“Sounds too old.”

“How about...darling?”

“Sounds too Hollywood, and please stop trying to cheer me up. I’m too afraid to be cheerful.”

Todd sat quiet for a time, listening to the fire.

“I’m sorry I got us into this,” Maria said softly.

After a quiet spell she turned and looked at Todd. “Aren’t you

gonna say anything?”

“I’m trying to understand.”

“I know,” she said, looking away. “I was...a little optimistic...before.” She paused and glanced back at him. “Ok, I was delusional.”

Todd sat, silently looking back at her. “What should we do now?” he said after a time. “Do you want to keep going...or go back?”

Maria sighed and looked into the fire. She pulled her eyebrows together and looked back up at him. “If we go back, will we survive?”

“No,” Todd said softly.

“So, it makes no difference whether we keep going or not?”

Todd didn’t respond.

“I need to keep going,” she said finally, “I still have this need to go.”

She pulled the sleeping bag up under her chin and turned her attention back to the fire. “I can’t ask you to go, though. You don’t have to come with me, if you don’t want to.”

“Are you sure?” Todd said.

She hesitated a moment, shrugged slightly and shook her head. “If you don’t want to go with me...you don’t have to go.”

“Okay,” Todd said, standing up. “I’ll see ya later.”

She watched him walk away towards the Humvee. “Get back here!” she yelled.

Todd turned and sent her a puzzled look. “I thought you said—”

“Get back here!” she growled.

Todd smiled and returned to her side.

She looked into the fire for a time before laying her head on his knees.

“I wouldn’t change a thing,” Todd said, rolling his fingers in her black hair. “These have been the best days of my life.”

“Aren’t you afraid?” she said without looking up.

“Yeah...a little.”

“I guess Brother Michael’s magic made me believe in fairy tale endings.”

“It *is* easy to get caught up in that sort of thing, isn’t it?” Todd

said.

He pulled a fallen corner of the sleeping bag back up over Maria's shoulder and settled back in next to her. "You really should eat... for the baby."

Maria lifted the bag and looked inside. "Ok, I guess I'll eat it."

Todd smiled, stood, and began picking things up from the campsite.

"What are you doing?" she said, munching on her bag of omelet with bacon and cheese.

"I'm loading up. We only have a few more days. We better be getting on if we plan on making it to Omaha..."

~~~

Sadie was sleeping soundly on her father's shoulder when the family arrived at Hampton beach. When she finally awoke, the huge tumultuous crowd took her completely by surprise. It took the family a few moments to settle her down.

Scores of military vehicles were driving up and down the beach. Each one equipped with a loud speaker conveying the same message.

"Last names beginning with A through C, must make their way north along the beach until they come to the landing zone clearly marked A through C.

Last names beginning with D through F must make their way north along the beach until they come to the landing zone clearly marked D through F.

Last names beginning with..."

Eric looked at the nearest landing zone. "We have to go south!" he yelled over the din.

"How far?" Stacey said. She held her hand up, shielding her eyes from the blinding glare reflecting off the Atlantic Ocean.

"Well, this is M through O...so we have to go a little ways further south."

The family began making their way south along the beach. As they slowly walked, Eric could see rows of titanic ships lined up as far as he could see into the horizon. Helicopters buzzed to and fro over their heads like elephantine dragonflies. Landing craft were

constantly moving back and forth, empty ones coming into the shore, full ones hurrying back out again. They finally found the landing zone marked W through Z.

“Look, honey,” Eric said, pointing at the sky, “the planes are flying again.”

Stacey looked up to see rows of jet plumes streaking high over their heads, each vapor trail heading east, towards Europe.

They patiently waited in line for hours. Each new landing craft leaving the beach allowed the long line to push forward ever so slightly. The two younger girls took turns napping in their parents arms. Throughout the long day, the children bickered and argued. Tempers flared as they methodically moved forward in line until finally they were prompted to move up the wide ramp onto the landing craft. As the family made their way up the ramp, Sadie changed her mind and didn’t want to go. Her father explained to her that it was just like a ride at the Silver Mountain Fun Park and she finally relented.

Within a short time the family was standing in a large crowd of somber, weather-worn American citizens looking back at the coast from the deck of the doughty aircraft carrier *Ronald Reagan*.

“Where are we going?” Stacey said, her tired eyes filling up with tears.

“I don’t know,” Eric said, softly.

They had been in such a hurry to get their family to safety they hadn’t considered what it was going to be like to forever leave their beloved homeland. Eric stared out over the blue water, at the never-ending carousels of landing vehicles busily moving back and forth. He looked past the shoreline, onto the crowded, riotous beach. He noticed how thick and plush the New England forests were this time of year. He remembered his childhood growing up in Vermont, riding bicycles up and down the steep hills, family reunions and ballgames in the park. He looked up at the star spangled banner waving over the deck of the USS Ronald Reagan. Reaching down, he lifted little Sadie onto his shoulder.

“Look, sweetheart,” he said, softly. “That was the United States of America; the greatest nation that ever was. You remember what she

looked like, ok? You keep her memory forever in your heart...Tell your children about her, and tell them to tell their children...Promise me you will never forget the United States of America.”

~~~

Maria had been exceptionally quiet all day. They had been following the track bed until it unexpectedly widened into a vast railroad yard and they found themselves in downtown Nebraska City, Nebraska.

Todd pulled the Humvee to a stop and reached for a bottle of water. “How do you feel?”

“Not very good,” Maria said. “My stomach feels tight and heavy. I think I need to get out of the car for a while.”

“We could park right here...set up camp?”

“No, this place is creepy. Could we at least get out of the city?”

“Which way?”

Maria unfolded the map. “Look,” she said, glancing up. “Omaha is straight north from here...not very far.”

Todd scanned the map. “We need to try and find a track heading north.” He backed the Humvee up, pulled around an abandoned train car and quickly closed the distance.

“I think it’s going north,” Maria said, holding her stomach.

Todd glanced at the onboard compass. “It’s going north, but we don’t know for how long.”

The northbound track bed led them through the middle of the city.

“It looks like they really had it bad here,” Todd said, as they passed dozens of discarded vehicles piled up at the railroad crossings.

~~~

As they blew past one of the railroad crossings, neither Todd nor Maria noticed the black SUV parked, its engine still idling, only yards from the track bed. It waited fifteen minutes, then pulled forward, turned onto the track bed and headed north towards Omaha.

~~~

Todd and Maria drove until the city faded into suburbs, then into vast, browning cornfields stretching on for as far as they could see.

“Let’s stop there,” Maria said, pointing at a small patch of trees.

Todd pulled off the track bed.

Maria motioned towards a small fenced area to the west. “What’s that? It seems so out of place...out here in the middle of nowhere.”

“I don’t know,” Todd said. “looks like a power station or something.”

They drove the Humvee through the open field till they finally reached the patch of trees. They set up camp near an irrigation ditch, unrolled their sleeping bag and settled in next to a small, crackling fire. Soon, they were huddled together against an old feeding trough, silently watching the western sky turn to shades of pink as the glimmering yellow sun slipped down below the boundless Nebraska horizon.

“That was so beautiful,” Maria said.

Todd silently sat next to her.

She dropped her head on his shoulder. “How much longer?” she said, softly.

Todd gently rolling his hand up and down her shoulder. “Till what?”

“Till the...till that thing kills us.”

He sat quietly for a time. “I’m not sure,” he said finally. “I’ve lost track of what day it is.”

She snuggled in tighter under his arm and sat quietly staring into the fire. “I hope we can’t see it tonight. I hope it’s cloudy.”

The baby should be coming any time now,” she continued, breaking another long silent spell.

Todd nodded. “I’ve noticed you’ve dropped a lot.”

“Really?”

“Quite a bit.”

She rolled her hand over her stomach. “I hadn’t noticed.”

They sat listening to the sounds of the trickling irrigation ditch. After a moment Maria softly spoke. “Brother Michael said...when the baby grew up, he’d change the world...set everything straight....”

Todd sat quietly beside her.

"Do you remember what Dr. Donahue said that day? He said God himself told him nothing would stand in the way of the baby being born."

She sat staring into the fire for a moment before continuing. "Remember... Father Jenkins, he showed us right out of the bible....The baby was supposed to be the second coming of the Messiah."

Todd looked down at her. Her tear-welled eyes glistened in the firelight. "Maria," he said softly, "maybe, they were all wrong. Maybe they all got so caught up in this thing they...convinced themselves."

"You didn't see the things Brother Michael did," Maria said.

"There are other explanations," Todd said quietly. "The truth is, the least likely scenario would be...supernatural."

"But how? How could he have killed those men...fooled all those people."

"Maybe..." Todd paused for a moment, not sure if he should continue. "Maybe they didn't die. Maybe you just thought they did."

"But...I was there...those men died..."

Todd pulled out of the sleeping bag just enough to stoke the fire with a stick, sending a billow of sparks out into the night sky. He slipped back in beside her, hesitated and spoke softly. "Last summer Obie, Tadpole and I spent some time in San Francisco. On our way back we stopped off at a little fair, I'm not sure where...somewhere upstate. They had a hypnotist there. The guys dared me to go up and be hypnotized. Before I know it I'm sitting on the stage looking out. I'm looking at the audience and they were naked...The whole audience was naked. Of course, I know now they weren't really naked, but at the time...What I'm trying to say is, I genuinely saw those naked people, and I was genuinely wrong."

Maria looked up at him, her moist eyes sparking in the firelight. "So that's it then? All this is for nothing?"

Todd blew out a sigh. "Ultimately...maybe, but right now, we have this beautiful fire, the smell of God's good earth beneath our feet, the sounds of the water and the wind in the trees...the canopy

of stars over our heads...we have our baby...and we have our love."

Maria melted into him and began crying softly. "I want to keep it," she moaned.

Todd tenderly rocked her till she finally drifted off to sleep...

~~~

Blaze had been drinking for days, ever since he inadvertently stumbled upon the Bishop's letters. Apparently they had managed to fall down between the wall and his desk. They'd been there all along. His once plush office was now littered with rotting hamburger corpses, tin cans half full of molding vegetables and partially eaten sacks of uncooked Ramen noodles. He slowly regained consciousness to the smell of old vomit and urine.

His only desire was to die quickly but he was terrified of hell. The death of Todd and Maria was the clincher. He had a part in killing Nathan, but he may just as well have pulled the trigger on Riley...God only knows what happened to poor little Maria. What was left of the police said they'd never seen such a crime scene. Oliver had apparently gone berserk, killing Santana and his goons. What he did to that poor girl was anyone's guess.

If only he could be an atheist again. Maybe those terrifying nightmares of hell wouldn't haunt him. Even now he wasn't sure he believed in God. It was the possibility God existed that kept him reaching for the bottle. He slowly pulled himself up off the floor and set out in search of rum. An old fuzzy memory stopped him...he had finished off the last of his rum the night before. "How much longer before that damn asteroid hits?" he wondered out loud. "What day is it?"

Only a few months ago, in another life, he was at the top of his game. The same folks who wined and dined him then, were now scattered to the wind. Even the Moody twins had vamoosed without a trace. Jim Donahue, his old friend, hadn't even bothered to try to get in touch with him. You could bet the distinguished ladies and gentlemen of the Vincs were even now enjoying the hospitality of the European Union.

Blaze had become a liability, if not a downright embarrassment. It



was obvious. They all knew...even Jim knew....Damn hypocrites. Where was their noble morality when they were moving heaven and earth to illegally clone a child, killing people to preserve their anonymity? The first sign of trouble...they discard the project, forget the child and dump Blaze in the street like a trash bag.

*Something's going on out there*, he thought, noticing the flashes of light for the first time. He stumbled to the window and looked out towards the east in the direction of Arnold Air Force Base. *What are they doing over there, setting off fireworks? Maybe the asteroid has been diverted or something. Was he still dreaming? What the hell has happened since he passed out?*

~~~

The sound had driven the family out of their beds. They were now pressed against the tent door flap, peering out onto the massive lower deck of the former United States ship Ronald Reagan. In better days, the lower deck had been used to store and maintain some of the ship's array of warplanes. The president had ordered the planes scuttled into the sea to make room for hundreds of tents, now housing families of American refugees. The battle group had been steaming eastward across the north Atlantic for the last two days.

Stacey Wheeler peered out of the tent. "What was that?"

"I don't know," Eric said. He looked down at the girls. "You kids stay here. Mommy and I will be right back."

Eric and Stacey pushed out of the tent and began moving towards a small gathering crowd.

"What's going on?" Eric asked a couple who were meandering along with them.

"We heard a bunch of loud gong sounding things," the man said. "Everybody started running, that's all I know."

"My name is Eric. This is my wife Stacey."

The man pushed his hand out. "I'm Mike Gibson...this is Nikki, glad to meet ya."

"Where you from?" Stacey said, looking at Nikki.

"We're from Salt Lake City...originally, we moved to Boston to be near Mike's mother."

"We lived in Burlington, Vermont," Stacey said, as they walked. "I can't believe how many kids there are around. Do you have any?"

Nikki glanced up at her husband. "We have two; a boy and a girl...thirteen and fifteen."

They walked together in silence for a time until Nikki finally spoke. "Mike's brother...they turned him away."

"They did what?" Eric said.

"Mike's brother was traveling with us. We had to leave him on the beach. They were only taking families with children."

"Oh my Lord," Stacey breathed.

"Makes you wonder how many folks are getting out," Eric said softly.

"I don't think there are very many of us," Mike said.

A group of military men appeared at the entrance of one of the colossal elevators used to move aircraft. They quickly left the elevator and struck out towards the small, growing crowd of civilians gathering at one of the stair rails.

"There's no cause for alarm," a navy lieutenant said, as he came within earshot. "The Admiral is getting ready to call the crew to general quarters...it's routine."

"General quarters?" Eric asked from within the crowd. "What does that mean?"

"It's just a drill, nothing to worry about."

The lieutenant motioned to another man standing nearby. The other man lifted a large telephone looking apparatus and spoke into it. Without warning, a loud cacophony of ringing gongs sent civilian hands to their ears. People ducked and blinked as the military contingent soberly looked on.

"General Quarters, General Quarters," a voice rang out over the din. "This is not a drill...all hands man your battle stations...set condition Zebra!"

"What's happening?" several people yelled from the crowd.

"Please stay in this area," the Lieutenant hollered, "until the Admiral calls the stand down."

The noise stopped as soon as it had started, giving way to the sounds of uniformed men frantically running back and forth across

the deck.

“Are we under attack?” one of the men in the crowd asked.

“No,” the Lieutenant said. “It’s just a drill.”

“Why would you be having a drill on a ship evacuating civilians?” another man asked.

“The drills are a requirement of the normal operation—”

A deafening roar silenced the Lieutenant who quickly covered his ears. The mighty aircraft carrier Ronald Reagan began shuddering beneath their feet. Within moments, the roar ebbed and was gone.

“Look!” Eric said pointing out at the sea through an opening left visible by the elevator.

Two white plumes were making their way skywards from the deck of an enormous battle cruiser just off the starboard bow.

“What is that?” Mike yelled.

“Nothing to be concerned about,” the Lieutenant said, “just routine.”

The crowd remained quiet for a moment before slowly turning inward, quietly conversing with one another. A new sound erupted from the COM.

“Now secure from general quarters, set condition X-ray...set the regular underway watch!”

~~~

Todd had been trying to cover Maria without waking her when he felt the first tiny raindrop on his face. “I don’t think we’ll see the moon tonight, baby,” he whispered. He carefully laid her down, ran towards the Humvee and quickly pulled the tent from the back seat. A loud grinding noise made him jump.

Maria woke up. “Todd!” she yelled.

The ground began to shake as the entire corn field lit up with a glowing white light.

“Oh no!” Todd yelled. “It can’t be....” He sprinted towards Maria and dove on top of her. A deafening roar drove their hands to their ears as a mammoth plume of white-hot fire shot hundreds of feet into the night sky. Maria screamed as searing hot wind sandblasted the campsite, sending debris clanging and clattering into the trees. The ear shattering sound reached a crescendo, then there was

silence.

Todd slowly backed off of Maria, shaking his head trying to clear his ears. He turned and looked back behind him. "Look," he said softly.

Maria slowly pulled the sleeping bag away from her face. Todd was staring into the sky. The thick smell of smoke and sulfur hung in the air as she slowly sat up. High above the campsite, a glowing white light was making its way skyward.

"Todd," Maria said, pointing into the west, "Look!"

He turned. In the distance, two more fiery plumes were streaking skyward, one closer than the other.

"There's more," she said, pointing east.

Todd turned just in time to see several more columns of fire moving into the clouds. An eerie glow followed the plumes deep into the cloud cover until they finally disappeared from sight.

"Maria," Todd said, motioning towards the fenced area next to the camp sight, "that's a by-God missile silo...those were missiles! Somebody fired off our land-based nuclear missiles!"

~~~

"Why don't you just go away and let me die in peace."

"Oh stop being so melodramatic and eat this thing."

The old woman winced and turned away. "At least pull the legs off, can you do that for me?"

"Yes, Gladys, I'll throw away a third of the protein so that you can pretend it isn't what it is."

"It's a bug, Louis...I know what it is, pull the damn thing's legs off."

Louis shrugged, pulled the still writhing legs off the grasshopper and pushed it at his wife.

"What was that?" Gladys said, ignoring his offering. "Did you feel that?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's an earthquake...eat."

"Look at that," she said, pointing out of the tent flap into the east.

He turned to see a distant light, streaking into the air. "Maybe it's the asteroid," he said, staring into the rainy night.

"Ya' think?" Gladys asked. "Isn't the asteroid supposed to be

coming down?”

Louis glowered back at her. “I merely meant that it could have been an atmospheric phenomena caused by the asteroids approach.”

Uh huh,” she grunted, pushing the bug into her mouth. “Yummy. Tastes just like chicken...I have one more day to live and I’m eating bugs.”

“I think we’ve positioned ourselves just right,” Louis said, ignoring his wife’s sarcasm. “I think it will come down right over there next to that grain silo.” He pointed into the drizzly night sky.

“It’ll come in at a very gradual angle, thirty degrees or so. It should pass by right over our heads.”

“I should’ve gotten married when I was three,” Gladys said. “I would’ve married my father or a policeman...Instead, I get the nutty professor.”

“I’m coming to bed now,” Louis said. “Stop nagging me. We have a big day ahead of us tomorrow and I need my sleep.”

“Tomorrow, we’re gonna die in a horrible fiery cataclysm, Louis.”

“Stop being so dramatic, Gladys. You won’t feel a thing.”

“Silly me,” Gladys snorted, “and to think I was worried....”

~~~

Maria had insisted they move as far away from the missile silo as possible before they set up camp again. By the time they had managed to get the tent set up it was pouring rain. They finally dozed off just as the sun was rising onto the vast, drizzly Nebraska horizon.

A hard contraction brought Maria out of her sleep. “Todd,” she moaned. “I think it’s starting.”

“What?” Todd said, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

“We have to go...now! The baby is gonna be born now!”

Todd sat up. “Are you sure?”

Maria was panting.

“Ok...ok,” Todd said, squirming out of the sleeping bag, “nothing to worry about. I’m an ex med student...this is gonna be cake.”

“We have to go,” Maria said, still panting. “We have to go to Omaha.”

“I think we should stay here,” Todd said. “You really shouldn’t—”

Maria reached out and took hold of his leg. “We have to go,” she screamed. “NOW!”

“Ok...ok uh...we’ll...I’ll get the....”

“Help me,” she said, reaching up towards him.

Todd pulled her up from the ground. She painfully stepped out of the sleeping bag and moved towards the tent door flap. He helped her to the Humvee and left her there while he sprinted back for the sleeping bag. He returned, quickly made a bed for her in the back compartment and helped her in. Within minutes the camp was loaded into the Humvee.

They made their way back towards the track bed and headed north.

~~~

“NORAD is reporting hundreds of direct hits on the asteroid, Mr. President, but there has been no noticeable change in velocity or trajectory.”

The President sighed. “Damn, we hit it with all we had; didn’t even budge the thing.”

“At this range, sir,” the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff said softly. “It’s like trying to stop a howitzer shell with a BB gun.”

The president looked at the chairman with tears in his eyes. “But we had to try didn’t we? I did everything I could, didn’t I?”

“Yes sir, you did,” the Chairman said.

The president sat silent for a time staring into his coffee cup. “How long do we have left?” he said finally.

“Just a few hours sir, we need to get out of here right now.”

“Where’s Dalton?”

“Admiral Dalton has the fleet waiting just off the German coast, Mr. President. He’s awaiting your orders.”

“Is Charlie there with him?”

“Yes sir, the Secretary of State is there.”

“Tell them we’re coming...Tell them to get ready to do it.”

“Yes, sir,” the chairman said quickly moving off.

“Sir,” the SECDEF said, moving forward. “The EU has issued a

statement condemning our actions...calling them reckless and irresponsible.”

“They wanted those nukes,” the president snorted, “as if we didn’t give them enough.”

“The Chinese government has gone to DEFCON 2. They say another unannounced nuclear exchange will result in a full-scale retaliatory strike.”

“What are they gonna’ do, nuke the chipmunks? Is everybody completely stupid?”

~~~

“Todd, pull over!” Maria yelled.

Todd pulled off the track base and jumped into the back compartment.

“I need for you to check me again...I think the baby’s coming.”

Todd gently checked her. “No, no change yet.”

“Are you sure? The baby feels like he’s coming right now.”

“I think that’s normal, angel. Try to relax.”

“How much further?”

“I’m not sure,” Todd said. “I’m expecting to pull into Omaha at any moment.”

“What time is it? It’s getting dark.”

“I think it’s about seven.”

“Will we be able to get there? Will we have time to get there?”

“Yes, sweetheart, we’ll get there.”

“I think my water broke.”

Todd noticed the moisture. “Yeah...yeah, baby, your water broke.”

“Oh my God!” Maria cried. “We’re not gonna get there in time!”

“Come on, angel,” Todd said, pulling her up. “We need to change your bedding.” He helped her out of the back compartment.

“Stop...stop!” she squealed. “I’m having another contraction!”

He held her head as she buckled against the pain.

“Ok...ok,” she said, after an agonizing moment. “It’s gone, please hurry, I have to lie down.”

Todd dashed to the trailer and pulled the other sleeping bag out. He rushed back and quickly laid it out in the back compartment.

“It’s ready, baby,” he said.

She moved unsteadily towards him. Another contraction buckled her over. Todd moved to her and held her head. “Breathe, angel, breathe...keep panting like this....”

Maria tried to mimic Todd’s panting but had to stop after a few moments.

“Try not to hold your breath, baby...try to pant.”

Maria moaned as the contraction finally abated. “Ok, it’s gone,” she said breathlessly. “We can go now. Check me again first?”

“Ok, baby, lie down.”

He checked her again. “You’re starting to dilate, sweetheart. We better stop.”

“No...no, Todd, you have to promise me. We can’t stop till we get to Omaha...no matter what!”

“But, Maria, if you’re—”

“PLEASE!” she screamed.

“Ok...ok we’ll go...we’ll go....” Todd jumped back into the front seat and pushed the Humvee north as fast as he dared.

~~~

Brother Michael stood staring out the high-rise hotel window into the Sydney harbor. The noonday sun sparkled across the calm water normally filled with tourist-clad ferries, jet-cats and sailboats. The harbor was completely empty today. The whole world had stopped today. Today was the day the great asteroid would impact the earth, turning it inside out. Michael knew it was getting late in Omaha, Nebraska. He knew Maria was there. He had prayed night and day for the answer and had concluded that some answers belonged only to the Father.

Barney had been sitting nervously on the couch next to Mallory. “What do you think it’s gonna be like?”

Michael turned. “We won’t feel anything at first, but it will come...The world, as we know it, will cease to exist. It’ll be as if...we’re in hell.”

Barney glanced at Mallory and back at Michael. “I don’t get it. Aren’t we supposed to change the world? How we supposed to do that if there ain’t no world left to change?”

"Shh," Mallory whispered. "Don't push him now."

Michael slowly returned to the window.

"Brother Michael?" Pete said softly.

Michael turned back to face him.

"Is the asteroid the third sign? Remember when you said there would be a third sign that would bring the world to its knees?"

Michael stared at Pete for a long time. "I don't know," he said softly, breaking the long silence, "but whatever is going to happen has already begun."

He turned and looked back out the window towards the harbor. "I'm going to my room to pray," he said quietly. "I don't want to be disturbed."

~~~

Miles Draper was at the helm of the Ground-Based Electro-Optical Deep Space Surveillance at Maui, Hawaii. He was working with the auxiliary telescope known as 'Schmidt,' used primarily for tracking lower altitude objects. Like every other available tracking system on earth, "Schmidt" was currently locked on to Dante657.

Draper was on the phone to Professor David Arno at the Comet and Asteroid Information Network, in the center of Wales, England. "What do you have, David?"

"I have her coming in at around sixteen k, over Nebraska in about three hours."

"Yeah, that's what I have. I estimate impact at four fifteen GMT."

"Yup, that's just what I've got."

"Thanks, David. Keep me in the loop."

"Righto, Miles, will do."

Arno put the phone down and picked it back up again. He quickly dialed Professor Nanyang Siang Pau at the Chinese Beijing Astronomical Observatory. "Yes...Professor, we have Dante coming in at sixteen k over Nebraska in about three hours...Impact, at around four fifteen GMT."

"Yes, I concur," Pau said in a thick Chinese accent. "Please keep me posted."

"Will do."

~~~

“Maria, we’re here! Look...there’s a sign up ahead, we’re in Omaha!”

Maria painfully sat up before collapsing back into the sleeping bag. “Find a place to pitch the tent,” she groaned.

“We need something bigger than a tent,” Todd said, frantically looking for a place to stop. “Wait, there’s a building!”

“Stop there!” Maria wailed. “We have to stop now!”

Todd quickly pulled off the track bed and pointed the Humvee towards a huge double story barn in the center of a cornfield near a grain silo. The Humvee bounced and jerked as Todd pushed it through the dense furrowed rows of brown, rain-soaked corn stocks. “I’m sorry, baby,” Todd yelled over the noise. “I’m going as fast as I can.”

“Just hurry please. I need for you to check me. I think the baby is coming!”

Todd blasted out of the cornfield and shot over a gravel-covered road leading to the barn. He brought the Humvee to a sliding stop, backed up till he was on the road again, aimed the Humvee towards the barn and pushed the gas pedal to the floor.

“Oh my God, Todd. Please hurry!” Maria moaned.

Todd skated the Humvee to a stop in front of the barn and blasted out of the driver side door. He ran through the rain and threw himself against the barn doors. They were locked. Frantically, he looked around. On the far end of the barn he spotted a man-door flapping in the wind. He ran towards it. He looked inside the dark barn, turned and sprinted back towards Maria. To his horror, she was already out of the Humvee, making her way towards him through the driving rain. “Maria!” he yelled, running towards her, “it’s okay... it’s dry in there!” He jerked his shirt off and threw it over her. “This way, baby,” he said. “Everything is gonna be fine.”

“You need to check me,” Maria said softly. “The baby’s coming.”

He gently guided her through the rain towards the man-door. They stepped inside the dark barn and found a pile of straw. Maria tried to lie down, but Todd wouldn’t let her.

“Let me get the sleeping bag, Baby. Don’t lay down on that

straw...ok? We don't know what kind of bugs are in there." Maria nodded. Todd could see she was completely exhausted.

He sprinted back towards the Humvee and returned with a sleeping bag and oversized military lamp. He laid the sleeping bag out over the straw, pulled his rain-soaked shirt off her and gently helped her lie down.

She shivered as he pulled the sleeping bag around her and pushed it up under her chin. "Check me?" she said softly.

Todd carefully checked her. "Not yet, sweetheart," he said. "You're only six centimeters."

"Oh no!" Maria moaned. "How much longer? I can't take much more of....Here comes another one, Todd....Hold my hand!"

Todd helplessly watched her wince and fold up against the searing pain.

She threw her head back. "Ohh My GODDDDD!" she screamed. "It's tearing me apart!"

"Maria," Todd said, looking deep into her terrified eyes. "You have to try to relax. You're working against your body. When the contraction comes, try panting....Try making your muscles relax between the contractions. Try thinking about the baby...ok? Remember how we used to dream about the baby? Try thinking on those thoughts. Think about what our boy might look like. He might look like you...who knows? Think about what he might be like when he grows up."

Maria's contraction was finally starting to abate. She looked up at him. "He'll never grow up," she said quietly. "The asteroid is gonna take him away from me...take you away from me; it's gonna' take us all. All of this is for nothing."

"No...no, Maria," Todd said, lying down beside her. "I think you're right...I've been givin' it some thought. That Brother Michael was on to something. I don't think the asteroid is gonna hit us after all...I mean, it wouldn't make any sense. Why would all of these...prophecies and...things be coming true right and left? You said yourself...you watched Brother Michael do some pretty intense stuff."

"Really?" Maria said quietly. "You really think that?"

"Yes...I do...I really do."

"You don't think the asteroid is gonna hit us?"

"No...think about it..."

"You believe I really saw all those things Brother Michael did?"

"Absolutely, why else—"

"Let me..." Maria stopped, winced against the pain and softly continued. "Let me see your hands."

Tears filled Todd's eyes. He paused a moment, looking down at her beautiful face. "Sure...sweetheart," he said, his voice choking with emotion, "...look." He gulped down the lump in his throat, and pulled his hands out.

"Wh...why aren't your fingers crossed?"

"I'm telling you the truth, baby, I really think..."

"Liar."

"No, sweetheart, I'm not lying..."

"My sweet liar," she said, gently pushing the wet hair out of his eyes. "I couldn't have picked a sweeter guy to die with."

Todd softly smiled.

"I'll try to relax," she said, looking up at him, "for you..."

Todd tried holding back the tears but it was no use. He gently kissed her forehead and wiped the tears away. He lay by her side, thankful for the merciful reprieve between contractions.

"I have to go out to the Humvee," he said after a time.

"Oh no...why?"

"I have to get some supplies. We need water, antiseptic wash."

"Ok," she said softly, "but hurry."

Todd smiled and pulled himself away from her.

She reached for his hand. "Hurry," she repeated softly.

"I'm just gonna get a few things. I'll only be gone a second." He stood and quickly moved out the man-door.

Maria lay in the dim light of the battery powered lamp staring up at the huge vaulted ceiling. Faint moon rays were filtering through large weather protected openings running horizontally along each side of the loft. She could see tiny creatures fluttering about above her. She hoped they weren't bats.

The tightness began to return. "Todd!" she yelled. She folded and

grimaced against the onslaught. Within moments, the mind-numbing pain was upon her.

“Todd!” she groaned.

The pain stabbed at her. She screamed and pulled her legs up. “Relax, relax, relax,” she panted, reeling against the pain. She felt something give way. The pain overwhelmed her. She screamed. She reached down, wrapped her hands around her stomach and tried pulling back against the staggering pressure.

“TODDD,” she screamed. “OH MY GODDD, TODDD!”

She threw her head back, screaming through her grinding clenched teeth.

“TODDD...”

“Finally, she felt the agony slowly abate. She lay in the dark sobbing. *He’s been gone to long!* she told herself. Panic overwhelmed her. She painfully rolled on to her side and pushed herself to her hands and knees. “TOODD,” she sobbed, crawling towards the man-door.

She stopped.

“Oh my God, Todd,” she wailed, as the man-door began slowly opening. “Where have you been? I’ve been calli—”

Something was strange...he was moving...strangely. She backed away and looked up from the floor at a black figure silhouetted against the dark night. It moved out of the shadows into the lamp light. She could see a thick grizzled beard and dark bushy eyebrows. She gasped and pushed herself away. The black flashing eyes looked down at her as the strange gnarled face drew nearer.

~~~

“**Mr.** Prime Minister, we must act now. In less than two hours the American impact will render our weapons useless.”

“If I begin this thing the Russians will follow,” the Israeli prime minister yelled. “We will be in an all out nuclear exchange and it will be *me* killing my own people instead of the Russians...does that make any sense to you?”

“The enemy outnumber us ten to one! Without our weapons, we don’t have a chance!”

“What chance?” the Prime minister hollered. “We have no

chance! Have you been listening to me?"

"Sir," General Ben-Gurion said softly, trying to control his temper, "when that thing hits America, we will have less than one hour before our enemies swarm us and annihilate our people!"

"You want me to annihilate them sooner, is that it?" the Prime minister yelled.

"Sir! I'm prepared to go over your head! I'm prepared to step in if I have to...the military is with me!"

"Do what you have to do, General!" the Prime Minister yelled. "I have no plans to kill my own people today or any other day!"

~~~

"This is the darkest day of my life," the President of the United States said.

The SECDEF nodded as the US101, one of 28 Lockheed Martin helicopters collectively known as Marine one, settled down on the deck of the European Union's new flagship Ronald Reagan.

The SECDEF looked across the cabin at the president. "Sir," he said over the quiet hum of the rotors. "There is nothing else that can be done. This is all that is left to us."

The president looked back and sighed. "I know," he said. "I know."

The door opened and the president stepped out. Sailors, standing at ease, lined the perimeter of the colossal deck. On command, they snapped to attention and saluted.

High-ranking officers and dignitaries surrounded the president as he walked. He immediately moved towards a large crowd of civilians who had been recently transported off the mainland and began shaking hands. Some moved forward to meet him, others held back, tears in their eyes. Others cried openly. The unmistakable look of pity kept the president's eyes lowered.

A young man carrying a small child on his shoulders moved towards him and pushed his hand out. "God Bless America, Mr. President."

"What's your name?" the President asked.

"My name is Eric Wheeler, sir. This is my little girl Sadie."

The president smiled down at the child who immediately ducked

away behind her father. He pulled his weary eyes back up and leveled them on Eric. His tired smile slowly melted. "That's right, son," he said finally, his voice cracking. "God bless the United States of America."

He reached out and shook Eric's hand, turned and walked away from the crowd of civilians and into the group of dignitaries. After a time, he moved to a podium.

"Today," the president's voice echoed, "the sovereign nation of the United States of America will cease to exist. Our government was disbanded today, effective at noon. Command and control of the American Armed forces have already been passed on to the sovereign nations of the European Union."

The president turned and looked into the crowd of dignitaries. "Mr. Secretary," he said, "I'm ready now."

The presiding Secretary of the European Union stepped to the podium. He was joined by other dignitaries.

The president raised his right hand. "Mr. Secretary," the president began, "I do solemnly swear allegiance to the sovereign governments of the European Union and do hereby subjugate governmental control of the United States of America to the newly formed government of the European Union."

The Secretary smiled and shook the President's hand. They were quickly replaced at the podium by the members of the Joint Chiefs. American civilians and military personnel alike wept openly as each member formally passed the torch to their European Union counterpart.

~~~

The black silhouette slowly moved towards Maria. She screamed and scrambled backwards on her hands and knees.

The dark figure stiffened and moved into the lamp light. "Settle down now, mister!" the stranger said as he stepped forward.

Todd stepped through the man-door behind him. The barrel of his pistol was pressed against the back of the stranger's head. "What are you doing here?" Todd growled.

"My wife and I heard someone screaming," the stranger said. "I came to investigate...that's all."

Todd flashed a military issue flashlight into the stranger's face. The stranger blinked and looked away. He had to have been at least seventy years old. Todd lowered the pistol.

"Todd," Maria yelled breathlessly. "Where have you been? I've been calling you!"

"I'm sorry, baby. This guy was snooping around—"

"I wasn't snooping around!" the stranger yelled. "I heard someone screaming. I came to see what was wrong!"

"You just happen to be in the neighborhood, is that it?"

"My wife and I have taken refuge in the silo next door. We were trying to get out of our rain-soaked tent."

"Didn't anybody tell you an asteroid is due this way within a few days?"

The old man looked at Todd. "You mean a few hours, don't you?"

Todd stiffened.

The old man looked down at Maria. "You kids don't know, do you?"

"Know what?" Todd said.

"The asteroid is coming tonight...in just a few hours."

Maria squealed and clutched at her stomach. "Another one....Another one is coming, Todd!"

Todd quickly moved to her and helped her back to the sleeping bag.

"Oh I see what all the hubbub is about," the old man said cheerfully. "You two are having a baby."

Maria sent him a black look. He frowned and retreated slightly.

"Todd...oh my God, Todd, it's coming again!"

"Try to breathe, baby, like I told you."

"Do you know what I should do...I should go get my wife—"

"Maria threw her head back and screamed against the pain.

"Pant, Maria. Pant like this..." Todd was panting animatedly, trying his best to coach her.

"Allow me to introduce myself, my name is—"

"Mister," Todd yelled, "we don't have time to socialize right—" Another scream pulled Todd's attention back to Maria.



"Todd," she screamed, "it's coming, check me, I know it's coming!"

Todd rounded on the old man. "Turn around."

What? Oh... of course. The old man dutifully turned and faced the man door.

Todd quickly checked Maria. "You've dilated a little more, baby but—"

"My wife should be here," the old man said, still facing the door, "she loves babies...she had three of them herself you know..."

"Go away!" Todd hollered.

"I think it's finally easing up now," Maria said softly.

"You kids need my wife—"

"Yes, YES!" Maria yelled through her teeth. "Get your wife, bring her back here, we'll watch TV... play video games!"

"No reason for sarcasm, young lady," the old man said. "I merely thought she might come in handy...her being a medical doctor and all..."

Todd and Maria glared up at him.

"What?" he asked, turning back to face them.

Todd jumped to his feet. "Medical doctor... medical doctor? Why didn't you say your wife was a doctor?"

"Well excuse me," the stranger said indignantly. "I tried to tell you, but you two haven't exactly been open to input."

Todd stared at him, nodding his head. "Yes...a doctor would be good. Don't you think, Maria?" He looked down at her and shrugged. "Don't you think a doctor would be good?"

"Yes please," Maria said. "By all means...go get her."

"Do you know something," the old man said, grinning. "This could be fun, it's been a long time since Gladys and I have—"

"Please hurry," Todd said.

"Oh, of course. You'll love Gladys....She still thinks she's a kid—  
"

Todd pointed at the man-door. "Could we talk about this later?"

"Oh...yes...I'll...I'll be right back." The old man sauntered to the door and disappeared into the dark rainy night.

"Todd," Maria said breathlessly, "do you think he's telling the

truth?”

He knelt down next to her. “I don’t know. He might just be a lonely old boy in need of attention. Sometimes people come up with problems so they can call attention to themselves... be a hero for a while... They think that’s the reason a lot of folks bounce checks. They can be—”

“No, I mean about the asteroid; about it hitting in a few hours.”

Todd shrugged slightly. “I don’t know. I’ve lost track of the days.”

“My husband tells me you kids are in need of a doctor,” a voice behind them said.

Todd turned to look. “Yes, yes, thank you, we’re really happy....Are you really a doctor?”

“Not only am I a doctor, I’m a damn good one.”

The older, slightly overweight woman moved towards them and knelted down. Todd moved aside as she put her hand on Maria’s forehead. “Aren’t you a beautiful girl?” She looked Maria up and down. “I know it hurts, honey but it’s worth it. I’ve had three children...all natural.”

Todd stood and backed away. “Can I get you anything? Is there anything I can do?”

“Blankets!” the woman said sternly, looking up, “lots of blankets and boiling water! I’m not sure what we’ll use them for, but that’s what they always say in the movies isn’t it?” She grinned and giggled loudly.

Todd looked down at her, blinking.

“Just kidding, dear,” she said, looking around Todd. “Louis, you might want to take...I’m sorry, what’s your name, young man?”

“Uh...Todd, Todd Riley.”

“You might want to take Todd for a little walk. I need to check...I’m sorry, what’s your name, honey?”

“Maria...”

“I have to check Maria to see how far along she is.”

“It’s ok,” Todd said, “I’m a...I was a medical student. I’ve been caring for her. Her water has broken. As you can see we have antiseptic wash and she’s dilated about seven centimeters...”

“Oh, that’s good,” the old lady said. “You’ve been in good hands

then.” She grinned and giggled.

“Gladys,” Louis said, standing behind Todd. “You’re scaring the kids.”

“Oh for the love of Pete,” the old lady said. “Why does everything have to be so serious? It isn’t as if women haven’t been having kids for millions of years.”

The old man pushed his hand towards Todd. “I don’t think we’ve met.”

“She’s getting ready to have another contraction,” the old lady said. “Could you please give us a hand, young man?”

Todd quickly moved to Maria’s other side and knelt down.

“Get in behind Maria,” the old lady said. “Support her shoulders and push her forward as if you were trying to sit her up.”

Todd moved in under Maria and pushed forward. Maria groaned against the pressure. The old lady pushed her hand under Maria’s lower back, made a fist and pressed as hard as she could.

“Now, honey, try to relax. Todd here will do all the work for you...won’t you, Todd.”

Todd nodded like a child, then felt silly.

“You won’t have to do this much longer. You only have a few more contractions to go. Everything is going perfectly.”

Maria groaned as the contraction began.

“Push her forward now, Todd,” the old lady said. “Now pant like a puppy dog, Maria. That keeps you from pressing down too hard. We don’t want to do that yet, we want to give your body enough time to make a path for the baby first...ok?”

Maria nodded, panting.

“That’s right...just keep panting...Oh no honey, don’t tighten up, just keep panting. Hold her up, Todd... yes, that’s right...Ok, the contraction is starting to go away. Just a few more...now relax. Todd, you can let her lie down now.”

“Thank you so much,” Maria said breathlessly. “That was so much better...Thank God you’re here.”

“Oh you’re so sweet,” the old lady said. “You were just having a little trouble coping with the anxiety, that’s all.”

“Is there anything we can do for you?” Todd said. “Anything at

all...we have guns, water, food, flashlights, sleeping bags—”

“Did you say food?” the old lady said.

Her old husband quickly moved forward. “Do you have food?”

“Yes,” Todd said. “We have lots of—”

“We haven’t eaten anything but bugs for the last three days,” the old woman said.

Todd jumped to his feet. “Oh, you’re gonna’ love this.”

~~~

“I must be put in command...now! We have no time left! In forty five minutes the American—”

“We know, General,” the president of the State of Israel said.

“And yet you continue to let this man stand in the way of our preemptive strike!” the General yelled, pointing at the Prime Minister.

All one hundred and twenty Knesset members of the Israeli plenary turned to look at the Prime Minister.

Prime Minister Yael Ben Judah held his hands out and shook his head. “The European Union has demanded that our enemies stand down or face dire consequences. The EU is stepping in, filling the American void. We must give them a chance to—”

“The enemy will not listen to them! They have acquired the military might of the United States, but are in utter turmoil. The enemy knows this!”

“Please!” the Prime Minister yelled over his adversary, “honorable members of the plenary hear me! There are no less than fifty nuclear tipped Russian warheads aimed at our families, friends and acquaintances! The moment the order is given to attack, the Russians will launch their weapons. They will have no reservations! They know the American asteroid impact will render their weapons useless just the same as it will ours. They’re waiting in anticipation for the slightest hint of aggression on our part—”

“Mister President,” the General roared. “How can you stand by and let this...this coward...”

“That’s enough from you, General,” the president of the State of Israel yelled over the tirade. “As of right now, you are dismissed!”

“You...you’re all cowards!” the General raged. “You have no

business being where you are! I'll show you who is dismissed!"

The General reached into his uniform and pulled out a side arm. He managed to fire three rounds into the Prime Minister before the Israeli security forces cut him down.

~~~

At the Maui, Ground-Based Electro-Optical Deep Space Surveillance, Miles Draper was back on the satellite phone with David Arno at The Wales Comet and Asteroid Information Network.

"Still clocking her at over sixteen k, David. It should be entering the atmosphere in about twenty minutes. Is that what you have?"

"Pretty much, I've got it coming in a little higher because of the speed but I have the same figures round about."

"Send it down, will you, David?"

"Will do."

~~~

"General Quarters, General Quarters..." the voice boomed amidst the clanging gongs. "This is not a drill...all hands, man your battle stations...set condition Zebra."

Eric had solemnly watched the change of guard ceremony and had remained on deck hoping to have another glance at the president before he left the ship. A contingent of military officials was quickly making their way towards the large group of civilians.

"Ladies and gentleman," the familiar Lieutenant said as he approached, "the Admiral has asked us to explain what is about to happen. Soon you'll all be asked to go below. It is important to know that the next few hours may be a little...frightening."

The Lieutenant stopped talking and gazed into the group for a moment. "Dante657 has been picked up on our ground-based radar."

The crowd shifted and murmured amongst themselves.

Eric looked down at his family and back at the Lieutenant.

"The Admiral will be turning the ship hard to port with orders to face her due west. This may be a little uncomfortable for some of you." The Lieutenant stopped for effect, then continued. "We'll be turning the ship into the direction of the impact in anticipation of

possible tsunami activity. Strange as it may seem, the open sea is the safest place to be in the advent of a tsunami. A tidal wave hundreds of feet high at the coasts would most likely pass under us undetected. Dante will be traveling east to west, directly overhead. It will not be visible in the night sky until it enters the earth's atmosphere somewhere over the Middle East in around...thirty minutes."

Eric noticed the Lieutenant was standing at an odd angle. He realized the ship was starting to list dramatically to the right. He reached out frantically and grabbed hold of a nearby railing.

"Daddy, are we tipping over?" Sadie whined, hanging onto his leg.

The Lieutenant stopped talking and looked out into the crowd. "No need for concern," he said. "The ship is turning. The deck will appear to shift approximately thirty degrees against the horizontal sea. The effect might make some of you a little nauseous."

Eric looked out over the Atlantic. For as far as he could see in the light of the bright, full moon, huge ships were coming about, their wakes churning behind them, mirroring the movements of the mighty flagship.

The Lieutenant continued, undaunted by the surrealistic happenings going on beneath his feet. "Because of the distance, we will more than likely not be exposed to a flash. However...the data is sketchy, the earth has never had an impact of this magnitude before. You may hear a noise, probably a series of loud, clicking or crackling sounds. We'll be powering the ship down moments before the impact in an effort to lessen the effects of the electromagnetic pulse and ionizing radiation. All hands will clear the deck in anticipation of the fireball which will reach us approximately thirty seconds after impact. Anyone or anything flammable on the ships deck will be burned.

Within eleven minutes after the impact, the fireball will light up the sky, however...debris and aerosols will block most of this light. The dust will blot out the moon and the stars. We can expect to be in total pitch darkness. The ship will then be pelted by heavy fallout from the blast...From that point on folks, the world as we know it will cease to exist."

"We won't be seeing the sun again for a few...years. The Admiral wants you to know that the ship will be under martial law after this point. Criminal activity will not be tolerated...."

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"This is absolutely delicious," the old man said, gulping down his Country Captain Chicken MRE. "And isn't that amazing, Gladys, how it heats the food up like that...I think I remember reading something about it once."

"Oh, oh," Gladys said between bites. "Louis is about to dazzle us with his vast knowledge."

"That's right," the old man said. "They use a magnesium iron compound...I remember now."

"You'll have to forgive my husband, kids," Gladys said, accidentally slurping her food. "He's a certified Mensa Genius and it's vastly important to him that everyone knows about it."

"Really?" Maria asked faintly. "You're a Mensa Genius?"

"Allow me to introduce myself," the old man said grinning. "I'm Louis Fasbender."

"Louis Fasbender, the physicist?" Todd yelled.

"Yes, Todd," the old man said. "I never did catch your last name."

"Riley," Todd said stammering. "I can't believe I've met two Nobel Laureates in one lifetime." Todd looked down at Maria. "Do you know who this is?" He looked back at Louis. "I was able to catch your lecture on string theory at UCLA. I couldn't believe how well you explained...Louis Fasbender!" he repeated, shaking his head and staring at the old man. "Why didn't I recognize you?"

"I've looked better," Louis said. "It's probably the beard."

"I'm sorry to pull the attention away from my humble husband," Gladys said, "but Maria's about to have another contraction. Everyone take your place. Louis, Push on the small of her back. It's getting close now...I'd better be on the receiving end."

"Maria's contractions are getting harder," Gladys said, after the contraction had finally abated. "She's dilated to ten. The baby will be coming any time now."

Maria squeezed the doctor's hand. "I'm so glad you're here."

Gladys grinned. "You'd have done this just as well with or without me, honey."

"Why are you folks here?" Todd said. "People with your credentials wouldn't have had any problem finding a way off the mainland."

Louis and Gladys looked at each other before Gladys finally spoke. "We started to leave. It didn't take long for us to realize there was nowhere to run. The planet will never be inhabitable, at least not in the way we know it, not for a long, long time. Louis is the former head of the U.S. Aeronautical Space Administration. He had the bright idea that he wanted to die watching the impact first hand."

"Right here is the best place to be," Louis said. "All those people out there fleeing, those poor folks will starve to death. Here, on the other hand, we'll simply pass from life to ionized dust particles, just like that." He snapped his fingers.

Maria started crying.

"Oh look what you've done, Louis," Gladys yelled. "You've upset Maria."

"I don't want to die!" Maria said crying. "I don't want my baby to die. It's not fair. Do you know who my baby is? Do you have any idea who this child is?"

"Sweetheart," Gladys said softly. "Try and settle down—"

"Todd!" Maria wailed, "I'm gonna tell them. Somebody in this world should know who my baby is before we all die."

"Maria, I don't think—"

"This is Jesus!" Maria yelled. "This is the clone of Jesus Christ and he'll never even be born."

"Maria," Gladys said. "You're getting too upset. You need to relax...please."

Todd looked at the couple sheepishly. "She's getting a little...delirious. She's so exhausted. She's been in labor for hours."

Louis and Gladys looked at Todd curiously. "Where was the child conceived?" Louis asked.

"What? Do you mean, where are we from?"

"Yes, where are you from?"



“We were students at UCLA...then we went to Nash...”

Louis and Gladys looked at each other before returning their attention to Todd. “Was the child conceived at Vanderbilt University?” Gladys asked.

Todd jumped to his feet. “If you people are Vincés I swear I’ll kill you now!” He jerked the pistol from his pants.

“Todd!” Maria yelled. “Stop it! What’s happened to you?”

Louis frowned and scratched his wiry beard. “I can’t tell you anything about the...what did you call it?”

“The Vincés,” Todd said. “Don’t pretend you don’t know.”

“I don’t know anything about the Vincés young man, but I can tell you this. There has been a lot of buzz about a baby...this baby. No one is talking about it openly, but we all know. Dr. James Donahue was involved, Is that right?”

“Yes,” Todd said, still leery. “He was involved.”

“That’s what I thought...Gladys, this is the child.”

Gladys slowly raised her hand to her face and looked down at Maria.

A distant clap of thunder reverberated, shaking the barn.

“That’s it!” Louis said. “It’s the sonic boom. The asteroid has arrived!”

“So has the baby,” Gladys said, dropping down on her knees.

Maria screamed and arched her back.

“The baby’s coming now,” Gladys said.

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“This is Professor Nanyang Siang Pau at the Chinese Beijing Astronomical Observatory.

Dante657 has just entered the atmosphere. It is traveling at just over sixteen k, moving west, over the Middle East. It appears to be following its anticipated path. I estimate impact in thirteen minutes, fifteen seconds.”

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“Sir,” the pale secretary said, pushing a piece of paper into the hands of the newly named supreme commander of the EU armed forces. “All five geostationary meteorological satellites are reporting that Dante has entered the atmosphere and is traveling due west

towards the United States at over sixteen thousand miles per hour, estimated time of impact, just over ten minutes.”

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“The Admiral has called General quarters, all hands and civilian personnel below deck. Situation ZEBRA.”

Eric had heard and felt the deafening sonic boom coming from everywhere. He couldn’t help but look into the sky one last time.

“Look daddy,” Sadie said, pointing a tiny finger into the night sky, “a falling star. Twinkle, twinkle little star,” she sang, her big oval eyes glistening in the moonlight, “how I wonder what you are, up above—”

“Come sweetheart,” Eric said, gently pulling on her arm. “We have to hurry now.”

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“Oh my God!” Maria screamed, “I can’t stand this pain!”

“You’re doing just fine,” Gladys said. “The baby’s almost out. One more push.”

Louis moved towards the man-door. “I have to go out there. I have to see this thing.”

“LOUIS!” Gladys yelled, tears filling her eyes.

Louis stopped, looked back and quickly moved towards her. “How can we do this?” he said. “How can we say goodbye after all this time?”

“The baby’s coming. I feel it!” Maria screamed. Gladys looked back down at Maria. “The baby’s here,” she said softly.

The sounds of a crying newborn infant echoed off the dark barn walls. Gladys gently lifted the baby and laid him on Maria’s chest. Todd stared transfixed at the beautiful child.

Maria sobbed, rolling her hand over the baby’s back. “My baby,” she cried, “my sweet little baby.”

Gladys pulled the sleeping bag up and wrapped it around the child. She turned and looked into her husband’s old eyes. “I have to stay here with Maria...you go. I know how much this means to you. I love you,” she said, her lips trembling.

“Me too,” the old man said softly.

“Now get out of here before you miss that damn thing!” Gladys

yelled.

Louis wiped the tears from his eyes, slowly stood and moved out the man-door into the night.

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“This is Draper at The Ground-Based Electro-Optical Deep Space Surveillance in Maui. I’ve got Dante657 entering New York City airspace, still holding at sixteen k. It’s coming in high...steadily dropping altitude, maintaining, just above its projected course. Estimated time of impact...eight minutes thirty two seconds...Switching to visual.”

The New York City skyline appeared on millions of televisions and computer monitors all over the world.

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“I don’t see anything!” Nate Rosario yelled over the talk phone. “Do you read me? I’m not getting anything on the monitor! This is Rosario at the BBD communications desk. I’m not getting anything on visual. Has it already passed by?”

“Do you have the skyline?” the technician yelled back.

“Yes, but nothing’s happening. Shouldn’t we see—”

Suddenly, a blinding flash of light overcame the visual.

“What happened?” Rosario yelled. “The camera went dead! This stuff isn’t working...wait, it’s coming back.”

Random activity began slowly reappearing on his monitor. Computers switched, automatically trying to locate one of the few surviving rooftop cameras. Within moments, the computers locked on to an active feed. Billowing clouds of dust peppered with flying street signs and billboards came into view. Trees, paper, and turbulent black rolling debris filled the screen.

Entire rooftops were spinning to the ground like gigantic Frisbees.

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Todd was staring at the beautiful child lying on Maria’s chest. Gladys stood and moved away towards the man-door. He noticed a dim red light appear at the door. It began to slowly intensify. He could hear a distant sputtering roar approaching from the east like the sound of a thousand colossal flags flapping in a hurricane. He

threw his arm over the baby and lay down over Maria.

“No, Todd, NO!” Maria wailed.

“This is it, baby,” he said. “Hold on.... It’ll be over soon.”

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“This is Draper, at the Ground-Based Electro-Optical Deep Space Surveillance in Maui. I’ve got Dante coming in high, still holding at sixteen k. It’s going to overshoot the projected target. Estimated time of impact...two minutes twenty two seconds....”

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Louis had positioned himself next to the Humvee. Already the roar of the approaching monster was deafening. In the distance, he could see the dull yellow ball, careening towards him from the east, well above the thick cloud layer. As it drew nearer, the clouds parted like the red sea in the wake of the massive fiery orb, revealing a crystal clear spray of stars and a huge glowing full moon.

He could see the wave of debris blasting towards him at twenty times the speed of sound.

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“This is Draper at the Ground-Based Electro-Optical Deep Space Surveillance in Maui. I’ve got Dante657 still holding at sixteen k. It’s coming in high...it doesn’t appear to be dropping. It’s maintaining above its projected course.

Estimated time of impact...eight minutes fifteen seconds....”

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Todd clenched his teeth as the roar approached. He pressed himself as hard as he could over Maria and the baby. Maria screamed as the ground began shaking beneath them....

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The immense wake blasted Louis off his feet. He rolled under the Humvee, only to watch it tumble away over his head. Suddenly, he found himself airborne, then he was lying in a ditch, debris whizzing over him. Incredible, searing heat enveloped him. An all consuming smell...like fire and brimstone invaded his senses. He pressed himself into the cool wet grass. That’s when he saw it...It was right above him, a Herculean mountain of flame, nearly ten miles long,

careening past him less than seven miles directly over his head.

In an instant it was gone. He sat up in the ditch and watched the fiery hot white light turn to a soft amber glow and disappear into the western horizon, its tumbling debris-laden wake following behind like a gargantuan swarm of demonic bees.

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“This is Draper at the Ground-Based Electro-Optical Deep Space Surveillance in Maui. I’ve got Dante657 completely overshooting the projected point of impact. Still holding at sixteen k. Estimated time of impact... Ten minutes thirty-two seconds, somewhere over... Wyoming, God help us if it impacts near the Yellowstone caldera.”

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Louis’s incessant chatter brought Todd back to his senses.

“It went right over the top of me...I think it was...it was so wet...the rain and all...kept us from burning up...flew right over me! Just like that...the biggest thing I’ve ever seen! I looked up and swish...it was gone...”

Todd shook his head, trying to make sense of Louis’s manic ramblings. He unfolded himself from Maria and looked around the dark cavernous barn. The sound of rain had disappeared. The heat from the passing asteroid had burned the cloud cover off and the moonlight was shining brightly through the loft windows. He could see the enormous barn had been literally pushed off its foundation.

Maria was frantically looking for her crying baby who had somehow tumbled into the folds of the sleeping bag. She quickly recovered him and pressed him against her chest.

“Louis, settle down!” Gladys yelled. She was partially buried beneath a sprung bail of straw. “Come over here and help me up.”

“Maria,” Todd said softly. “It’s gone, it went over us.”

Maria looked up at him, her gaunt ashen face glowing in the moonlight. “Are you sure? Are you sure we’re not dead?”

“Don’t get your hopes up, kids,” Louis said cheerfully, moving towards his partially buried wife. “It’s still gonna hit...just not here.”

“Don’t listen to him, kids,” Gladys said. “If it were going to hit, it would’ve hit by now.”

Maria pulled Todd's face towards her. "We're gonna' live," she sobbed. "It's gonna be just like I told you, we're gonna be a family."

Todd stared at Maria, trying to digest the new data now flooding his mind. He had grown so used to the notion of imminent death and destruction, he didn't know how to feel otherwise.

Louis had managed to dig Gladys out of the straw and the old couple was making their way back towards Todd and Maria.

Gladys knelt down next to them. "Is everyone okay?"

"I've never been better," Maria said, tears glistening in her eyes. "I've been given everything I've ever wanted."

"Let me see that baby," Gladys said, holding her hands out.

Maria grinned and unfolded the sleeping bag. She gently lifted the child and handed him up to Gladys.

"Oh my word," Gladys said. "This is such a beautiful child." She turned her head and grinned down at Maria, "just like his mo..."

The look of sobering realization appeared on her face. She stared back at the cooing child. She looked at the tiny fingers, gently working against the sleeping bag. She looked at the eyes, the tiny nose, the mouth...

"Louis," she said softly, "look at him. Do you realize who we're looking at?"

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"This is Draper, at the Ground-Based Electro-Optical Deep Space Surveillance in Maui. I've got Dante657 moving out of the atmosphere, folks; it has passed through the atmosphere and is now moving back out into deep space! It is now moving back out into deep space, people! God bless it! It's moving back into deep space!"

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"**Brother Michael!**" Pete yelled through the door. "It's gone. It didn't hit. The asteroid didn't hit!"

Michael's door slowly opened. He stepped out looking unshaven and exhausted. "Of course it didn't," he said, grinning. "It's all so obvious I can't believe I didn't see it before..."

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Louis slowly moved towards the child. "This is momentous. This

is history unfolding before our very eyes.”

“Knock, knock,” an effeminate male voice rang out from the vicinity of the man-door.

Todd wheeled and went for his pistol.

“Well...it looks like we have company,” Louis said cheerfully. “Allow me to introduce myself—”

“Oh stop,” Gladys said, still looking at the child. “They’ll know who you are soon enough.”

“Tell me this isn’t the child,” the man at the door gushed as he stepped in. Another man and woman stepped in behind him. He moved towards Gladys and the baby but was stopped by the barrel of Todd’s pistol pressing against his forehead.

“Oh don’t worry about him,” Louis said. “He did the same thing to me...we haven’t been introduced, I’m—”

“I’m unarmed,” the man said softly, staring at Todd. “I come in peace...see.” He held his hands out.

“I don’t care why you’ve come,” Todd said. “Leave!”

“We only want to see the child,” the woman standing behind him said. “We’ve come a long way. We have no interest in hurting anyone. Please put the gun away.”

“You had better not be with the Vinces!” Todd growled.

“Oh goodness no,” the effeminate man said. “We’re from The Wind and The Holy Way astrology clinic. Well actually, that’s two clinics...I’m with The Wind and Meredith is with The Holy Way astrology... anyway...I’m Terrance, she’s Meredith and that’s Stephen.”

Todd blinked as Terrence pushed a limp hand in his direction. He lowered the gun.

Terrence sidestepped him and gasped. “Is this...don’t tell me...” He moved towards Gladys and the baby. “Oh...he...is...adorable. Meredith, come and see Baby Jesus.”

Todd whirled and stared at Maria. She shook her head and shrugged. “Wait a minute,” Todd said. “How did you find—”

“Are you the child’s mother?” Terrance said, interrupting Todd. Gladys giggled. “Oh no, Maria is the child’s mother.”

“Oh my,” Terrance said, looking down at Maria. “Aren’t you the

pretty one? Of course you are...your name is Maria? Isn't that funny, I guess that makes you Joseph..." He turned to look at Todd.

"No," Todd said slowly. "I'm Todd..." He turned and glared at Maria, who was staring back. "Wait a minute!" Todd yelled, suddenly taking charge. "How did you happen to find us? How did you know we were here?"

"It was easy," Terrance said. "We spotted the first house cusp. We knew that Jupiter was 13° Libra, which would place it in the 12th house...oh what am I saying, this is gibberish to you. Suffice it to say, the stars told us that the Christ child would be re-born today. We knew the asteroid was supposed to hit here in Omaha—"

"Shuddup!" Todd yelled blinking. "Just...Shuddup! You're telling me you used astrology to find this place...this very barn?"

"Well, I mean, no one is that good are they?" Terrence said. "Actually, we knew the baby had to be born where the asteroid was gonna hit, but of course, that could be anywhere in Nebraska...I mean, goodness...where on earth are you gonna begin to look for—"

"Get to the point!" Todd yelled. "How did you know we were in this barn?"

"We saw you in Nebraska City," Meredith said, breaking her long silence. "You drove right past us. We followed you here."

"I'm picking up a pattern here," Louis said. "You're saying you knew the asteroid was supposed to hit here, but you knew it wouldn't."

Terrance grinned. "Yes, that's right. You're catching on."

"You took the asteroid as a sign."

"Keep going...keep going."

"In other words, you followed the star."

"Bingo!" Terrence sang.

"Ha, I knew it," Louis said, clapping his hands together. "Do you remember where the historical Jesus was born?"

Terrance gasped, "Isn't that strange. What a coincidence."

"What are you people even talking about?" Todd said, completely confused.

“Do you remember where Jesus was born?” Louis repeated, looking at Todd.

“In Bethlehem!”

“In a stable,” Maria said, grinning.

Louis smiled and pointed at Maria. “He was born in a stable or as we like to call it, a barn.”

Todd stared at Louis. “That is strange isn’t it?”

Maria looked up and yelled. “Wait a minute, wait a minute...everybody stop!

The Barn instantly quieted.

There’s something you all should know.” She paused a moment obviously pondering the implications. “I’m a virgin,” she said softly.

Terrence howled with laughter. “That’s a good one. Wouldn’t that be funny—” His face dropped as he looked into the serious faces staring back at him. “Come on...I mean...how could—”

“It’s true,” Todd said. “Maria is a virgin.”

Terrance frowned and put his hand to his mouth. “You’re not saying...” He pointed towards the roof.

“Oh, of course not,” Louis said.

“Oh thank God,” Terrance said, giggling.

“The baby was cloned...” Louis said flatly.

“Oh,” Terrence answered. “He was clo....” Confusion reappeared on his face.

“We have something for the child,” Meredith said. “We hope it won’t be too...thespian... It just seemed like the right thing to do.”

Gladys leaned down and laid the baby in his mother’s arms. “I think it’s a wonderful thing,” she said, kneeling in front of Maria. “Come over here Louis,” she commanded. Louis moved to her side and knelt next to her.

Meredith moved forward, knelt and produced a small package from her clothing. She unraveled it and pulled out three large gold coins. “What’s the child’s name?” she asked.

“Joshua,” Maria said. “His name is Joshua.”

“Perfect,” Meredith said, “a beautiful name for a beautiful child... The stars told us of the birth of this child,” she continued solemnly. “They also tell us who he will be...his destiny. I give Joshua gold,

representing his office...the king of kings and the lord of lords.”

Todd stood back, staring into the surreal scene.

Stephen moved forward and knelt in front of Maria. He pulled a small ornamental box from under his loose clothing, opened it, and spilled a number of large yellow orbs into the palm of his hand. “I give Joshua the tears of frankincense, representing his divinity.”

Maria looked up at Todd, tears flowing down her face.

Terrence moved forward and knelt in front of her. He produced a box filled with smaller, lighter orbs and poured them in his hand. “Myrrh was a sacred and valued commodity of the ancient world,” he said. “It was used to anoint the heads of kings, embalm the dead and perfume fabrics for holy places...I give Joshua the tears of myrrh, representing his manhood.”

Todd could feel the ghosts of another time and place moving within the dark cavernous barn. A new chapter in the story of mankind was about to be written. He knew the world would never be the same again....

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“This is the BBD World News Tonight. I am Hugh Brolley reporting from our studios in London, England.

We are honored to be the very first news broadcast to appear on the air following the harrowing near miss. At the top of the news of course, the Great planet killer Dante657.... What happened? How could we have been so wrong? With us in studio, is Professor Claire Fuhrman of the Comet and Asteroid Information Network located in the Center of Wales...

Professor Fuhrman, the title says it best...how could we have been so wrong?”

“To be perfectly honest with you, Hugh, the answer to that question is still being hotly debated, the more answers we discover, the more questions arise. One thing we do agree on however, the unusually slow speed the asteroid was traveling made it especially hard to vector.”

“By vector, you mean to...chart or plot its course.”

“Yes, the speed and shape of the object seemed to have played heavily into the equation. It was wide and flat. There is the

possibility the general shape of the object itself was able to create lift... sort of like an airplane wing. At that speed, of course, we just don't know for sure at this point."

"I'm sorry, are you saying the asteroid entered into our atmosphere and then flew back out?"

"Of course not, Hugh. Dante657 was coming in at an extreme angle. We knew it would travel a long way.... Remember, we predicted the asteroid would enter our atmosphere over the middle east and impact thousands of miles away in the central United States. We were convinced that it would impact the earth...but we clearly understood it would be a glancing blow. It was traveling at just under twenty times the speed of sound, coming in at an angle less than thirty degrees. The idea of the wide flat surface of the asteroid causing the miniscule amount of lift needed for it to have skated through the atmosphere is well within the realm of possibility."

"Hmmm, interesting...they're saying Dante657 has left behind some surprising clues as to its origin. Can you update us on that?"

"Uh yes, Hugh, typically, asteroids are primordial objects left over from the formation of the solar system. Basically, we believe they're leftover rocky matter that never successfully coalesced into a planet. Usually they reside within the main asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter. Occasionally a collision knocks them off course. These asteroids are pretty much all made of the same thing. We find from the debris Dante657 left behind that it is made up of something entirely different."

"So what you're saying is, Dante657 didn't come from the asteroid belt at all?"

"That's right. That's what we are thinking now."

"If not from the asteroid belt, then where?"

"We think it's a fragment of a planet in an elliptical orbit within our solar system."

"What does that mean, professor?"

"That means Dante657 has been through this way many times before, and will almost certainly be back."

"There's another little tidbit of news circulating about our

asteroid. Could you fill us in on that, professor?”

“Oh yes, using the present known vector, we were able to chart the asteroid’s past orbits.”

“And what have you found?”

“It appears Dante657 was the object of another near miss two thousand years ago, probably mistaken for a rogue star...as a matter of fact, we’re almost certain at this point, Dante657’s previous near miss was widely reported... We just never made the connection until recently. The asteroid was all but certainly the historical star of Bethlehem.”

“Very interesting, professor...Thank you for being with us.

In other news, the Arab Russian alliance has withdrawn from Israeli borders under the close scrutiny of the European Union. Officials of the former United States of America continue to petition for the reestablishment of the former government. So far, all of the requests have been denied. American refugees are being encouraged to return to their homes on the American mainland... Governmental aid will be made available.”

“Also in related news...thousands of recently deposed American land owners and developers are screaming foul play regarding the spectacular land grab orchestrated by the British corporation Jeckle and Hidesman. It has been estimated that nearly a third of the entire North American continent has fallen into the hands of this cryptically named, privately owned corporation. Former land owners claim the property was sold under duress and has asked the British cabinet to intervene. Our sources tell us the transactions were perfectly legal and that it is highly unlikely any changes will be made. If all goes well for the company, Jeckle and Hidesman will become the first privately owned business whose assets range in the multiple trillions.”

“A sad note in closing... The former president of the now defunct United States of America has been found dead in his suite in Liverpool this morning, an apparent victim of suicide...”

You’ve been watching the BBD news, updated by the minute.  
This is Hugh Brolley...signing off...”