

A VOICE IN THE WILDERNESS

edited by
Winston Crutchfield

A
CRITICAL
PRESS
MEDIA
BENEFIT
BOOK



Luke 3 (ASV)

1 Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judaea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituræa and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene,

2 in the highpriesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came unto John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness.

3 And he came into all the region round about the Jordan, preaching the baptism of repentance unto remission of sins;

4 as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make ye ready the way of the Lord, Make his paths straight.

5 Every valley shall be filled, And every mountain and hill shall be brought low; And the crooked shall become straight, And the rough ways smooth;

6 And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

7 He said therefore to the multitudes that went out to be baptized of him, Ye offspring of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?

8 Bring forth therefore fruits worthy of repentance, and begin not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham.

9 And even now the axe also lieth at the root of the trees: every tree therefore that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire.

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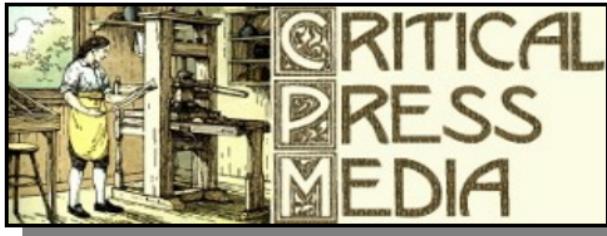


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But Greater Than Himself

by Winston Crutchfield

THE WHOLE OF the Biblical story revolves around a construction of type and anti-type. Throughout the Old Testament, the lives of the patriarchs and prophets depict the life of Jesus in miniature. As Moses led his people out of the bondage of Egypt into the promised land, so Jesus releases his people from the bondage of sin into eternal life. As Joseph prepared Egypt as a haven for the people of Israel, so Jesus prepares heaven to receive His Elect. Even as death entered the world through the sin of one man, so through one perfect redemptive act has mankind been reconciled to a relationship with his Creator.

John the Baptist was the last of the Old Testament prophets and the first of the Apostles, a man chosen to have a special relationship with Jesus. John acted as a forerunner for the Christ, preparing the world to recognize Jesus' role in the fulfillment of prophecy. John anticipated a messianic figure greater than himself, preaching the coming of the Christ as an

imminent event. John closed his own ministry and initiated the ministry of Jesus by recognizing him as the Christ and formally ordaining Him through water baptism. After Jesus' ordination, John spent the remainder of his ministry continually pointing people toward the Christ.

John the Baptist has his own story echoed in type and anti-type through the Old Testament as well. Abraham sends his servant to procure a wife for his son Isaac, to act as Abraham's emissary and with his authority in this matter. The judges act with the authority of God to instruct the people of Israel in their conduct as a nation. Jonah preaches imminent judgment to the people of Nineveh, complete with instructions for repentance and deliverance. Every time a prophet steps forward to bring the Word of the LORD to the people of Israel, they do so with a call to repentance based on existing scripture and a prophetic utterance regarding the appearance of the Christ. Only John saw his ministry fulfilled.

The Apostles continued the work of John through the founding of the church and the spreading of the gospel throughout the world. Each of the Apostles received his instruction in the scriptural interpretation of prophecy through a personal encounter with Jesus and the direct revelation of the Holy Spirit. Every one of the Apostles worked miracles in the name of Jesus for the purpose of confirming them in their office and establishing the reliability of their teaching. When the Apostles instructed the nascent church, they always did so through the interpretation of the Old Testament

scriptures and the explanation of prophetic fulfillment.

In this way, John the Baptist bridged the two generations of the keepers of divine revelation. All of the Old Testament patriarchs and prophets anticipated John's office. Each of the Apostles continued the function of John's office. In this volume, authors endeavor to portray the ministry of John by expressing a type of forerunner that acts within the story on behalf of another and under their authority. John's story ended badly for him, so perhaps it is not surprising that a number of these stories end on a dark note for a character dealing with forces vital to his calling but greater than himself.

John the Baptist was a unique person in the history of God's plan for redemption, and in the history of the world. He was the last of the Old Testament Prophets, and the first of the Apostles. He was sent before Christ to prepare the world to recognize and receive the Savior. Authors were challenged to fulfill the function of John the Baptist's office in creative and visionary stories.

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Word of Miracles

by David Crutchfield

I AM REMINDED OF the time I gave one of my soldier a ride home. In the course of the day our conversations had turned to God. Many of them denied him because they found the works described in the Bible to be impossible. This soldier was a little different. On the ride home he confessed to me that he did not believe because he had not *seen* any miracles and that if he could see just one such impossibility he would believe. So I answered his challenge the only way it could be answered, with the truth.

I asked him if he knew the story Jesus told of the rich man who died. He said he did not, so I told him.

Luke 16 (NKJV)

19 “There was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day. 20 But there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, full of sores, who was laid at his gate, 21 desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell[d] from the

rich man's table. Moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. 22 So it was that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom. The rich man also died and was buried. 23 And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom.

24 "Then he cried and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.' 25 But Abraham said, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and you are tormented. 26 And besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us.'

27 "Then he said, 'I beg you therefore, father, that you would send him to my father's house, 28 for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them, lest they also come to this place of torment.' 29 Abraham said to him, 'They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.' 30 And he said, 'No, father Abraham; but if one goes

to them from the dead, they will repent.' 31
But he said to him, 'If they do not hear
Moses and the prophets, neither will they be
persuaded though one rise from the dead.'"'

He wanted to argue with me but I continued to explain. I could tell him of the miracles I've seen, how God had healed the sick in my church and in my family, how He repaired machines before my eyes, even of the demons I have battled and the angels who protected me. But if he did not want to see a miracle, he would find a natural way to explain it all away – even if it is the dead brought back to life. I explained to him how miracles happened all around him every day and he need only open his eyes and look to see them. I asked him to recall the times in his past when a small unexpected delay put him minutes behind an accident, or when the stars seemed to fall perfectly in line allowing him to do something just right at just the right time, something he had to admit he did not have the skill to do, times when he got *lucky* again and again. I told him I stopped believing in luck years ago because the things that happened in my life were statistical impossibilities.

How many times do you have to get lucky before you realize that everything happens for a purpose, and if it has a purpose it is not random but guided, if they are guided there must be a God, and if there is a God then everything He does is a miracle. Miracles, I repeated, happen all around you all the time. But you will never see them because you don't want to see them. You will explain them away instead of accepting the

possibility that perhaps it was an act of God.

A few days later we were once again in the car together on the way back from work, he told me he understood now what I said then and was trying to look at life a little differently. I cannot say if he turned his life to God, but he opened up his mind to the possibility of God. This man did not believe and sought justification for belief through miracles.

John the Baptist believed first but needed conformation through miracles. When in prison, John sent his disciples to Jesus to ask if he was the messiah. Jesus answered by describing the miracles he performed in fulfillment of scripture.

Luke 7 (NKJV)

20 When the men had come to Him, they said, “John the Baptist has sent us to You, saying, ‘Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?’” 21 And that very hour He cured many of infirmities, afflictions, and evil spirits; and to many blind He gave sight.

22 Jesus answered and said to them, “Go and tell John the things you have seen and heard: that *the* blind see, *the* lame walk, *the* lepers are cleansed, *the* deaf hear, *the* dead are raised, *the* poor have the gospel preached to them. (Isaiah 35:5-6, 61:1-3) 23 And blessed is *he* who is not offended

because of Me.”

In Matthew 13 it was the unbelief in Israel that preempted Jesus from performing many miracles. In Luke 11 the people refused to believe and challenged Jesus for a miracle. He refused to give it. Paul said it best in 1 Corinthians 1:22-23 (NKJV) “For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness.” Miracles are not given to unbelievers who seek their power but refuse God, but are given to believers who seek God and in whose need God can be glorified. So if you want to see a miracle, *first seek God, then just open your eyes and you will see Him work.*

David Crutchfield is addicted to tabletop gaming, online MMORPGs, and flying small-engine aircraft. He believes in self-expression through the mass-extinction of fantasy orcs, digital zombies, and alien invaders. He writes adventures, reflections, and devotionals when the mood strikes or he's bribed with supreme pizza and cheesy bread. David currently lives in southern Indiana with a wife who followed him all the way from Honduras, a pint-sized clone, and a ferocious miniature wildcat.

Mike

by Ken Harmeyer

AWARENESS SLOWLY CAME to John before he opened his eyes. He sat there thinking to himself, "I must have fallen asleep in my chair again. I don't want to open my eyes yet."

He sat there a minute, then couldn't stand it any longer and said out loud, "Will you stop spraying water on my face."

As soon as he said it his eyes flew open.

"It's rain on my face! What the heck!" It was so dark he couldn't be sure his eyes were open, he couldn't see anything. He made sure he squeezed his eyes shut and opened them again. As far as he could tell they were open, but it didn't make any difference.

He sat there a minute listening to the rain drumming on the roof of the car. His memory slowly came back. He had been driving on the two lane mountain short cut. Living in the country had its advantages, but it had its disadvantages also. It was raining, he was going a bit fast because it was getting late. He was so tired and those three beers didn't help. He came to the straight

part, and then, what? He couldn't remember anything after that.

He felt around himself. The airbag had gone off, so he must have crashed. He was leaning back, so he must have gone off the road. He must be facing uphill toward the road. The rain was coming in through the windshield, so it must be broken.

He tried to remember the section of road he was traveling. It was sort of a shortcut, but a bad one. It was a poorly repaired narrow two lane. There was the mountain on one side. On the other side there was the ravine. That side slanted down at a 45 degree or better angle. There were trees and bushes all the way down to the river a few hundred feet down. There was hardly any guard rail, certainly none on the straight section.

As the rain fell gently on his face he thought about honking the horn. He touched the place where the horn should be, but felt only the deflated airbag and the broken plastic where the airbag had blown out.

His mind slowly started working again, and he realized it was very dark, so his headlights must not be working. He felt around and found the light switch, but it was already in the on position. There were no dash lights, no lights all in fact. He sat there wondering how bad the crash had been. Had he turned over and the battery had come out? With no light he couldn't tell.

He started to take a deep breath to yell. As soon as he did he felt the worst stabbing pain in his side he had ever felt! Tears came to his eyes and lights flashed before his eyes. He wasn't going to do that again!

"Okay," he thought. "I have to get out of this car and

get up to the road.”

He tried the door, but it seemed to be jammed shut. He reached through the broken window and felt a small tree hard up against the door.

“Alright, so I climb out the other window.”

He tried to move his legs. “What the heck! I can’t move, I’m stuck,” he said out loud.

As gingerly as he could, being careful to not move too much because he didn’t want a repeat of the pain in his side, he reached down and felt around.

“Oh that’s just great! The dash has come down on my legs,” he said to no one in particular. “So I’m stuck here till someone comes by and sees the skid marks and finds me.”

He sat there a minute and let his mind go blank; because for the first time he was starting to get scared. At work he did this when things were getting too hectic, it helped him concentrate.

With his mind clear he realized it was raining, so there wouldn’t be any skid marks! If it kept raining it would wash away even the evidence of him going over the side! No one would know he was here! Even when his wife reported him missing, they wouldn’t think of looking here. He almost never took this road. In fact very few people took this road. So if he didn’t do something he might never be found!

“If only it wasn’t so dark. With the clouds, rain, new moon, trees and bushes no light can get through.” He said to himself.

“How long have I been out,” he wondered? He couldn’t reach his cell phone, and he had stopped

wearing a watch, so he didn't know what time it was. He could have been out for minutes or hours, he just didn't know.

"Well nothing to do but wait for it to get light enough to see the situation," he said out loud. He found that talking out loud was comforting somehow.

He sat there with the rain coming down, feeling depressed.

He hadn't noticed it before, but he had a headache and he was noticing it now. It felt like his head was in a vice that had been squeezed tight, and there was a troll inside with a hammer trying to pound his way out.

As he sat in the dark he realized it had stopped raining. When had that happened? How long till dawn?

He sat there and thought about that first time he met Candi. It was three or four months ago. Things were not going well between he and Karen for a long time before that.

His mind started drifting.

HIS OFFICE PHONE rang, he glanced at the clock and knew it was Karen before he picked it up.

"What time are you going to be home?" she asked just as he said hello.

"The boss just dumped a bunch of stuff on my desk. I've got to get some of it done. It is really important. I'm not sure what time I'll be home. Don't wait dinner on me. I might be really late."

He could hear the tension in her voice as she spoke. "John, you promised Tim you would take him to see that movie. You remember your son Tim don't you?"

You know, I can put up with the disappointments when you say you are working late and leave me alone, but Tim is too young to really understand. This is not the first time you have done this to him either. I can't count how many times you have done it to me." As she spoke her voice went up in pitch and volume. He could tell she was working up to a fight, and he didn't need that right now he had work to do.

"Can't someone else do it? Can't it wait till tomorrow? Why does it have to be you? You promised!" She almost screamed into the phone.

"Listen, I don't want to argue now. The sooner I get on this the sooner I get home. I'll take Tim to the movie tomorrow night. It'll be okay, you'll see." He tried keeping his voice calm and even, but knew he was getting stressed and he could hear it in his voice.

"Fine!" was all Karen said and slammed the phone down.

John knew she was very upset. She didn't like that word, fine. Sometimes when they were going out, she would put a dress on and ask how it looked. After several years of marriage he learned not to say, "You look fine." So now when she used it and just hung up without saying I love you, he knew there was going to be trouble. But he had work to do.

A few people said bye as they left for the day, he hardly noticed. He worked for several hours, finally he was done. On the way home he decided to stop for a beer at the sports bar.

"Maybe they'll have the game on even though it is so late," he thought to himself.

He had been sitting at the bar nursing a beer and watching the game for a while when he noticed a woman looking his way. She had on a dark blue dress that almost wasn't there. She showed a lot of cleavage. He thought the opening might go all the way to her bellybutton, but he couldn't tell because his view was blocked by the bar. She sure was showing lots of leg. The dress was so tight he thought it might be painted on. She had dark blond hair that came to her shoulders the bluest eyes he had ever seen; and a shape that would make a priest think twice. When she saw he had noticed, she came over and sat next to him.

"Buy a girl a drink?" she said in a voice that almost made John turn to jelly.

"Sure," he said as he got the attention of the bartender.

"I haven't seen you here," she said as she looked into his eyes.

The alarm bells started going off in the back of his head, but he pushed them aside. Here was a good looking sexy woman talking to him! And she had started the conversation! "I haven't been in here for a long time. I worked late tonight and wanted to unwind before I went home." He almost couldn't get the words out he was so thrilled.

Her drink came; he was kind of surprised it cost so much for such a small glass.

Then John saw Candi wink at the bartender and thought to himself, "They must be working together."

Then she put her hand on his thigh. His thrill meter went off the scale! His internal alarm bells almost

deafened him. But what was the harm? They were in a bar with other people, and she wasn't moving her hand any further up, so no big deal.

"What's your name?" She put her lips so close to his ear he could feel her breath. This close he could smell her intoxicating perfume.

"John, what's yours?" He said using the coolest most debonair tone he could muster.

"I'm Candi," she said as she leaned back and smiled at him.

Eye candy he thought to himself as he looked her up and down. Then he shook his head, what the heck am I doing? I'm married!

Candi moved her stool closer to him and whispered in his ear, "You know we don't have to stay here, we can go to my place." As she said this she started rubbing his inner thigh, going higher and higher each time.

He grabbed her hand, pulled it away and placed it on the bar top.

"What's the matter, don't you like it?" She cooed.

"That's the problem, I do enjoy it. So I wanted to stop you before something got started here."

She looked him in the eye and said, "Okay. We can go to my place and get something started there."

"I'm married," he said flatly and wiggled his finger with his wedding ring.

"What she doesn't know won't hurt you. Anyway, what's the harm. It isn't like I want you to leave her. I just thought we could both have a bit of fun."

The voice in the back of his head said, "Run! Run as

fast as you can! Get into Karen's arms and love her for all you're worth." At the same time the voice in the front of his brain was saying, "She wants you, boy, don't be stupid! She is hot and she wants you! Karen will never know. You have been working hard and deserve some fun and relaxation."

Then Candi leaned in and said in a low voice, "When we go to my place, do you think you can help out a bit? I am kind of short on the rent this month."

He and Karen were growing farther apart and started arguing more.

Thinking about Candi a lot didn't help. He had been back to the bar several times. He told himself he just wanted to drink a beer and watch a game. Karen didn't allow alcohol in the house and hated sports. But he knew he really wanted to see Candi. She was there many of the times he went. Much of the time she left the bar with someone. He guessed she was "getting help with the rent." But there were times she came over, sat with him, and just talked. She knew a lot about sports and had a sympathetic ear. He told her about the problems with Karen. Candi understood how he needed to work a lot to be sure Karen and Tim had the best. She understood how he was just too tired many nights to make love to Karen. She understood how he just didn't have the energy to be romantic any more.

He had started going to the bar more and more. He liked talking to Candi, but he liked looking at her also. The last time he went to the bar he had decided. He was going to go home with her. He and Karen hadn't done anything for a long while. Karen always wanted some

romance before they made love. Why couldn't she just understand he was too tired. It wasn't his fault they hadn't done anything.

He walked into the bar and looked for Candi. He was nervous, but he had determined to help her with the rent tonight. He saw her sitting and talking with a well dressed, large muscular man with short blond hair. She gestured at him and the guy looked over. Then the guy got up and walked over to him. He sat down next to John and smiled. "Hey there, my name is Chad. If I am not mistaken your name is John. Is that right?"

John could only nod his head.

"Good!" Chad said as he slapped John on the back. John thought he had been hit by a bowling ball! He had the wind almost knocked out of him.

Chad was still smiling as he said, "I'm Candi's manager. She says she has been giving you therapy. Now the way I see it, you owe me \$200 for the sessions."

John had a hard time getting the words out, "But, but, we didn't do anything! All we did was talk. We didn't even leave the bar. All we did was talk."

"Right, she was sitting here giving you therapy instead of working. So you owe me \$200. If you open your mouth again I'll make it \$300." Chads smile faded and his voice became hard.

"I don't have that kind of money on me." John stammered.

"They have a ATM right over there, we'll just go over and you can pay me."

They got up and walked to the ATM. John punched

in \$200, but Chad stopped him.

"Since I'm such a nice guy, I'll charge you \$350 instead and not break your arm like I was going too." Chad smiled a humorless smile as he said this.

John started to say something then thought better of it. He punched in \$300. He gave the \$300 to Chad, then got out his wallet and gave him the other \$50.

Chad smiled and said, "Pleasure doing business. Next time you try to get some free time with my girl I won't be so nice." He turned and walked out of the bar.

John stood a minute and then left the bar. He was shaking so hard he couldn't get the key in the ignition to get the car started. As he sat there trying to calm himself, Candi walked up to the window and knocked. John hadn't seen her come up and almost jumped out of his skin! Without rolling the window down he said, "What do you want?"

"I'm sorry about that. But Chad saw me one night talking to you and wanted to know what was up. We can still sit and talk, you just have to pay me a little bit."

John finally was calm enough to get the key in the ignition and get going, he pulled out of the parking lot without saying a word. He knew he was never going back there again!

The incident with Chad had been a week ago. He hoped Karen wouldn't see the \$300 withdraw, but that didn't happen. The fight that happened when she found that, and then when he wouldn't tell her the truth was a real knock-down drag-out. He made up a lie, but she saw right through it. She was sure he was doing drugs

or something like that. He was so afraid of the truth he was ready and willing to lie to her. Just as long as she never found out about Candi. After a day or so she had just given up trying to get a straight answer.

Then tonight he worked late yet again. On his way home he decided to stop at a bar to relieve the stress. He had three beers then left. While he was driving it started raining hard. He decided to take the shortcut, and now here he was.

He slowly realized he could see shadows. Things around him were taking on shape. The sun was coming up! After what seemed like a year, he could see his situation clearly. It was not good. He looked in his rear view mirror and saw his car had come to rest on a tree. Better to say the tree had stopped him from falling all the way to the river. He must have turned all the way around because he was facing the road. He couldn't see the road or even the edge of the road. It was totally obscured by bushes. The front of his car was smashed, so he must have hit some trees on the way down.

He started to cry as he thought to himself, "If I can't see the road, no one can see me. I don't know what to do."

Then he started praying; he had been so far from God lately, but as the pastor always said, "Ten thousand steps away, one step back."

"Dear God. I am so far away from you right now. But I sure could use your help. I know other people promise all kinds of stuff in these kinds of situations. Sometimes they keep the promise; sometimes they don't. I won't promise anything. However, I will I get

back on track and back on the straight and narrow road. Karen was right when she said I hadn't been going to church, that is going to change. She is right when she said you never know when it will be your time to go. I will get back to being a Christian husband and father. Please help me get out of this alive."

He sat there for what seemed a long time. But he was sure his sense of time was way off.

He heard some twigs breaking, and some words. He couldn't make out what the words were since they were spoken in a low tone. He looked through the broken windshield and saw a man making his way down the hill to him. At least he thought it was a man. He was gigantic, easily the biggest man John had ever seen. He didn't seem to have anything but muscles. He had a full beard and long wild hair. He had on a t-shirt that had seen better days. His arms were covered with tattoos. The jeans he had on were stained and had a few holes in them.

His heart jumped in his chest, and he felt a sense of elation that he had never felt! He was saved!

"Hello, my name is Mike," said the man. "I called 911 and they should be here in a while."

"Thank you, thank you!" John started crying. "I thought I was going to die here. I didn't think anyone could see me from the road."

"Well you really can't see anything from the road. How did you get down here?"

"It was raining and I slid off the road. Listen, I hope you don't mind, but I think I have a couple of ribs broken and it's hard to talk," John said between short

breaths.

Mike smiled and said, "That's okay, I was sent to help. I would have been here sooner, but I was delayed."

John wasn't sure what to make of that statement, so he asked, "What do you mean you were sent?"

Mike looked at him and said, "You asked God for help. You realized you had screwed up, now you want a second chance. God is all about second chances. As long as you mean it. I hope you understand what I am saying."

John smiled and said in a very low tone "I'm a Christian so I understand and believe what you are saying, I have gotten away from God and what I should be doing as a Christian."

Mike smiled and said "Ten thousand steps away one step back."

Off in the distance they heard a siren.

"Oh, I better get up to the road or they may pass us." Mike said as he started walking away.

As the paramedics were loading John into the ambulance the deputy spoke to John. "This one has got me kind of spooked. You know, our 911 system gets the phone number of the person calling. But when this call came in there wasn't any phone number. It's a good thing the dispatcher wrote down the location. When I asked her to play the recording back to be sure of the spot, there wasn't anything on the tape. Well, better to say it sounded like the dispatcher was talking to herself. You could hear her responses, but you couldn't hear the guy. Then when I got here, he was standing on the side

of the road. He told me where you were. I came down to check on you, but when I came back up he was gone. Where did he go?"

John smiled to himself and thought, "Back to Heaven."

Ken is a professional driver who lives in Honolulu with his wife of 31 years and two dogs. He likes to ride his Ninja with his friends from the Christian Motorcyclist Assoc. on Oahu.

Who Goes Before Us

by Deborah Caligiuri

ABIJAH PUSHED ASIDE the tent flap of his master Abraham. He had been with Abraham as long as he could remember, and Abijah knew his master trusted him. He was the chief servant, in charge of all of Abraham's property, people, and livestock. All that Abraham had, Abijah was responsible to attend.

The wind whipped dust into the tent as Abijah stepped to Abraham's side. Abijah felt very weary and aged, as was his master. "I am here, my lord. You have need of me?"

Abraham smiled, and the wrinkles on his face multiplied to a number untold. "Abijah, I am the old man, and yet you seem to carry my years on your shoulders. Sit down, old friend, I think we have much in common right now. I've heard that your son Gamaliel desires a wife from the Canaanites who live among us. That is cause enough to distress an righteous man."

Abijah sighed and squatted on the ground next to his master. "My lord is right. I am in great distress. The boy

is not thinking of his duty but of her beauty. He is not thinking of his people or his God, only his passion.”

“I remember a young servant in my household who almost made a very similar choice,” said Abraham with a chuckle.

That pulled a reluctant smile from Abijah. “Yes, my lord, but my father and my lord threatened to cut off my head if I didn’t turn my eyes to my own people. Gamaliel will not respond to such a call for respect. I fear that would only provoke him to hasten into the very thing I threaten to take from him.”

“Then you must seduce his heart back to you,” said Abraham kindly. “Would that I had such a problem with Isaac, but his heart is pining for his mother. What is harder? Drawing a virile, young man from an undesirable woman? Or finding a desirable woman to fill his heart?”

Abijah sighed. “I wish I could answer you, my lord. The Canaanite women are very beautiful. Would that I could strike them with a plague of ugliness.”

Abraham laughed out loud at his servant’s tongue in cheek expression of frustration. “I fear we would only make things worse for ourselves, Abijah. It is for this matter that I sent for you, old friend.”

“I’m listening, my lord.”

“You are my chief servant, my right hand. I trust my very life in your keeping,” said Abraham. “I am a very old man, and my son has no wife to give him children. I have told him to choose, but he can only think of his mother, so I have told him that I will choose for him. To this, Isaac agreed.” Abraham chuckled. “He desires to

fill his bed if not his heart.”

Abijah smiled. “This sounds like a young man to me.”

“I am giving you the task to bring Isaac a wife from among my own country and my own relatives. Swear this to me Abijah. You will not bring him a wife from among the Canaanites but from my people.” Abraham took Abijah’s hand and thrust it under his own thigh in their traditional gesture of an oath.

“If the woman is not willing to return with me to this land, shall I bring Isaac back to her?” asked Abijah quietly.

Abraham’s brown eyes grew warm with conviction. *“The LORD, the God of heaven, who brought me out of my father’s household and my native land and who spoke to me and promised me an oath, saying, ‘To your offspring I will give this land’--he will send his angel before you so that you can get a wife for my son from there. If the woman is unwilling to come back with you, then you will be released from this oath of mine. Only do not take my son back there.”*

With his hand under his master’s thigh as a sign of oath, Abijah answered. “I make this oath to you, my lord, that I will bring back a wife for your son from among your relatives and your country.”

“Thank you, my old friend. I know that you will fulfill your oath. Now, go and prepare for your journey. It will be long. Do not forget, Abijah, the God of heaven is going before you to prepare the way for you as you seek a wife for Isaac. He is your forerunner as you are Isaac’s.”

"Yes, my lord." Abijah bid his master good-bye and left to prepare for his journey.

With renewed purpose in his heart, Abijah sent one of his younger sons to find Gamaliel and bid him seek his father. Abijah began gathering jewelry, pottery and rich fabrics from his master's belongings to bring with him on his journey.

Gamaliel ran to his father and bowed his head respectfully to the man. "Yes, father?"

Abijah felt his heart warm at the sound of his son's voice. "Gamaliel, I need to you accompany me on a task for my lord Abraham. We are to go to Aram-Naharaim."

"Yes, father." said Gamaliel. His hesitancy was evident though he tried to keep his tone respectful.

Abijah put a hand on his son's shoulder. "I will share this when we have begun our journey. Now we must prepare. Find ten strong camels and see that they have filled themselves with water. We will leave before the sun rises in the morning."

Gamaliel almost groaned. Giving the camels water was tedious and time-consuming work. This was not how he wanted to spend his evening. His mind flew with pictures of Hurriya, his Caananite beauty. Gamaliel knew that mentioning her name would not bring favor with his father though Abijah would not speak it. A son could feel his father's disappointment whether voiced or unvoiced, so Gamaliel simply nodded and set about his task.

On his way out of the tent, Gamaliel grabbed his two youngest brothers by their shoulders and insisted they

help him in this chore. Abijah chuckled quietly and continued selecting the best of Abraham's riches to bring with him as gifts. He couldn't help but wonder what kind of woman would receive this bounty.

Abijah knew Abraham's brother Nahor lived in a village in Aram-Naharaim, and this is where he would begin to search for a wife for Isaac. The weary father sighed deeply. Perhaps the God of heaven would favor him with a wife for Gamaliel from their own people as well. Abijah's movements slowed to a near stop as he remembered the day he took Daliyah as his wife.

They had been strangers to each other entering a marriage covenant for which neither was anxious. Daliyah was a girl of sixteen and Abijah nearly ten years her elder. It was a good match. They were from favored families, and it was right that they should marry. Abijah was well in years then, and he knew it was a disappointment to his father and his master that he still had no wife. So he took Daliyah for his wife.

It wasn't so easy at first. The night he first brought Daliyah into his tent, she tried valiantly to control her fear but crumbled into tears in his arms. Abijah had compassion and taught her that he could be trusted.

She gave him six fine sons and four daughters in what seemed like such a very brief time. She was devoted to him, and they had grown to respect and even love one another. No man could ask for more, unless he asked for her love from the start.

Perhaps this is why he had not pushed Gamaliel to marry. Three of Abijah's daughters were already wives, and three of his sons had also married. Gamaliel was

his second eldest son, nearly twenty now, and reluctantly Abijah could admit to himself that this son was somewhat favored.

With a shake of his head, Abijah again sighed and quickly finished his packing. He commanded two trusted servants to attend the parcels even after they were strung on the camels. Abijah felt compassion stir and walked through the dust and sun to the well where his three sons were watering the camels.

“Gamaliel,” he called.

Gamaliel lifted his head at his father’s voice and left his pitcher to see what his father wanted of him. “Yes, father?”

“I do not know how long this journey will take us. If you have need of saying good-bye to anyone, you may do that, and I will help your brothers finish with the camels.” Abijah knew he had done the right thing when joy lit his son’s face. “Gamaliel, we will leave before sun up tomorrow. Do not make me search for you.”

“I won’t, father. I will be ready,” said Gamaliel practically running in the direction of the Caananite village.

“God of Abraham, I humbly ask that you would turn his heart to his own people!” pleaded Abijah silently. He joined his two younger sons at the well and continued the work of watering his livestock.

The sun had set by the time Abijah completed preparations to leave, and he had no desire but to see his wife. He found her playing with their daughter Jaantje’s young son, their first grandchild. Abijah couldn’t help but smile. Children were a blessing, and

grandchildren were a multiplied blessing. He scooped the toddler from his wife's lap and tossed him in the air pulling a delighted laugh from the boy.

Abijah played with the boy by the light of the fire for a little while before Jaantje's husband sought his wife and son. Abijah kissed his daughter's temple as she bid him a safe journey. News traveled amongst small communities.

With his arm around his wife, Abijah drew her into his tent for the night. "So you have heard that I am leaving in the morning for Aram-Naharaim."

Daliyah smiled at her husband. "I have heard that, my lord. I have heard that Gamaliel is accompanying you as well."

Abijah frowned. "Yes, I hope to put distance between Gamaliel and Hurriya though I dare not tell him that."

"No, indeed," agreed Daliyah. "Has my lord forgotten that I have a cousin in the village of Nahor?"

"I had forgotten," said Abijah with a tender smile for his wife. "Shall I bring greetings from you?"

"Yes," said Daliyah slowly. "Did you know that my cousin has a beautiful daughter of her own, name Onit?"

Abijah chuckled and pulled his wife against him. "Of course she is beautiful. She shares your blood."

Daliyah laughed in delight. After so many years and so many children, Abijah could still make her feel young and beautiful. "My lord, I do not believe her daughter is married , and she is no younger than I when I became your wife."

"I have a wife whom I adore, Daliyah. What do I need with a younger woman?" teased Abijah with twinkle in his eye.

"Abijah," said Daliyah in mock frustration. "Do you not think it is a good idea to have Gamaliel meet Onit? Will your business there not allow it?"

"I honestly do not know, but I will try. Do you have something to send with me that will identify me to your family?" asked Abijah quietly. The idea of Onit as a wife for Gamaliel appealed to him.

With a smile, Daliyah stood on tiptoe to brush his cheek with a kiss. "If my lord will release me for a moment, I will give you what you request."

Abijah chuckled and let her go.

Daliyah went quickly to her tent and returned in mere moments with a jeweled necklace in her hand. She pressed it into Abijah's palm and closed his fingers around it. "This will tell them who you are."

Abijah safely stored the necklace in a leather pouch at his waist then reached for his wife again. "Now, you must give me what I request."

Daliyah laughed and wrapped her arms around her husband's neck.

BEFORE THE SUN was up, Abijah kissed his sleeping wife and left the tent to begin the journey of finding a wife for his master's son.

Gamaliel sat bleary eyed atop his camel next to his father. He couldn't get Hurriya out of his mind. His jaunt into the village had not gone as expected. Hurriya's flashing, black eyes haunted him.

"Why must you go, Gamaliel?" she whimpered, puckering her bright, red lips temptingly.

"It is my duty," he said regretfully. Standing in her home always gave Gamaliel shivers. He preferred to meet her in the village market.

It seemed the idols her family worshiped surrounded him, glaring at him with their cold, stone images. In his heart, Gamaliel knew there was only one God, the God of heaven whom his master Abraham worshiped. This was the God of his people, and Hurriya was not of his people.

Gamaliel told himself that didn't matter. Once she was his wife, she would worship his God. That is what he had believed until last night. Now his head spun with how quickly everything in his world had changed.

"You do not have to go," commented Hurriya slowly as she boldly touched the front of his cloak. "If you do not return tonight, your father can't say anything. You are a grown man."

The heat from her hand had practically seared his chest, and he found himself short of breath. Gamaliel studied Hurriya as he tried to slow his pounding heart. Her skin was fair for a Caananite, almost as light as the sand, but her hair was as black as the night sky and so were her eyes. She mesmerized him.

Disobeying his father was not a consideration. Gamaliel had no regret about that. "I am sure our journey will not last more than a month, and I will return to you at that time," he said softly, his voice almost a caress.

Hurriya's eyes narrowed to thin, black slits. "Then

take me as your wife tonight, so that I am assured of your return.” Her voice was silken, but her eyes were hard.

That thought sent Gamaliel’s blood racing through his veins. He wanted nothing more.

“Gamaliel!”

Gamaliel’s head snapped up at the sound of his father’s voice. “Yes, father?”

Abijah repeated himself. “Raise the camels and let us depart. Where is your head this morning?”

Setting the caravan into motion across the sand, Gamaliel opened his heart to his father. “I was thinking of Hurriya. I almost took her for my wife last night.”

Abijah forced down the ill feeling and evened his voice as he spoke. “What prevented you? Was she not willing? Was her family not willing?”

“They were all very willing,” said Gamaliel. “I was very willing as well, but I could not bear the stares of the idols in her house. They seemed to mock me, to mock you.”

“This is why you did not take her?” pressed Abijah, trying to understand.

“I told Hurriya that I would make her my wife and take her to my mother’s tent. She would live there until I returned, and she would learn to worship the God of heaven. She refused.” Gamaliel clearly remembered the defiant fury in her eyes.

Abijah felt his son’s pain. “She wanted to bring her gods with her?”

Gamaliel sighed and rubbed his face. “She wanted me to forsake my family and my God and embrace

hers. I would not. I have seen the work of the God of heaven in my master Abraham. How could I believe that something made of wood or of stone has any power? I tried to tell Hurriya, but she would not hear it. I do not understand women, father."

Laughing, Abijah was greatly relieved and sorrowed at the same time. "They are mysterious creatures, Gamaliel, but it can be an enjoyable mystery. Did you give Hurriya a promise for when you return?"

"No," said Gamaliel painfully. "I know you did not approve of her, and I know now that I cannot take Hurriya as a wife, but I do not know why it is so painful to make the right choice."

"I am glad of it, but not for your sorrow. Perhaps if you had made a sacrifice to our God to bring you a wife, you would have waited for Him to prepare the way and would not have given your heart to a Caananite," said Abijah kindly.

Gamaliel considered this thought for some time. "Do you think it's too late for me to petition Him now?"

Abijah felt his heart lift in thankfulness to the God of heaven. "I do not think that, Gamaliel. Before light breaks tomorrow, you will build an altar and offer a sacrifice. It will be a stone of remembrance."

"Yes, father." With a burden lifted from his back, Gamaliel smiled. "So why are we on this journey?"

"We are going to find a wife for Isaac," said Abijah.

"Isaac will not choose his own wife?" asked Gamaliel.

"Isaac still grieves for his mother. That makes it impossible for him to open his heart to a wife at the

moment. He will get over it eventually.” Abijah spoke frankly with his son. “Having another choose your wife isn’t always a bad thing. Sometimes those around us can see more clearly than we.”

Gamaliel remained silent for a few moments. “Why have you left me to make this choice on my own?”

“Gamaliel, tell me again why you would not take Hurriya to wife last night.”

“I would not forsake my family and embrace her gods,” repeated Gamaliel.

Abijah smiled. “Why do you think you were unwilling to do that, even for such a beautiful woman?”

“I know that your God, the God of heaven, is the only God, and I would rather pluck out my own eyes than cause you that kind of pain.” Gamaliel answered passionately. His eyes widened in understanding. “I see. I am not making this choice on my own. I have with me all the words you have spoken in my life.”

“Indeed, my son. And I have more words, still, if you choose to hear them,” said Abijah with great fondness.

“I do, but sometimes, my fool head gets in the way.” Gamaliel frowned at his weakness.

Abijah laughed out loud. “That is only your youth, boy. One day, you will feel that your head has cleared, and all the words I have spoken are still there. Then you will give those words to your son.”

“Why did you choose Josiah’s wife? Did you not trust him?” asked Gamaliel about his elder brother.

“Josiah asked me to,” explained Abijah quietly. “It was not a matter of trust.”

“Was it easy for you?” asked Gamaliel.

Abijah glanced at his son as his camel swayed side to side. “It was not very difficult.”

“How did you know that he should marry Naama?” pressed Gamaliel.

Finally, this was the intent behind the questions. Abijah felt himself smile. “She worships the God of Abraham, and she is kind and patient. Those are qualities Josiah needed in a wife. You will know, Gamaliel, and if you wish to ask me, I will help you.”

Gamaliel felt the cadence of his moving camel and looked at his father. “Is there a woman you would choose for me? Do I need a woman who is kind and patient?”

“Those are qualities to be admired in every woman, but you do not need them the way Josiah does. I would say you need a woman who will adore you with her whole heart and not be timid,” pondered Abijah slowly.

Gamaliel chuckled. “I need a woman who will tell me how great I am and tell everyone else as well.”

Abijah chuckled as well. “I only pray she doesn’t make your cloak fit too tightly.”

Laughing outright, Gamaliel nearly lost his balance atop his camel. “I’m sure she will be exactly the encouragement you need,” Abijah assured his son.

“So, do you have someone in mind then?” pressed Gamaliel.

“There is a woman in the village of Nahor who is your mother’s family and who may be just that woman. We will see.” Abijah spoke seriously with anticipation in his heart.

“What’s her name?” inquired Gamaliel with a racing heart.

“Onit.”

Gamaliel played the name in his mind and let his mind imagine what she would be like. Abijah quickly saw that he lost his son’s attention to the daydream of Onit. He smiled and silently praised God for this change in Gamaliel’s heart. He had hoped that this journey would not only be a blessing for his master Abraham but also for Abijah’s own son. Abijah had not expected this change to happen so quickly.

Abijah had learned from his father and from his master Abraham that there was no greater opportunity to grow as a man than to trust the God of heaven for the very breath in his body. His father had told him stories of Abraham’s faith and his failures.

There had been a promise. *“I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those you bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you. To your offspring I will give this land.”* Abraham and Sarah had been barren for so very long that the promise of a child was enough to draw their hearts to the God of heaven. He gave them hope, a breath of their desire.

“Father?”

Abijah was startled from his thoughts by Gamaliel’s voice. “What is it, Gamaliel?”

Gamaliel looked with bewildered eyes at his father. “Shouldn’t we make camp for the night?”

It was only with Gamaliel's words that Abijah saw the fading sunlight and felt the air surrounding him becoming very cool. Traveling at night in the desert was not a wise choice.

"Yes. Here we stop," said Abijah.

The men quickly prepared for the night while there was light enough to see. Soon, with a warming fire in their midst, Abijah sank to the sand with a sigh. These travels were not nearly so easy as they had been in his youth. He was thankful for the other menservants who accompanied him and his son.

Abijah instinctively looked to his son and saw Gamaliel's eyes wide open. "Sleep, son. The morning will come very swiftly."

"I was just thinking of mother," said Gamaliel quietly.

"She is a beautiful woman," replied Abijah seeing his lovely wife in his mind's eye.

"That is not what I was thinking," said Gamaliel wryly.

Abijah chuckled. "Nevertheless, it is true."

"I was just thinking that mother would have loved Hurriya." Gamaliel sighed. "I do not believe Hurriya would have returned that affection. I want Mother to love my wife, and I want my wife to love my mother."

"That is a very honorable desire. So you must see how a woman treats those around her. Is she compassionate? Does she think of the needs of others? Is she respectful?" Abijah voiced his thoughts softly.

The men grew quiet and slept. Shortly before daybreak, Abijah's eyes opened abruptly at the sound of

a man's voice. He rose quickly and breathed a breath of relief when he saw that his son had built an altar and sacrificed one of the lambs which they had brought on their journey. It was Gamaliel's voice in prayer that Abijah had heard. That brought great relief for the weary father.

THERE WERE MANY long days of travel, and Abijah's thoughts dwelt on the faithfulness of his master Abraham. When Abijah was a very small child, Abraham bravely gathered his wife and his family and left the only land he had ever known as home to follow the voice of God. Abraham obeyed God and put his life and the lives of his family and servants in the hands of a God he couldn't see.

Abraham's faith was not without flaws. He had twice presented his beautiful wife Sarah as his sister to local pharaohs, knowing that as her husband he could be killed if the pharaoh coveted her. Abraham had not trusted God to prepare the way in front of him. Both times, Abraham and Sarah were spared, and God forgave Abraham.

Many years passed, and Abijah grew to manhood and married. Still, Abraham and Sarah had no child. Their hearts burned with pain and hunger for this promise. Abraham pleaded with God when God renewed His promise to bless Abraham. "*O Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless... You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.*"

Abijah could nearly feel the longing of his master's

heart in those grief-filled words. It was that longing that provoked what came next. Sarah gave Abraham a servant girl named Hagar, and Abraham had a child with Hagar. Abijah had watched Ishmael grow from an infant and knew that he would never have the true love of his father that should be his. Ishmael was not the promised heir.

So much pain came from that act of desperation. A boy's heart and very soul were shattered. The God of heaven was compassionate and not only spared Ishmael's life but promised to make him a great nation.
“*...But my covenant I will establish with Isaac...*”

Isaac was the promised child. Isaac was a bit of a spoiled brat, thought Abijah wryly. Unfortunately, he knew Gamaliel was as well. It was because of his father's indulgence that Gamaliel had ever had opportunity to become acquainted with Hurriya. Abijah had prepared the way for his son's heart to potentially turn away from the God of heaven.

Abijah grimaced at the crippling fear that thought inspired. He quickly gave praise and thanks to God that Gamaliel had turned away from Hurriya.

“Father, are you in pain?” asked Gamaliel with concern.

“Only the pain of regret,” said Abijah with a small smile.

“What do you regret?” Gamaliel grew weary of the camel's back and wished for conversation.

Abijah spoke slowly. “I regret allowing you the freedom to have your heart ensnared by a woman who does not worship the LORD the God of heaven.”

Gamaliel felt a moment of grief at the loss of Hurriya, but that fleeting feeling passed as a stronger feeling replaced it. "I regret turning my eyes from the God of my fathers and nearly losing my soul for my foolishness."

FINALLY, THE WEARY travelers saw the well of Aram-Naharaim. They drew near the well and climbed down from the camels as the women of the town approached the well to draw water for the evening.

Abijah began praying silently in his heart. "*O Lord, God of my master Abraham, give me success today, and show kindness to my master Abraham. See, I am standing beside this spring, and the daughters of the townspeople are coming out to draw water. May it be that when I say to a girl, 'Please let down your jar that I may have a drink,' and she says, 'Drink, and I'll water your camels too' -- let her be the one you have chosen for your servant Isaac.*"

"Father," said Gamaliel quietly with his eyes glued to a girl heading their way with a smile.

Abijah's breath left in a rush. There was a very young vision of his wife approaching the well with her companions. It had to be Onit. "Do not speak to her, Gamaliel. Let us watch her and discover if we can if she is of your mother's family."

"Yes, father," agreed Gamaliel. Thinking of his near tragic affection for Hurriya, the young man was loathe to approach this girl too hastily.

Abijah swung his gaze away from Onit, and his eyes fell on another beautiful, young woman coming to the

well. Peace gently stirred in his heart that this should be the girl for Isaac. He rushed toward her before he could change his mind.

“Please give me a little water from your jar,” he requested kindly.

After studying him for a mere moment the girl spoke. “Drink, my lord,” she said, and quickly lowered the jar to her hands and gave him a drink. After she had given him a drink, she said, “I’ll draw water for your camels too, until they have finished drinking.”

Abijah moved aside silently and watched the girl move swiftly to the tedious task of watering the camels. He watched her closely to discern if his initial feeling was correct and the LORD had made his journey successful.

Gamaliel approached his father and spoke softly. “It is her, father. I heard her companions call her by name.”

It took a moment for Abijah to realize that Gamaliel was not speaking of the girl watering their camels. “Ah, yes. So we have found Onit of your mother’s family.”

“Should I talk to her?”

“We must be patient, Gamaliel. First, I must complete my task for my master Abraham. If Onit is God’s desire for you, He will prepare the way for us to go to her father’s house. The God of heaven will give us favor with her father and her heart if she is to be your wife,” said Abijah calmly.

Gamaliel nodded, feeling the pounding of goats’ hooves in his chest. “I can hardly breathe.”

Abijah chuckled. “You will survive.”

“Who is the girl watering our camels?” asked

Gamaliel in attempt to clear his thoughts from the beautiful, distracting Onit.

"I believe she is the girl the LORD the God of heaven has set aside for our master Isaac. I need only to discover if she comes from my lord Abraham's family," said Abijah.

Gamaliel watched the girl for a moment. "It's certainly kind of her to water the camels. I despise watering these beasts."

Abijah smiled. "And yet she is doing it with no word of complaint."

Gamaliel's eyes wandered back to the young woman occupying his every thought. "Do you think Onit would show such kindness?"

Abijah pulled his gaze from the girl ministering to his camels and sought the young woman who so resembled his wife. The same sweetness and gentleness in his wife's presence echoed in the rhythmic movements of Onit as she drew water and spoke softly with her companions. "I believe that she would, son."

At that moment, Onit looked up from her companions and met the eyes of the two men watching her. She lowered her eyes and lifted her veil to cover her face as she continued with her task. The men turned to each other, regretting that they had made her work more difficult by their intrusion.

Abijah glanced back at the young girl watering his camels and prayed silently that God would bring an opportunity for him to see Gamaliel introduced in his wife's family. He no longer questioned that Onit should be his son's wife.

Some minutes later, the girl finished watering Abijah's livestock. The chief servant went to his burdened camel and removed some pieces of fine jewelry. He approached the girl with the gifts of a gold nose ring and two gold bracelets.

"What is your name, girl?" he asked gently.

"I am Rebekah," she answered with her chest heaving from the effort of watering the camels.

Abijah had compassion for her weariness. It was no small task Rebekah had accomplished. Then he asked, "Whose daughter are you? Please tell me, is there room in your father's house for us to spend the night?"

She answered, "I am the daughter of Bethuel, the son that Milcah bore to Nahor." And she added, "We have plenty of straw and fodder, as well as room for you to spend the night."

Abijah's heart was so lightened with peace that he dropped to his knees to give thanks to the God of heaven. "Praise be to the LORD, the God of my master Abraham, who has not abandoned his kindness and faithfulness to my master. As for me, the LORD has led me on the journey to the house of my master's relatives."

Rebekah knew the name of Abraham, knew that he was her grandfather's brother. This prayer of thanks left her breathless in a rush of excitement, and she ran quickly to her father's house to share the news of this servant's arrival.

Her brother Laban was present when she spoke breathlessly to her mother and showed her the beautiful jewelry.

Laban's eyes brightened at the sight of the gold. He stood and gripped his sister's shoulders. "This must mean he has come to share news of Abraham's death and give to us an inheritance from our relative."

"Laban, I do not believe this is true. Why must you always think of riches?" asked Rebekah with disdain. "He is the servant of our relative about whom we know little. Perhaps he was sent ahead to prepare the way for Abraham."

Hardly hearing his sister, Laban rushed to the well where the servant would surely be waiting. He saw the old man standing near his camels. "Come, you who are blessed by the LORD," he said. "Why are you standing out here? I have prepared the house and a place for the camels."

Abijah glanced at Gamaliel. They had no choice but to hope for an opportunity to see Onit and her family later. Abijah gathered the camels and the other men with him and followed the young man to the house of Rebekah's family.

It took some time to settle the camels and remove their burdens. Straw and fodder were provided for the beasts, and Laban instructed a servant to provide Abijah and his men with water to wash their feet.

At long last, a very weary Abijah was seated at the table with Rebekah's family, and a lovely spread of food was laid before him and Gamaliel.

"I am so grateful for your kindness, but I will not eat until I have completed my task and said what I need to say," said Abijah firmly.

"Speak then," said Laban trying not to be impatient.

So he said, “I am Abraham’s servant. The LORD has blessed my master abundantly, and he has become wealthy. He has given him sheep and cattle, silver and gold, menservants and maidservants, and camels and donkeys. My master’s wife Sarah has borne him a son in her old age, and he has given him everything he owns. And my master made me swear an oath, and said, ‘You must not get a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, in whose land I live, but go to my father’s family and to my own clan, and get a wife for my son.’” Abijah paused for a drink of water. “When I saw the spring ahead of me and saw the women coming to the spring, I prayed to the LORD, the God of heaven. I asked Him that when a woman comes to the spring and I ask her for a drink that she would offer to water my camels as well and this would be a sign that she is the one the LORD intends for my master’s son. This is what happened. I saw Rebekah, and I asked her for a drink. She offered water for my camels as well. When she told me the name of her father, I knew this was from the LORD, the God of my master Abraham. He has brought me to the granddaughter of my master’s brother. If you will agree to this tell me, and if not tell me so that I may know what to do from here.”

Abijah finished speaking and held his breath in anticipation of the answer. The room was thick with silence and thought. Rebekah’s face registered surprise and hope. Milcah, her mother, carefully guarded her expression. Rebekah’s father, Bethuel, and Laban seemed grim and thoughtful. Abijah’s heart nearly stopped as he observed them.

Bethuel and Laban spoke in agreement. “This is from the LORD; we can say nothing to you one way or the other. Here is Rebekah; take her and go, and let her become the wife of your master’s son, as the LORD has directed.”

So grateful and overwhelmed that his journey had been successful so quickly, Abijah bowed his head low and gave thanks to God for this blessing. Then he rose and retrieved more gold and silver and clothing as gifts for Rebekah, and he bestowed generous and costly gifts on Milcah and Laban as well from their relative Abraham. After this was done, Abijah allowed himself and his men to eat and drink their fill.

As they were eating, Abijah casually inquired of his wife’s family, if Bethuel or Laban had any knowledge of them. They were able to tell Abijah the location of his relatives, for which both Gamaliel and Abijah thanked them.

When the meal was finished, Abijah and Gamaliel took leave to visit the house of his relatives before going to sleep. As they walked in the dark, Abijah could practically hear Gamaliel’s anxious breaths. His hand went to cover the leather pouch at his waist. God had granted them favor on this journey so far, Abijah had faith that He would continue to go before them and prepare the way.

With swift steps, Abijah and Gamaliel found the home of Daliyah’s family and knocked at the door. A man opened the door with a welcoming smile. “You are Bethuel’s guests, the servants of Abraham,” he declared. “What brings you to my door?”

Abijah unstrapped the pouch from his waist and lightly tipped the pendant from it. “You are the cousin of my wife, Daliyah. I have come to bring greetings.”

The man’s wide smile grew, if such was possible. “My wife’s cousin! That is the other half of my wife’s jewel. Please come in and be welcome. I am Gad, and this is my wife Puah.”

“I am Abijah, and this is my son Gamaliel. I fear we have only these few moments for speaking, and we have an unexpected request,” said Abijah hesitantly, feeling his core swirl with anxiety.

Gad lifted his eyebrows in amused surprise. “Please, make your request known.”

Before Abijah could speak, Gamaliel stepped forward. “I would respectfully ask to have your daughter Onit as my wife, if she is not betrothed already,” he added quickly.

Gad’s smile froze on his face, the shock and reluctance evident in his eyes. Abijah understood that look well. Onit was the sparkle of her father’s eye. It would be only by God’s favor that Gamaliel would have this gift.

Puah gently slipped her hand inside her husband’s arm and spoke softly in his ear. The travelers watched Gad’s face soften at his wife’s words. He put his arm around her waist before responding to Gamaliel.

“Onit is my youngest child, and she is a very strong woman. She is very respectful, but she does not fear speaking her mind. I have always encouraged this in her, though she knows there are times when it is simply inappropriate. This strength should be cherished. It

would be hard to let her go so far from us," said Gad honestly.

This description of Onit made Gamaliel's heart pound, then just as quickly drop to his stomach; he frowned to cover his disappointment at her father's last words. Gamaliel merely nodded to Gad ready to bid farewell.

"However," continued Gad, "my wife reminds me that it is this strength that can enable Onit to take such a journey. What do you say about such a strong woman as a wife?"

Gamaliel searched for an answer quickly. "I say my mother is a strong woman, and I love her dearly. I would not be happy with a meek, silent woman. Sir, may I make another request?" Gamaliel had no idea where this was coming from. Words simply kept leaving his mouth unbidden.

Gad looked curiously at the young man. "Go ahead."

"Since Onit knows her own mind so clearly, I ask permission to place this offer of marriage before her and allow her answer to be as it is," said Gamaliel respectfully.

Any concern in Gad's heart for his daughter's care was dispelled with this simple request. "I believe that is an excellent idea. Puah, call for Onit that she might answer this request."

Abijah was near tears with fatherly pride and joy for his son. His heart brimmed once again with thankfulness to the LORD the God of heaven for preparing the way in this home. He had no doubt that God had prepared Onit's heart as well.

In moments, Puah returned with the beautiful Onit at her side. The veil left only her warm, brown eyes visible, and Gamaliel could not stop staring. He was lost for words for several moments. Abijah nearly chuckled, and Gad could not keep from grinning.

"Daughter, this is Abijah and his son Gamaliel. They are from Abraham's household, and they are our family," said Gad.

Was that a sparkle which lit her eyes? Gamaliel was certain he dreamed it. Still, it was enough to loosen his tongue so that he could speak to Onit. Very simply and respectfully, he repeated his request to her.

Onit's eyes went first to her father's face. "What have you answered him?" she asked softly.

"I have not answered," replied Gad. "Gamaliel requested that your answer be his answer."

Onit turned back to Gamaliel. "I am to choose for myself?"

Gamaliel fell a little more in love with her and spoke gently. "I have no desire for a captive wife. If we marry, it is by choice."

The veil hid much, but there was no questioning the delight in Onit's eyes at Gamaliel's words. "May I have some time to consider it?" she asked.

Regret filled Gamaliel's eyes. "We leave early tomorrow morning to return to our master Abraham. I can give only until then. I will return tomorrow morning as the sun rises to hear your answer. That is the most I can do. I'm sorry."

Onit grew silent and moved her eyes from Gamaliel's face. "Then I will answer now so to ease

your sleep tonight," she said softly.

Gamaliel felt ready to faint. Surely she would say "no" having no time to prepare or to have a ceremony. "You are kind," he murmured.

"If my father approves, I will be ready to leave with you when you come for me at sunrise," said Onit quietly, looking to her father. Gad nodded his approval.

"What?" Gamaliel had fully expected to be rejected. His chest heaved as a cloud slowly lifted from his mind.

"I will accept your offer of marriage," stated Onit.

Abijah dropped to his knees again and gave praise to God for this gift. "Surely God has done this for my son."

The travelers departed soon after to give Onit and her family time to prepare for her leaving.

It seemed like only a moment when the sun rose and Gamaliel was at the door of Onit's home once again. Sudden fear that she had changed her mind gripped him like an icy fist, but Gamaliel remembered the faithfulness of the God of heaven and found peace just as suddenly.

When Onit appeared, Gamaliel could hardly speak. Her veil was lowered, and she smiled calmly at her betrothed. Though he felt her sorrow in leaving her parents so suddenly, Gamaliel knew there was little time.

Abijah had readied Rebekah's camel and one for Onit, and he now waited for Gamaliel to return with his young bride. Onit was ready. She followed swiftly the footsteps of her intended and gasped when his strong hands swung her up on the camel's back.

Somehow the journey home did not seem as tedious. It was long and tiresome, but it was made with great anticipation rather than trepidation.

At long last, they entered the land of Isaac, son of Abraham. He was handsome in the eyes of many, and when Rebekah saw him in the distance she mentioned it. When she learned this was to be her husband, she lifted her veil, if for no other reason than to hide the blush in her cheeks.

Isaac saw them approaching, saw the woman with Abijah, and his heart pounded in his chest. He ran to meet the caravan carrying his bride.

Gamaliel saw the look of rapture on Isaac's face as he approached them. This was something Gamaliel could well understand. All he needed to feel the same was a glimpse of Onit's face.

Sometime later, Abijah pushed aside the flap of Abraham's tent, dropped to the ground beside his master, and told of everything that had transpired.

Abraham's wrinkles danced with his smile. "Surely the LORD the God of heaven went before you and made straight your path, my old friend. Praise be to the God who goes before us."

Jeremiah 29:11(NIV) *For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.*

The wonderful Bible story of Isaac and Rebekah can be found in Genesis 24. I've enjoyed imagining how the rest of the story may have gone.

Deborah Caligiuri lives somewhere near Pittsburgh with one husband, two young boys, and more stories than she can bear to put on paper.

The Book

by Don Yarber

A T FIRST THEY HAD tortured only him; now they were torturing her. His eyes were taped open and he was bound to a post in the center of a clearing. Before him stood his naked wife, screaming each time the soldiers touched her.

His lips were drawn tightly across his mouth; his young, slender face was pallid in the evening light. A trickle of blood ran down his chin. "God, please. God, help me!" he prayed. He thought of Jesus on the cross praying that if it be God's will, to take the cup from him. He tried praying that prayer. His chin dropped to his chest and he lost consciousness and sagged against the ropes.

HIS MIND HEARD her laughing. He could hear the laughter trickle out of the mouth of the cave as he stood at the edge of the stream. Her laughter blended perfectly with the tinkling melody of the water tripping over the rocks. He smiled at his reflection in the small pool at his feet and bent to fill the bucket with water. He sat the full

bucket back on the bank and then stretched himself prone in the black sand at water's edge and drank deeply.

"Joe, come on, honey," she called from the cave. "I need the water for bread." He picked up the pail and returned with long quick strides to the cave.

"I've got to go out for food again, Meredith."

"So soon?" She asked. "It's only been a week."

"Yes. We've got just enough to last through tomorrow and I want to finish copying the Book of Luke before we move again."

He picked up the hand-written sheets from a crate that had served as a table. He had been three days on the Book of Luke, much too long. But with Meredith pregnant he had to do more of the chores each day and less copying of the Bible.

His work was progressing very slowly, he knew. The Bible must be reproduced. It was the only copy in that part of what had once been the United States of America. He must finish it.

Word had crossed the territory that he had a copy of the Bible. People were streaming into the woods near the cave each day to hear him read from it. They didn't realize it, he knew, but they were endangering his life as well as their own lives each time they met.

Bands of rogue outlaws also ranged through the territory. They were lawless and dangerous. They cared not for the Bible, or for anything in particular, just survival. They took what they wanted and held no regard for any effort to recapture the land that was once so great, so mighty.

Slow, insidious corruption had taken over the land. Politicians were interested only in lining their own pockets. Graft had been prevalent. No one cared about the church or religious freedoms. Religion had become a bad word in the new establishment. The minorities were those who believed in God and salvation. The rulers were more intense on removing religious freedom so that the young people could be brainwashed to believe in the government's version of what was best for mankind.

The government soon became the enemy. They had started by removing all books that pertained to God from public libraries. Then they had passed laws that prohibited carrying a Bible in public. Then the laws were extended to make it illegal to possess a Bible in a house of worship. Then the houses of worship were disbanded; laws were passed to prohibit religion from being taught.

That was the final straw. Groups of rebellious, righteous people swarmed the streets only to be arrested and sprayed with tear gas and water hoses.

All Bibles were banned, and possession of a Bible could mean years in prison or even death. That is why his assignment from God was so important. To reproduce the copy of the Bible his mother had given him when he was baptized at the age of 15. It was that assignment that had driven him to this remote cave in the forest hills of Tennessee.

“What’s the matter, hon?” His wife’s voice brought him back to his task at hand.

“Nothing,” he lied, not wanting her to worry about

the increasingly difficult task of hunting for food.

“Joe?” She said.

“Yes, dear?”

“Will we finish it?”

“I hope we will, Meredith,” he answered truthfully. “God promised that His scripture would never pass away, and I have faith in the promises of God.” He did believe he would finish it, even though he was burdened with the thought. They must move. The people who searched them out to hear the word would eventually lead authorities to them.

“I’ve got to go, Meredith,” he said, and left the cave. The sweetness of her kiss lingered on his breath.

His thoughts wandered as he walked upstream, not aware of a small band of men gathering around him. Suddenly he looked up and noticed that he was surrounded by a dozen or so men, young, dirty and unshaven, dressed in remnant clothing or long flowing robes. In previous years they would have been called hippies. They lived nomadic, tramp-like lives, taking what they could and using all the drugs they could find.

One of them spoke.

“Hey man, look what we got here. He’s even packing a gun.” They all laughed and the one who spoke, encouraged by the laughter, went on with his teasing.

“Yeah, crazy. Looks like Daniel Boone himself.”

They all laughed again. Joe started to walk on, pushing towards the edge of the circle. The men refused to budge.

“We could sure use that gun, man!”

“Sorry, you can’t have it.” Joe said.

“What if we take it, Daniel?” The first man asked.

“That’s the only way you’ll get it,” Joe said, and leveled the gun at the stranger’s midsection.

“Cool it, you creeps,” a giant of a man said from outside the circle.

“Hey now, Big Daddy. Join the fun, man. We’re gonna take this guy’s popgun away from him.” The one called “Big Daddy” appeared in the circle and looked at Joe.

“Well I’ll be,” he said.

“Toby.” Joe said, amazed.

“Yep. Best known as Big Daddy now. I’m the head of this bunch of outlaws.” The crowd mumbled dissents, some raising their voices in protest.

“Cool it,” the big man said. “I know this dude. He saved my life in Afghanistan.”

“Big deal,” one of the men said.

Big Daddy lashed out savagely with his foot, catching the man in the gut and sending him sprawling. “I said cool it, man!” Big Daddy said as the crowd rushed away from his tirade. “Now let’s talk, Joe.”

They sat beneath a tree and talked of the war, the takeover of the country, and life in general. Joe explained what he was trying to do with the Bible.

“Waste of time, Joe.” Big Daddy said. “Join up with me, smoke some pot and forget it.”

“You know I can’t do that, Smitty.”

“Yeah, like I can’t copy a Bible.”

They talked for a few minutes and parted, the leader gathered his clan and rambled away.

Joe continued upstream, looking for a place he knew where he could kill some squirrels. He shot at three, killed two of them, and was on his way back to the cave when the soldiers captured him.

A BREEZE SWEPT across the clearing and stirred his mind back to consciousness somewhere between the pains that echoed in his head like thunder.

“Here it comes now,” he thought. “Here comes the Spirit of God that will save us.” But the breeze died and no miracle came.

He could suddenly feel the heat of the torch near his face and he jerked his head away.

“Now will you tell us where to find the Bible?” a voice was saying. “After all, we don’t want to kill your wife, but if you leave us no choice &help;”

Joe shook his head weakly. “I can’t.”

“When I count to ten she dies,” the soldier said. “Unless you tell me where the Bible is.” He began counting, “One...”

“How long, O Lord? Will You forget me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me?”

“Two...”

“How long shall I take counsel in my soul, having sorrow in my heart daily?”

“Three...”

“Consider and hear me, O Lord my God,”

“Four...”

“Enlighten my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death.”

“Five...”

At the count of “five” Joe fell back into the

bottomless pit of pain. Once again he was kissing Meredith and she was laughing. They were lying side by side in the cave. Her silky red hair was on his chest, his arm under her shoulders.

“Joe, why are we so happy when all around is there is sorrow?”

“We have each other,” he answered. “And we are doing God’s work.” He sighed deeply. “This country was built around the Bible. With God’s help maybe someday someone can build it back with this Bible.”

“You’ve worked so hard, Joe.”

The pain returned.

“Seven....”

He began to pray again. “But I have trusted in Your mercy; my heart shall rejoice in Your salvation.”

“Eight..”

“I will sing to the Lord,”

“Nine...”

“For He has dealt bountifully with me.”

“Ten,” the final count.

“No! Wait. I’ll tell you what you want to know.” It was a voice from the crowd. It roared through the gathering and caused the soldier to turn to seek its source.

Big Daddy Smith walked to the center of the clearing.

“You saved my life, buddy, now I’m gonna save

yours," he said.

"No! Don't tell them," Joe pleaded.

When he had the information that he wanted, the leader of the soldiers shot the young minister's wife. Then he commanded that the hand-written pages be brought out and burned in the fire. Afterward he took the Bible, began on the first page of Genesis, tore the pages out one by one, and dropped them into the fire before the young minister's eyes, laughing at the misery shown there.

Finally they tore out the last page in the Book of Revelation and after it had burned they shot the minister.

The crowd dispersed almost immediately. No one wanted to die, and none had the heart to resist the soldiers' merciless rampage.

Dusk sat in on the clearing as a huge man wearing a long flowing gown, dirty and unshaven, walked silently to the body of the young minister. There were tears running down his face. He stooped and lifted Joe's body slowly and started to walk away. The breeze stiffened and picked up a scrap of burned paper from the dirt and carried it tumbling to land on the shoulder of the man they called Big Daddy.

He shifted his burden, took the scrap of paper, and read it to the dead man he carried.

"Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen."

Isaiah 40 (NKJV)

1 “Comfort, yes, comfort My people!”
Says your God.

2 “Speak comfort to Jerusalem, and cry out
to her,
That her warfare is ended,
That her iniquity is pardoned;
For she has received from the LORD’s hand

Double for all her sins.”

3 The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

“Prepare the way of the LORD;
Make straight in the desert
A highway for our God.

4 Every valley shall be exalted
And every mountain and hill brought low;
The crooked places shall be made straight
And the rough places smooth;

5 The glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
And all flesh shall see *it* together;
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

6 The voice said, “Cry out!”
And he said, “What shall I cry?”
“All flesh *is* grass,
And all its loveliness *is* like the flower of
the field.

7 The grass withers, the flower fades,
Because the breath of the LORD blows
upon it;

Surely the people *are* grass.
8 The grass withers, the flower fades,
But the word of our God stands forever.”

Don Yarber was born in Harrisburg, IL and has loved story telling from a young age, sitting behind a wood-burning pot-bellied stove, listening to the coon-hunting tales of his father, Luther Yarber, and his grandfather, Henry Burns. Don enlisted in the U.S. Navy after high-school graduation where he served aboard the U.S.S. Helena (CA75). He attended El Camino College in Torrance, CA after service, and majored in Journalism.

Don lives with his wife Shirley near Morganfield, KY and attends Morganfield Christian Church. He has written three Kip Yardly, Private Eye novels, Bodies and Beaches, Corpses and Canyons, and Death and Deep Waters. Don is listed on cozymysteries.com; more information about his books can be found at: www.kipyardleymysteries.bravehost.com.

Beyond the Forest

by Philip Carrol

HOSMER SAT ON the clay tile roof of the family home and eyed the trees over the top of the stone wall. They didn't walk about, nor speak, nor reach across the protective wall to snatch him from his perch. Why had he braved the climb out onto the slippery tiles once again, when his decision was already made? Did expect the trees to answer his question in any way differently than the people he'd asked?

That morning he had followed the southern road out of the village. He walked beneath the high, arched, passage that once held an iron gate, long since rusted into antiquity. Moss and creepers hung from the top of the wall, and the arch, thirty feet above. Here, he passed from within the protective wall of the last village and followed a path to the monastery. To his left, a natural hedge grew thick, thorned, and tall, adding strength to the belief the forest wanted no human intruders within its borders. To his right, the cliff dropped away to the placid winding river below.

He left Walltown behind him, the early morning sun shining on the far bank of the broad lazy river to his right. His village was the last this far upriver, far away from the cities along the ocean, and the capitol. He believed he would see that great city one day with its castles and battlements. Right now his interests lay within the forest.

The village disappeared behind him, huddled close to the shore, pinched between the wide river and the mysterious forest.

Hosmer knew every inch of the trail, and every inch of the hedge. He had walked the path every day since his eight birthday, when the responsibility of taking bread to the brethren at the monastery had fallen to him. Now sixteen winters behind him, he knew the exact number of steps from the village he would walk before he came to the only place where he could peer between the interwoven branches of the hedge, and see the forest beyond.

That morning, however, he neither counted the steps nor carried bread to the brethren; he carried his own heavy thoughts.

“Brother Timothy,” Hosmer asked, “I have heard since I could climb to my mother’s lap, that the forest beyond the wall is evil. Yet as I traveled the dirt path to your sanctuary, I have never seen or heard anything from it that would make me believe this. Is it? Is the forest evil?” Hosmer felt insulted and frowned at the old monk when Brother Timothy laughed. Yet, he was polite, and waited for an explanation. His old friend had never refused to answer his questions in the past.

"No, young friend," Brother Timothy said, and shifted around in his chair to find a comfortable place, as he did every time he prepared to tell Hosmer a tale. "I traveled much of this earth in my younger days and saw much that was evil. But never did I see evil from the trees and plants of the forest as I did from the hearts of men. Even from my own heart, if I must tell you the truth.

"I didn't come here of my own free will, you'll remember. I was a wild sort when the drink got a hold of me; I damaged property and a few men as well. The King himself gave me the choice when his soldiers pulled me from a fight and dragged me before His Majesty. He told me I could live my last days in his dungeon, or spend it in contemplation with the brethren out here in the forest.

"Now, my thoughts and beliefs run a bit different than my more devout brothers, here. But if you were to ask me, I'd say none of God's creations are evil. Not even a man; when he's born a little baby, he's as innocent and pure as a dove. It is only when Satan enters a man's heart that he becomes evil. Those creatures who have hearts but not reason are also unaffected by the devil. Though he can enter their hearts, they have no guile, no spite, or greed. It is only by turning a man's heart to revenge, or greed or covetousness that the devil brings men to do evil.

"Trees have neither heart nor will, and only grow toward the light as God has designed them."

"So why do the people of the village say the forest is evil? That it comes to life and the trees walk about like

men. And spirits whisper between the broad trunks of the trees to lead fools into the forest depths where they'll be consumed." Hosmer asked.

"Many reasons," Brother Timothy said, "mostly because of tradition. The village is more than four hundred years old, and the wall perhaps three hundred. Though the monastery goes back into antiquity, we have never felt the need to protect ourselves from the forest.

"Perhaps it began with fear, and fear usually comes from ignorance. Perhaps a child was lost, or an adult. There are those who say, once setting foot into the forest, you can't find your way back out, that the forest loses you deep within its grasp. Men have tried to plumb its depths in our day, and have never returned to relate the tale of their adventures. There are even many among the brethren who believe the forest is evil and has a mind or life of its own. But we look to God for our protection and don't depend on walls or hedges."

"I want to know what's in there," Hosmer blurted, climbing from his seat on the floor to kneel before the Brother. "Should I not? Would God look upon it as a sin to find out the truth of the forest?"

"My son," Brother Timothy said, "look into your heart and see what it tells you to do. If you desire glory, gold or power, you'd best not go. God's blessing will not be with you. However, if you go to expand the reach of God's influence, to seek freedom for your people or others, you may go with His blessings."

Hosmer climbed back through his bedroom window and descended the stairs to help his parents in the

bakery. That night, when his parents closed their store, cleaned the tables, and banked the coals in their ovens, Hosmer gathered three of the hard, day-old loaves and slipped them into a linen sack. He tiptoed through their small kitchen to the pantry and snuck a small block of white cheese from a back shelf.

In the morning, before the sun rose, Hosmer slipped from his bed, carried his linen sack in one hand, his boots in the other, and stole out the front door. He sat on the stone porch, pulled on the soft boots and jogged to the south gate.

The moon had set, and where he could see the river's placid surface, the stars glimmered and reflected off it.

He counted his steps and he watched carefully for hazardous narrows in the path. Soon he stood at the single window into the forest.

Doubt crouched in the back of his mind and whispered to him to reconsider. Before he could change his mind, he pushed through the hedge and marched blindly into to forest of giants, his hands stretched ahead of him into the impenetrable darkness. He turned and looked back at the hedge he had just penetrated. The opening was a grey shadow in the in the pitch blackness beneath the canopy of firs and pines.

Hosmer walked back to the hedge and poked his head through.

"Well," he said as he pulled his head back and turned to face the forest again, "the rest of the world is still where I left it." He sat in the moss and ferns, and leaned back against an unseen tree. In the silent darkness, he waited for sunrise.

As light from the hole in the hedge told him that day had dawned in the village, the forest remained in twilight. Hosmer gathered his sack, turned his back to the hedge and strode into the depths of the unknown. He was light-headed in the euphoria of his new freedom. He wandered along between the pines which stretched endlessly above him. The air was cool. Mist puddled in low places, scattered like fish in a pond as he strode through. His soft leather boots and the legs of his wool trousers were dew-soaked through to the skin within minutes.

Shortly the ground sloped upward, gradually at first and then steeply. He climbed the hillside quickly as if rushing up stairs. What would he see at the crest, a valley, or higher mountains? Sweat ran down the middle of his back and dripped from the end of his nose. Hosmer unbuttoned his cloak and reveled in the rush of cool air on his sweaty skin. He left it clasped at the neck, to hang down his back.

He assumed he must still be headed in the correct direction, away from the river, as the ground to his right and his left remained even and level. The rise ahead of him crested eventually, and the forest spread out around him.

Hosmer stopped and drank from his water skin. He held it at eye level and shook it to see how much remained. He should drink less for now, until he was able to find a source to refill it. It was then he thought he heard the sound of moving water.

It could have been the wind. The sound disappeared so quickly, perhaps it was the sound of water and only

carried on the wind.

Hosmer returned the water skin to his carrying sack and walked forward slowly, turning his head one way then another to find the sound of the water again.

There it was to his left; he turned, increasing his pace again. He had water in his skin; he wasn't even thirsty. Yet on he ran, as if something vital awaited him at the source of the sound.

The pines and evergreens gave way as the first bushes other than ferns and grasses Hosmer had seen. The sound of the water grew louder, and the bushes grew higher, until he found himself wading through brambles, holding his hands and carry sack above his head to be able to pass more freely. He imagined the water rushing and pouring, just out of sight over a boulder strewn riverbed, icy and clear, fresh from melted mountain snow.

"Just beyond these brambles," he gasped and pressed on until the bushes stretched above him, their branches intertwining overhead like intricate needlework or crocheted wool. He held his bag close to his chest and wrapped his cloak around himself to push through the increasingly thicker trunks of the brambles.

He held the bag in one hand to push the trunks aside and squeezed between and over to slowly inch forward. He dropped to his knees and crawled sideways and around. The water was there, it had to be, just out of his reach.

He was stuck, wedged solidly among the roots and fallen branches of the inhibiting plants. He dug in with his feet and pushed forward with all his might, yet went

nowhere. He dropped his bag to grab the trunk of a tree before him and pushed himself backwards, but even then was unable to move.

“Brother Timothy was wrong,” Hosmer thought. The forest was evil and trapped him among its evil-hearted trees. The hateful forest had lured him here with the promise of new and exotic places, to take and hold him under its feet until he rotted and fed the roots below with his decomposed body.

“Brother Timothy was wrong. God did make evil plants,” he cried in despair.

Could God not care that he was trapped in the roots of this unforgiving forest? No, that’s not what Brother Timothy had told him. He said that God forgives and God helps, and God loves. If what Brother Timothy said was true, God should love him too, should help him too, and should forgive Hosmer’s vain pride and free him from these roots.

“Dear Jesus,” Hosmer cried out. “Loving, forgiving, Son of God, Help me. I’m lost and I need your help. Forgive me for my vain pride and I will promise to do only your will.” Words resounded in the back of his mind. Were they Brother Timothy’s words, something he had heard elsewhere, or were they words he was hearing anew? “And he said unto them, where is your faith? And they being afraid wondered, saying one to another, What manner of man is this! For he commandeth even the winds and water, and they obey him.” “Then said Jesus unto them again, Peace be unto you.”

Hosmer held onto his carry sack as he pushed up and

back onto his feet.

As he searched the brambles closely, the way before him opened. Carefully he stepped here, ducked there, bent back a branch and shimmied through. Soon, he stood on the bank of the stream and stretched his cramping arms and back.

The water flowed with enthusiasm over rocks and gravel. As he dipped his hand into the crystal clear water it stung with the cold, and his teeth ached as he sipped from his palm. The water was fresh and invigorating and filled him with strength and renewed determination.

Hosmer hopped from rock to rock and crossed the shallow torrent. His feet slipped as he climbed the sandy bank, and he laughed at the sensation of sliding helplessly into the water, and at his own fallibility. He had been so close to despair and yet so simply snatched from within its poisonous grasp. With a new spring in his step he proceeded up the gently climbing slope and left the stream and its ensnaring vines and brambles behind.

At times the sun followed him high up in the blue expanse. At others, it peeked and peered around trees as he traveled. At others, it hid itself completely in the interwoven canopy of ancient trees.

As Hosmer realized the sun must have set from the sudden onset of darkness, he found a wide flat area of short grass to settle down on for the night. He found a convenient berm opposite where he climbed onto the plateau, and after eating some bread and cheese, he rolled up in his cloak and dropped off into welcome

sleep.

He woke several times during the night. The moon wasn't visible and the trees obscured the familiar constellations. He assured himself, since it was still dark, it was still time to sleep. He would wait until full daylight before heading on again.

As night gave way to dusk and dusk to dawn, Hosmer saw that he had spent the night on what appeared to be an ancient roadway. Parts of it had crumbled away under the continuous strain of wind and rain, but for the most part it was flat and smooth with relatively few turns. He searched the distance carefully, both to the left and then to the right. Either direction could lead him to his destination. Or they both could lead him nowhere.

Hosmer turned north onto the smooth grass road, and hoped it would wind to the east and take him in the direction of the rising sun. He felt the middle of the forest lay to the east and south, if for no other reason, that was the direction completely opposite of the largest known city to his people.

He followed the road, wide enough for two large wagons drawn by broad-backed oxen to pass one another without slowing. Periodically, Hosmer passed crumbling stone structures the size of small houses. Little more than a grass-filled foundation and a few of the cut stones upon one another, yet they were an affirmation to Hosmer that he had been right to believe there was something more to the forest than tall trees and fearsome legends. At noon he rested in one of the grassy squares, sitting with his back against the

crumbled wall facing the home's former doorway.

Hosmer tried to imagine the guards or other officials who would have used these waypoints along the lost highway. Did they protect travelers from robbers? Or house tax collectors to extract fees from merchants or emigrants? Where had the road begun, and where did it go? And which direction was he headed, toward or away?

As he walked from the rough square of blocks, he found his answer to his last question. Only yards away in the direction he had been traveling all morning lay an exposed area of paving bricks. Grass and moss grew between their seams, and some were cracked, but this appeared to be the road itself, laid out in antiquity. He traveled along with interest, counting the number of exposed areas until he could count no higher and the exposed areas were greater than those covered in dirt and plants.

Hosmer soon found he could stay on the paved stones completely as nature receded from the roadway. Walking across the smoothly laid bricks his legs felt rejuvenated and strengthened. He traveled quickly and without undue effort. It was near nightfall when he found the first of the waystations with its walls and roof intact. He approached cautiously and tapped respectfully on the door with his knuckles. When there was no reply, he lifted the latch slowly and eased the door open.

As far as he could tell, there was no one inside. All was shadow within the small building.

“Hello?” he said. There was no reply.

He pushed the door completely open and stepped into the dim room. He set his carry sack carefully to the side and peered about. He stood with his back to the door to allow the weak light from outside an opportunity to illuminate what was within. As his eyes adjusted to the dimness he found a low cot with a straw tick mattress against the far wall. To the side sat a small table with rectangular blocks on it. In the corner appeared to be a small fire pit beneath a tin flue.

Hosmer stepped closer to the table and examined the items more closely.

His heart swelled with joy and relief. The first items he found were flint, steel and tinder.

He set to work and in no time had a small fire burning in the pit. It took the edge of chill from the room and cast light sufficient to see all in the room clearly. There was nothing more than what he had seen from the door, however their identities became clear. The boxes on the table were enameled tins, finely crafted with pictures painted on their lids. He hoped with all his heart the boxes contained what the artwork described: hard biscuits, tea, and honey.

He carefully pried the lid off the biscuits and the room immediately filled with the scents of ginger and molasses. He nibbled one, and though it was as hard as he thought it would be, it was barely stale, and very tasty.

Hosmer searched the room for a tea pot, and found it hanging from a hook below the tin flue. He hooked it free with an iron poker from beside the pit and poured water from his skin.

When the tea was ready he sweetened it with honey and soaked the ginger biscuits to soften them. Hosmer ate until he was full. Though he had felt invigorated and alert as hiked along the road, he found once he had settled down, he was exhausted. As soon as he lay on the cot he quickly fell asleep.

It the morning after another cup of tea and the last of the bread he'd brought from the village, spread generously with honey, he gathered his things to leave. He insured the tins were securely sealed, the fire completely out, and pulled on the door until he felt the latch set.

As he returned to the road, Hosmer mused about the supplies in the small waybuilding, ready and waiting for a passing traveler's benefit. Yet, he had seen no signs of any others since leaving the village by the river, two days before.

The road descended slowly ahead of him and was straight enough to disappear into the infinite distance directly ahead of him. The mountains to both sides of the valley seemed to fall away into the forest as he walked and all that remained to his right and left were straight, dense fir trees, no bigger around than he could reach with his arms. Had a fire wiped out the giants of the forest he had traveled through for the past two days, or was it possible he approached a civilization who used the trees for building or fuel?

He looked more closely at the highway and could see it was slightly higher in the middle than at the sides, and running along the road on both sides was a gutter as finely laid with matching bricks and as straight as the

road itself.

Soon, along with the mountains, the trees pulled back from the road on both sides and before to reveal a long deep valley directly ahead of the road.

The length of the valley, deep at its center, shimmered as if a thousand stars had fallen from the sky and remained there to twinkle day and night. Hosmer stood at the edge of this valley which ran away to his right and left, its width across from him, more miles than he could imagine. Running through the center of the valley, winding lazily through the glittering stars, was a river as blue and as brilliant as the stars that twinkled along its banks.

Hosmer descended rapidly down the steep slope of the valley wall on a course directly for the river. As the highway reached the valley bottom and the slope grew more gradual, Hosmer noticed the first wildlife other than birds that he had seen since entering the forest. Cattle grazed placidly in the grass. Deer and moose and another similar animal which Hosmer didn't recognize grazed on the open plains. When the highway crossed small tributaries on the central river and the ground became swampy, Hosmer saw ducks, geese, other water fowl, pigs, fish and other animals suited to swamps and rivers.

The valley shimmered in the distance. The innumerable sparkling stars danced in the valley shallows. But as he came closer the glitter turned to glow, and as the sun approached the horizon behind him, descending into the trees, the length of the valley burst into magnificent brilliance. He shielded his eyes

as the light became almost too much to bear. Yet as he looked again, its intensity had already faded to a glow like embers of an evening's dieing fire.

A surreal twilight glowed ahead of him as it came to full night and Hosmer reached the source of the illumination. A city of crystal lay before him, with walls of faceted diamonds and gates of silver icicle bars. In the night the vaulted spires reached to the sky in luminescent rainbow peaks.

There were no plowed fields or fenced land outside the walls of the city, only open plains. The night birds twittered and sang as they dashed in and out of bushes and across the grass. Feral cats stalked and pounced as the birds landed and quickly flew away. Foxes stalked the cats, all unaware or unconcerned with Hosmer's passing.

The gates of the glistening city stood wide, the crystal icicle spikes drawn high enough to allow the tallest man on horseback to pass freely beneath. Hosmer heard voices from within the city walls and called, "Halooooo?"

The voices carried on in jovial conversation without response to the boy. He walked below the spiked gate and looked about for the source of the voices. Suddenly people were everywhere, standing on street corners, walking together in groups, sitting at a street side cafe. They all dressed in grand fashion. Hosmer has seen drawings of wealthy people in the large cities down river from Walltown. While he understood they were just drawings, and not doing justice to the style and glamour of the people of Hosmer's world, these people

were many time grander than any he had ever seen portrayed.

“My boy,” said a man, who smiled as he approached Hosmer. He wore a black top hat, gold embroidered vest and a silk jacket and britches. His shoes were polished to shine like black mirrors. He held his hand out to Hosmer who stood, frozen in surprise.

“Sir,” Hosmer said, bobbed a quick bow and stood with his head tipped down, eyes cast at the ground.

“My boy,” the man said again. “We don’t stand on such formality in the Crystal City. Welcome, welcome. I see that you have come from outside.”

“Yes, sir,” Hosmer said, still feeling sheepish. “I traveled through the forest from Walltown, on the river.”

The man frowned for a moment, and said, “Can’t say I’ve heard of it. I’ve heard of many places, but no Wallton Ontheriver. Come over here and sit. If you’ve traveled far, you must be tired. No need to stand.” The man dragged him to a table at the cafe, and shouted, “Emil. Some food for a weary traveler. Quickly, before he starves.”

“Of course, Mayor Branson,” Emil said as he appeared at their side. He balanced a bowl of stew and large round loaf of sweet smelling bread on a wooden platter on one hand. He sat them before Hosmer and said, “Eat. Please eat. You look positively wasted away.”

“I’m sorry, sir,” Hosmer said, “but I have no gold or silver. In fact I have nothing of value at all.”

“No matter, young man,” Emil said. “There is no

charge for food in the Crystal City. Whatever you desire, it's yours. There are only two requirements. Give thanks to God for what you receive and do for your neighbor as you would have him do for you."

"No charge?" Hosmer asked dumbly. His father was the baker in their small village. He required payment for any of the bread taken from his store. Even the old bread, though at a reduced price. "If they're going to feed it to their pigs, they will sell me their bacon. We all need compensation for our efforts," his father would say.

"No," Emil repeated. "In the Crystal City we are all neighbors. We share all the work and as God showers His blessing upon us, we all share the reward. Thus we are no poor among us. All are fed. All are clothed. All are happy in His holy light."

"But I haven't worked here," Hosmer said. "I may have to leave soon. Must I work for what I will eat, before I may leave?"

"No." The Mayor shook with friendly laughter. "We work together so that all are fed as good Master Emil here said. We always have more to share with the unexpected guest and for the injured or lame. We care for one another as God cares for us." The mayor sat at the crystal table across from Hosmer, a bowl of the same stew in front of him as well.

"Excuse my reach," he said as he extended his hands to the bread Emil had brought to Hosmer, and asked, "May I?"

"Of course," Hosmer said, "Aren't you the mayor here?"

"I am one of them," Branson said, "We have many here since the city is so large. We have many visitors each day, and want each to be greeted by a mayor." Hosmer considered all of this as he ate his stew. It was the tastiest meat he had ever eaten. The bread was light and fluffy and almost melted in his mouth. He thought of his parents baking bread and cakes in the village. He thought about Brother Timothy who labored in the vegetable garden at the monastery. He considered the poor children in his village who rarely had enough food to make a single meal each day.

"May I bring my family and others from my village to the Crystal City?" Hosmer asked.

"Of course," the Mayor said, cheerfully. "You may bring as many people as you like, but," The mayor stopped and his expression turned sad.

"But what?" Hosmer asked. "Is there a limit, or a tax, or payment they must make?"

"No," the mayor said.

Emil stood behind him and nodded his head, his face grim and hard.

"No," the mayor said again, "All are welcome, yet few, if any, will come."

"Why wouldn't they come?" Hosmer asked, astonished.

"Because they won't believe you," the mayor said sadly. Emil nodded his head as the mayor spoke. "You followed a road to the Crystal City, I assume. Is that correct?"

"Yes," Hosmer said, with returning hope. "I followed it for almost two days."

"Did the road appear well traveled?" the mayor asked wryly.

"No," Hosmer said, "Most of the way it was covered over with earth and grass and plants."

"Do you understand why?" the mayor asked.

"Yes," Hosmer said, down cast. "Because no one, or very few at least, travel the roads." Hosmer finished his meal, placed his utensils side by side next to the bowl and wiped his mouth on a linen napkin. Again, he turned hopeful eyes on the mayor. "Isn't there something I could take and show to them, to make them believe?" Hosmer asked in desperation.

"Here," the mayor said and took something from his pocket. "If you want to convince anyone, you may try showing them this." Hosmer looked in awe at the shimmering stone in his hand.

"This is so beautiful," Hosmer whispered, "It couldn't be a diamond. This would be far too valuable."

"It is a diamond, dear boy," the mayor said frankly. "Probably larger than any in the kingdom you come from. Here, we have so many, it means little to us. If there are any you truly want to believe in your story, show it to them, yet I do not think even this would convince them." The Mayor tumbled the gem between his fingers. "Think of it," the older gentleman said, "The road you traveled here was straight and broad and inviting, yet few find and follow it. Why is that? Because their hearts are drawn away by the trees. Fear of giving up what they have for something far better. Holding onto their petty little lives and possessions and losing out on all God has to offer."

Emil carried the tray and bowl from the table after he nodded good night to the mayor.

The mayor watched his friend walk away and then turned back to Hosmer. "Spend the night in our inn, over there, on the corner. Tell them the mayor extends his welcome. Eat there or here with Emil again, though make it early. You'll have a long trek ahead of you. The road out is not nearly as easy as the road in. I will provide you with provisions for your journey."

"Thank you, Lord Mayor," Hosmer said, "I'll bring my family back, you'll see. I'll bring them and my friends, too."

The mayor smiled and said "It's just Mayor. I'm no lord, and I hope you do bring them back, every one. Enter through this same gate and you'll find me close by. Now, good night and on the morrow, good journey."

Hosmer spent the night at the inn and ate a hearty breakfast in its common room the next morning. He found his carry sack filled with bread, cheese, dried fruit, and the ginger biscuits he'd eaten in the waystation. There were two new water skins with wide leather straps which he found easy and comfortable to carry with each strap over one shoulder and crossing his chest.

The rising sun found Hosmer at the far end of the broad flat valley, beginning his climb back up into the mountains. The mayor had been right, and traveling was slow and exhausting. It was close to midnight as he approached the waystation he had slept in two nights before. The brick hut was dim angles outlined by starlight in the shadows of trees.

He crawled onto the straw tick mattress and in moments was sound asleep.

Hosmer woke the next morning to the sound of rain on the wood shingled planks of the roof. He wished he could stay in the safety and comfort of the waystation, but his mission and message spurred him onward. Soon he was out in the rain, the hood of his cloak pulled over his head leaning into the driving wind and rain. Each step was slow and labored, but he pressed on.

Night fell again, and he remained on the road. He wanted to keep going, but feared he would miss the spot where he had come onto the road in the darkness. Instead, he crawled beneath the branches of a massive blue spruce and found the space close to the trunk virtually dry. He wrapped his cloak around him and shivered himself to sleep.

In the morning he wasted no time and as soon as he could see the outline of the trees branches above him, he crawled back out and hurried up the grass and vine carpeted roadway. Near noon, he found the place where he had spent his first night, and from there found the spot where he pushed through the brush to climb onto the road.

Hosmer slogged down the hill to the rushing torrent which had swelled from simple babbling brook just days before. He scouted from the close bank for a place where he was likely to find the easiest way through the twisted and intertwined brambles on the opposite bank. He plunged through the quickly flowing water and crashed through the branches and runners across the stream.

Sunset had faded from red to orange and purple, then gray and black, as Hosmer worked his way slowly through the big trees. He found the patch of gray against the impenetrable black and squeezed back through the hedge as he had entered the forest days before.

Stars glimmered on the placid river as he traveled the familiar footpath back to his home.

“My home?” he asked himself, “Or my former home?” Could he ever be happy back in this simple life when he had seen something that was so much more? He walked below the high arched gateway through the protective wall, so different than the crystal icicle gate to the Crystal City.

He saw light inside the bakery and hurried through the door. A bell tinkled to alert his parents of customers while they worked back in the kitchen.

“We’re closed,” his father’s voice called in a heavy, slurred voice. “Come back in the morning.”

“Father, Mother, it’s me, Hosmer,” he said and hurried through the heavy curtains in the doorway between the shop and their home.

“Hosmer?” His mother’s voice was rich with sadness and hope. She was already on her feet as he ran into the sitting room.

“Mother,” he ran to her and was wrapped in her arms and flour dusted apron.

“Son?” His father asked, also standing, stern reprimand set his shoulders straight and feet planted. “Where have you been?” His enthusiasm and excitement to share his recent discovery had nearly

cracked Hosmer open as the hours slowly passed on his return journey. His words spilled out of him like a laden canopy suddenly tearing under the weight of accumulated rainwater.

“Father, Mother,” he said and stepped out of his mother’s grasp. “I’ve been through the forest to the other side and I’ve found what’s out there. The forest. It’s not evil; it’s merely old, ancient and broad. But there’s a city on the other side. A city of crystal where all are welcome and all work together and share equally in the work and equally in the bounty. It’s a place of happiness, a place of joy and rest. It’s like Heaven.”

“Son,” his father said sternly, his mother looking on with worry and fear, “you disobeyed me and entered that evil place. I should whip you for that alone, but the forest has deluded you, caused you to have dreams like a mad man.

“Son,” he said again and took a single step forward and balled his hand into a fist, “we thought you were dead. We thought you were dead, and now you wander out of those woods with crazy tales of golden cities, and Heaven in a valley instead of in the sky as it should be. You’ve been bewitched by something in those evil trees; goblins or trolls or flinter snooks. It’s crazy talk and evil nightmares. I’ll hear none of it.”

His father stood where he was, his fist raise in defiance of whatever had twisted his son. Hosmer was surprised to see tears welling in his father’s eyes. Never in his sixteen years had such a thing happened. His mother stood at his father’s side, a frozen, fearful, memory of the loving woman who had nurtured him

until the day he climbed through the hedge. She twisted her apron in her hands.

"Am I wanted in your home no longer, then?" he asked. His own words sounded as if from a long distance.

"No, son," his father said, "of course you're wanted and welcome in our home. It's just such a shock to have though you lost and then you return home, alive, but speaking madness. You can go to your room. You'll find it as you left it. Perhaps you ought do that now and we'll talk more in the morning."

Dismissed by his father, he climbed the stairs to bed, and heard his father speak, "Miriam, I'll be found at the tavern, should anyone come looking."

When Hosmer woke, his parents had already been busy at the ovens for hours and he found the family kitchen empty when he'd dressed and went downstairs looking for breakfast. After a breakfast of wheat mush and fried pork he cleaned up and walked into the bakery to help his parents. His parents worked as they normally did, with little discussion, other than how long to bake the bread or the price of a slice of custard. However, as Hosmer walked in, the customers fell silent and watched him warily.

One old man stepped up to Hosmer, peered at him through rheumy eyes, and rasped, "there's a devil in you boy. No god-fearing man has made it through that forest and returned. You best get to the cathedral and pray for your forgiveness."

"How can you say no one has ever made it through the forest?" Hosmer asked.

"Because no one has ever come back to say they been through it," the man said as if Hosmer was stupid, "the forest is evil."

"A forest can't be evil," Hosmer felt heat climb the back of his neck, "A forest is nothing but trees. And I've been through it. I should know. There is nothing evil in there and there's a city on the other side. A city of crystal where everyone is happy, and works together and no one is hungry."

"Sounds like paradise," the old man said with a smile.

"Yes, like paradise," Hosmer agreed.

"Like the Garden of Eden," the old man said, and smiled around at the rest of the patrons, who had now jammed into the small store.

Hosmer thought about the animals that wandered the plains without fear of him or the other animals around them.

"Yes, kind of," he had to agree.

"You hear that everyone? This boy thinks he's found the Garden of Eden."

Everyone in the store laughed. Hosmer looked around at the people of his village. Some were his friends, some were the parents of friends, but he knew them all by name, and they knew him. How could they mock him like this? How could they summarily discount his testimony?

"You can go and see it for yourselves," Hosmer said. "That's why I came back, so I could take all of you back with me, and you can be happy there too."

"Do you hear that?" the old man screamed, no false

humor in his smile, a boiling hate in his eyes. “He is possessed by devils. Now he wants to take us all in the forest, so he can win back his soul as the demons consume ours.” There was a general gasp and uproar from those in the store. Others ran from the porch to tell their neighbors about the horrible news.

There were calls from throughout the crowd of “That’s right”, and “Forest demons will get us” and “He’s gone mad.”

The tall, broad shouldered baker walked around the counter and stood in front of his son. He put his hands on his hips and said “Now I may believe that my son has been misled, or confused, or even gone a spell off his normal thinking, but there’s no devils in him. So, if you have bread or cakes you wish to purchase, step forward to the counter. Otherwise, I’d ask you to please clear out of my bakery.” Most everyone slowly cleared out of the bakery. Some grumbled about devils and forests, others only cast dark glances at father and son and many remained on the cobbled lane outside the bakery for a long time.

His father walked Homer back to the sitting room.

“I’m sorry, son,” he said. “I went to the tavern last night. You can understand why, I’m sure. But I got a bit of the spirits in me and lost control of my tongue more than I should have.” He brushed his hair back with the sleeve of his white linen shirt and left flour smears across his forehead.

“You’re just too young to be having experiences in the forest,” his father said, “If you were older, some people might believe you. But what you’re saying just

comes across as crazy. You just need to stop talking about it. Sooner or later people will begin to forget what you said, and forget your crazy ideas, and we can all go back to normal.”

“Father?” Hosmer asked, “do you truly believe I’m possessed by a devil or crazy?”

It took a long time for him to finally answer, “Son, I don’t believe you’re possessed by a devil.”

With that, his father left him and went back to the bakery.

“I know someone who will believe me,” Hosmer said, picked up his carry sack and slipped out the side door. He looped back behind their home, down an alley, and out to the road north. Few people were on the road, as most who weren’t working were still gathered in front of the bakery.

A quarter hour later Hosmer was at the monastery. The brethren milled about in their daily tasks. Some greeted the boy with a smile while others remained focused stoically on their labors.

“Brother Timothy,” Hosmer said when he found his friend digging in the vegetable garden.

The man came up to his knees at the sound of Hosmer’s voice and smiled, “Hosmer, dear boy. You’ve returned.” Hosmer bent and hugged the old man and sat amid the tomato plants.

“I’m glad to find one who is happy at my return,” he said, evaluating tomatoes that hung near him.

“Your parents were sick with worry, Hosmer, when they found you were gone,” Brother Timothy said, “Many had given you up for dead, knowing you’d gone

into the forest.”

“It’s not evil,” Hosmer said desperately. “Just like you said. I’ve been through it clear to the other side. I found a city there. A city of crystal where people help each other, and work together, and there is no poor among them. Like the City of Enoch dropped down there by a river.”

“That’s wonderful,” Brother Timothy said. “It sounds like a beautiful place. Why did you come back?”

“I wanted to take my family,” he said, dropping his head. “I wanted my friends to have the same wonderful thing I had, but no one believes me.”

“Don’t say no one believes you,” Brother Timothy said. “If you say you saw it, I believe you, and God believes you.”

“Thanks,” Hosmer said with real gratitude. “But half the village cover their ears and say I’m crazy while the other half want to listen to me babble and laugh at what I say.” Brother Timothy laughed. Hosmer looked at the old man, and recognized the gleam in his eyes. He laughed along, too. “Why won’t they believe me, Brother Timothy? They could all be so happy.”

“I think you hit on it there, young man,” Brother Timothy said, nodding his head, agreeing with himself. “I think most people aren’t happy, and either don’t think anyone really can be, or maybe don’t want them to be.”

“Well, then,” Hosmer said, “If no one will believe me, then I’ll go back on my own. Or, you could go with me, right? Because you believe me.”

He laughed again, “I’m afraid my place is here. I’m happy here, serving my Lord by serving my brethren. I’ve been here a long time and I don’t think I’m ready for a change.

“I found God here, with the brethren and with my tomatoes,” he said. He reached out and took a tomato and carefully turned it over to check its ripeness. “I think I should stay here, where I’m happy. I think you need to be where you’re happy as well.”

“They told me when I wanted to leave the Crystal City that no one would believe me. And they said it would be hard to get back, if I left,” Hosmer said sadly.

“I think,” Brother Timothy said, “If you do like you did last time, follow the same way, trust in God, you’ll find it okay.”

“Thank you,” Hosmer said and walked back to his home.

EARLY THE NEXT MORNING, when his parents came down the stairs to start their day in the bakery, they found a gift waiting for them on the dinner table, a finely crafted enameled tin. Its lid was decorated with the landscape of a valley, stars hanging in the sky above and the brilliant glow of a crystal city below. His mother opened the tin and found, nestled amidst ginger-molasses biscuits, the largest diamond anyone in the village had ever seen.

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The Gryphon of Tirshal

by Henry Brown

THE OPULENCE OF the capitol building bespoke unbelievable wealth in Cemar's past: marble inlaid with gold; velvet and fine-woven silk upholstery with intricate embroidery; and clear glass windows in large panes overlooking the courtyard with its famous Fountain of Freedom. The Cemarite staff inside were also adorned with velvet, silk and gold, as if visually reinforcing their many promises to restore and even surpass the robust treasures of Cemar's former glory.

In fact, only three in the executive chamber that afternoon practiced no self decoration: Krag, the white-furred giant; Turgar, as short as Krag was huge, as bowlegged as Krag was erect; and Sir Javo, the hawk-nosed, bronze-skinned knight.

Javo's only ostentatious indulgence came in the form of the plume of colorful feathers on his great helm — the helmet he used when fighting on horseback. But none of them wore battle harness now, in this place for diplomats, tax collectors and other city-born fops.

Ustane, the first King of Cemar, entered the chamber and the staff hushed, all turning to bow except the three mercenaries. Ustane took a seat at the center of the long, marble table — his throne was still being built by skilled craftsmen in another room. He was a thin, handsome man with a kingly bearing, as if he had been born to royalty. As if there had been royalty in Cemar before. He gazed sternly at Javo. “We might excuse your barbarian comrades for ignorance to our customs,” Ustane said. “But we understand you are native born to my kingdom. Do you purposefully intend to insult our office?”

“You mean because we didn’t bow?” Javo’s face remained blank, but there was a tremor in his voice. “I was born a Cemarite, but in the High Forest, and never lived in the city. In any case, there was no monarchy when I lived in this country, nor any customs concerning royalty for me to be ignorant of, King Ustane.”

Ustane silently contemplated these words, then motioned for his obediently kowtowing court to relax and take seats. They did, with the rustling of silk and the scraping of wooden chair legs on marble floor.

The three mercenaries remained standing.

“Our crown may be new,” Ustane said, “and our throne as yet unfinished...” He said this with a glance down at his ordinary chair and a puffing of the cheeks which caused laughter amongst his loyal sycophants. “But we hope you understand that we could have you severely dealt with for any act of disrespect.”

Javo nodded. “I understand, King.”

Ustane's chiseled bronze face darkened for a moment, but then he smiled, showing perfect white teeth. "We suppose it will take some time, even for city natives, to adjust to the new era."

The members of his court nodded and harrumphed their concurrence, pleased that nothing need become ugly at this euphoric stage of the Transition.

The Chief Speaker of the old Parliament was there, along with the Ministers of Commerce, War, and Information. The Bard and Minstrel's Guild, instrumental in Ustane's rise to power, was well-represented as well.

Lingering on the periphery, watching everything but drawing little attention to themselves, were figures in dark burgundy robes, hoods covering their heads and hiding their faces in shadow.

Ustane exchanged glances with his advisors left and right, but addressed the threesome. "We understand you're willing to face the gryphon."

"True, O King," Krag replied, quick to add, "for the price agreed upon earlier." The crimson-skinned Turgar placed a calloused hand over his breast and bent slightly forward at the waist — a gesture of perfunctory obeisance. "Most regal Majesty, we are unsure whether you desire that we slay this great beast, or merely cut its wings off."

Now a servant poured some wine into the goblet on the table. Ustane swirled it with pinkie extended, and took a dainty sip. "It has been shackled before, so it is evidently possible to approach it closely and live. But it wouldn't offend us whatsoever if you were to simply

kill it.”

“Very well,” Javo said. “With your leave then, we shall set out immediately.”

Ustane fluttered his fingers. “You have our leave. Dismissed. Off with you.” He smiled at his advisers. “And upon your return, we’ll have to teach you about proper respect for the crown, hmm?”

THE THREE WARRIORS strode through the courtyard with an escort of royal guards following. The huge crowd, gathered in the hope that their new king would appear at the balcony, parted before the bronze knight and the savage outsiders beside him.

Javo was a head taller than most men, but the top of his black mane only came as high as the massive chest of Krag. Though Turgar could hardly intimidate any but a child with size alone, his alien appearance was enough to hold townsfolk at bay: red skin; hair of an even darker shade of crimson; yellow eyes with vertical slits for pupils.

Krag glanced at Javo, to his side. “The people certainly seem to adore your king.”

“I have no king,” Javo said. The three of them had each spoken these words many times, but not with quite as much venom as Javo spat now. “But yes, more than half the population believes Ustane and the Transition will solve all their troubles.”

Cemar had been unique among the city-states, not just because of its abundant wealth but, more importantly, because of the representative parliament, the esteem for and practice of freedom. Vast stretches of

pasture and forests surrounding the city proper had come under her protection over the generations, and the state grew to become the peaceful envy of the entire world.

"I think we took a risk," Turgar grunted, "showing contempt for their formalities."

Krag waved dismissively. "What could they do? Call the guards? We'd tear the walls down around them, and have our way with the whole city."

"Reckless words, my friend," Turgar said. "Your open lust for these Cemarite wenches suggests you might try to have your way with the whole city on any account." The women of Cemaria, especially those in the city, were a brazen, impudent lot. The comely ones garbed themselves so as to leave little to the imagination. And nowhere were women granted such powers as here. Turgar preferred subservient maidens, like those from the harsh climes of his desert homeland.

Krag's native islands were also rugged country where women were careful how they spoke and behaved. These brash, aggressive Cemarite damsels thrilled him to no end. There in the courtyard, even, few in the crowd paid attention to the jesters and acrobats — most (Krag especially) had their eyes locked on the scantily-clad dancing girls or the buxom lass singing bawdy songs to lust-drunk men happy to have her flash them a leg or breathe sultry notes in their ears. Of course, the merrymaking wasn't nearly as raucous now as in richer times.

Krag laughed. "Yes, indeed! And even in the king's court! Did you take a good look at that Minister of

Information?"

"Who could help it?" Turgar said. "Even our serious Cemarite comrade took notice of her."

Javo broke his brooding with a momentary grin. "And the legion of assistants in there. If one more of them had rubbed her bottom against me as we awaited *His Majesty*, I should have given it a good swat."

They shouldered through the last layer of humanity into a narrow cobblestone street beyond the courtyard. The guard escort halted here, and the three comrades continued without accompaniment. Now they could move faster, and did.

Turgar pointed upwards at a window in one of the buildings towering over them. "Behold the claw marks." Just under the lower edge of the window were two groupings of three short scratches.

"I warrant the gryphon left those when fleeing the scene of its crime," Krag said. "I see similar scratches below that window across the street. And that one, there!"

"This gryphon is busy," Turgar mused. "But what use does this creature have for gold and infants?"

"None," Javo said. "It must steal on behalf of someone who does have use for them." They continued walking, the stables now in sight. Turgar gazed askance at Javo. "You say 'someone' as if you know who it is."

"I know not. I only suspect."

Krag's great shaggy head tilted down from examining high windows and claw marks. "Who do you suspect?"

"The sorceress Rothquark."

"Krag is the superstitious one," Turgar said. "I'm disappointed that you believe in these imaginary villains invented to scare children."

"Nobody I know is certain of her real name," Javo said. "But I believe she is real; and, what's more, that those secretive folk back at the capitol building — I suppose we should call it a palace, now — owe their foremost allegiance to her and her dark arts."

"Those who wore the hooded robes?" Turgar asked.

"Aye, hiding their faces."

The very mention of magic soured Krag's mood. His pale green face wrinkled under the fine white beard. The thicker white fur on his arms prickled straight up. Even the unruly white hair atop his head stiffened. "This gryphon..." He started suspiciously.

Javo reached up to strike his friend's heavily muscled arm reassuringly. "I doubt it has any magical powers. In any case, does not your helmet protect you against evil spells?"

"So far it has," Krag muttered. "I think." A Bruk priest had given him the ceremonial helm when he first undertook his warrior pilgrimage.

They reached the stables and went inside. Their mounts, saddles, and armor were guarded by the stable boy, himself under the watchful eyes of two enormous war hounds.

Javo inventoried their belongings, then paid the boy. Turgar grunted to the hounds and fed them their reward — large morsels of raw meat.

"Think of all the gold which must be on that mountain," Turgar told Krag. Next to lusty women,

gold was Krag's greatest incentive for any daunting task.

"Why would gold still be up there," Krag asked, donning his horned helm before lifting his saddle from a wooden stool, "if the gryphon is stealing it on someone else's behalf?" The dome of the helm was reinforced with steel ribbing. A flaring noseguard extended down in front, protective skirting hung down in back. The horns were real and sharp, but small enough so as not to snag during movement.

"Unless the gryphon delivers every stolen coin or purse directly to its master," Javo reasoned, dropping his saddle on his sleek, black charger, "there must grow a hoard of some size before it is collected."

"What of the stolen babes?" Krag wondered, aloud.

"Perhaps 'tis all just a theory, that the gryphon is some villain's thrall," Turgar said, turning from the two hounds to his three ponies, examining and stroking their tawny coats affectionately. "Perhaps this gryphon merely likes the shine of gold, and the taste of babes."

Krag's horse was a Chyrvadon, the largest, most powerful breed known to men. Not as swift as Turgar's desert ponies or Javo's charger, it could bear the weight of the gigantic Bruk Islanders like Krag. Originally bred for plowing, it had tremendous strength.

Krag saddled it and strapped on his armor — a scaled steel hauberk, plus iron greaves and loin guard.

Turgar's armor protected more of the body, but aside from the fur-lined, spiked helmet, was not metal. Most of the leather was thick, stiff and lacquered except the boots, trousers and archer's gauntlets.

Javo took the longest to dress, as his full battle harness, though forged from some mysterious lightweight steel and articulated superbly at the joints, was nonetheless cumbersome to assemble and align.

The small party rode out from the stable toward Mount Tirshal. Trailing the three riders were two desert ponies bearing supplies, and the two monstrous hounds.

Turgar pointed at the Cemarite flag flapping from a watchtower pole as they rode through the outskirts of the city. “Surprising that the old banner has not been replaced, yes?”

Javo nodded. “All that once made Cemar great has been corrupted; yet the symbols remain unchanged thus far.”

“They should replace the national symbol indeed,” Krag said, staring at the golden gryphon on the crimson banner “if the gryphon is now their bane. How was it that foul beast was honored so?”

“Legends say it was dispatched ages ago by the great Aod, to guard over Cemar’s tribe when they first settled in this valley,” Javo said.

“Why would a creature which has protected your people for so long suddenly turn to plundering them?” Turgar asked.

“It was not sudden,” Javo said. “It has grown gradually over the generations, starting out so subtly that few paid attention at first.”

“The question is a good one,” Krag said, “and remains unanswered.”

Javo sighed. “I know not why the guardian has taken to eating out the substance of those it was commanded

to protect. But corruption is a disease from which no living creature is immune. Even knighthood doesn't make one exempt. I've seen many earn their commission with the sincere, passionate intention of serving justice, righting wrongs and protecting the unfortunate only to witness, years later, those noble ideals flipped unceremoniously upside-down and backwards."

They rode past the last buildings and a small, dirty urchin waved at them. Javo waved back, wondering if the child were grown too large now to be a target for the gryphon's abduction. It seemed the nocturnal kidnapper preferred only children still too young to walk or speak.

"I think the Cemarites waxed arrogant with the gryphon to watch over them," Turgar said, sweeping one hand across the landscape. "This must be the only city in all the world without a wall. Do they imagine no enemy could ever grow powerful enough to march against them?"

"I warrant," Javo agreed, frowning. "There are those like my father and uncles who spoke against this carelessness, and tried to get a wall built. But others of the same ilk that so fervently sold the Transition to my countrymen found manifold excuses to undermine their efforts."

They passed cultivated fields, framed by canals. Farmers worked amidst the crops, just as they had over many generations, diligently building the surpluses that made the nearby city thrive. Only now, the farmer's youngest children, and treasures, had been stolen from

them night by night, just like the city dwellers — what treasures were left after the ever-balloonning tax burden.

"These fields are still a wonder," Javo said, admiring the efficiency of the modern agricultural engineering. "You won't see any as productive the world over."

Beyond the last farm, they rode past a mining camp, then reached the base of Mount Tirshal.

Krag looked up the steep slope. About halfway up, the mountain disappeared behind a veil of mist. "You are certain it is up this mountain?"

Javo nodded. He found the mouth of the trail and nudged his mount forward with no delay.

The trail wound up the mountain at a grade navigable for horse and rider. The blue sun sank lower as the small caravan climbed. Darkness crept in from the far horizon, growing until it swallowed the last vestiges of daylight.

Turgar moved to the front, pupils thickening in the darkness, so he could pick out the trail. When the first moon finally arose, his companions were able to see almost as well as the Gabomite archer. The trail led them to a flat outcropping where the mist thickened around the mountain. There seemed to be no way beyond this spot, save that whence they had come.

Javo reined in his charger behind Turgar and dismounted. "From here we must progress on foot," he said.

"Why?" demanded Krag, his huge mount halting behind.

"The slope is too steep from here up," Javo replied. "And the fog too thick."

"You've climbed Tirshal before?" Turgar asked, dismounting.

"Aye, when but a lad seeking adventure," Javo replied. "But I got no further than this."

Krag swung down from the saddle, gazing up into the fog. "Will you remove your armor for the climb?"

"No," Javo said. "We came to do battle with the gryphon, and I shall remain prepared for such." They all kept their armor on. With Turgar's feline eyes picking out handholds and footholds, they continued their ascent, leaving their dogs of war to guard the horses.

Conversation ceased. All three were stout hearted and strong, but needed all their energy and concentration for the climb. Moss-covered rock was slick with the moisture of the swirling vapors which limited even Turgar's vision to only a spear-length in the night.

Grunting and sweating with the effort, Javo reconsidered, too late, keeping his armor on, lightweight though it was.

"What is that?" Krag asked, suddenly.

"What is what?" Javo replied.

"Don't you hear it? Don't you feel it?" the giant asked, a fearful tone to his voice.

Turgar's keen yellow eyes swept through the misty shroud. "I hear nothing but the wind, my friend."

"We are not alone," Krag said. "Something moves nearby; swiftly but stealthily."

They paused to listen, then Turgar shook his head. "The dark, the mist, and the whistling wind play tricks

on a man's mind."

Javo nodded agreement. "If a man hears nothing but this wind for long enough, he begins to imagine things. One can go mad. Next ledge we reach, Turgar, let us rest and eat something before climbing farther."

Not long thereafter, Turgar found a ledge large enough for a much larger party of men. They shared a flagon of ale, a loaf of bread, and round of cheese.

"Reminds me of the mountain fortress, yes?" Turgar suggested, catching his breath.

"I warrant this slope is far steeper than that mountain," Javo said.

The dark and fog seemed heavier than what should be normal. The ledge was covered with something loose and jagged, like a layer of gravel. Krag lifted himself up to sweep a spot smooth under him before sitting back down. "I sense something out there. We have not been alone since we entered this accursed fog."

Turgar ignored him, not wanting anyone's courage to falter this close to their objective. "Tell us, my Cemarite warrior brother, what legends surround Tirshal? Surely a mountain like this has inspired tales."

Javo nodded. "Most concern the gryphon and those who've sought it."

"What warnings of the mountain?" Krag asked, eyes darting about as if searching for something in the darkness.

Javo shrugged. "Just to not blaspheme the great Aod, and light no torches."

"I won't blaspheme your invisible god," Turgar said,

“but I soberly contemplate lighting a torch. I’ve never had so much trouble seeing at night. My vision blurs in this infernal wet mist. All three moons should be out by now, yet I spy not even a glow through this black fog.”

“Why is lighting a torch forbidden?” Krag asked.

Javo hunched armored shoulders. “I suppose so that the gryphon won’t see your approach. But then, other Cemarites have faced the beast, yet lived.”

“Is it true the beast was shackled?” Turgar asked.

“That is what some believe.”

Krag chewed his bread thoughtfully. “If the gryphon lives to protect Cemarites, why then would it steal their gold and their children?”

“Again, my friend,” Javo said, “that is the riddle vexing everyone. But I’ve heard it won’t harm a Cemarite, unless they blaspheme the great Aod.” After a thoughtful pause, he added, scornfully, “Perhaps this is why none of Ustane’s Transition prophets dare undertake this mission.”

Turgar rummaged through his haversack. “Who knows where or what the truth is in the haystack of legends? I say we need torchlight to continue.”

Javo put the food and ale away. He thought of protesting, but wasn’t sure he believed the legends and warnings himself.

“We’ve made it this far with no light,” Krag reasoned, voice tainted with desperation. “We can go on as before, else lose the favor of surprise.”

Turgar struck flint to steel, and expertly sparked a flame to the torch in moments. Flame gave light, which haloed out into the fog around them.

“Behold!” Turgar exclaimed, pointing. His friends followed his gesture.

Farther along the ledge was a thick iron stake, the size of a small tree bole, driven into a crevice in the rock. The stake secured the link of a huge chain to the mountain.

Rising from a squat to a crouch, Turgar moved toward the stake on the balls of his feet. After examining it, he stood straight, lifting the torch high.

“This chain is anchored here, but goes further up the slope.” Javo and Krag rose and joined him.

“So the gryphon has indeed been chained,” Javo said.

Turgar squatted again, lowering the torch to his feet. With his free hand he scooped up some gravel for examination.

It was not gravel, but bone fragments.

“What evil is this?” gasped Krag. “Bones of hundreds of victims all around us!” Without a word, Turgar clamped the torch between his teeth and began climbing the chain. Javo followed, then, reluctantly, Krag.

A short distance up from their erstwhile roost, Turgar stopped, taking the torch in one hand and extending it over a strange shape. The others, leaning out to see around their comrade, sucked in breath as the shape was illuminated.

It was a skeleton, draped over a narrow shelf of rock. But not a man’s skeleton — the skull was different, elongated like a crocodile or lizard’s head. But a large reptile, to be certain.

"Hold this to the light," Javo said, handing something up to Turgar.

Turgar took it, and brought the torch close. "A gold coin."

"We must be getting close," Javo said.

Just as they resumed climbing, the huge chain trembled in Turgar's grip as he heard a great scuffling noise below him. He looked down to see his giant Bruk friend dangling by one hand from the chain. But that one arm was strong, and pulled the rest of his body back to the chain for a safe grip. "Tell me you didn't feel that!" Krag called.

"Feel what?" Turgar asked. "Are you trying to shake us off our perches?!"

"No," Javo said. "I felt it, too. At least the air it moved in passing."

"Felt what?"

"Something flew past," Krag said. "It brushed across my back."

"But you didn't see what it was?"

"No."

Turgar licked drying lips. He climbed quicker than ever, trying not to imagine what was truly happening.

He came to another iron stake, which pinned down another link of the chain.

Something flew past his back, close enough for him to feel the air, too, this time.

He climbed.

Krag cried out from below.

"What is it, Krag?"

Turgar felt something rake across his leather

backplate, then scratch his unprotected nape.

The air rushed again, and something scraped the black steel of Javo's armor.

They climbed.

Turgar came to another stake, but didn't slow this time. He saw more queer skeletons, and more scattered gold, but kept climbing. Something heavy landed on his back, and clawed at his face from behind. He felt the handle of the torch being wrenched from his teeth, and then a horrible shriek tore at his ears.

The weight came off his back. The torch jiggled, but then was released. Turgar craned his neck around to look down behind him.

A bizarre form writhed in the flame shadows, skewered on Javo's sword. Before Turgar could get a good look, Javo saw the creature more clearly than he cared to and shook it off his sword the way he might fling mud from a stick. The shrieking trailed off as the creature plummeted, hopefully to its death.

Krag cursed as another creature latched onto his leg. He grabbed hold of its head and tore it off, then smashed its skull against the rocky cliff and let it drop.

"Are you hurt?" Turgar called below.

"Just climb!" Javo said. "Find another ledge so we may fight these fiends face-to-face!" They passed another stake through a link. The chain vibrated.

More creatures came at them, growing more fierce with each attack. Skeletons and gold grew thicker as they ascended, though they paid little attention.

They passed another stake. The chain quivered.

Turgar reached a ledge and, sinewy arms pulsing

with the strength of great springs, vaulted up to land on its bone-covered surface. Immediately, several of the ghastly beasts latched onto him at once. Sharp claws and fangs sunk into leather and flesh. He transferred the torch from mouth to hand just as a creature grabbed for it again. His other gloved hand drew his single-edged sword and swung it at the swarm of foul terror trying to rip his flesh asunder.

Javo hoisted himself up, followed by Krag, and fell upon the vile beasts. Javo cleaved them in twain with his double-edged longsword, while Krag used bare hands to snap, break, and crush until Turgar was free of them.

“Triangle!” Javo barked.

The three warriors faced outward in three directions, their backs toward each other. Javo pulled the heart-shaped shield off his back with his free hand, and thrust his forearm through the straps. Krag also had a shield — a huge round one — strapped to his back, but he left it there, reaching underneath it instead. He pulled out the great two-handed axe, which he normally wielded in one huge fist. As he sometimes did when the odds against them were considerable, his other hand pulled out his warhammer.

Visor slamming down into place, Javo’s helmet swiveled to the side toward his friend. “Your bow, Turgar! Quickly!”

The desert warrior, descendant of generations of proud horse-archers, realized his friend was right — the fiends were far enough at bay now that he could sheath his sword and use arrows to keep them there. He was,

perhaps, better than average in melee combat, but unsurpassed with ranged weapons.

In a few heartbeats Turgar had his first arrow nocked, the torch transferred to Javo, who held it with his shield hand.

One creature landed, facing their triangle. Then another. Then three more. Then five. Five more. Nine. Thirteen. They kept landing until they formed a solid, hideous wall surrounding the warriors.

They advanced, the circle tightening.

The creatures walked on something like the hind legs of goats, but with monkey feet. Long, spindly arms snaked out from their shoulders, with hands like a bird's talons. Vein-webbed membranes, in multiple layers, extended out from each side of their backs like women's fans, buzzing so fast as to blur when in flight, collapsing and folding against their sides upon landing. Their heads resembled the heads of lizards. Also reptilian was their skin, and of a strange dark green that seemed to absorb light more than reflect it. Their eyes were thin, horizontal slits in bulging, scaled sockets.

The fiends appeared furious, their gruesome eyes darting first to the glowing torch, then to the humans, then back to the light. In unison their mouths opened, forked tongues slithering. But instead of a collective hiss or another shriek, what came out was a rhythmic, monotonous chant.

The words of the chant were unknown to the three warriors, but so powerful and intoxicating that their lips moved involuntarily to duplicate the sound.

Krag's yell began as a low growl, then built into a

savage bellow, drowning out the chant. Turgar blinked his eyes and let his arrow fly. It pierced a reptilian head, right between the eyes. The fiend fell over backwards, shrieking. Before it hit the ground, he nocked another arrow, drew and let fly. When his third arrow found its mark, the chanting stopped.

The fiends charged at full speed.

“Come to me!” growled Krag. “My steel thirsts for your vermin blood!” He longed to meet them headlong in a berserker’s rush. His nervousness about the eerie darkness and fear of possible magic was gone. These creatures, grotesque and unnatural though they were, could be touched; therefore they could be slain. He willed his feet to stay planted, lest he leave the back of one of his comrades exposed. When the wave of attackers came within range of his gigantic arms, both his weapons swung downward.

The warhammer crashed into a fiend’s head, splintering skullbone, pulping the brain, which squirted out its tiny ears. The great axe split another from shoulder to crotch.

Another fiend, intending to bite into his flesh, instead shattered its teeth on a suddenly blocking hammer head, while the axe cut through the midsection of two more attackers.

Turgar could shoot arrows at an incredible rate, and at this range even a novice archer couldn’t miss. But there were so many fiends pressing in so quickly, one closed with him even as he launched a shaft into another. He kicked it hard in the belly and cried, “Left!”

The three warriors shuffled leftward and the triangle

rotated. Javo's sword swung over from the side and chopped the head off the fiend attacking Turgar.

Javo's blade was double-edged, and he used both edges efficiently. He lashed left and right with short killing strokes. His accuracy was machine-like, and he used just exactly enough energy to fell each attacker. He only thrust with the sharp point at the rare instants when a single foe faced him. He sometimes used his shield as a weapon, but mainly kept the fiends at bay with it while they grabbed for the torch, until Krag's warhammer crushed them or his own sword was free to hack them down.

As skillful as Turgar was with the bow, was Javo with sword and shield. As skilled as both of them were with their weapons, was Krag savage and unstoppable.

Every time a fiend fell dead, it seemed another landed on the ledge to replace it.

Turgar felt the bundle of arrows thinning in his quiver. It alarmed him that his shafts were running out, but his enemies were not.

Suddenly, the mist swirled as if caught in a tornado. A tremendous roar echoed off the side of the mountain and into the night. An animal roar, like a lion, only louder.

The fiends stopped in their tracks, jolted by the noise.

Out of the billowing vortex of fog dove the gryphon. It wasn't like most of the gryphons depicted in art. This one resembled the creature on the Cemarite flag: Huge wings, dwarfing those of the largest condor, sprouted from between the shoulders. Its paws resembled a

lion's, with pads and five retracting claws but with toes more like fingers. It had a lion's head and mane, but with horns like a bull. It snatched four of the creatures off the ledge — one in each paw. It speared a fifth with its horns. It tore all five to pieces and dropped them, quickly snatching replacements.

As it hovered in place, the wind of the gryphon's huge, beating wings caused the three warriors to take balancing steps and lean slightly into the rush of air. Krag struck down the remaining fiends near he and his friends.

Javo lifted his visor. They broke the triangle and all faced the remarkable scene.

"The gryphon protects us?" Krag muttered. "Or will it turn on us once these vermin are gone?"

"Either way," Turgar said, counting arrows with gloved fingers, "let it slay however many it will, before we draw its attention."

"Look at the ground," Javo said, pointing with his sword.

They stood on layers of mostly intact bones from a thousand jumbled skeletons, highlighted with a smattering of gold coins and trinkets. As the fiends fell dead in rapid succession, it was obvious they were now joining their parents and ancestors.

"Behold," Krag said. "The darkness, it recedes like a scroll."

With each slain fiend, the light from the torch stretched further, and the glow of the triplet moons seeped through the fog.

The remaining fiends fled, wings fanning out and

propelling them out of the light.

The gryphon flew after them, plucking one from the sky, then another. Before it could grab a third, it was brought short with a jerk. One hind leg was shackled to the huge chain, the ankle raw and bloody from the friction. The huge chain rattled, jerked and swung to and fro as the gryphon caught what fiends it could. The smarter ones flew out of range, gauging how far the chain would allow their adversary to reach. As they scattered, the gryphon concentrated first on those flying toward the city, then on all others.

When the last fiend left, the night was bright enough for the three men to make out the extent of the flat outcropping they now occupied. It was large enough to build a sea-going ship upon, with room left over.

The gryphon dropped down to the surface. It stood on hind legs, facing them. As it stared at them, each had the impression they were being studied with intelligence far beyond animal. The gryphon's face was unmistakably feline, but it spoke with a human voice, "Hast thou found what ye seek, warriors?"

"We seek you," Javo said.

Krag recoiled in suspicion, "Do not speak to it. This unnatural creature is surely the dark work of witchcraft."

"Some brave the cliffs of Tirshal for lust of the gold scattered near its peak," the gryphon said. "Is it gold which ye covet so strongly?"

Javo lowered his sword, thoughtful. Krag tightened the grip on his warhammer.

"It is you that steals the gold of Cemar," Turgar

accused. An arrow was nocked, but he didn't draw the string, awed by the presence of the gryphon.

"Ye have killed many in battle, valiant Gabomite," the gryphon told Turgar. "That is no dishonor, for a warrior. But to attack the innocent for naught but the lie of a schemer: that would be a pox on thy soul."

"You know who sent us?" Javo asked.

The gryphon blinked wearily. "I know many things."

"Perhaps we should only clip your wings," Krag said, voice quavering.

"Many have tried, sailor of Bruk," said the gryphon. "Thy courage matches thy great strength, thou who hast mastered thy fear. I would rather not suffer thy bones to be mixed in with this ignoble carpeting."

"His name is Krag, the Wrecker," Javo said. "This is Turgar, renowned as Lightning Thrower on two continents. There are songs and poems which tell of my friends already. And I am Sir Javo, a knight of the Black Lancers."

"But thou art a son of Cemaria," said the gryphon.

Javo removed his helmet, exposing his bronze face and black mane. "Aye." Knighthood was not an institution practiced in Cemaria, hence none would imagine a Cemarite inside this black armor.

"I see more than just what these eyes show me," said the gryphon, blinking those luminous orbs again.

"And what is your name?" Javo asked.

The gryphon tilted its head slightly, and smiled. "I am Freibuzar."

Freibuzar's ears pricked up. His eyes probed the sky behind them.

Krag was the next to notice it: a dimming of the moonlight; movement through the air. He whirled to see a fiend flying from the direction of the city.

Freibuzar's great wings beat the air. He shot upwards and plucked the fiend out of the sky, twisting it apart in his front paws. The two halves of the gruesome body fell on the pile of recently slain, and a purse fell near Krag's feet, bursting apart upon impact with a reptilian skull, sending gold coins flying in all directions.

Krag squatted to examine the purse and what coins remained therein. "The truth stares us in the face, my friends."

Freibuzar returned to the bone-covered outcropping, huge chain coiling like a serpent as he descended.

Turgar nodded, returning his arrow to the quiver. "It is these hellspawned fiends that eat out your nation's substance, Javo. This creature tries to stop the plunder, yet is blamed for it."

Freibuzar heard this. He leaned forward to rest on all four paws and his shoulders slumped a bit, wings drooping down from them like wet rags. His countenance transformed to radiate profound sadness. He focused on Javo. "Thy people vex me, Cemarite. Their cries of anguish sometimes reach the peak of Tirshal, even mine own ears. But they conspire to bring yet greater calamity upon themselves."

Javo sheathed his sword. "My people have gone mad, Freibuzar. Now a king rules over them, and I fear they deserve him."

Freibuzar blinked bewildered eyes. "Long ago, thy ancestor Cemar called on the name of the great Aod,

asking for protection and prosperity. Aod Himself sent me here. Told me I must serve your nation, and protect them.” Javo’s thoughts drifted back over the ages, to when the farms and villages coalesced into a city, to when the city and surrounding lands grew into the jewel of the known world.

“Why did they shackle you?” asked Krag.

“Madness,” said Freibuzar. “I never slept, but watched faithfully over the land. The first visitors told me that as their servant, I must submit to the chains. I was unable to stop all the plunderers after that, but Cemar still overflowed with abundant wealth. Later others came, and staked the chain down closer. More plunderers escaped me, but Cemar remained the wealthiest city. Later, another stake through the chain. Every generation hath shortened my tether. Now most of the plunderers, foolish though they are, are able to fly outside my reach and ravage at will.”

Freibuzar’s head raised level again, and he grinned. “I am thankful for thee. Because thou, and the light ye brought here, drew them into a pitched battle, we have reduced their number and the city may have some relief for a while.”

“These plunderers,” Javo said, “who sends them?”

Freibuzar locked eyes with Javo. “Thou knowest.”

“Rothquark,” Javo whispered.

“Pray tell, Javo,” said Turgar.

“I can prove nothing,” Javo said, “but I know those we saw in the hooded robes answer to the hidden sorceress. I suspect she’s had some mystical influence on the Bard and Minstrel’s Guild for a few generations

now, as well."

"What could the witch's designs be?" muttered Turgar, not really expecting an answer.

Freibuzar shook his head slowly. "Man can be so blind, even when his natural eyes gaze upon the truth he seeks."

The three warriors stared at the gryphon, confused. But rather than explain his remark, his wings sprang out, then flapped down as he leapt from the ground with the strength of all four legs. Like a bolt from a crossbow he shot through the air, catching another dark fiend flying from the city.

Freibuzar tore the fiend apart, dropping it down the mist-shrouded slope of Tirshal. Another purse fell toward the outcropping, but the three warriors' attention was drawn to another, larger falling object, emitting a high-pitched wail.

Turgar maneuvered underneath, and caught the wailing bundle, squatting as he did so to absorb some of the shock. The crying ceased with a gasp, then resumed with renewed fury. Turgar held a baby in his arms.

Freibuzar landed again; the infant saw him and stopped crying. Its tiny face broke out in a rapturous grin.

Freibuzar tipped his head back and roared. It was the roar of victory. The infant laughed.

"This one shall live!" Freibuzar said. "And thou shalt return her to the mourning parents." All human eyes bounced from the gryphon to the babe, and back again. "What happens to the treasure which falls here on Tirshal?" Krag finally asked.

"Thou wert promised some of it as payment?"
Freibuzar asked.

"A third," said Krag.

Freibuzar glanced soberly about, at the highlights of moon-glittering gold in the sea of bones. "This is the price thy king hast set to rid his people of he who watches over thy countrymen day and night." Freibuzar crouched on all fours again, his forelegs flat against the bone-covered ground. "If thou dost intend to collect this blood money, I warn thee, I am bound to submit to none but a Cemarite... one who blasphemers not the great Aod."

Javo laid his helmet down and turned to Krag with extended hand. "Your axe, my friend." Krag exchanged confused glances with Turgar, but handed over his axe. Javo gripped it in both hands, and approached Freibuzar.

Sir Javo stopped beside the gryphon, who remained still, though his maned neck was completely exposed. The axe was called Blood Drinker, and its heavy, double-bladed head had proven capable of cleaving anything.

"I am Cemarite," Javo said, "and not a blasphemer." He lifted the axe high, then brought it down with all his strength.

The cliffs of Tirshal echoed with the ringing of steel on iron, as Blood Drinker sheared through the band securing Freibuzar's leg to the chain.

Freibuzar stood, shaking his raw leg until free of the broken shackle.

"Thou art rebellious in spirit, Sir Javo," said

Freibuzar, “and harbor bitterness against thy countrymen. But a blasphemer thou art not, nor hast thou ever been.”

The gryphon spread his wings as an eagle does when soaring, and roared in victory again. “Now Cemar will be restored!”

“No,” said Javo, quietly.

Jaws slack, eyes wide, his friends stared astonished at him.

“You still intend to slay this protector of your people?” asked Turgar.

“Not slay him,” Javo said. “But free him.” He strode around to stand directly in front of Freibuzar. “You can truly see more than just what your eyes witness, Freibuzar.

“Consider Cemar. They have scorned your protection by chaining you and by plotting your destruction. They have despised their freedom by submitting themselves to a mortal king. My nation, my people, blaspheme against the great Aod who bestowed these favors upon them. Go whence you came; you have fulfilled your duty.”

All were silent. Freibuzar studied Javo for a moment, then looked beyond him, through the mist.

Javo imagined him searching the souls within the city below. Or perhaps he listened to the voice of the great Aod, whispering to him through the misty breeze.

Finally, Freibuzar nodded. His muscles coiled, then sprang. His gigantic wings drove him up, up, up into the sky, past the peak of Tirshal, leaving behind a rush of wind and a vortex in the fog. Then he was gone from

sight.

Javo and his two friends looked at each other wordlessly for a time.

The baby resumed crying.

"We had best climb down," Javo finally said, "while there is still light and peace."

Krag began collecting gold.

"Should we return to Ustane's court?" Turgar wondered aloud, stooping to recover arrows still intact. "He was already perturbed with us. Now might he be furious."

"The gryphon is gone," Krag reminded them. "Is that not what he wanted?"

"We should at least take this one back to its mother," Javo said, pointing to the baby. "After that, I know not."

They converged on the chain and climbed down from the outcropping.

"Would anyone in Cemaria believe what we've seen and heard this night?" mused Turgar aloud, the insteps of his boots sandwiching the chain, sliding downward as his hands moved from link to link..

"I think not," Javo said, the infant still bawling inside the haversack now hanging against his armored stomach. "To contradict the assumption that Freibuzar is the cause of their grief would threaten the Transition. Or at least tarnish it. Such would make us enemies of the crown." He pronounced the word "crown" with anguish and disgust.

"I warrant we shall suffer Ustane's wrath anyway," Krag said, feet scarcely touching the chain as he lowered his tremendous weight, hand over powerful

hand.

“When they find themselves plundered as never before, they shall remember the ransom paid for ridding their mountain of the gryphon, and focus their wrath upon us.”

“Let us be far away from here by then, my friends,” Javo said. “There will be other kingdoms in need of our steel.”

“Other battles to be fought,” agreed Turgar.

“And gold to be won,” added Krag.

The mist, mixed with sweat, stung Javo’s eyes. He grinned, “And justice to be dealt.”

Henry Brown is a voracious reader, a history buff from a young age, and a WWII aficionado by the age of 17.

He joined the Army the summer he graduated high school, and volunteered for the Airborne Infantry. After active duty, he earned a degree in the arts, but spent most of his elective credits on martial arts sparring classes and military history. He is the columns editor at New Pulp Fiction and rants periodically as the Two-Fisted Blogger. His author credits include the military thriller/action novel Hell and Gone, as well as pulp-style fiction available at major online booksellers. He recently launched Virtual Pulp Press (<http://www.virtualpulppress.com>), a one-stop shopping site for lovers of action-packed fiction, film and videogames.

Flood of Terror

by Justin Lowmaster

CHARLES GOT OUT from his car, martial arts gi draped over his arm and opened the mailbox. Amid the sales ads and the offers for maid service he could never afford, a plain envelope stood out. The address was hand written, as was the return address. It was from Isaac Walters.

“Haven’t heard from him in an age.”

Once Charles was sure that there was no other mail of importance, he deposited the rest in the recycle bin and started opening the envelope, tearing along the short end, and extracting the paper. He read as he approached the door to the house.

Dear Charles,

I regret that I haven’t contacted you in a long time, and when I do, I am asking for something.

I have been unwell for about three weeks now, have gotten worse, and am now in the

hospital. I fear for my flock and was hoping you could take some time in shepherding for me while I recover. There aren't many in attendance these days, but there are a few faithful.

I fear that some power of darkness has taken root in our town, but perhaps I am just overreacting to the changes in society, and am only sensing it strongly because of the small community in which I reside.

The doctors say I should be recovered in two weeks or so. If you could come and tend the church for a time, I would be eternally grateful. There is a small place to stay on the church grounds, my house. It should have anything you might need.

Please send word soon.

Your Friend and Brother in Christ,

Isaac Walters

Charles realized he was standing in front of the door and folded the letter back up and went inside. Lisa hasn't home from work yet, so he sat and contemplated on the couch. "God, it's been a while since I shepherded anyone. Is this what you would have for me?"

He leaned back into the couch and rubbed his hands

over his face, then slowly his eyes fell shut.

Charles stood in the rain, clouds of darkness rolling into the sky from a crack in the ground. The water rose higher and higher. It was up to his chest and the current was pulling at him with cold fingers. A hooded figure rose out of the water and pointed at him through the gloom. The figure raised his other hand, palm up, and the waters raged higher. Charles struggled in the water as it began to wrap around him. He tried to twist free of the water's grasp striking it with his hands, his blows useless against the relentless current.

The front door shut and woke him. There was the sound of grocery bags and glass jars setting on the counter, then she came around the corner.

"Hey, honey, were you sleeping?"

Charles sat up in the chair and rubbed his eyes, and found the letter still in his hands. "Yeah, I guess I was." He looked out the windows at the sun-filled lawn, set the down the letter, and rubbed his hand down his face. "What a dream. How are you, Crystal?" She came over and they embraced, then she picked up the letter.

"What's this?"

"It's from Isaac, over in Weston."

"Oh! How is he?"

"Not too good I guess."

Crystal sat on the couch, putting down the letter.
"Oh, what's wrong?"

"Don't know, he didn't say, but ..."

Crystal looked at Charles expectantly.

"He wants me to preach at his church while he recovers."

Crystal smiled. “Well, are you going to?”

Charles failed to suppress a scowl. “If they let me.”

Crystal tilted her head and smiled slightly, resting her hand on Charles’ leg. “You know that it isn’t because of you that the congregation pushed us away. They didn’t want to hear the truth.”

Charles slumped in the chair. “I know; it’s still disheartening.”

“Like an Old Testament prophet when the people wouldn’t listen.”

Charles stared at the letter beside him, then nodded. “A lot like that.”

After a moment, Crystal stood. “How about some spaghetti? I am going to make meatballs.”

Charles smiled. “I’ll start boiling the water.”

Later, Charles twisted the noddles into his fork. “Did you want to go with me, or you could go visit your sister like you’ve been wanting.”

Crystal chewed her noodles. “What would you prefer?”

“Well, Isaac said there is a little place for me to stay. Didn’t sound very big.”

“How long will you be gone?”

Charles took a sip of water. “Well, he didn’t say, but it sounded like he was getting better.” He stuck his fork into a meatball. “With not knowing what’s going to happen .. you should probably visit your sister now, in case it’s a lot harder to get away later.”

Crystal tilted her head to the side. “Hard to get away? What do you mean?”

“I mean harder to visit your sister, in case we have to

move, if I get a new job.”

Crystal laughed, with only a hint of mirth. “Oh, I thought you mean you’d be stuck in Weston.” Crystal touched Charles’ hand. “Are you sure you’ll be okay by yourself?”

Charles smiled. “Yeah. I’m sure. God won’t give me any more than I can bear, right?”

CHARLES SAW THE sign “Welcome to Weston, Population 10,213” and pulled over to get out his map. He’d love to go green and not print them out, but that meant investing his already strained resources in a more expensive phone. Once he memorized the three turns to get to the church, he pulled out his cell phone and started to call Crystal, who was probably already up in the air on Southwest Airlines, but the battery meter blinked, almost out of charge. “Nuts.” He checked for oncoming cars, and seeing none, pulled back onto the road.

After a few minutes he parked near the church, and saw that the church was wooden and in need of a new coat of paint, and the parsonage stood behind it in similar condition. A man with a graying beard stepped out of the front doors of the church and waved. Charles got out of the car as the man walked up to it.

“You must be Charles. I’m Nicholas Jones, call me Nick. Isaac said you’d be coming.”

“How is Isaac?”

“He’s still in the hospital. Would you like to see him later, once I’ve shown you around?”

Charles pulled his bag out of the car and closed the

door. “That would be great. Are you part of the church staff?”

Nick gestured at the church grounds. “I’m the groundskeeper. Otherwise it’s just Isaac. It’s a very small church.”

Charles nodded. “Seems so.”

Nick pointed to the small parsonage. “There’s where you’ll be staying. Let me get your bag?”

“Sure, thanks. How many people show up on Sundays?”

Nick pulled the beginnings of a weed from the gravel walkway. “Well, it used to be around a hundred, but lately it’s been fifty or less.”

“Since Isaac got sick?”

“Even before.”

“New church open up?”

“You could say that.” Nick pushed the door open and walked in, sitting the bag down in the small kitchen. “It’s not much, but the fridge is stocked, and there’s even internet.”

Charles dug in his bag. “Gotta charge my phone. Just got to find my charger.” He dug around some more, then his shoulders slumped. “I think I left it at home.”

“Sorry to hear that, but the General Store might have a charger. Bedroom is there, and bathroom is connected, and the sitting room is there.”

Charles stuffed the loose items back in his bag. “Yeah, thanks.”

CHARLES FOLLOWED THE directions Nick had given him to the General Store, avoiding some construction vehicles.

Charles wasn't surprised that none of the big box stores were in Weston, but the fact the biggest store was named "General Store" didn't give him much hope of finding what he wanted. When he walked in however, he was greeted with a store that was a bit more modern than he had expected. He felt a little silly as he saw a stand with DVDs near the section of electronics. The woman behind the singular counter waved at him. "Welcome! I'm Marcy. How can I help you?"

He walked up and held out his phone. "Good to meet you, Marcy. I left my charger at home, and I wondered if you had one in stock?"

She smiled. "I probably do. I have all the latest ones in stock. Let me see that?"

Charles handed her the phone. She looked around the edges, her brow wrinkling a bit. "Oh, is this it?" She pointed to a wide socket on the bottom of the phone. Charles nodded. She handed him back the phone. "We don't have that kind anymore. Everything uses standard USB cords, except for iPhones, of course. That's still USB obviously, but they want to prevent filling the landfills with cords when people change phones ... Sorry, I'm rambling. I can order you one maybe, but it'll take a few days."

Charles looked at his phone, frowning. "Well, I guess it can't hurt to have a spare. Can you let me know when it's in?"

"Sure, what's your phone number? Oh, I'm so sorry! How can I contact you?"

"I'm staying at the Weston Christian Church, I don't know the number yet, just got into town."

She smiled. “It’s okay, I’ll look it up. If I can’t find it I’ll let you know, okay?”

Charles grinned. “You can just tell me on Sunday if you want.”

The door jingled behind Charles and Marcy’s smile faltered. Charles held up his hands. “Sorry, no offense ...”

She shook her head. “No, it’s not that.” She nodded to someone behind Charles.

He turned and saw a man wearing a black robe walking towards them. The black robed man raised up his hands and spoke. “Soon the waters will rise, and soon the Miracle of the Deep will rise to meet us. Even you, Charles, who is blinded by the Cross, will see the truth of the Deep when the seas overcome the lands, and the Great One will rise again!”

Marcy started to speak, but the man continued.

“Despair the land, and embrace the deep! From the stars will come they who will seed the waters with new life, and the earth will be reborn anew in the floods of their love! Turn from your foolish ways, turn to the waters and live life anew!”

Charles had trouble looking into the man’s eyes, even though they were not covered. He couldn’t focus on them. “How do you know my name?”

“The deep tells those loyal to it many things. Leave now, Charles, flee from here. Your faith is useless and will matter not here. The tides of glory will come. And you are powerless to stop them.” The man turned and walked out of the store.

Marcy sighed. “That guy is a freak. He’s been going

around the town for the last three or four weeks. What's crazy is people listen. I don't get it."

Charles shook his head. "Maybe he's related to that guy with the sign who keeps predicting the end of the world."

Marcy peered out the window. "What guy?"

"Oh you know, there's always a guy with a sign ..."

Marcy shrugged. "Ah, yeah ... That was creepy though how he know who you were. And his eyes! He must be on something really trippy."

Charles shuddered as he recalled the eyes. They stuck in his memory, and would not leave it.

On his way out of the store, he saw a flier for a meeting of "The Church of the Rising Sea" the prophet had posted on the light pole for the next night.

One of the city works trucks pulled away from the work site, revealing a large rift in the street. One of the workers, who was leaning against the store drinking a Dr. Pepper saw him staring and walked up to Charles and pointed at the ruined street. "Craziest thing that. Water main just up and exploded, flooded the street right up. Still can't find an explanation as to why."

It started to rain.

RETURNING TO THE parsonage, he got onto the computer and booted it up. After what seemed to be forty days and nights, Windows 98 loaded. He clicked Internet Explorer and the IE6 splash page loaded. "Dear God, save me, this is older than my phone!" Then the modem started gurgling. "Dial-up? You've got to be ..." He sighed, "Nothing more than I can bear." Eventually he

logged into his email and sent a message to his wife, detailing his safe arrival, and that he was without a cell phone but would try to call her later from the church phone. The doorbell rang and he hit Send. “Maybe by the time I get back, it will be done sending.”

Nick was at the door, ready to take Charles to the hospital to see Issac.

AT THE HOSPITAL, Nick led Charles to Isaac’s room. On their way there, a nurse rushed past. There seemed to be a slight commotion that got louder as they approached. Nick started walking faster. Charles quickened his steps to keep up. “What’s wrong.”

Nick pointed to the room with the commotion. “That’s Isaac’s room.”

Once there, a nurse waved them back as the sound of a barely beating, irregular heartbeat monitor filled the room with solemn focus. The paddles discharged on Isaac’s bare chest and his body jerked. The heartbeat became rhythmic and grew in strength. Everyone in the room visibly relaxed, and the nurse made notes on a chart while another read the results off a piece of equipment. A doctor came in and checked Isaac’s eyes with a light. After a bit more checking, the doctor turned to Nick. “He’s in a coma. Not sure much yet, but I will let you know as soon as I know more. Who’s this?” He gestured to Charles.

“Charles Frederick. Isaac called me here to take over while he was ... recovering.”

The doctor nodded. “I’m Doctor Murphy. We’ll get him back in business soon as we can. Glad to see

someone here to take care of the flock. I'll be sure to let you know if anything changes. Any questions?"

Charles shook his head. "No. Thanks for watching him. I'll be praying for you and him." The doctor smiled. "Of course." He shook Charles' hand and bowed out of the room.

Charles sat next to Isaac and spoke to the sleeping man. "Hey, it's Charles. I'm here now, but that's no excuse to not get better. I hope to talk to you soon." He held Isaac's hand and said a prayer, then he and Nick went back to the church.

ONCE AGAIN IN the parsonage, Charles sat at the computer. The message had indeed sent. He tried to reconnect back to the Internet, but it wasn't working. "Try later I guess." He decided to look instead for some sermon notes to see what he had been preaching on, and to see if he could come up with something along those lines for Sunday's message. While searching the disorganized paper on Issac's desk, he opened a folder than had printouts from the Internet, and a few handwritten notes. They were concerning the cult of Rising Sea. Charles was surprised at the depth of the information, and that the handwritten notes correlated the data from the different printouts in detail.

The initial browsing of the notes mentioned that the cult dated back to the Philistines and centered on a god named Dagon. Charles recalled the story in the Bible when the Philistines stole the Ark of the Covenant and put it in their temple; the statue of Dagon continually fell over until it broke. The cult claimed it would call

down some entities from the stars which would crash into the seas and cause catastrophic tidal waves. “Deep Impact, but with cultists.” Further information declared that the cult members could be dangerous. “Nice of Isaac to tell me.”

Charles sat back and pondered. “If Isaac knew this stuff, why didn’t he tell me. Was he trying to protect me? Or did he not have a chance? Maybe he didn’t really believe it was a real threat? Do even I think it’s a real threat?” He thought of the dream he had had, and how much the prophet looked like the dark figure in the dream. He shuddered, and then rubbed his eyes. He was here to preach to the lost, not investigate some cult.

He put the notes back in the folder and grabbed his Bible. “At least I can preach something to warn people about the lies of the enemy.” He opened up to Ephesians and started looking for the verses he was thinking of.

CHARLES PICKED UP his sermon notes and shuffled them into an organized stack and looked over the sparse congregation. “Therefore, as it says in Ephesians four, we must unify as a body in Christ. Use the gifts God has given us, not just show up at church. When we do these things, we grow up and are no longer children, tossed around by the waves and wind of every teaching by crafty and deceitful people who wish to steal you away from the loving arms of God. Whether it’s society saying certain sinful lifestyles are OK, or someone with a whole new set of beliefs they are peddling, to people without a strong hold on what is truth and what

is lies.” He stepped away from behind the lectern. “Please continue to pray for Isaac as he’s recovering. See you next Sunday!”

Charles moved to the entrance of the church to shake the hands of the people as he left, but most everyone was already out the door before he got there, and he only ended up shaking the hand of three people. He shut the door and turned around to see a woman. “Oh, sorry, I didn’t realize anyone else was here.”

She walked up to him and he saw she had been crying. “Can you help me? Please?” She looked about ready to grab him and start sobbing.

“What’s the matter? Here, let’s get a seat.” He gestured to the sanctuary and lead her to a seat. Once they were sitting, he picked up a Bible from the back of the pew in front of him. “What’s the problem?”

She sniffled. “My boy, my Jason, he joined in with that crazy priest. He’s been going to those meetings and ... oh!” She started sobbing again.

“Where is Jason now?”

“He’s at home, but he’s going to the meeting tonight. I can’t convince him not to go. I don’t know what they do there, but it scares me.”

“Do you want me to talk to him?”

“Can’t you do something about the meetings? The police won’t; I asked. They said they aren’t doing anything illegal.”

“I don’t know if I can stop them, but I agree that something seems wrong about them.”

“Please! Maybe you can go to the meeting, and talk some sense into them? Someone has to stop them!” She

stood up. "I must go, I have others at home to take care of." She quickly moved out of the church.

Charles sat back into the pew and looked to the front of the sanctuary and rubbed his forehead, then looked up to Heaven. "Sure didn't send me somewhere boring, did you God?"

NICK WAS AT the door. "I see you met Mrs. Moore?"

"Mother of Jason?"

Nick nodded. "Yeah, he's a good kid. What did she want? I saw her from the rose garden. She didn't look well."

Charles stood aside of the door. "Want to come in?"

Nick stepped in and closed the door and pointed to a cabinet. "Tea is in there."

Charles made for it. "Not too subtle, are you?"

"No, sir. I'll have Earl Grey."

Charles started the kettle on the stove. "She said Jason is in with that crazy prophet I met earlier at the store, unless there is more than one."

Nick shook his head. "Nope, that would be old Daniel Marsh. He's something alright. Most of those who don't come here anymore either go there, or were scared away by his propaganda." Nick sat at the table.

Charles followed suit. "People just left the church for that guy? He must be pretty convincing."

Nick shook his head. "Some say there are miracles happening at the meeting. If it's not simple trickery, it's certainly not holy. Isaac was looking into their cult when he got sick."

"Got sick? Interesting."

"Yeah, don't know if it's related. He's old, but tended to be healthy."

"Sounds like I should be careful then?"

Nick looked at Charles. "Why would you say that?"

THAT EVENING, CHARLES made his way to the meeting of the Church of the Rising Sea. It ended up being a huge tent on the edge of town, near the edge of a copse in front of a much denser forest. As he stepped from the car, shielding himself from the wind and rain with his jacket, flashes of lightning illuminated the trees. The tent sounded full, and service was already in full swing. He could hear the prophet ranting about rising waters. Lightning sundered much of what the priest had to say, but Charles heard enough to unsettle him as he approached the meeting. The tent undulated in the darkness as the winds pulled at it. As he got near, two large men stepped out of the tent and stood in his way, rivers of rain pouring off their suits. "You're not getting in."

Charles was taken aback. "I'm not worthy to know your truth?"

The big man on the left poked Charles in the chest. "You have no business here, Jesus man."

"I'm pretty famous for just having gotten here less than a week ago."

The man pushed his finger hard into Charles' chest, causing him to stumble back. "Go back to your little church, and get it ready for a flood. The time is almost here."

"I'll get some water wings." He turned and headed

towards his car. He was unlocking his car door when he heard Mrs. Moore scream for Jason. Charles instinctively reached for his phone, still not used to it being dead. He walked off the drive and into the wet grass and away from the lights.

He made a wide birth around the tent and sneaked up to the side where he saw a bit of light coming through. He peered in and saw what had to be over a hundred people inside. Everyone was sitting except the prophet, who was ranting about baptizing everyone tonight in the river.

“Nice night for outdoor baptisms,” Charles muttered. Then he heard a shout, Mrs. Moore, from further into the darkness behind the tent. He trotted quickly towards the sound until he could make out some sounds of struggle. In a flash of lightning, he saw two men struggling with a woman. The wind shifted to blow towards him, and he could make out a voice crying, “Let me go, let me see my Jason!”

A set of lightning flashes showed a stop-motion view of the men dragging Mrs. Moore deeper into the trees. One of them shouted over the increasing wind. “Let’s start the baptisms early!”

Charles didn’t want to rush in wildly, but he knew there was no time to go get help. He stalked closer in the stuttering flashes of light. He heard the sound of running water just as the three of them splashed into what had to be a river. “Here goes. God help me!”

He ran forwards as the men started to hold Mrs. Moore under the water, each holding an arm, the furthest thug holding down her head. A flash of

lightning burst and the nearest thug spotted Charles approaching. He released Mrs. Moore and turned to face Charles, who leaped into the air. The whole insanity of the situation passed through his head as he was mid-flight. A Christian Pastor leaping through the air about to jump kick a cultist. His foot neatly connected with the chest, shoving the two men together in a shower of water and cursing.

Mrs. Moore thrashed in the water, gasping for air. The other thug swung wildly, but Charles ducked and struck the man straight in the gut thrice, then an uppercut to the temple. As the man tumbled, Charles redirected his backwards into the water so he fell onto the bank.

Having regained his footing, the remaining man rushed at Charles. A long flash of light reflected off metal. Charles saw rain shatter against the steel of a knife and sidestepped the cut. He grabbed his foe's wrist then twisted and pulled, dislocating the shoulder of the thug, who screamed, dropping the knife which disappeared into the water. He shoved the man to land next to his cohort.

He grabbed Mrs. Moore by the arm and started towards the shore. At first she struggled, until she realized what was going on. "Pastor Charles?" He led Mrs. Moore stumbling up the bank in time to see light as people streamed out of the tent and towards the river.

"This should be interesting."

As THE CROWD of people made their way into the bushes, Charles moved Mrs. Moore off into the shadows. "Do

you have a phone with you?" She nodded. "Dial the police, but let me talk to them." She got her phone from her pocket and dialed. She handed it to Charles and he listened to it ring. When it picked up, he talked quietly into the phone. "My name is Charles Frederick, I'm in the trees behind the Church of the Rising Sea meeting tent. I've just rescued a woman they tried to drown. We're still in danger, please ..." A hand swatted the phone from his grasp. Charles shoved Mrs. Moore forward. "Run!" She ran.

A rough hand spun him around and he slipped in the mud. Charles saw the punch coming, but wasn't able to move out of the way. The blow hit him and he slammed backwards into a tree. He saw stars despite the rain and clouds. The hand grabbed his head by the hair and dragged him back towards the water. Getting a painful glance to his right he saw an arm hanging limply from the man dragging him. Should have made sure he was out, Charles thought.

He got tossed down into the mud, and he rolled and ended up on his feet. He stood just a few yards before the prophet, and his four bodyguards who were huge. They didn't look right either. Their lips reminded him of a catfish. The thug behind him spoke. "He attacked us in the dark. We were going to baptize someone who was causing trouble, but because of him, she got away."

The prophet eyed him with his shifting eye. "No matter, his pitiful existence won't stop us now. In mere moments, the river's waters will flow and summon the Starry Ones. Let's begin by ridding ourselves of this menace, as soon as the ritual of the rising waters is

complete.” Stepping out in front of the crowd, the prophet raised his hand. “Remember the chant of the rising waters! Speak it now, and then we may be baptized in the waters, and bring the Starry Ones down to earth, to summon the great seas to the whole earth!”

The people, who lined the river now, chanted and to Charles’ surprise, the water of the river began to rise to a torrent.

The prophet gestured some precise symbols in the air. Charles watches as something moved of the surface of the water. The prophet smiled. “We have a special gift! A last minute participant in the baptisms! Take him into the water.”

Two undulating tendrils of water burst out of the rising river and grasped Charles’ legs, and dragged him into the water. The cold gnawed at Charles’ bones as the tendrils slid up his body. He grabbed at the tendrils. They were slimy and his fingers purchased no hold. “God help me!”

The people continued to chant. The things in the water grasped at Charles. The prophet raised his hands again, and he cried out. “Walk into the waters, be baptized!”

The crowd started slowly towards the water, still chanting. Charles shouted. “Jason Moore!” He saw a young man turn and look at him. Charles pointed at the thug with the broken arm. “Than man tried to drown your mother, but I saved her; she’s gone to get help!” Some of the chanters slowed.

A woman ran from the darkness. “Jason, my Jason!” She ran to Jason she held him.

The prophet shouted. “Pay these who are weak in the faith no heed! Be reborn into new life! Walk into the waters of a new existence!” More tendrils lashed from the waters, pulling those nearest to the bank screaming into the raging water. The handful in the water thrashed and struggled as they began to submerge. Some on the bank turned to run, while others stood in shock and horror. Charles tried to slide his fingers under the tendrils, but they were too tight. He felt himself being pulled down. He tried punching the tendril once, then looked up. The prophet was pointing at him, grinning. Some movement caught his eye, and he saw the Moores rushing towards the water.

At first Charles was mortified, but they stopped short of the water and were obviously looking for some something. A bolt of lightning struck a tree near the two, splitting it asunder. Once Jason helped his mother up, he picked up a burning branch that laid in the mud. The glowing end hissing as the rain struck it. He plunged it into the waters. Charles grabbed it. At first it crumbled as the embers and ashes crumbled away, but soon he had a firm hold on solid wood. Jason pulled, feet slipping, but the tendrils’ grip tightened, and Charles screamed as his chest popped several times as ribs cracked from the pressure.

The prophet laughed. “You cannot escape the hold of Dagon, lord of the waters. When the water meets the sky, the reign of Man will come to an end as the True Lords of Earth swim over the drowned graves of humanity!”

Charles stared into the eyes of the prophet. “Never

again will the waters become a flood and destroy all living things.”

The tendrils loosed him, retreating as if shocked. Jason and another who stood near him pulled Charles free of the water.

Several people in the waters managed to the shore, but a few followers still remained, the waters clutching them, pulling them under, cutting their screams short.

A few in the crowd pointed and shouted. “You wanted that to happen to us?” They rushed the prophet.

Charles ran towards them. “No, that is not the way!”

The four bodyguards created a wall in front of him and proceeded to wedge their way into the crowd, knocking over anyone in their way.

At the bank, the prophet and the bodyguards dove into the water, swimming under the surface. Soon after, the waters receded, leaving no trace of the prophet or his men.

Charles saw the world turned to flashing red and blue, and then only black.

CHARLES LAID IN a hospital bed, next to Isaac.

Isaac was awake and well; he smiled. “Last night I just woke up, and felt so much better. The doctors can’t explain it. Then I heard you were here in surgery. Nick got us into the same room.”

Charles explained the previous day’s events to an increasingly astounded Isaac. When Charles finished, Isaac sat up in his bed a little higher. “Well, now I know why God told me to ask you to come.” He smiled.

Slumping in the chair, Charles sighed. “I can hardly

believe it myself. I don't know what would have happened. I passed out just before the cops showed up."

Isaac nodded. "It's over now, though, we can rest easy, with the prophet arrested."

Charles furrowed his brow. "They caught him?"

Isaac shrugged. "I had assumed ..."

Charles' cell phone rang on the table next to him. He reached for it instinctively, wincing at the pain. There was a sticky note wrapped into the power cord. "Charles: Cable came in. Nick picked it up. Street is fixed up, so you can get in easier to pay for it! :) -Marcy"

Charles smiled and then looked at the phone. It was Crystal. He answered, feeling relief to finally be able to talk to his wife. He put it on speaker phone because it was hard to hold his hand up to his ear. "Crystal, I love you! My phone has power again. How are you?"

There was a crash.

"Crystal, are you okay?"

"Yes, sorry, thunder. I'm so glad to talk to you again. I think the signal is bad."

"Bad? Why, where are you? Thunder?"

"I'm at home. It's been crazy, the town water main broke, and there's a terrible rainstor ..."

There was another crash of thunder on the phone.

"Crystal? Hello? Crystal, are you there?" Charles looked at Isaac.

The phone only answered with the sounds of rain.

Justin Lowmaster is a writer and an entertainer. Aside from writing science fiction, fantasy, horror and humor, he cracks jokes and makes bad puns. He is married and has one daughter and one son, and no cats. He and his family live in the Great Northwest. He enjoys gaming of all types, computer, console, board/card, and role playing games.

Adventures on the Atomic Earth: Message From Space

by Winston Crutchfield

The world ended when the moon shattered. Irradiated atomic elements cascaded across the face of the globe, bathing man and beast alike in primal, uncontrollable energies. The largest rock struck the base of the Grand Canyon in North America, splitting open a passage to the earth's core, and releasing ancient monsters from millennia of imprisonment. The world is overgrown by atomically charged wilderness; the survival of mankind depends on those men and women of courage who stand sentry duty at the edge of civilization.

“**T**OWER TO WOLF, need you to fly by a bogie on the ground east by northeast 1100 klicks out.”

Raw elemental power harnessed to a frame of metal and mesh kicked against the sky and yielded to the jockey’s steady touch. “Copy that, Tower. Feed me the

dots and I'll light up the ground." Gravity and acceleration pushed Wolf against the webbing of his cockpit as he climbed out of his patrol pattern. A pulsing beacon appeared in his heads-up display; Wolf leveled off to chase it once the clouds had obscured the ground. "Clear skies to the northeast, Tower. That's a long trip, do I get any company?"

"Negative, Wolf, can't spare the rockets today."

"When can we ever," Wolf muttered without keying the transmission. "Copy that," he finally responded. The jockey checked his threat indicator reflexively and pushed the thrust forward. Power flowed along his touch and through his will, drawn from the elemental shards that powered his rocket. The sky opened up to one of its own.

Wolf lived for this. The rocket's reaction chamber pulsed to the rhythm of the jockey's heart, bleeding the atomic potential from samples of solidified energy and inertia into a boiling storm of quantum instability. Wolf's will channeled this potential into speed and direction. The scientists of Challenger City qualified and quantified and named the distillations according to their properties. Wolf knew them for what they really were — shards of pure fire and air.

Thick clouds hid the wilderness from him, but Wolf knew the area well enough by now. The bearhawk pack his patrol had been observing was already well behind him; a dip below the clouds would show him the nytant hive that had taken over the ruins of some pre-Shattering city. A sneer touched the corner of his lips; such a dip would also expose him to the frostskulls that

preyed on the nytants. No sense tempting fate without cause. Ahead ... he struggled to recall the maps of this region. He remembered a waterfall that fed from several large lakes, but nothing more of interest. Someone must have called in the bogie though, and that meant an outpost of some kind.

“Wolf to Tower, I’m breaking cloud cover. What am I looking for?” Ancient trees as big around as his apartment covered gently rolling hills and large stretches of valley. Great stretches of water lay flat and blue to the north and southwest, a thin strip of grassland cutting between them.

“Tower copies. We are lighting up the outpost for you,” a green dot winked at Wolf from the display, “They have reported an impact site 50 klicks to the east. Investigate and advise.”

Wolf blinked in surprise, “Impact? Like, from space impact?” He checked the new dot, now labeled Sentri Uplink. “Shards and blazes, Tower, I’m not equipped for an evacuation.” Wolf flexed fingers suddenly gone cold and numb, even through the thick gloves he wore.

“Steady, Wolf. Tower advises threat level green.”

Wolf relaxed and angled his rocket to the east, “Copy that, Tower. Sweeping the area now.” Lakes and city ruins melted away; Wolf throttled back as the trees thinned out and opened up to grassland. He banked into a corkscrew pattern for a better view of more ground.

He saw the vehicle on his third loop, and corrected his flight to match. The armored carrier bounced over the fields towards a crater barely five meters across. A scout speeder was already parked next to it. “Wolf to

Tower, site located. Looks like the locals are already here, don't know why you needed me."

"Copy, Wolf. Ground your rocket and see the outpost supervisor for further instructions."

"Clear, Tower. Wolf out." The jockey circled the crater, drawing a wave from the figure standing next to it; Wolf picked a landing spot a good hundred meters away from the crater. He throttled back and pulled up on the nose of the rocket, turning forward thrust into stopping power and balancing vertically on the plume of exhaust. The rocket settled to earth with a gentle bump.

Wolf quelled his curiosity while he carefully removed and stowed the reflex controls for the rocket. He pulled the helmet off and scrubbed at his hair with a gloved hand. The helmet went into its own sealed container. Once all the controls had been shut down and sealed, Wolf extricated himself from the webbing of the cockpit and broke the door seal on the side of the hull. Fresh air flooded the compartment, and Wolf breathed deeply. He knocked a high-tensile line from the top of the door frame, stepping into its attached stirrup and gripping the leash controls firmly. The winch dropped him smoothly to the ground, and Wolf secured the leash against the body of his rocket.

By this time, the armored carrier had entered the field and bounced its way to his landing zone. The driver pulled up next to him, and Wolf jumped onto the running board of the vehicle. "Hang on tight if you're gonna ride out there," the driver warned. Wolf wrapped his arm around a length of bar and nodded. He didn't

try to talk for the rest of the ride.

When the driver stopped next to the speeder and killed the vehicle, Wolf jumped off. The scout was already waiting for them, a roughly dressed, unshaven man Wolf guessed was already several weeks on walkabout. He put his hand out, "Harrison Canis." The scout eyed him warily, his attention constantly wavering to the distant treeline.

The carrier driver had dismounted, and took Wolf's grip in his own. "Hello, Harry. I'm Eddie. I man the uplink you flew over on the way in."

"Call me Wolf," Wolf replied. "What happened here?"

"Well it's not alive, and it's not atomic," the scout mumbled just loud enough for Wolf to hear, "so it's not going to blow up or eat us."

"That's something, at least. Did you call this in?" The scout nodded curtly.

Eddie clapped him on the shoulder and the other man winced. "C'mon, Griz," Eddie hopped over the ridge of the furrow plowed into the ground by the impact, "I wanna open this up."

Wolf followed Eddie into the crater, leaving Griz standing in the field. At the large end of a teardrop-shaped crater lay the source of the impact, a solid mass of black metal twisted and scarred from the burn of reentry. Wolf walked all the way around it, cautiously extended his hand when he realized there was no radiant heat.

"It oughta be quite cool, Mr. Wolf," Eddie spoke up. "You can see the pits and seams where layers of metal

burned off on the way down. The inside stays pretty cool, but air friction just eats up the surface." Eddie unclipped a tool from his belt and scraped enthusiastically at the carbon scoring over several portions of the wreckage. "Maybe I can find a seal or an insignia or something to tell us how to get in."

Wolf kicked at the metal, "Big deal. Two or three old satellites splash down every year. You know how many of those things got shot into orbit before the Shattering?"

"S'not a satellite," Eddie said, "No way. Satellites usually break up on the way down, and the ones that hit get splashed all over the place." He gave up on the section in front of him and picked a new one on the other side the wreck. His tool scratched black flakes into the dirt.

Wolf looked up at Griz; the scout had walked to the other side of the crater but stayed in the grass. "What do you think?" Wolf asked.

"It's not alive, and it's not atomic," Griz mumbled. "I don't much care."

"Right. I can see calling it in, but why did you need me again?" Griz just pointed to the young man now on his belly in the dirt, trying to get to a spot between the metal and the ground. Wolf sighed, "It's a lovely not-satellite, Eddie. But if you knew what it wasn't, and that it wasn't dangerous ... "

"Sure hope its not dangerous. Don't think they would send it if it were too dangerous," Eddie's voice floated up from underneath the metal wreckage.

"Wait ... what ... who ... what are you talking

about?"

Eddie's scraping stopped. He pounded experimentally on the surface of the metal with his tool, giving off a dull clank. "Sentri's been tracking a new blip northeast of here for a few months now. I've been working with one of the guys on the station, trying to figure out the data, right? Not easy with the flow of critters out of the area, s'alot of numbers to crunch, plus we don't know which ones come from the blip and which migratory patterns are disrupted 'cuz of the other monsters."

Wolf stepped up and put a hand on the blackened mass, "You knew this was coming?"

"Sure, been expecting it for a week or so. Just got the go sign last night."

Wolf looked up at Griz, "You know about this?" The scout just shook his head.

"S'good thing you're here, though," Eddie continued. "If we can get this open, the lab boys are gonna want dibs on the contents."

"So what is it?"

"A message from space. A secret weapon. I dunno. Something important enough the space monkeys had to pack it up and drop it on us. They, uh, they wouldn't tell me on the link," Eddie confessed.

Wolf walked all the way around the twisted mass of metal, running his hand along the surface. "Looks like they gathered up a whole bunch of junk satellites and welded them together."

"Yeah, prolly," Eddie agreed. "Compacted them first, I'll bet. Gotta have something pretty solid if you

want to drop it down here and stay intact.”

Wolf looked up at the sky, as though to spot the Sentri Station in high orbit overhead. “What’s so important they couldn’t wait for the next supply shuttle?”

Eddie scooted away from the wrecked satellite and scrambled to his feet, brushing at the dirt now covering his clothes. “I just can’t find a good access point. Griz, you think you can cut this thing open? This outer shell’s only going to be a couple of inches thick at most.”

The scout grunted noncommittally and placed a hand protectively over his taq device. He cocked one eye at Wolf, who stepped back and raised his hands.

“Don’t look at me. I can’t move something that big in my rocket. If the lab coats are expecting a delivery, it’s going to have to be much smaller.”

Eddie grinned, “C’mon. Like you said, it’s not gonna blow up and it’s not gonna eat us.”

“Maybe,” Griz admitted. “We’ll see.” The scout stepped warily back to his speeder and rummaged through the saddlebags, finally coming out with a hand held cutting torch. Reluctantly, he trudged carefully into the shallow crater and set to work on one side of the wrecked satellite. “Watch the trees,” was all he said.

Under careful application of the scout’s cutting torch, pieces of the wrecked satellite rapidly sloughed away from the main body. Griz kept an eye out for previous welds and attempted to cut through or near them. In just over an hour, he sliced through a section of plating and a puff of vapor hissed whitely from the opening, followed by a thick, colorless gel spilling

through the cut.

Wolf had gone to get them all canteens of water from Eddie's carrier, and returned to find Eddie fairly hopping in excitement. "What did I miss?"

Eddie pointed at the breach, "Inertial damping string-net gel. Looks like the impact sublimated most of it directly into gas, but the payload's intact!"

Griz finished slicing away the exterior of the capsule and stepped away from the satellite, pulling the last bit of welded plating with him. He accepted a canteen from Wolf and went to stow his cutting torch.

Eddie didn't seem to notice the water Wolf offered him, but dived into the breach as soon as Griz had moved aside. Eagerly, he tugged at the sides of the inertial containment capsule to bend them further back along the cuts and make enough room for him to remove a phasic stasis unit from the interior. The readout pulsed faintly as it monitored the energy within. "Shards ..."

Wolf drank deeply and closed the cap over his own canteen, "Well, what did you find?"

Eddie held up the unit, "Shards. Unless they just needed the unit to contain something else." He wiped the remaining gel from the stasis unit and ran his hands over the controls. The readout blinked and altered, counting down. "Find out soon enough; if it's a distilled energy matrix, the unit won't open outside a processor."

"I don't think that's a good idea ..." Wolf began, but the stasis unit hissed and a thin line split the capsule from end to end. The two halves fell into Eddie's waiting hands; a thin wisp of vapor spilled over the coal

black contents.

A klaxon sounded from the armored carrier, and Griz whirled away from the speeder to head back to the satellite at a dead run. The trans-atomic quantumizer on his belt insistently buzzed a quiet warning; the holographic display strapped to his wrist projected rapid-fire hazard protocols into the air. “Seal it up!” Griz shouted. “Seal the blasted stasis unit!”

Eddie stared at the array of crystals, “I can’t feel my hands.” The container slipped from his numb fingers.

Wolf darted in and snagged the containment unit, snapping it shut abruptly. He passed a hand quickly over the controls and the readout flashed red before settling into a rhythmic pulse as the phasic stasis field engaged.

The klaxon on the armored carrier continued to scream.

Eddie stumbled backward and sat down abruptly in the dirt, “That’s not ... what is that?” He wrung his hands, trying work feeling back into them.

Griz skidded to a halt at the edge of the crater and his taq device dropped a holographic overlay on top of Eddie and the half satellite facing him. Angry orange reticles highlighted several pinpricks of energy, scattered invisibly in the area in front of the field scientist. Griz’s hands flew over the holographic controls, and he carefully manipulated the virtual waldoes to gather the unfamiliar energy into a phasic stability field. After a moment, the quantumizer chimed softly, the reticles within the holographic grid vanished, and the klaxon from the carrier abruptly shut off.

The three men stared at the phasic stasis unit Wolf held gingerly, once a familiar tool designed to hold the same distilled shards of quantum energy that powered Wolf's rocket, now an alien and menacing threat with decidedly unfamiliar contents.

Griz locked down his taq device without taking his eyes from the holographic readouts still projecting in the air in front of them. "I been gathering shards for near thirty years and never seen an elemental signature like that before." He poked the display and scrolled through a length of data. "If it weren't flat impossible, I'd call it distilled dark matter."

"S'not impossible, Griz. S'just blazin unusual." The feeling had returned to Eddie's hands and he scrambled to his feet. He pointed at the satellite wreckage, "String-net compounds used to be just theoretical, now we use 'em as packing material."

Griz shut down his quantumizer. "Least it ain't blown up yet."

Wolf tucked the unit under his arm, "I'd better get this back to the lab coats. I could use a ride back to my rocket. You drive, I'll hang on to the stasis unit."

Eddie's face visibly fell.

"I'll meet the two of you at the outpost and we can transfer the escaped shards into the main unit," Griz said. "I don't want to carry them around, and I ain't got a program that can use them."

Eddie looked up hopefully.

"Just a transfer, passive readings only," Wolf warned the younger man, "I've got a feeling we don't want to mess with this stuff any more than we have to."

Eddie grinned, "S'not a problem." Visions of data fairly danced in eyes.

Wolf shook his head and climbed carefully in the armored carrier. A green light on the dash winked for attention. "You have a message."

Eddie clambered into the vehicle and hit the playback button right after he started the engine. A crackle of static filled the cab, punctuated by a man's voice, "... moving your direction ... other wildlife fleeing the area ... respond soonest." Eddie sobered immediately, "You know where the uplink is, Wolf?"

"Overflew it on my way in."

"Your rocket will get there faster than either me or Griz. Let Sentri know what happened, and see if they have any advice. It sounds like something nasty is headed this way, I just hope it's not the unidentified contact we've been tracking. I'd rather deal with a devil we know." Eddie stopped the armored carrier in front of Wolf's rocket.

Wolf dropped halfway to the ground, hanging onto the vehicle with one hand. "And if the monsters get there before you do? I'd just as soon burst you a warning and clear out."

Eddie shook his head, "Unless Sentri advises differently, Griz is right. We need to consolidate this unknown distillation and get the whole of it back to the Foundation. The outpost has a force field; lock it down and we'll dodge around until the coast is clear."

"Roger that." Wolf dropped to the ground and stepped into the stirrup fastened to the stabilizer fin of his rocket. He rose swiftly, and shortly had webbed

himself into the cockpit and secured his cargo. Neither the armored carrier nor the scout's speeder were in sight by the time he had donned the reflex helmet and primed the reaction chamber.

Wolf's touch fed distilled atomic power to the engines and the rocket stabbed the sky in burst of flame and smoke, leaving only the scorched and blackened earth in company with the remains of the downed satellite.

WOLF STOOD HIS rocket on its thrusters and grounded it on the landing pad near the outpost uplink; a thick wall shielded the installation from the rocket's exhaust, deflecting the superheated gases away from the building and into a series of underground ventilation systems. Wolf kicked out the tether and slid to the ground, the phasic stasis unit cradled securely in the crook of an arm.

In moments, the portable unit had been locked and loaded into the outpost's stationary multiphasic (stamp) reactor, the control panel glowing green and yellow as the unit processed and analyzed the exotic energy signature. When the locks depressurized and the portable unit slid free of the magnetic fields, Wolf headed for the comm station.

In front of the main communication console, Wolf quickly located the station ID and comm protocols. He keyed the transmitter, "Uplink Epsilon-Delta to S.E.N.T.R.I. 3, the package is secure on the ground. Previous transmission not copied, please repeat."

The unit responded immediately, "This is

S.E.N.T.R.I. 3. We are tracking an unidentified contact moving your direction, estimated Threat Level Four. The native wildlife is fleeing its path, and the contact is leaving a trail of decaying energy in its wake.” The speaker paused a moment, long enough for Wolf to glance at the area scan being fed to the monitors. Several klicks north and west, a red contact moved slowly his direction. The comm unit crackled back to life, “Where’s Eddie? What happened to the package?”

Wolf turned his full attention to the comm, “The package is secure in the stamp reactor downstairs. Eddie and a scout are on their way back to the outpost. There was an incident with the integrity of the portable containment unit.” Wolf quickly explained the situation.

“That timing matches our movement on the unknown contact,” the Sentri operator confirmed. “Whatever it is, it sensed the presence of hot energy nearby and it’s coming to investigate.”

“Griz, that’s the scout on the scene, is worried the matrix is volatile,” Wolf said as casually as he could.

The operator barked a short laugh of familiarity, “Griz always worries this stuff is going to blow up. When he gets there, ask him if he’s ever had an incident in all his thirty years.” The two men shared a chuckle over the comm. “My name’s Keith.”

“Wolf.”

“Have you ever made a shuttle run up to the Sentri habitats, Wolf?”

“I’m no space monkey,” the rocket jockey replied, “I like it fine down here. Where I can breathe.”

“If you get bored dodging monsters, you should pull

a tour of duty on the ceiling with the rest of us. Our jockeys deal with a lot of space junk but not so many things trying to eat you, you know?"

"Not so many, huh?"

Keith laughed again, "You want to make friends with the guys, you put some coffee on in the mess and come back to the chatterbox. We'll swap monster stories."

Wolf looked around for the door to the mess hall. The thought of coffee appealed to him. "You're on."

BY THE TIME Griz and Eddie arrived, Wolf and Keith had taken a break from one-upping each other's monsters to reevaluating the data on the unknown contact. Wolf looked up from the monitors as the other two men entered the room, "Glad you're here." One hand reached for the lock-down sequence and the air snapped in a brief metallic tingle as the outpost's force field engaged. "We were beginning to worry you weren't going to beat the crowd."

"Show me," Eddie said.

Wolf pushed back from the bank so that Eddie had a clear view of the monitor banks. The unknown contact had just touched the south bank of the large lake to the north-west, labeled "Huron" on the display. Next to it, numbers counted down the distance between the outpost and monster – now bearing the label "Contact Eron" – along with an estimated time to contact on its present course.

Eddie's eyes were glued to the readouts, "What is that?"

“That’s coffee,” Griz said, and moved directly for the mess hall.

“You lock down those shards yet?” Wolf asked.

“Griz was at the stamp reactor before I had the garage door shut,” Eddie said absently. He traced the energy readings along the contact’s path. “This is different. These Class 4 and 5 monsters usually soak up the energy in their path, not leave it behind. What is this stuff?” His fingers flew across the control panels and lines of data scrolled over the monitors. “It’s sucking heat energy from the area right enough, look at the way Lake Huron is frosted over, but it’s leaving something behind as well.” One hand tapped a second set of controls, and data from the stamp reactor scrolled alongside Sentri’s scans of Contact Eron’s wake. “That’s decaying dark matter; I can’t imagine how concentrated it has to have been to last long enough for Sentri to detect it.”

“Glad to hear you confirm our readings, Eddie.” Keith’s voice chimed in over the comm. “Our lab coats didn’t want to bias your lab coats before you saw the phenomenon.”

“I may be on rotation in the sticks, but that just means my toys are smaller.” Eddie couldn’t look away from the data rolling across the monitor. “Griz, plug your taq device into the console and I’ll write it a program to utilize the black shard energy.”

Griz hesitated. “I’m not so sure as I want you doing that,” he admitted.

Eddie flashed him a grin, “S’gotta be done. When this thing passes, you’re heading up north to see what

all that dark matter did to the environment. Keith, are you going to stay on the channel with us? I could use your eyes watching Eron while I work on this.”

“Roger that, Eddie. You crunch the numbers and we’ll watch the skies.”

Grumbling, Griz plugged his quantumizer into the monitor bank and Eddie went to work. Griz drank his coffee and the men waited, watching Sentri track Contact Eron as it crept towards the outpost.

“So where did this thing come from,” Wolf finally asked.

Eddie’s attention never left his math; it was Keith who finally answered. “We’ve been tracking it from space for more than a year now. It hesitated around the habitats and orbital graveyards for a while; made us all three kinds of nervous while we assumed it fed on the naturally occurring dark matter distillations in microgravity. It finally touched down in upper North America a few weeks ago.”

“Touched down?” Wolf asked. “We’re more used to things crashing down than touching down. Wait, you assumed?”

“When our guys went to examine the area, we found it had left behind deposits of that same distilled dark matter. In fact, that’s the stuff we sent down to you.” Keith hesitated. “The stuff’s not quite right, you know? It emits a sub-quantum pulse instead of a low-level quantum radiation when not in phasic lockdown. It doesn’t interact the right way with other distillations. It’s more like a secretion than a distillation.”

Wolf grimaced. “Give me clean air and pure fire any

day. Is the stuff still there?"

"Scads of it," Keith answered. "It doesn't seem to decay in micro-gravity the way it's doing dirtside. None of the sub-orbital beasties feed on it, either."

"Keith," Eddie interrupted, "did Eron approach any of the habitats while it was in orbit?"

"No, but," Keith paused briefly, "we did send a team out to get some readings on it while it was here. It killed the walker that EVAed to try and tag it, but totally ignored the guys on the zipper. Not a one of them liked being near it, though. We suspect it's got a resonant psychic signature, same as other creatures composed primarily of dark matter."

"Killed how?" Eddie insisted. "Mauled? Eaten? Burned? Frozen? Lobotomized?"

"Frozen, I think. I can find out."

"It's going to be on our position in less than ten minutes, and I'm not confident the force field will stop it," Eddie said grimly. "It occurred to me that if the phasic containment unit let me open it because it didn't register the contents as active, that the force field might not recognize Eron's signature. If it doesn't generate an opposing charge, Eron won't even notice it's there." Eddie looked up at Griz and Wolf, uncharacteristic worry lines creasing his forehead. "If you guys want to clear out, I can't say I'd blame you. I've got to stay and get this data."

Eddie removed Griz's taq device from the coupling unit and handed it back. "Your software ought to be able to utilize the, uh, secretion now. I think you guys ought to pack up the stuff and get it to the Foundation

before anything else happens.”

Wolf and Griz exchanged glances. “It’s your house, Eddie. You’re the boss.” Wolf finally said. “I just wish you’d have said something thirty minutes ago. That thing’s blazin close. What do I do if it starts chasing me instead of just going on its merry way?”

“Backtrack along its trail,” Griz suggested. “The big ones like this tend to get territorial. If you’ve already got its interest, and then it sees you threatening its territory, it’s likely to focus on protecting the nest instead of chasing prey.”

“I don’t think I like that bit about chasing its prey,” Wolf remarked dryly.

“I don’t like the bit about protecting the nest,” Keith interrupted from the comm system. “What are you saying, Griz? You think there are more out there?”

“Baby Blobs from Outer Space,” Eddie put in with desperate humor, “A limited theater engagement!”

“I dunno,” the scout started, “but if this thing touched down deliberately, and it’s not looking for something to feed on, then my money’s on it getting ready to spawn. Why else would it suddenly leave micro-gravity and set up shop dirtside? These dark matter beasties don’t hold together too well in full gravity; that’s why birdthought only manifest when they feed.”

“I’ve got the report on the walker killed by Eron,” Keith spoke up grimly. “Turns out he was dead when they reeled him back to the zipper by the lifeline, but not from anything the monster did. Seems he shut off his own life support and popped his helmet.”

An uncomfortable silence settled over the four men.

"Birdthought send their victims into psychic shock and then feed on the resonance," Griz offered. "I don't much like dealing with the psychic ones."

"No one does," Wolf shuddered.

"Did he say anything," Eddie asked.

"Nothing coherent."

Eddie straightened up in his chair and turned back to the monitor bank. "We need to figure out what it wants. Then we can deal with it."

Griz grunted and gulped the rest of his coffee, already gone lukewarm. "Most of the big monsters get that way by feeding on shards in the hot zones. They don't want much of anything but to feed and fight."

"Keith said earlier this was a Threat Level 4," Wolf put in. "But I don't deal with these things up close and personal."

Eddie called up several diagrams to the monitor displays, "The threat levels are an exponential measure of the atomic potential of a given monster. Little ones like these," nytants and frostsksulls scrolled into view, "are a Threat Level 2. They pack about the same potential energy as the reactor on your rocket."

Wolf blinked in surprise.

"It's the Class 5 monsters that cause the most devastation. At Class 4, it just takes a good force field to keep them at bay." Eddie said. "If I can isolate this thing's elemental signature, we should be okay here."

"If we know what elements it responds to, we should be able to use the stamp reactor against it, right?" Wolf asked. "The stationary reactor's got to pack a much

larger punch than my rocket.”

“It’s not the power level,” Eddie replied absently. “The cutouts on your rocket keep the energy in check so you can direct it without being consumed. Quantum reactions are infinitely sustainable as long as they’re directed, but ordinary people can’t sustain that kind of interface. We burn up long before the reaction reaches dangerous levels. But,” Eddie trailed off.

“But,” Wolf prompted.

“But this secretion seems to have a stabilizing influence, if my math checks out. I just can’t figure out how to sustain it for more than a few seconds,” Eddie sighed.

“And you’re out of time,” Keith broke in. “Eron’s going to overrun your position in less than ten minutes. Time to bug out, kids.”

Griz strapped his taq device in place and booted up the controls. The three men stopped at the stamp reactor to bottle the dark matter secretion for Wolf to transport and charged Griz’s taq device with a few shards of the exotic energy. Moments later, Wolf was sliding up his rocket tether while Griz and Eddie vanished into the nearby woods on Griz’s speeder.

Wolf webbed himself in and stowed his cargo. Fire blossomed from his rocket and he stabbed the sky.

Leveling out, Wolf put the rocket on a wide circular pattern so he could watch the roiling cloud of semi-solid darkness creep across the lake and envelope the listening post. His stomach pitched sideways at just the sight of the monster, but Wolf forced himself to look on. After a moment he triggered the comm, “Wolf to

S.E.N.T.R.I. 3.”

“Go for S.E.N.T.R.I. 3,” Keith’s voice responded immediately.

“It looks like contact Eron is just sitting on top of the listening post. And … I don’t like looking at it,” Wolf admitted reluctantly.

“Copy that. We are still reading activity from the listening post, Wolf. Did everyone bug out?” Keith sounded nervous.

“Oh, we are long gone!” Eddie’s voice chimed in over the comm. “I don’t know why it’s just sitting there; we cleared all the dark matter out of the stamp reactor. S.E.N.T.R.I. 3, are you showing a drain on the outposts energy levels? Is it eating the remaining distillations? Why are we stopping, Griz?”

The scout’s rough voice sounded over the comm, “What was it doing in orbit? You thought it was feeding, and then found out it wasn’t. So what was it doing?”

“That’s a good question, Griz. Standby,” Keith replied.

Wolf banked his rocket away from the listening post and headed north-west. Lake Huron’s frozen waters stretched out below him. By the time he had reached the far bank, the water still hadn’t thawed. The landscape along the shore and into the countryside stretched out in a wake of frozen devastation. Decaying dark matter triggered alarms on his controls, now calibrated to use the same software Eddie had written for the quantumizer. No surprise there, Wolf figured, the rocket’s reflex technology was based on the same

principles of quantum entanglement. It was why the controls responded so intuitively to his touch.

“S.E.N.T.R.I. 3 to Uplink Epsilon-Delta and attached units.”

Wolf turned his attention away from the ground to listen.

“Go for Epsilon-Delta,” Eddie’s voice sounded stressed.

“Contact Eron had been exploring the orbital graveyard, among junked satellites and other debris. We have no reports of conflict with other orbital monsters. We have confirmed the loss of residual energy matrix units.”

Wolf looked at the frozen landscape below him and muttered without keying the comm, “It feeds on fire shards, no surprise there.”

Griz acknowledged the report, “Copy that, S.E.N.T.R.I. 3. These dark matter monsters are all about resonant signatures. Is there anything in the graveyard it could synch with?”

“You mean like a functioning uplink array and force field generator?” Eddie’s voice interrupted in naked horror.

“Shards and blazes,” Wolf cursed.

The comm system screamed and the world went white. Wolf fought the urge to vomit and claw at his eyes. Ebon fangs dripping with starblood blotted out the sky. He thrashed against his webbing until a sharp spike of pain cleared his head for a brief instant and he tasted copper. Wolf slammed one fist against the emergency psychic counter-measures and felt the flood of energy

surge through his reflex controls and set his brain on fire. Thinking clearly felt like pushing through glass shards, but at least he could do it.

Thankful he had gained as much altitude as he had, Wolf turned his rocket engines against the ground, correcting his out of control death spiral and blasted back towards the listening post. After a moment, he had the scout's speeder pinpointed on his heads-up display.

"Wolf to S.E.N.T.R.I. 3. What was that?"

"Standby, Wolf." The channel remained open, and Wolf could hear the operators taking reports in the background. He spotted Griz's speeder and the two men lying on the ground beside it, writhing in pain. Wolf grounded the rocket and pulled a psychic screamer from his emergency locker, triggering the tapered oblong cylinder and tossing it unceremoniously out of the access door. The black object hit the ground with a thump, and Griz and Eddie began to stir.

"S.E.N.T.R.I. 3 to Epsilon-Delta."

"Go for Epsilon-Delta," Wolf responded.

"We've got contacts going crazy all across the continent," Keith's voice held a ragged edge. "We caught the trailing edge of that psychic scream up here, and it shook us up but good."

"We're not so hot on the ground either," Wolf said dryly.

"We've confirmed that Contact Eron is using the uplink as a resonant amplifier. We think ... I think Griz is right. This thing is looking for a fight, and just challenged every blasted creature on the planet. If you don't get it off that antenna you're going to have every

Threat Level 4 and 5 monster in the hemisphere headed your way.”

“Copy that. Keith, get your station commander online. I’m going to need top-level Sentri authorization and his command override codes.” Wolf pulled data grimly through his reflex system and fed the proposed schematics to the satellite. Moments later, he held a brief conversation with the station commander.

“Wolf out.” Wolf closed the comm, rummaged through his emergency stores and finally tossed a portable talkie to the ground through the access door. After a moment, the matching unit he held crackled to life.

“You okay, Wolf?” Eddie sounded concerned, and in more than a little pain. The psychic screamer cut the effect of the monster’s resonant broadcast, but clearly at a price.

“I don’t want to take the reflex helmet off, Eddie. Look, can you plug Griz and his taq device into my reflex matrix core? I need someone to tweak the transforming interlocks.” Wolf killed the burn on his rocket motor and flushed the reaction mass. A great wash of white steam billowed over the two men on the ground.

“I’m an elemental physicist, not a rocket scientist!” Eddie protested. “I screw up the balance and you could blow yourself up!”

“More importantly, I could blow up Eron.” Wolf said.

“Don’t be stupid, Wolf.” Eddie said angrily. “We’ll get a Civil Defense airship out here and bomb this thing

to kingdom come.”

Wolf sighed, “I’ve got to get it away from the uplink right now. Put Griz on.”

There was a struggle on the ground, “Griz here.”

“Here’s what I want you to do ...” Wolf outlined his request. Griz tapped into an access panel on the side of the rocket and started working.

Eddie had been messing with the scout speeder, and now took the talkie from Griz. “I’ve just outlined the situation to the Foundation. They’ve got airships on the way as we speak. Five, six hours tops and this will all be over. All we have to do is wait for a Class 4 or 5 monster to arrive, let the two of them exhaust each other, and then clean up the mess.” Eddie sounded earnest and desperate over the comm. “It’s textbook! I’ve read all the reports!”

Wolf grinned into the talkie, “Don’t worry, Eddie, I know what I’m doing.”

Griz took the talkie from Eddie, “Good to launch, Wolf. Clear skies.”

“And good hunting.” Wolf switched off the talkie. On the ground, the two men ran for cover. Wolf fed power to the reaction chamber and his rocket stabbed the sky in a burst of flame and smoke.

Wolf’s touch channeled the raw elemental power of the shards of fire and air at the heart of his elemental reflex matrix. He angled the rocket toward the uplink station, rapidly sighting the writhing cloud of black coiling in upon itself. The sight of it turned his stomach, but the elemental fire of his rocket burned his brain more fiercely still.

Wolf kicked out the first interlock and felt the fire flow through him like never before as the cutaway expanded the output of his atomic potential exponentially. His rocket scorched the sky and he angled in low, plunging like a blazing needle into the heart of the mass of living dark matter. Light fled.

Wolf's rocket ground to a halt in the dark matter, suspended in time and space without even gravity as an anchor. The darkness clawed at the edge of Wolf's mind with tentacles determined to drag his sanity screaming into the vacant recesses of eternity. A spark of flame and whisper of air tugged at the bleeding edge of Wolf's vision and he reached deep into the heart of his rocket – his heart – and tripped the next interlock.

The elemental reflex matrix sang a song of fire and air. Wolf's rocket burst free of the monster's grip, scattering shreds dark matter into smoldering wispy embers. Wolf's eyes burned brighter than the sun, and the energy at his fingertips called to him to burn brighter still. The monster screamed in pain and rage, a psychic thunderclap that echoed into the living world. The creature released its hold on the uplink array and clawed at the sky in pursuit of Wolf's rocket.

Black tendrils snaked upward, catching the clouds and pulling with sharp hooks at the fabric of the world. The seething mass of dark matter flowed toward space as though gravity were a mere suggestion. Something at the center of the creature yawned toothily toward the sky, gaseous poison misting from its heart as it consumed reality around itself.

The first tentacles reached for Wolf's rocket. Wolf

felt the dark matter coil about the skin of the rocket – his skin – leeching the heat and life from his heart in furious defiance of nature. His eyes blazed and Wolf inhaled raw kinetic potential from the elemental shards at the edge of his will. He tripped the final interlock and shed all pretense of mortality in blazing apocalyptic revelation. His fire reached down for the alien interloper. His breath touched the fragile intrusion of another reality superimposed upon the faint echoes of the visible world. The horrific creature of nebulous matter and blasphemous appetite nipping at the heels of Wolf's existence shuddered to embrace his essence.

Wolf's rocket and the dark monster consumed each other in a flash of fire that sucked the light from the sky.

ON THE GROUND, Griz and Eddie watched the black abomination crawl across the sky in pursuit of a blazing tendril of smoke and fire. When the atomic conflagration consumed them both, Eddie let out an unconsciously held breath in a ragged heave of anger and impotence. Griz rested his hand on the younger man's shoulder and said nothing.

SENTRI COMMAND MONITORED the explosion, logging the residual radiation and flagging the area for continued observation. The station commander removed his headgear, and called for a moment of silence throughout the habitat.

For long minutes after, none of the technicians spoke, silently working their stations.

Keith finally drew a long breath and tried one more time to focus on the information scrolling through his workstation. He ran the analysis subroutine again and triggered a sensor suite calibration. After a moment, he called for the station commander's attention. "Sir, I think you should see this."

The commander joined Keith at the monitor bank. A red reticle hovered over a point in space directed toward the outer planets. The holographic display bore the legend: "Synchronized elemental signature detected. Threat Level 5. Contact designate: Eronyah."

The commander straightened up, floating a little ways away from the monitor bank in the micro-gravity of the habitat. "We were warned. And now we'll be better prepared."

Winston Crutchfield lives on the banks of the Ohio River with his wife, two children, and one black-and-white cat of undetermined breed but obvious noble birth. The cat has a pet kitten of her own.

The Final Revelation

by Nathan James Norman

THE MESSAGE APPEARED the day after the world declared God dead. Not that he ever existed, but humanity, finally united under one language, realized they had outgrown their need for the concept of God.

Then, all at once even though no one quite saw it happen, the message appeared in the sky, visible from nearly every point on the surface of the earth: I AM HERE. The message repeated itself in thousands of locations. The blue text, several shades darker than the sky on a sunny day, became obscure during twilight, disappeared during the night and reappeared in the midst of dawn every day.

Several scientific inquiries were launched, including a specially modified spacecraft that flew right through the text in an attempt to gather material from the message's makeup. When that proved inconclusive, the Rayleigh scattering phenomenon was reexamined. Tests continued to be confounded. Trillions of dollars spent in a mere half century yielded no results. Perhaps the

message was a result of the rebuilding process of the ozone layer which began a decade before the appearance. Perhaps the nitrogen in the air had somehow changed its molecular structure slightly. Perhaps there was something wrong with the sun.

As generations died out, and new ones took their places, children stopped asking their parents, "Why is the sky blue?" and instead asked, "Why does the sky say 'I AM HERE'?"

And when parents responded, "I don't know," it was not out of their own ignorance. It was out of the ignorance of the whole world.

2500 C.E.

"BE REASONABLE, GREGORY." Dr. David Dryer sat across from his colleague and friend. He was starving because a temporary lapse in the Epsilon Space Station's gravity module had shut down the station for four hours, and delayed his lunch appointment with Gregory. Normally, the doctor would have abandoned the conversation when his base needs growled against his higher intellect, but today his friend was making a catastrophic decision.

"I have debated this with myself for the last ten years, David. My decision is the only rational one to be had." Gregory collected a section of iceberg lettuce onto his fork and continued eating.

"Gregory, stop eating!" David pounded his fist on the table.

Gregory shoveled another hunk of lettuce into his

mouth and took several moments to chew the mouthful, then swallowed. “I skipped breakfast this morning, and with the gravity loss today...”

David shook his head, “Yes, yes, I’m hungry too. But I’m more concerned for you, Gregory. If you do this... if you go down this road you’ll lose your position in the fellowship, and your job,” he paused for a moment, “and how do Jack and Jessica feel about all of this?”

Putting his fork down, Gregory picked up his napkin and wiped his face, “Jessica said she’d leave me if I went through with all of this. Jack pretty much said the same”

“There, you see?” David said, “You’ve told me, on more than once occasion, that Jessica is your soul mate! And Jack walked you through your alcoholism.”

“I know what they mean to me.” Gregory said.

“For man’s sake, Gregory, I can look out that window there and the message says ‘ereh ma I’!” David pointed toward the end of the restaurant to the curved window on the bulkhead. “If it really was a message, why can’t I read it from up here? Didn’t God know we would colonize the moon? And why was the message on Mars? When we first landed, there was a message in the sky for a dead world with no intelligent life. Why would God communicate with non-intelligence?”

Gregory leaned back in his chair, “Three hundred years ago, those words appeared in the sky, David. We have studied the phenomenon since the day it appeared. We have no answers. Using all the tools of philosophy I can come to no other conclusion.”

“We have no answers yet.” David corrected, “Just because we don’t have the answer now, does not mean there is no answer.”

“There is an answer,” Gregory leaned in, “Only science cannot provide it, and I think philosophy can only get me part of the way there.”

David sighed, “So you think these cults that have popped up all over the surface have the answers.” Nodding, Gregory stood up, “Some of them do.”

David stood up and walked around the table, “But is it worth losing your career, your position, alienating your friends... and losing the ones you love?”

Gregory sat back down. He put his head into his hands for a moment, fighting back the urge to cry. He looked back up at David, “If keeping everything I love means pretending to believe something I don’t... then yes.”

Pushing his chair away, Gregory walked toward the exit.

“Where are you going?” David asked.

Gregory turned, “Back to earth.”

“To stare at the message in the sky?” David frowned, “Are you going to find answers contemplating the heavens?”

“No,” Gregory shook his head, “I’m going to travel between each of these so-called cults and find the answers I know are out there.” “But you’ll lose everything,” David pointed at him, “You’ll live in poverty!”

Gregory smiled. “If it leads me to the truth . . . it’s worth it.”

2800 C.E.

THE WEATHER WAS near-perfect – as it always was. Jeremiah still pulled on his sports coat over his shoulders – not because he was trying to get dressed up, but because twenty-one degrees Celsius was just a bit too cold for him under the Amazonis Planitia dome on Mars.

“Abigail, let’s go!” He shouted down the stairs into their sleeping quarters.

Moments later Abigail ascended. Her hair hung straight, under a small white kerchief, missing the usual braiding.

Jeremiah grabbed her chin and lifted her hair, “Why aren’t you wearing earrings?” Abigail pushed his hand away. “I told you we were going to the Revenant church this morning.” “And I seem to remember telling you ‘no’.” Jeremiah grabbed her wrist.

Twisting free, she pushed past him to the door and slid the handle to the side, then up. The pneumatic door hissed as it pushed out, then slid to the side. Before her husband could exit their home Abigail pleaded with him, “I just want to go see it once. Just this once. Please.”

Turning Jeremiah grit his teeth. “I already told you... no.” “Why not?” She asked.

“Because,” he said, “it’s two domes away. I spend all week traveling the tubes and I don’t want to spend my only day off in the tubes.”

“But there’s less traffic on Sunday.” Abigail retorted.

He turned from her again and walked through the

door, “Our church here is just fine.” He stepped out, a breeze of reacclimated air hit him and he smiled, glad that he had put on his coat. Then he glanced over his shoulder, “Why do you want to go anyway?”

Abigail got excited, “Because they were the first church to form after the Message appeared! They were the first group to see it for what it was! The other denominations are just copy-cats!”

“So you’re willing to give up wearing earrings and make-up to go to a church . . . because it was the first?” He asked.

“Not because they’re the first, because they’re right. They follow the Message correctly. They’ve been following God longer than any of the other churches.” Abigail said.

Jeremiah looked up at the orange sky and the orange message through the protective dome overhead, then turned to his wife. “Being the first is not always the best.” He looked back up at the sky, “And I like you with your hair all made-up, and wearing jewelry.”

“Well I don’t... other men look at me.” She said. “And I don’t always like the way you look at me when I’m wearing jewelry.”

“What?” Jeremiah stared at her. “I’m your husband! I can- I should look at you however I want.” Abigail touched her husband’s arm, “According to Reverend Michael it is good to be married and for a man to not touch his woman.” Hitting her hand away Jeremiah spit, “I thought I told you not to go to that church!” She backed away, just inside the door frame, “I didn’t. I haven’t. I’ve been listening to him on the mind-wave.”

“That’s just as bad!” Jeremiah took a step towards her and she backed into the house.

Abigail pleaded. “Please, Jeremiah, please... you’d like Reverend Michael. One of his ancestors founded the church just after the message appeared. He says that God has given him and his family visions of the truth every day since!”

“Why would I like that?” He pushed his way into the door. “We go to a good church. They read Scripture. They don’t meddle in our personal lives. What more do we want?”

Taking another step back, Abigail moved past the foyer into the modest living room. “You don’t really care about going to church anyway. Can’t you just make me happy?” She paused. “You’d like him, Jeremiah, he says that wives have to do whatever their husbands tell them to do.”

Michael said, “What if I tell you to wear make-up and jewelry?” “No, you can’t tell me to do anything against our teaching.” She said.

“Our teaching?” He asked, then raised his voice. “Our teaching? How long have you been listening to this lunatic?”

Abigail threw herself onto her knees. With her face to the ground she began to chant, “iamhere – iamhere – iamhere”

“What are you doing?” Jeremiah yelled.

Abigail’s chant turned into a scream, “iamhere – iamhere – iamhere”

Grabbing her by the arm, Jeremiah yanked his wife to her feet, “Stop it!”

“iamhere – iamhere – iamhere”

Jeremiah put his hand over her mouth, “Stop. It.”

Halting for only a moment, Abigail bit his hand, and returned to the floor when he let go, “iamhere – iamhere – iamhere”

He grabbed Abigail by her hair and dragged her across the living room and through the foyer as her relentless chanting continued through screams and gasps for air. With his hand clenched tight around her hair, Jeremiah pulled her down the stairs to their sleeping quarters.

Abigail slipped and fell, but never stopped her chanting. Abigail bounced down, stair after stair, her body crashing into the railing and wall. “iamhere – iamhere – iamhere” Then Abigail hit the bottom of the stairs.

And the chanting stopped.

Jeremiah stooped over her body and shook her. “Now look what you made me do.” He ascended the steps and stepped outside with his sports jacket still on. Standing in the doorway of his home he looked up past the dome and to the message, I AM HERE, blazing orange against the Martian sky.

“How ‘bout you stay up there, and I’ll stay down here?” He said to no one in particular. “You do what you want up there, and I’ll do what I want down here.”

Jeremiah slid the door closed behind him and headed for the church, hoping the pastor would take his side again if Abigail ever woke up.

4000 C.E.

PUSHING INTO THE basal lamina, Dr. Lee issued a command, “Inject three-percent coloring.” Inside the translucent membrane, various blues began filling in the cell, allowing Emily Beckett and the rest of her fifth-grade class to see the nuances of the cell stretch beyond the horizon of their vision. Behind her, a wall of blue membrane blocked her view outside of the cell. Looking past the laminin, she could see the cell alive with movement. Directly in front of the class, over what looked like three hundred meters, a massive ribosome strung together proteins in perfect clockwork timing. Emily shifted around one of the students to try and view a few other structures on the horizon, but the ribosome blocked her view of most of the rest of the cell and she only caught glimpses of movement from behind the protein machine.

“If we were standing here in a cell from two-thousand years ago, we would be seeing something completely different.” Dr. Lee pointed to the dark blue laminin structure in front of the group. “The alpha chain would be a straight line, and the beta and gamma chains would come out from either side, creating a connective structure that roughly resembled a cross.”

A loud crash followed by two yelps came from behind the group. Dr. Lee pushed through the students and saw Alex Richards and Johnny Com sprawled on the floor, glistening in membrane from head to toe. “Johnny, Alex, I thought I told you two to be careful when walking around in here today!”

Alex pushed Johnny off of him and stood up. He tried to brush himself off, but the membrane just smeared across his clothes and hands. “Ewww, gross.” He looked up, “How do I get this off Dr. Lee?”

Dr. Lee shook his head, “You don’t, Alex. We’re going to have to burn your clothes and carefully bathe you in acetone.”

“What!” Alex yelled and stepped forward towards Dr. Lee.

The doctor put up his hand, “Don’t touch me. Or anyone else. Help Johnny up.” Flopping back onto the ground, Alex yanked Johnny up. Webs of membrane were strung between the two of them. Even though she was pretty far from the scene, Emily took an extra step back, glad that the school had given her disposable cleats for today’s class.

When Alex and Johnny finally got to their feet Dr. Lee instructed them. “I want you to step into the gateway device, take out the breathing units from the corners of your mouths and press that button while hold your breath. Do you think you can do that?”

The boys nodded and stepped onto the grated platform that had brought the students here a few minutes ago. With their field trip cut short, Alex, then Johnny, removed their breathing units and hit the button.

A bubble appeared and shimmered around the gateway device, lifted off the ground and pulled itself through the basal lamina before disappearing out of sight.

“They’ll send another one along in a few moments.”

Dr. Lee reassured his class before turning back to the laminin structure they had come to learn about. “As I was saying, when we look at cells that were preserved from two thousand years ago, laminin was a simple cross shape. But now, it has become a much more complex system, where the alpha chain stretches and curves into eleven well-formed, interconnected walls.”

Emily raised her hand. “It looks like it says, ‘I AM HERE’.” “Emily, it’s a structure inside a cell. It cannot say anything because it has no mind or vocal cords.” Dr. Lee chided, and the class erupted into laughter.

Rolling her eyes, the fifth-grader tried again, “It spells a message with words, then.” The teacher smiled. “Class, do you think this is a message?” More laughter followed.

“Emily, there are no individual letters here. One structure flows into another. Our minds try to make logical sense of the things we see,” Dr. Lee reminded his student, “so when you see words here, it is nothing more than your mind trying to impose meaning on what it cannot understand.”

Putting her hand on her hips Emily blurted out, “My dad says it’s a message from God.” This time, the class didn’t need a comment from Dr. Lee to erupt into laughter. After a moment, the teacher put his hands up to quiet the class. “Emily Beckett, that line of thought is exactly what halted scientific inquiry for nearly a thousand years. We would have colonized well beyond the solar system by now if religion hadn’t stopped us.” He turned to the class, “Does anyone know what the manifestation of the laminin’s change in the sky and

here in the cell actually means?” Hands shot up in the air.

“Jill.” Dr. Lee said.

Jill cleared her throat, “It’s a clear indication that we as a human species, along with other forms of life, are continuing to evolve.”

“Very good, Jill.” The teacher turned back to Emily, “The change in the laminin was not a message from a deity, but the next step in our evolution. Do you understand?”

Emily looked down and nodded.

“Good. Then we can move on” Dr. Lee turned towards the laminin, but Gretchen, one of the other students spoke up.

“Dr. Lee, do we have cells from older things... like dinosaurs?” She asked.

“Of course.” He said.

“So, is their laminin different from the laminin that was shaped like a cross?” Gretchen wondered.

Dr. Lee looked at her square on. “No.” Then turned to try and complete their lesson-time inside the cell.

Gretchen interrupted him, though, “But if the change in laminin means that we’re evolving now, then shouldn’t the laminin have changed at an earlier time?”

Turning back towards the class, Dr. Lee said. “No.”

“But if a change in laminin is an indication of evolution, why shouldn’t we see different forms of it earlier in Earth history?” She asked.

Smiling Dr. Lee shook his head. “We don’t have an answer for that . . . yet. But maybe earlier forms of evolution had different markers that didn’t involve

laminin. Maybe this is a new form of evolution. A process we've never undergone before."

Emily spoke up again, "Could the change in the laminin just be a message with a scientific explanation?"

Dr. Lee sighed, "No, Emily. That would be mixing religion and science. Superstition and facts. They cannot be mixed together."

"I don't see why they can't inform each other," Emily said.

The teacher mumbled under his breath, "And that's why you have a *D* in my class." He raised his voice, "We're through with questions, class. We need to move ahead with our lesson for the day."

Dr. Lee turned to the message and spent the next half hour using science to explain how the structure held every cell in the universe together.

10000 C.E.

THE SUN HAD less than fifty years of energy left to sustain the earth at sufficient levels.

Aniya and Grypic piloted their suncatcher to a relative stop inside the star-forming UDFy-38135539 galaxy. The stars here were younger, smaller and less dense than in other galaxies, and with only the inner planets and planetoids inhabited, the outer stars on the rim of UDFy-38135539 were ideal for the preservation of the home planet.

Aniya and Grypic's suncatcher, one in a fleet of ships designed to gather star-energy, would help re-

power the sun. and thus the home planet, in their collection mission.

Bring us to the red supergiant, Grypic ordered Aniya.

I don't see it. She thought to him, keeping her resentment for the commander of the two-person ship to herself.

Reaching across her lap, Grypic pointed to the star on the swirling disc that represented UDFy-38135539. Aniya touched the red supergiant and the small vessel twisted its hull, oozing towards the star.

He thought to her, *We've been working together for almost twenty years and you still haven't bothered trying to master stellar cartography.* He followed his thought with a ping indicating his sarcasm.

It's only been eighteen, she thought back to him, *and I've already mastered twenty-two levels of stellar cartography. You keep changing the computer's displays.*

He ignored her thoughts. *Are the collectors properly calibrated for the supergiant's energies?* Grypic sent the thought to Aniya's receptors.

Aniya nodded.

Grypic's smile flashed his canines. *Good,* he thought to her, *we should be able to partially drain a brown dwarf after we're done here. Do you see the star I'm thinking about?*

"I do." She said.

His frown to her was almost a snarl. *Keep your words to yourself.*

Aniya pinged Grypic's systems, then turned her

blockers on.

“Heh. Okay, I’m sorry, Aniya. I get tense before collecting.” Grypic extended his hand.

Taking his hand, Aniya smiled back, “Apology accepted.” She dropped her blockers and re-pinged his system with her updated status.

Approaching the red star, their contacts darkened in increments until they reached the fifteen million kilometer point and their ship came to a halt. The outer membrane of the ship shimmered red, reflecting the light from the star.

Grypic turned to Aniya, *Engage the collector.*

Pressing a glyph on the hovering counsel in front of her, the outer membrane shot out, away from the core of the ship. It sloughed off in sheets no thicker than a single cell. Wave after wave of the membrane unraveled itself from the main compartment. Several hours passed before the ship was noticeably smaller, but Grypic and Aniya still had a full day before the unraveling process would be complete.

They took turns napping while the other monitored the inner hull temperature, the membrane’s integrity, and its progression around the celestial body.

Minutes before the membrane would completely surround the star, Grypic smiled at Aniya. “It’s really a thing of beauty isn’t it?”

I assumed you did not believe in beauty. She thought to him.

“Well, philosophically I see no evidence for objective beauty,” he looked back at the red star which was now completely surrounded by the ship’s

membrane, “but in a subjective sense, I do find it... beautiful.”

It almost makes you wish the ancient myths were true... even if it was just for a moment. Aniya thought.

Grypic thought, *Maybe some of the myths.* He sent a redundancy to emphasize “*some*”.

Thinking back over the mythology she had learned when she was a little girl, Aniya tried to drink in all the memories from that aspect of her education. She found that she could not remember all the details after nearly five hundred years, but the emotions the myths had stirred stayed with her and filled her so much that she said, “No. All of them. The message written in the sky above every planet. The objective beauty. The hope. The design. The purpose.”

There is no purpose. There never was. Grypic thought to her just as the ship pinged them both, informing them that it was ready to begin collecting.

Aniya spoke, “Obviously there is no objective purpose. But there is the purpose that we decide to give our lives.”

There isn't even subjective purpose, Aniya. He thought.

She thought back, *Then there is no subjective beauty.*

Grypic looked back at the sun, “I suppose not.”

Well I think there's still subjective beauty and purpose. She thought.

Think about it, he shot back, *if there is no objective beauty then how can there be subjective beauty? If there is no objectivity, then the subjectivity is*

meaningless.

It's meaningful because I give it meaning. Aniya pinged the word "I".

And who are you? Grypic pinged every word. Who are you in all the universe? You work a menial job on a suncatcher! Five hundred years of life and all you can manage—

Aniya put up her blockers. She didn't bother to ping Grypic's system with the updated information.

Her hand moved to begin the collection process but stopped when Grypic began shouting at her, "Life has no purpose, Aniya, and no beauty!"

"I'm done with this discussion, Grypic." She said.

"Why? Are you going to go back to your mythology? Are you going to pretend like your life has any more meaning than the billions and billions of colonized worlds?" Spit flew out of his mouth.

"Stop. Talking." She said.

"No. You can block my thoughts, but you can't block my words, Aniya." His fists clenched. "You are not beautiful, Aniya. Just like me. You're life has no purpose. Just like mine."

"Stop." She said.

"Not until you realize that your only purpose in this universe is to live, die and have your body shoveled into the nearest sun. It doesn't matter who hurt you. It doesn't matter who said you were beautiful. It doesn't matter who thought they loved you. Your life... all life has no purpose."

Aniya turned her chair away. Tears forming in her eyes, hands trembling. She bent down to a tray that

housed their tools inside a protective green gel. She pulled out a small, gray handle from the gel.

Grypic ground his teeth, ignoring the pings from his own system warning him of the dental damage he was causing. The ship also pinged him repeatedly to begin the collection process. He touched the glyph and the process began.

This has no meaning, thought Aniya.

Grypic spun around in his chair just as Aniya depressed the handle. A blast of orange and blue superheated liquid-helium sprayed from the tool.

“This has no meaning.”

His right eye sputtered and popped.

This has no meaning.

His system pinged him warnings that costly repairs would have to be made to his eye and cranium.

“This has no meaning.”

His toes tingled, then he lost feeling in his legs. *This has no meaning.*

His system warned him that he was incurring permanent brain damage.

“This has no meaning.”

Grypic saw red. Then he saw black. Then he saw no more.

Releasing the handle, the tool turned off and dropped onto the floor. Aniya stared at the red splotches of blood covering Grypic’s body. The floor. Her clothes.

Then the red energies from the star flowed above, and below and around her, blocking her view of the stars beyond, swirling her world with thicker and thicker layers of red.

The console in front of Aniya was caked in dried rust-red splotches as she continued to monitor the progress of the collection. Grypic's body smelled. Even at the back of the compartment where she had dragged it several hours ago. The collection process was almost completed, and she would jettison him along with the refuse as soon as she left the sector.

As the collection slowed, then stopped, the message became visible through the membrane of the ship and would remain with Aniya as she disposed of Grypic, lied to her superiors about his disappearance, and returned to Earth with the rest of the fleet to re-power the Earth.

492000 C.E.

THEN THE MESSAGE STOPPED.

On every planet, in every galaxy, in every quadrant, the communal eye conducted an image of the message to all minds. As one, all of humanity beheld as the dark blue message above the skies of every moon, planet, and outpost shook, then split apart before dissipating.

The worlds cracked to pieces.

The continents of the worlds collapsed.

The mountains crumbled to dust.

And just like the message, and the worlds, and the continents, and the mountains in turn, the eyes and arms, toes and heads, fibers and molecules of every

living thing split and grew apart and dissipated into eternity.

The final revelation had been delivered ... and ignored.

A native New Yorker, Nathan James Norman is now a Northern Michigander with his wife Kristin and his two cats, Daisy and Duncan. He pastors at a small church with an awesome congregation who not only tolerates, but encourages his creativity from the pulpit. He is also the author of the science fiction novel Untold as well as the free audio-drama series Untold: Alliances.

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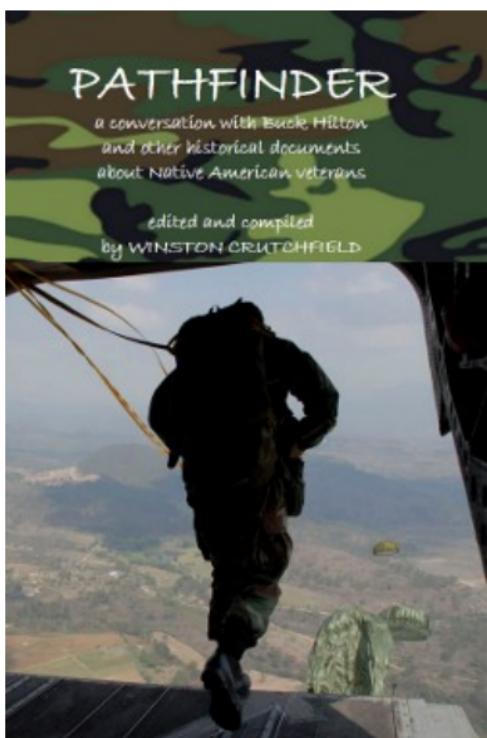
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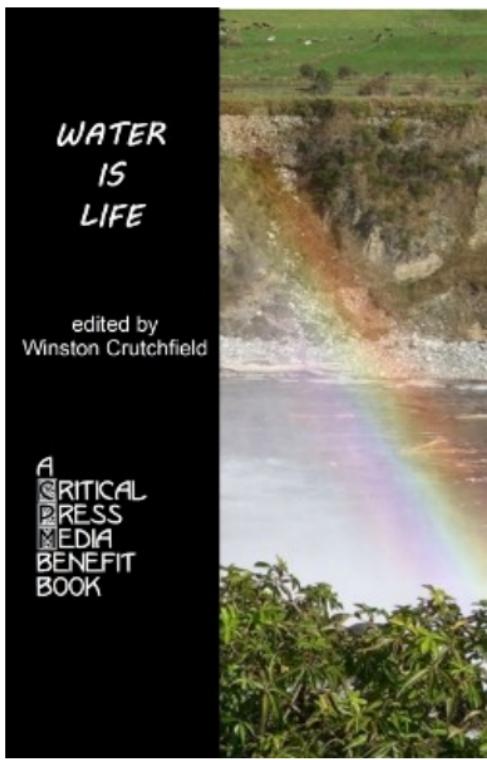
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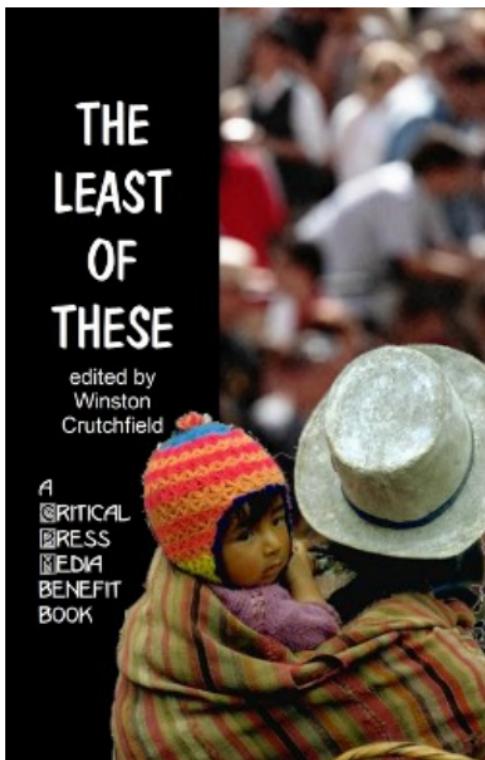
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Luke 3 (NIV)

3 And he went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins, 4 as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, saying: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the LORD!"

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