

The Bronze Saga #9

BRONZE GOLEM

A Doc Savage Novel by Mark Eidemiller

Deuteronomy 7:21 – Do not be terrified by them, for the LORD your God, who is among you, is a great and awesome God. (NIV)

Deuteronomy 9:3 – But be assured today that the LORD your God is the one who goes across ahead of you like a devouring fire. He will destroy them; he will subdue them before you. And you will drive them out and annihilate them quickly, as the LORD has promised you. (NIV)

1 Samuel 2:10 – The adversaries of the LORD shall be broken to pieces; out of heaven shall he thunder upon them: the LORD shall judge the ends of the earth; and he shall give strength unto his king, and exalt the horn of his anointed. (KJV)

2 Samuel 22:28-36 – You save the humble, but your eyes are on the haughty to bring them low. You are my lamp, O LORD; the LORD turns my darkness into light. With your help I can advance against a troop; with my God I can scale a wall. "As for God, his way is perfect; the word of the LORD is flawless. He is a shield for all who take refuge in him. For who is God besides the LORD? And who is the Rock except our God? It is God who arms me with strength and makes my way perfect. He makes my feet like the feet of a deer; he enables me to stand on the heights. He trains my hands for battle; my arms can bend a bow of bronze. You give me your shield of victory; you stoop down to make me great. (NIV)

Psalms 34:19-22 – A righteous man may have many troubles, but the LORD delivers him from them all; he protects all his bones, not one of them will be broken. Evil will slay the wicked; the foes of the righteous will be condemned. The LORD redeems his servants; no one will be condemned who takes refuge in him. (NIV)

Psalms 37:32 – The wicked lie in wait for the righteous, seeking their very lives; (NIV)

Excerpt, ENCYCLOPEDIA AMERICANA, 2008 Online Edition

SAVAGE, Clark, Junior. Born 1901. In the early 1930's and 1940's, Clark Jr. ("Doc") Savage was an adventurer and crime fighter. It had been rumored that he had fled justice prior to the Edward R. Murrow expose into the so-called "Crime College" (see video, 'See It Now: TARNISHED BRONZE') and subsequent investigations (Senator Estes Kefauver in 1951, Senator Richard M. Nixon in 1952). However, it was later brought out that Savage had actually been in suspended animation from 1949 to 1999 (see DOC SAVAGE: THE IDENTITY HEARING by Dorothy Liston, © 2008 Rosewood Press). He and his surviving associates Andrew Blodgett "Monk" Mayfair, William Harper "Johnny" Littlejohn, and John "Renny" Renwick were granted Presidential Amnesty by President George W. Bush in 2007.

THE PRINCIPLES [[Skip to Story](#)]

- Clark "Doc" Savage, Jr. (aka Clark Robeson Dent)

In 1948, following the events chronicled in *Up From Earth's Center*, he returned to the caverns of Maine – alone, unarmed, and in secret – in a determined attempt to recapture the mysterious self-proclaimed 'demon' Wail. Instead, he was caught off-guard, rendered unconscious, and placed into suspended animation by an enemy. Awakened fifty years later and finding himself in Oregon, he wandered into a downtown rescue mission, heard the message of salvation preached by Perry Liston and received Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior. Still drawn to mysteries and those in distress, he continues his adventures with the surviving members of his old team as well as his new family. In *Bronze New World*, he married the former Bonnie Clayton; they have three children – Jason, Jennifer, and Sarah. Following the events of *The Trial of Doc Savage*, he can once again declare his name publicly without fear of imprisonment.

- Bonnie Savage

Former mercenary, wife of Clark Savage, Jr. She first encountered Clark and Perry in *More Precious Than Gold*. Became a Christian through Clark in *Bronze Avengers*. Married Clark in *Bronze New World*.

- Perry Liston

A former street preacher from Portland, Oregon, he found his life tied into Clark's. Now, as his friend and companion, he is part of Clark's team and family.

- Dorothy ("Dot") Liston

Granddaughter of Monk Mayfair and Ham Brooks, wife of Perry Liston. Became a Christian through Perry in *Bronze Refined As Silver*.

- Andrew Blodgett "Monk" Mayfair

One of Doc Savage's original team. Monk tried desperately to keep fighting crime during and after the Senate hearings. However, after several major events changed his life – his marriage to his 'favorite secretary' Lea Aster, the birth of his daughter Caroline, and the apparent suicide of his old friend and sparring partner Ham – he turned his back on his old life of crimefighting and adventuring, and withdrew to a lakefront house near Tulsa, Oklahoma, where he remained in isolation until located by Clark and Perry. Shortly after, Clark was able to lead him to know God's peace. He and Lea have five children – Carrie, Clark, Hamilton, Mark, and Deborah – and thirteen grandchildren.

- John "Renny" Renwick

One of Doc Savage's original team. Assumed to have been killed in the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, Renny became a fugitive in an attempt to relive his adventurous past. Married Amanda and – under a new name – returned to the United States. Following the events in *The Trial of Doc Savage*, Renny came forth and faced up to his monsters. He and Amanda reside on a farm in Oberlin, Kansas.

- William Harper "Johnny" Littlejohn

One of Doc Savage's original team. Breaking from the team during the Senate hearings, he

continued his love of archaeology and participated in several digs around the world, accepting a professorship in a small California university, and becoming the head of the Archaeology Department at Drake College in Vermont. He has since moved to the Clark Savage Institute where he is Dean of the Archaeology Department.

- Patricia "Pat" Savage

Clark's cousin and only living blood relative, one of Doc Savage's original team. In light of events chronicled in *Bronze Refined as Silver* and *More Precious Than Gold*, she turned her life from one of selfish goals to selfless goals. She has turned her island home into a refuge and home for children who have been abandoned or orphaned.

- Clark "Gumball" Mayfair

Firstborn son of Monk and Lea Mayfair. Freelance pilot. First worked with Clark and Perry in *Bronze Refined As Silver*. Has worked with them on several occasions, mostly as a pilot. Became a Christian through Monk in *The Abduction of Amy Roberts*.

- Amy Mayfair

Adopted daughter of Long Tom Roberts, wife of Clark "Gumball" Mayfair. She was at her father's bedside when he accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and made the same decision soon after. They married and have one child, Thomas Andrew. They live in Lincoln City, Oregon.

THE REMEMBERED: those who have passed on

- Theodore Marley "Ham" Brooks

One of Doc Savage's original team. It was originally believed that Ham had committed suicide as a result of the enormous stress of the Senate hearings, his disbarment from legal practice, and a growing alcohol abuse problem. However, in *Bronze New World*, Clark and Perry discovered that Ham was actually murdered while attempting to trap the person responsible for leaking the Crime College information to Edward R. Murrow, and the scene was altered to make it appear as if Ham had committed suicide. Clark and Perry were also able to travel back in time and minister the gospel to Ham, thus securing his spiritual future.

- Thomas "Long Tom" Roberts

One of Doc Savage's original team. In the 1960's, while on a fact-finding trip to post-war Vietnam, Long Tom accidentally triggered a booby trap that destroyed his legs and hospitalized him. While recuperating, he was drawn to a little girl whose family had been killed. Taking compassion, he adopted her and raised her as his own daughter. They settled in Lincoln City, Oregon, and spent many years in anonymity before being reunited with Doc.

Shortly after, however, he suffered a heart attack that eventually cost him his life. On his deathbed, he was able to clear his conscience of the truth behind the loss of his legs, the death of Amy's birth-family, and, with Clark's help, was finally able to know peace with God before the end.

PROLOGUE

James Augustus Kandell was trying to flee from the Garden of Eden.

All he could hear, as he ran towards the cavern, was his heart's rapid beating and his labored breathing.

He stumbled in the dark, falling clumsily. He frantically looked around to see if anyone had heard him; thank God, he hadn't been discovered. Scrambling to his feet, he ignored the pain and continued. He hadn't dared bring a lantern, for fear of it being spotted.

I don't know how he does it, he thought to himself, but he's got spies everywhere.

He suddenly felt prompted to pray for his wife Belinda. He'd given her his cell phone, and given her instructions in case of an emergency. He didn't expect troubles; he intended to be gone just long enough to contact the authorities, then be back before anyone noticed him missing.

He smiled to himself as he saw the cavern ahead. Since nobody guarded the door at night, he felt confident he'd make it. And if he could make it that far, he could make it to the nearby town ... and success.

Suddenly he heard a rustling behind him. With just a few yards remaining, he put on the speed. However, before he could reach the entrance to the cavern, his way was obscured by a huge shadow. Then something slammed into him, knocking the wind from his lungs and sending him crashing to the ground. He rolled over onto his back and looked up at his assailant. Instead of being terrified, he was strangely at peace. At that moment he knew he'd never make it, and that his journey was over. In his last moments, he prayed that God would free his wife and the others in the valley, and forgive his captors.

Then, with a sickening thud, James Augustus Kandell was snuffed out.

A short distance away, a man hiding in a thicket of tall brush watched on in silent horror.

CHAPTER ONE

Sometimes, you never know what God has in mind until you get there.

When I was a kid, and the first episode of the now-classic science fiction anthology series, "*Outer Limits*", aired, I hid in the basement. And when the Alfred Hitchcock movie "*The Birds*" came on television, I hid around the corner.

I was terrified.

It wouldn't be for several years that I would know what the monster from *Outer Limits* looked like; but back then, I knew that it would come after me if I didn't hide. And, although I'd never had a bird attack me, and didn't really think they'd do so now, I was completely sure that, since they attacked the people in the movie, I'd be their next target.

I hid.

The Outer Limits – both the 1960's black-and-white series and the 1995-2002 color series – is now among my favorite science fiction shows. And I've been able to watch *The Birds* without expecting them to attack me personally.

I don't hide anymore from the monsters on television.

But that doesn't mean I choose to watch them, either. There are a lot of movies I *don't* watch.

I don't like the "slasher" movies, where teenagers are picked off one at a time by a monster that doesn't have the decency to stay dead.

I also don't like movies that come *too* close to the possible.

Nuclear war. I can attest to the possibility of it. A couple of years ago, in a different timeline, I witnessed it. I don't know how it started, but I still remember how it felt as radiation poisoning slowly killed me. And it was only by the grace of God – in the form of Clark's future offspring – pulling us out of there that allows me to write this.

Before September 11, 2001, a terrorist attack on American soil was just a thing of fiction – the plot of a Tom Clancy novel, or a scenario in a Chuck Norris action film. Sure, we'd see things like that happening on television in foreign countries, but America was safe ... so we thought.

In the 1960's, the term "atomic device" was a catchphrase used in the movie, *Goldfinger*; it was as big and bulky as a sofa. Now, the same kind of device can be carried in something as innocent as a gym bag or a kid's backpack

With the right equipment, supplies, and knowledge, nerve gas can be created in a rental storage unit. And suicide bombers still remind us – all over the world, as innocent people die – that they aren't about to go away soon.

Yeah, you might agree, but we're still safe in our homes ... our schools ... our streets – right?

Just open a newspaper, or watch the evening news.

A troubled youth takes a handgun he finds in his father's bureau drawer to school and kills the kids who taunted and laughed at him, or the girl who called him a loser, or the teacher who gave him a 'C' on a test, or opens fire on a crowd at a basketball game just so he can see them freak ... or all of the above.

A boy and a girl try to recapture the adrenaline thrill they felt from a recent movie by terrorizing, torturing, and murdering a family of four. And when it doesn't work the first time, they continue doing it until it does.

Several gang members in a car open fire on a rival gang member standing at a bus stop. Seven people dead, including a three-year-old girl who was waiting with her mother to go to McDonald's for her birthday party.

Who says the monsters are just in the movies?

People ask me if I get scared. Of course I do. Just because I'm a Christian doesn't mean that I don't get scared.

The difference is I know *who* to go to *when* I'm scared. '*For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.*' Or '*So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?"*' Or '*To the LORD I cry aloud, and he answers me from his holy hill. I lie down and sleep; I wake again, because the LORD sustains me. I will not fear the tens of thousands drawn up against me on every side.*' Or '*The LORD is my light and my salvation – whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life – of whom shall I be afraid?*' Or '*When I am afraid, I will trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I will not be afraid. What can mortal man do to me?*' Or '*In God have I put my trust: I will not be afraid what man can do unto me.*'

You get the idea. The Bible is full of encouraging words like that, plus plenty of examples that show us we're not alone when we're afraid.

The monsters are always going to be out there, and we may always feel helpless against them.

But we are never alone.

CHAPTER TWO

For the last two years, Dot and I have lived aboard a fortress named the *Orion*.

The *Orion* is a huge flying platform, quietly cruising the skies high above the planet. It's also Doc Savage's new *Fortress of Solitude*. However, the only thing that paid homage to its Arctic Circle predecessor was the optional blue tint to the center dome.

Monk's initial reaction had been, true to form, a wisecrack about the platform resembling a '5' domino. But his assessment was right. The platform was rectangular, box-like, with five geodesic domes on top – a large one in the center, and smaller ones at the four corners. It was only when you got closer that you were able to see the smaller details in perspective to the entire craft.

To say that it was impressive was like saying that the ocean liner *Queen Mary II* was 'a cute little rowboat'.

The *Orion* is our very own flying private neighborhood, using the most sophisticated camouflage technologies to keep its existence a closely-guarded secret.

Don't get me wrong. We're not trying to disassociate ourselves from the rest of the world, like the gods of Mount Olympus looking down on the rest of humanity. On the contrary, we're a flying hospital and warehouse, capable of responding to emergencies and disasters in even the remotest places on earth.

We started off with the name *Second Chances Ministry*, but we've kinda settled on *The Clark Savage Foundation*, to identify ourselves with the man in charge. We provide first response aid and supplies, but, for the long haul, we step aside to the real professionals like the *Red Cross* and *Medical Teams International*.

Anyhow, let me tell you how we ended up fighting a wildfire in Africa.

A lightning storm over Northern Mozambique, near the towns of Ruvuma and Lindi, 300 miles from the African coastline, had sparked a wildfire that threatened thousands of acres of bush, forest, and farmland across three provinces. A missionary in that area had tried explaining to the provincial government officials that several villages were in danger, and people could die if they didn't do something.

However, the officials explained to the missionary that the civil unrest in the country kept them from dispatching troops, and that their own experts had assured them that the fires would exhaust themselves in time. Despite the missionary's emotional words of warning, the officials callously explained that, "any potential loss of life would be truly unfortunate."

And that was when missionary Hugo Danner called *us*.

Thanks to the network of satellites at our disposal, we were cognizant of the situation long before we reached African airspace. The weather wasn't going to be any help, since the forecast called for zero precipitation. And we were hardly professional firefighters, barely equipped to tackle something as complicated as a wildfire. But we intended to give it our best shot.

To that end, our plan was to center in on the areas threatened by the wildlife, the various villages that were in danger, and keep them safe. That was the specific goal of Red and White Squadron; they would make 'first contact' and communicate our intention, making sure the natives wouldn't attack the very ones who wanted to keep them alive. Red Squadron had some people with actual fire experience, leaving White Squadron to focus on medical support. Green Squadron, garbed in flight suits, would engage in Search and Rescue, transporting endangered natives to the safety of their villages.

Finally, above the inferno, trying to keep things from spreading any more than had been done, while keeping themselves from any hostile neighbors, was Alpha Wing.

It had been decided to equip the squadrons with flight suits to deliver them to their action sites and transport them about their tasks.

Our flight suits were amazing things. The prototype had been made for Kal during his stay in our dimension, to approximate his own powers until they returned on their own.

The original electronics, each about the size of small cellular phones, had been attached to a belt that was strapped around the waist. Power to operate the electronics came from a flat battery pack that weighed just over one pound, and which had been mounted beneath the thruster unit nestled along the spine between the shoulder blades. The thruster unit itself had gone through several modifications since the prototype, and was now the size of a half-liter water bottle.

All of the helmets contained a sophisticated package that tracked eye and head movement, and relayed the information to the steering package. Basically, the direction you would travel was the direction where your eyes looked; but it was sophisticated enough to disregard movement when

turning the head to the left or to the right in order to look at something.

Individual start-up controls were on a pod attached to the left wrist. Once the circuits were activated, there was a surge of power and a feeling of near-weightlessness, which was the effect of the inertial neutralizer unit and the antigrav generator reducing weight to 20 percent of Earth normal. It took some getting used to, but was tremendously fun once you did. The untrained flier would often try to adjust their stance to counter the sudden feeling of imbalance; it wasn't unusual to see fliers bouncing off the ground a time or two until things got settled. Many of the controls were voice-activated, such as calling up the various heads-up display modes with which it could overlay the actual face-screen. Since air sickness was common for rookies, dermal patches with nausea meds were standard issue.

Since the prototype, Mitch Drake's 'tinkerers' had made a few improvements from the overall design. The concept for the new helmets had, oddly enough, originated from the 1998 movie based on the 1960's television series *Lost In Space*. There was a unit attached to the back just below the base of the skull, which expanded to surround the head in a special composite material then seal with the neck of the jumpsuit; for all intents and purposes, it had the same electronic interfaces as the original helmets, with the advantage of disappearing when not in use.

Dot and I had had the privilege of wearing 'customized' models, and we'd logged in hundreds of flight hours, both outside and under the *Orion's* domes. It wasn't unusual for us to get a sudden urge to suit up, upload a John Williams or Jerry Goldsmith movie score to our synchronized music players, and go for a hand-in-hand flight beneath the moonlight. So far, we hadn't gotten caught – although Karleen had advised us that leaking a couple of grainy pictures of us to the tabloids would throw off the credibility of any *real* eyewitnesses.

Now, as part of Green Squadron, Dot and I flew a search pattern above the burning jungle. Due to the waves of heat rippling the air and distorting our vision, we trusted our sensors to find victims. I suddenly caught the motion in my faceplate display and reported it to Dot.

"***Over there*** – two life signs, bearing oh-one-five, three clicks out!"

Dot acknowledged them, and we smoothly headed towards them.

In a small clearing, a young man was using farm implements to try and beat down the fire; an older man lay on the ground, apparently in pain. I retracted my helmet, feeling the sudden blast of heat on my face. But I wanted to show the native that – despite appearances to the contrary – we were human. "*Do not be afraid!*" I said, and my words were repeated in the native's language, through our translation programs from a speaker in my upper chest. "*We are friends! We are here to help you!*"

The younger man initially raised his implement to defend himself. But the combination of my smiling face and familiar words seemed to get through. He lowered the implement, and Dot and I moved in and landed.

"*Let's see what we can do to slow down this fire!*" I called to Dot, and we moved to opposite ends of the clearing.

Getting as close as we dared, we detached hoses from compartments on our backs, and now moved counterclockwise around the clearing, spraying a line of pellets in a wide arc across the path of the fire. The pellets were made of a special protein foam, which expanded geometrically into a green wall that stopped the fire in its tracks as they impacted the ground. Seconds later we were in a safe zone, and could concentrate on the others.

I turned and smiled at the young man. His face was mirroring astonishment that these two flying creatures had done what he hadn't been able to do. I secured the hose, and offered him my hand in friendship. He seemed to understand now that I was on his side, and he extended his own hand in return.

He said something that was translated into 'thank you'.

"Where is your village?" I asked.

He pointed to the west. I nodded; we'd find it.

Since she had the better experience when it came to First Aid, Dot knelt by the other man, giving him a quick once-over. A few moments later, she reported, "Smoke inhalation and second-degree burns. We better get going!"

I explained in simple terms what we were going to do. Then I helped Dot get the older native to his feet, and used a harness to tether him to her. Then I did the same with the younger man to me, all the while assuring them both that we'd be perfectly safe.

"Fly," repeated the young man, smiling. "Like ... *Superman*."

I tried not to burst into laughter. *More than you know, kid*, I thought. "Yes, fly like Superman."

The older man, despite his injuries, was more reluctant to comply. I extended my helmet back around my head in order to get official bearings on their village, and eased the younger boy and myself off the ground. As we gently hovered, the young man, sensing the older man's apprehension, said something to him. The older man gave a reluctant nod and hung onto Dot as they lifted off. The antigrav engines compensated for both our weights as we climbed high above the fire and moved toward their village.

"INCOMING!"

Clark watched as a woman in a white flight suit identical to his own guided the two fliers and their passengers to a landing spot in a clearing near some huts. His sharp eyes had easily ID'd Perry's distinctive blue jumpsuit, but he couldn't break away from his patient.

In the center of the village, several examination tables had been assembled; diagnostic sensors built into the beds relayed information to handheld instruments affectionately nicknamed 'tricorders'. As Clark finished bandaging up a serious burn on a woman's arm, he spoke soothingly to her in her native language and punctuated it with a warm smile. Her hesitation melted at his charm, and she flexed her fingers tentatively. Then her face lit up with appreciation, and she took his hand in hers and gently kissed the back of it. Years ago, such an action would've

caused him to blush and recoil. This time, he just thanked her and gave her a gentle embrace, then excused himself and turned the woman over to an assistant.

A dust mask was hanging around his neck. The air wasn't the best – the fire was to their north, and the wind was coming at them from the southwest – but it would do. And, besides, they had plenty of medical supplies to handle all but the most severe of casualties.

Perry and Dot had landed. Another doctor was helping Dot with her passenger, assisting him to an examination table. Meanwhile, Perry was receiving an overdose of gratitude from a young native. When the native ran off to join up with his mother, Perry came over to Clark.

"*Having fun?*" called Clark, taking his friend's gloved hand.

"*Actually, yes,*" Perry replied. "How's the situation?"

"Better than expected. They've got the fire contained around this village and the next one to the south. We've only gotten a handful of injured, and none of them critical, thank God!"

"Amen," agreed Perry. "Where's Hugo?"

Clark pointed. To the north, through the smoke and flames, it looked like a chain of explosions were taking place. It wasn't surprising. Hugo Danner was a singularly amazing man, probably the closest thing to a superhero this dimension would probably ever see.

Hugo had been a product of a genetic experiment from his mad scientist father, who had injected his pregnant wife with a substance that gave their child superhuman strength and invulnerability. However, without direction, and fueled by his own pride, his gift almost got him killed. Struck by a massive bolt of lightning and left for dead, he was found by some missionaries who nursed him back to health and led him into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. After they passed away, Hugo took on their mantle, becoming a missionary himself.

Although Clark had met Hugo decades earlier, it wasn't until 2001, when rescuing Amy Roberts-Mayfair from the terrorist Umberto Kananga, that their paths intersected once more. Since then, they'd tried keeping in touch. The last time they'd seen Hugo was at Clark's wedding.

"What could he be doing?" Perry asked slowly and thoughtfully.

"Knowing him," replied Clark. "Anything's possible. I'm just glad we're way over here while he's doing it."

"Amen."

"*Perry!*"

They turned to see Perry's wife Dot approaching. She was getting their attention.

"Let's go!" she announced, and easily slipped into the air.

"I'm needed," commented Perry, expanding his helmet around his head. "Later, *Doc!*"

As Perry followed his wife into the air, Clark took a moment to survey the rest of his medical team. They had been hand-picked, experts all, zealous in their skills yet humble in their abilities. He was proud of them. And he was glad he could be able to join their ranks. It had taken a lot of work, but he was now licensed to practice medicine once more. It was a good feeling.

"Incoming!"

He turned to see several members of Green Squadron coming in with more wounded. Seeing that he would be needed, he ran to meet them.

"Alpha One to Orion!"

The voice of Flight Captain Dan Reynolds came over the speakers on the bridge. Bonnie responded by pressing a control on her captain's chair and answering, "*Orion*, go!"

"We're on the northern edge of the wildfire, Commander! We've dropped our second load, and it seems to be slowing things down!"

"Do you think you'll be able to contain it, Captain Reynolds?"

"As long as it doesn't jump over the break," he offered.

"Very well," she replied. "Keep in touch! *Orion* out!"

She disconnected. A moment later, another call came through. It was Clark.

"Bonnie, we've got a couple of serious injuries here, including some severe burns. We'll get them stable, but they'll need more than what we can offer."

"Roger," she acknowledged, leaning forward to address the navigator. "Mr. Elric, dispatch a Chariot!" She turned back to the com. "Okay, hon, it's on its way! And I'll let Diane know to be ready."

"*Hi, Daddy!*" came a second voice from the chair next to Bonnie. It was three-year-old Jason. His eyes had lit up at the sound of his father's voice.

"Hi, Jason!" Clark returned. "How's my big boy?"

"I'm helpin' Mommy!" he reported. "The girls are sleepin'."

"Son, I need to get back to work. I'll see you later, okay?"

"Can I come to work wit'cha?"

There was a grin in Clark's tone. "We'll see."

"Jason," interrupted Bonnie. "Why don't you go play in the other room? Play quiet, so you don't wake the girls."

"Okay, Mommy," he conceded. "But let me know if I can help, okay?"

"I sure will," she smiled. "Now scoot along."

The little boy hopped off of the chair and trotted off to the nursery. As the door closed, Bonnie wanted to laugh.

"He *so* loves his Daddy," she commented. "How's it going down there?"

"Actually, quite good. Most of the injuries have been minor ones. These are the first two serious ones, thank God. How's the progress on the fire?"

"Not sure if we'll be able to contain it. It looks like the best we'll be able to do is keep the people as safe as possible, and keep the damage down."

"You're doing fine." He paused. "I see the Chariot! Gotta get to work! Love you!"

"Love you, too." And she closed the connection.

From the command seat of the Bridge, Bonnie took a deep breath, surveyed her charge, and went back in her mind to the decision that put her in this position.

When they were contemplating what she called a 'life after Trial' and a new life aboard this new Fortress, a dilemma arose concerning her role in it all. Having spent years as a mercenary, she was a person of action who enjoyed a good barroom brawl as much as the next person. But now, as a mother of three, she had an enormous responsibility which demanded her undivided attention. She didn't want to miss out on some of the potential action, but she wasn't about to turn her kids over to some stranger to be raised. Concerned that she'd be torn between being a mommy and a warrior, something had to be done.

The final solution was nothing less than inspired.

Since she had a natural instinct for leadership anyway, it was determined that she would be put in command of the *Orion*. In addition, this Bridge would double as both the command center for the Fortress *and* a place to take care of the triplets.

In order to do that, the final design included two "ready rooms" which branched off from the Bridge. One was a personal study and conference room for her use. The other functioned as a day care room for the triplets. If any of the kids needed mommy, she was just in the other room. Besides, she had more than her share of help. Apart from the rotating staff of highly-qualified professional nannies, any of the bridge crew could sub as an impromptu babysitter.

And, in those times she chose to join the others on a mission, she had Malcolm Foyle – her "Number One" – plus a dedicated staff that would care for and protect the children with all the loyalty of a Secret Service detail.

It was a new paradigm. And Bonnie couldn't be happier.

In the Korean and Vietnam wars, helicopters were used to evacuate wounded to MASH units. A common configuration had been to equip a small maneuverable helicopter, such as the Bell 47, with stretchers on both sides of the cockpit – outside of the cockpit – atop the landing skids, so that a pilot could carry the wounded soldiers to medical facilities.

The vehicle nicknamed the Chariot looked like a futuristic version of the 47. Here, however, the side pods were experimental stasis chambers developed by Bill Sloan, the grandson of the man who had put Clark in suspended animation. With these stasis chambers, they could literally put a patient's life signs on pause while transporting them to where they could receive proper medical treatment. Their dream was to provide stasis chambers at low or no cost for all medical facilities, and have at least one as a part of every ambulance and EMT vehicle. No more would patients die en route to proper facilities, no matter how distant or how long it would take to prepare.

Bill Sloan, in researching ways to free his grandfather from the suspended animation chamber that had trapped him in limbo, had developed an extensive knowledge of the subject. When he'd been sentenced to prison, Clark had encouraged him to use his time and knowledge to develop stasis chambers that could be used in medical situation such as this. And now that Sloan was out of prison and working at CSI, he was making great strides in the field.

The white Chariot touched down in the middle of the village, while medical techs explained to the natives that this flying creature was not going to harm them. The pod covers were removed and the patients eased into position. Friends and relatives were reassured that the injured would be fine, that they were being taken to a place where they'd receive the best of care, and they'd be back as soon as possible. The stasis chambers were activated and the pod covers replaced, and the Chariot given the go-ahead to return to the Orion. Like the flight suits, the Chariot incorporated antigrav and inertia-dampening technology, to make the ride as swift as humanly possible. The team moved clear of the Chariot and it smoothly jumped into the air.

Clark radioed Bonnie and reported the Chariot's departure.

"We're ready," she responded.

"Chariot One on final approach!" boomed the announcement over the speakers in the hangar bay. ***"Landing crews ready!"***

The blonde woman in charge spoke into a lip mike attached to a wireless headset. "We're ready!" Then she turned to the rest of her team and said, "Look alive, everybody!"

The small craft sailed into their line of sight and moved into the hangar bay. A Landing Signal Officer waved him towards a glowing circle; with professional ease, he eased it into the circle and cut the engines as Dr. Diane Cunningham and her trauma team ran into action. They quickly separated the stasis chambers from the sides of the Chariot, connecting them to wheeled cradles and making their connections sure. Despite the fact that their patients were in suspended animation, their injuries frozen in time, old habits still caused them to rush towards the express elevators leading to Sick Bay.

Behind them, the Chariot pilot stretched his legs as techs put fresh stasis chambers on the craft and made it ready for the next call.

They arrived in Medical.

They wheeled the stasis chambers over to two of several diagnostic bays where they could examine their patients in depth before releasing them from their stasis and transferring them to examination tables.

It had been a big step for Diane Cunningham to leave her position as Caroline Island's Chief Medical Officer – especially with all those children to take care of – but when Bonnie Savage was the one begging her to join their team, it was an offer she found difficult to refuse. And it wasn't a bad job for a former ER doctor from Chicago.

While the med techs were attaching diagnostic connections and external power feeds to the stasis chambers, Diane looked over the thin tablet computer containing data on the patients. Both had third-degree burns covering much of their bodies. The first one was a male, approximately 28 years of age. The second one was a female, approximately ... *six years old?* A knot began to grow in the pit of her stomach.

"All right," she announced business-like after a few moments to compose herself. "We'll start with the second patient. Is the bath ready?"

A couple of techs answered in the affirmative.

"Good. Okay, let's bring her out of stasis and give her a quick once-over. Remember, we're looking for potential internal injuries, as well as head trauma and damage to the lungs caused by the fire."

All of the med techs had been well-trained on this equipment, so that any of them could operate it. The closest ones to the second patient began making adjustments to the stasis controls. When they opened the lid, the rest moved in to assist in physically transferring the patient to the examination table.

As soon as they did, one of the younger techs gave a sudden intake of breath. "**Oh, God!**" she exclaimed, shocked. "She's just a little girl!" Her hand flew up to cover her mouth as she ran clear of the area; stopping at the nearest waste container, she unceremoniously lost her lunch.

The others looked at her actions, but nobody said anything. Most of them understood because they had been where she was at.

That included Doctor Diane Cunningham.

She'd seen her share of atrocities as Chief Medical Office on Caroline Island. But the hardest part came as a result of opening their doors to *all* abandoned children, regardless of their health. They ended up becoming a dumping ground for the sick and infirm children of the world. And it wasn't a situation where they could turn them away ... they had to accept them ... because nobody else would have compassion for them.

"But that didn't make it easy, especially for me," she would confide to her friend and employer, Pat Savage. "I remember every child who came through here, especially the ones who were dying. Some were dying of AIDS, as their mothers had. I remember holding six-month old babies in my arms, knowing that they would never see their first year. I remember sitting in the nursery, late at night, rocking an infant back and forth for hours while they died in my arms. *So many of them!* And I would pray, 'please, God, have mercy – let them live.' Or, 'please, God, have mercy – let them die.'

"And, above all, I was *angry!* I was angry at all those governments who didn't give a *damn* for those innocent little babies. How they would abandon these little ones who never did anything wrong, and they would wash the blood from their hands like Pontius Pilate. I don't think I'll ever get over that."

Diane Cunningham wouldn't chastise the med tech for her emotional reaction. She'd probably just get together with her over a cup of tea, and share with her the experiences of her own life. Hopefully, in the end, the girl would find strength and hope in knowing that she wouldn't have to face the monsters alone.

"Okay," she announced to the remainder of her team. "Check her out. I don't want any surprises."

The team worked professionally, making sure the child was ready to be placed in the 'bath'. They sedated her well, and gave her a breathing tube and an IV. Telemetry sensors were carefully placed on her body. Then she was wheeled into another room where several tanks waited for them. The first one was opened, and another tech confirmed that it was ready. The liquid in the tank was almost gelatinous, the color of seaweed. Carefully they lifted her and lowered her onto the goop, while another tech attached the various life-sustaining connections. When she didn't sink immediately, they didn't rush things, but patiently waited while her body weight displaced the goop and she was swallowed up. One tech steadily read off life sign readings while the others watched the girl disappear in the tank. After several seconds they were satisfied as to her safety, and they returned to the other room where they would take care of the other patient.

The 'bath' had properties similar to a neutral buoyancy tank, in that they would be in a state of suspension, where their flesh would not come into contact with anything around them. As the sedated patient rested suspended in this bath, their burns would receive steady exposure to the chemicals therein. The overall result was that the patient's burns would be treated and the healing accelerated.

The gel also had amniotic properties. Combined with the neutral buoyancy, many who had spent time in the bath claimed to have felt a deep peaceful feeling of security there, including experiencing dreams of being back in the womb. Diane knew it was still experimental, but it was the best thing for these – and, eventually, all – burn victims.

As they repeated the procedure on the second patient, Bonnie Savage's voice came over Diane Cunningham's wireless headset.

"Yes, Bonnie," she answered.

"How's it going down there?"

"We've got one patient in the treatment tank, and we're prepping the other."

"Okay. We're bringing a couple more up from the surface. Be ready."

Diane swallowed. "We will be. Thanks." And she disconnected.

DOT'S JOURNAL:

We're halfway through our third week, and it looks like the wildfires are getting close to under control. Things aren't too exciting right at the moment, so I thought I'd reflect a bit on some of the really cool things that have happened.

This was the first big test of the stasis chambers, and all the reports I've heard say they've performed with flying colors! Most of the routine medical cases were handled by Doc's crew on the ground, but the serious ones were flown up to the *Orion* to be taken care of by Doctor Cunningham's staff. Because of the stasis chambers, nobody was running around trying to beat the clock. Things were taken care of in an orderly fashion. There were only a couple of patients who needed special care elsewhere; Hugo personally delivered them to medical facilities in the area, and made quite sure they would be well taken care of – with a combination of our unlimited funds and Hugo's personality, nobody gave us any trouble.

Hugo's really something. I remember first meeting him at Clark and Bonnie's wedding, when he gave me an example of his strength by lifting a helicopter with one hand. He did it so easily, I was suspicious; I wondered if it had been some sort of trick, set up in advance as a practical joke on me. But it was very real. And, having seen him in action these last few days, I am thoroughly convinced he's everything people have said of him. And I am awed by what God has done in his life. For a man who has the power to do anything he wants to, choosing the humble life of a missionary is truly impressive.

But, then, there are few things in this new chapter of our lives that isn't impressive, as we see God working in our lives on a daily basis. Two big examples are Ed Elric and his younger brother Al. They handle Navigation and Ops for the *Orion*, and I would guess they spend more time in prayer than any two members of this crew.

When the *Orion* first set sail, the Situation Room dictated our course, taking us from crisis to crisis. However, it didn't take long, traversing the globe like some International Rescue wannabees. We were running ourselves ragged.

Finally, the voice of reason came from my Granddad Monk. He pointed out that, for the most part, wherever we've gone, adventure followed. He said that we attracted trouble like iron filings were attracted to a magnet.

And he's been right. Even when we haven't wanted it, God had other plans.

Looking back on everything we've gone through in the last ten years, I don't know if that was God's plan from the beginning, but we've never needed to seek out ways to help – they just fell in our laps as we went about our normal lives.

So we stopped listening to the crises and started listening to God. And that brought us to the Elric brothers.

When we're not on the job, Orion is constantly moving, cruising the skies around the world. There are many factors that determine where we go next. But like the little rudder that controls the huge ship, we have the two men who handle Navigation and Ops – Ed and Al Elric. Of all the crew, they seem to be the most in sync with each other and God's leading. And their devotion to Jesus Christ is an inspiration to us all.

So in the end, it becomes their responsibility to get us where God wants us to go. And, so far, they're doing a bang-up job. Sure, there are always exceptions to the rule – Hugo's distress call, for example – but the Elric brothers are following God's leading. And we have faith that God would open the doors of ministry.

Before I forget, I've got to share something cool here. One of Doctor Cunningham's burn patients was a six-year-old girl by the name of K'Lee. She was one of the first brought up here, and they had her for a week in the therapeutic bath. Talk about your medical miracles! The difference in her is amazing! <insert file **K_Lee before.jpg, K_Lee after.jpg**> When she was moved to the recovery area, she was a bit scared. But Doctor Cunningham turned it around with a familiar gift ... a teddy bear. The name of the bear was Hattie, and had short brown fur. That's the bear she's holding in the 'after' picture.

One last thing I want to mention. Something my translator picked up from a tribal chief addressing a group of young men. <insert file **34o4FS.mp3**>

Translation begins: "Listen closely, my brothers. Let the events of this day be spoken of for generations. Let them speak of the angels who came down from the skies, pulling our kinsmen out of danger and flying them to safety, magically holding back the fire and conquering it, and healing our people from their city in the sky. Though we know not all their names, we will forever speak of them as brave kinsmen." Translation ends.

God is good.

Twenty-three days after arriving over Africa, we said our farewells to a grateful Hugo Danner and prepared to get under way. But before we did, we took advantage of one of Drake's European bases to refresh our supplies and take in a bit of local shore leave.

Dot and I flew down to Paris, where we spent a couple of days testing her newly-developed fluency in French. Apart from the incident where she ordered a 'cheese-covered umbrella with a side of bees', she did great, and I was proud of her.

CHAPTER THREE

The Orion

The clock radio on my bedside table woke me up to Michael W. Smith's *Pray for Me*. I smiled at the classic favorite.

I stretched my arms up and out. I reached for my wife, but touched nothing but pillow.

"*Sebastian*," I called out. "Where's Dot?"

"She's in the gym, sir," came a voice seemingly from out of nowhere. "She didn't want to disturb you."

"Thanks."

I wasn't surprised to be conversing with an ethereal voice. *Sebastian* was the AI avatar for the *Orion*, in the same way *Myrna* was for our RV. I really thought it was something that they had actually gotten permission to use the voice of actor Morgan Freeman for *Sebastian*; he had one of those voices that made everything he said sound so *personal*.

I slid out of bed. I assumed there had been no new emergencies overnight, so went about my usual morning routine. "*Sebastian*, could you set me up with some oatmeal and a couple slices of toast?"

"Milk or juice, sir?" he asked, anticipating my preferences.

"Both, please," I replied, wishing he wouldn't keep calling me *sir*. "Cranberry juice. Thanks."

I walked to the kitchen by way of the den, so I could check my email and grab my satellite cell phone from its charger. By the time I was done, *Sebastian* had breakfast ready. One wall of the kitchen had a flat-screen plasma display. As I munched, I called up the main display from the Situation Room and got the headlines. There was a tropical storm near the Gulf of Mexico, some heavy sandstorm activity in Kansas – I called up a quick prayer for Renny and Amanda – and a 4.3 quake in northern Siberia. Since our position wasn't anywhere close to those locations, I figured the local authorities were handling things well enough.

I stepped out of the front door of my house, reminding myself that I didn't need to lock it; aboard the *Orion*, it just wasn't necessary. A ray of sunlight crossed my face, bringing a quick burst of warmth to my cheeks. Then, just as quickly, the ray of sunlight became a cold shadow, and I looked up to see dark clouds overhead. *Rain*, I observed.

I went around back and disconnected the charger from the golf cart. I knew that there were quicker ways to get from the center dome to the Bridge, but I wasn't in a hurry. Besides, taking the 'scenic route' brought me closer to the people who kept this floating city running.

Rather than the cold, sterile environment of a space station, the *Orion's* center dome reminded me a bit of the habitats from the 1971 Bruce Dern movie *Silent Running*. That was pretty much done for our benefit. The rest of the crew was stationed here on a rotational basis, but we few were permanent residents. It was very nice, with real grass and trees, and even birds. One quarter of the center dome contained a grove of trees, with a manmade pond and an actual waterfall; it was fun to swim there, and was a favorite place for the triplets to play hide-and-seek. There were actual houses built here, too – one for me and Dot, one for Clark and Bonnie and the kids, and a couple of smaller ones for guests to stay in. Some people would say that it was a waste of space, but I'm glad nobody listened to them.

Where I was now was on the access road just inside the dome that doubled as a jogging track; I curved along the road until I reached the ramp access to the service level below.

I was thankful that whoever came up with the design of this platform hadn't scrimped on corridor width. At least on this level, there was quite enough room to accommodate two lanes of traffic *plus* pedestrians. And, since speed wasn't an issue, I could take my time and interact with the men and women around me. I was impressed at the number of workers who waved at me, called me by my first name, or addressed me as "Pastor Perry", more of them knew me than I knew them. That would change in time, I reminded myself.

Starting here, I thought as I slowed down near a maintenance crew working on a section of wall.

"Hey, Hal!" I called out, recognizing the crew chief.

He gave me a brief wave as he turned to face me. "Hey, Mr. Perry!"

"What's up?" I inquired.

Hal grunted. "It's these blasted high-tech wall panels! One minnit it's normal, and the next minnit it's pink with green polka-dots. It's embarrassin', Mr. Perry!"

I gave him a smile. "You're a miracle worker, Hal," I reminded him. "You'll work it out."

I really appreciated all those who'd designed this rig. Down below, things were more function-over-fashion, simple and practical. But on this level, things were more relaxed, and could at times be as opulent as a luxury liner. Take the wall panels for example. At the moment – sans Hal's 'problem panel' – the walls were decorated in a tasteful pastel with a thick horizontal line mid-way down. But that could change in an instant. The walls were made of a substance that acted like flat screen computer monitors, with the capability of being 'programmed' accordingly. In the event of a local emergency, or a situation where the *Orion* was in danger, the walls would change to a military grey. It was also interactive; it could tell personnel where there was danger so they could avoid it, inform troops of hot spots and opposition strength, or direct maintenance crews to damaged areas.

"Thanks," Hal acknowledged, receiving the encouragement.

I excused myself and drove around them, continuing ahead to a bank of elevators at the end of the long corridor. I pulled into a convenient parking spot and stepped into the first available elevator.

"*Bridge*," I commanded, and the doors closed.

"Unca Perry!"

Three-year-old Jenny ran into my arms for a bear hug. I returned the hug from my favorite 'niece', then carried her as I headed for the command circle.

The bridge walls were composed of the same material as the ones Hal and his crew were working with, and had looked a lot more unadorned while we were helping Hugo with the wildfires.

It wasn't that way now. It was more casual now. I take that back. It was more than just casual. It was ... well ... 'Fisher-Price meets the Starship Enterprise.' The walls were dotted with colorful

flowers, balloons, teddy bears, and butterflies. A Mozart symphony filtered in lightly through multiple speakers. The overall atmosphere was relaxing and comfortable.

And, for the moment, Bonnie wasn't 'Commander Savage' ... she was the 'House Mom'. And the *Orion* was a family.

As Jenny nuzzled comfortably into my shoulder, I walked over and carefully lowered myself into the First Officer's chair.

"You *are* her favorite," Bonnie softly stated, smiling.

I smiled back. "It's mutual."

Ahead, sitting at Navigation and Ops were brothers Ed and Al Elric. Jason was sitting on Ed's knee, as the older brother pointed to the various controls and identified them to the intently curious child.

"Where's Clark?" I asked Bonnie.

"Sleeping in," she answered. "He decided to do some late-night ministering in Sydney."

"Disguised?"

"You know him," she nodded. "He's like a kid when it comes to disguises. Besides, a lot more people know him on sight now. He wants Jesus Christ to be the message, not Doc Savage. Where's Dot – in the gym again?"

I nodded. "I checked the headlines from the Sit Room before I came down here. No big crises, thank God."

"Yeah," she acknowledged distantly. "But I kinda wonder about that quake in Siberia. Aftershocks."

"All we can do is watch and pray."

Bonnie gave me a smile of confidence. Suddenly my cell phone buzzed for attention. I gently shifted Jenny to one shoulder and retrieved the phone. I glanced at the Caller ID, but didn't recognize the number. I answered it. "Hello?"

"Perry?" the voice was female, anxious. "Is that you?"

I didn't recognize the voice. "Speaking."

"It's Belinda – Belinda Kandell!"

That was a name I hadn't heard it a *long* time. No wonder I hadn't recognized it. "Linda! How are you?"

"I need your help, Perry!" she said. "It's Jim ... he's dead!"

My breath caught in my throat. I remembered Jim Kandell; at one time, he'd been my closest friend. "I'm sorry, Linda. What happened?"

"They said it was an accident, but I don't believe them!" She sounded close to hysterics.

"Who said?" I tried to calmly draw out the facts, as Bonnie looked on with concern. "Who said it was an accident?"

"Pastor Steve and the elders!"

At that, my body temperature dropped to sub-zero. "Where are you?"

Bonnie quietly got up from her seat. Seeing my stress, she took Jenny from me. Stopping briefly to say something to Al Elric, she carried Jenny into the nursery.

"Montana," Linda replied. "Miner's Bowl. I need your help, Perry! They won't let me leave!"

I didn't need to ask who 'they' were; I knew. "I'm on my way! Hang in there, okay?"

"I'll try." The tone of her voice reflected her relief. "Thanks."

She disconnected.

As I sat there silently, I was an emotional Mixmaster. I was also starting to feel light-headed, as if my blood pressure had taken a sudden nose-dive. I closed my eyes. I couldn't describe what was going on inside of me, except to say that – in the midst of my anger and fear – a prayer pushed its way through to me.

It prayed for safety and protection for Linda.

When I opened my eyes, Bonnie had returned to her command seat, and was looking at me with concern.

"Al?" she asked aside.

"Miner's Bowl, Montana," he responded. "Location plotted and course laid in."

"Let's go," Bonnie commanded.

I looked at Bonnie. "Thanks."

She nodded back. "What's up?"

"An old friend of mine, from my ... previous church. He's dead."

"I'm sorry," she sympathized. "The woman – Linda?"

"His wife," I filled in the blank. "She's in trouble. I need to talk to Clark."

"Go," she gently instructed. "I'll call ahead and make sure he's up."

"Thanks," I repeated, standing and heading for the elevator.

Clark was in a bathrobe, running a towel through his wet hair, when I arrived at their house. He gestured for me to have a seat in the living room. He had to ask me twice if I wanted to pray, because I was too agitated to hear it the first time. Once I realized what he'd said, I couldn't refuse it. After we prayed – mostly *he* prayed, but I agreed – I told him about the call.

"She needs our help," he concluded. "So what can you tell me about this group?"

I opened my mouth, but didn't know what to say. I guess I'd been avoiding this moment from when I left the Bridge. I knew I could trust Clark explicitly and there was nothing to fear. I stared down at the floor for several seconds before I finally spoke.

"It started with Barbara."

"Your first wife, before you became a Christian."

I nodded. "As you know, I was an abuser. Eventually Barbara had me thrown in jail for Domestic Violence." I sighed. "And I deserved it. Anyhow, that's where I met Pastor Steve. He was doing a jail ministry there at the time. I was arrested on a Saturday and had nobody who could foot my bail. So I was there that Sunday. I wasn't into religion at the time, but I knew I couldn't go another day the way I was. So I went to Sunday services. I sat in the back, barely paying attention. But then Pastor Steve got up to preach." My gaze turned away from Clark as I recalled all of the details of that day. "He didn't look like your average Bible-thumper. He was over six feet tall and wore motorcycle leathers. He reminded me of a Paul Bunyan statue they used to have over on Interstate in Portland, minus the axe. And then when he talked ... there was something about the way he spoke, the depth of his conviction, the sharpness of his attitude. He didn't pull any punches. It caught my attention and held it. And when he talked ... it was like he was talking just to me."

Clark was smiling thinly. "Sounds like when you preached to *me* that day."

"*Really?*" I smiled back. "Anyhow, when he gave the altar call, I went forward. Later, we talked. I was so ashamed of myself, of what I had done ... but there was no condemnation in his voice. He just encouraged me." I chuckled. "He visited me as often as he could, and he was even able to get one of those little New Testaments to me *while* I was still in there."

"Impressive," commented Clark.

"Yes, it was. When I got out of jail, I started going to his church. It was like nothing I'd ever seen. I started growing in my faith, putting my past behind me – especially the abuse. Barbara saw the changes, and I persuaded her to come with me.

"Before I go on, I've got to give you a little background on my ex-wife. At one time, she'd been what you'd call 'spiritual'. To her, religion was like a heavy coat you'd only wear only when the weather got bad. She'd indulge in religious music, but only the types you'd see advertised on TV – Christy Lane, Elvis – that type. She'd watch the holiday movies, like *The Ten Commandments* and *It's A Wonderful Life*. She'd even go to a church on Easter if the weather was nice, but it never really influenced how we lived. That's why I was kinda surprised when she accepted my

invitation to come to Pastor Steve's church. And even more surprised when she started liking what he had to say ... up until he started preaching about the roles of men and women in the family."

"Barefoot and pregnant?" Clark observed with a hint of a grin.

"You're not far off. Pastor Steve stressed that the wife's role was to be submissive to her husband, and *that* was to be the full extent of her existence. And that didn't sit well with Barbara. Anytime he preached on that, she'd sit, cross her arms in front of her, and grunt. And then, when we were back home, I'd hear her side of it loudly and clearly. I couldn't fight back. Since she'd thrown me in jail once before, all it would take would be one phone call to throw me back in. Barbara finally stopped coming – and, personally, I was glad. All she'd do is put down Pastor Steve and Christianity in general.

"Finally, she gave me her ultimatum: quit Pastor Steve's church, or she'd leave me."

Clark grimaced and grunted empathetically.

"It was one of the hardest decisions I ever made," I continued. "I mean, Barbara was my *wife*. But so many changes had happened in me because of Pastor Steve's church – I'd become a Christian there, I had new direction and purpose in my life, I had friends there. So I stood up to Barbara, hoping and praying she'd see the truth and stay." I paused. "Instead she hit me with a restraining order and kicked me out of our apartment."

"What did you do?"

"At the time, Pastor Steve and a few others – mostly street people and his wife Ginger – had been living on a ranch in Estacada. They took me in and helped me get through the divorce. It was rough, but having them around me was a Godsend. And, needless to say, it was a time where I couldn't do much else but press into God. When I wasn't working, I was into my Bible, or down on the streets sharing what God was doing in my life – the good *and* the bad.

"Unfortunately, while this was all going on with me, *something* happened to Pastor Steve," I said ominously. "Now, he'd always been into Revelation and prophecies of the End-Times. He was always preaching on it, to us or to those on the streets. But somehow, *somewhere*, he got ahold of a videotape, and everything seemed to shift. I don't know where he found it, but it changed his whole outlook on the End-Times. He claimed that the video contained concrete evidence of how the 'one world government' was preparing to imprison Christians once the Antichrist took power."

"Such as ...?" Clark probed curiously.

"Such as secret concentration camps being built across America to contain Christians, complete with guillotines," I stated calmly. "I'm not exactly sure; I refused to watch the video."

"Why?"

"Because I saw what everybody else's reaction was: they came away terrified. On top of that, God kept putting 2nd Timothy 1:7 on my heart: *'For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.'*" I paused. "It didn't make sense. Why would God provide this video that would deliberately put the spirit of fear in the others?"

"Were there others who avoided watching the video?"

"I don't know. There were a lot of things that weren't talked about. And when everybody else was so gung-ho about the video, why should anyone want to admit they were otherwise? Anyhow, in the meantime, this video was making a change in people. Somebody called it a 'prophetic renaissance'. Left and right, people were having their own 'prophetic' dreams of the End-Times – all apparently lining up with the video, of course."

"No surprise there," observed Clark. "The video put such strong images in their minds that their subconscious inserted it into their dreams."

"Yeah, that's the way I saw it, too. Anyhow, I don't know if I was the only one who saw all this coming down or what, but I didn't want to be part of it. I knew that there was no reasoning with Pastor Steve – or anybody in the church at that time. So I decided to leave. It took a lot of prayer and support from my friends Mark and Karen Eidemiller; they took me in when I moved off of the ranch. They were also the ones who introduced me to the Everlasting Missionary Baptist Church."

"Willy's church," Clark provided, smiling. "What was Pastor Steve's response?"

I gave a bitter laugh. "He declared that I was in rebellion against God, and had me marked from the body. Now, I'd been in his church long enough to see others marked, but I had done nothing but disagree with him."

"*Marked*," Clark repeated. "Is that anything like excommunication?"

"Same concept, different term. Have you ever studied about the concept of the 'hedge of thorns'?"

"Yes. It's kind of like a spiritual barbed-wire fence, isn't it?"

"Exactly. It's meant to keep something in from getting out, or out from getting in. In the book of Hosea, it's like a severe form of aversion therapy. First, God instructed the prophet Hosea to marry a prostitute named Gomer and have children by her."

"Hosea represented God, and Gomer represented the nation of Israel who'd gone whoring after false gods."

"Right," I concurred. "God said He would put a hedge of thorns around her so she wouldn't find any pleasure in her sin. Also, in First Corinthians, Paul instructs the church to stop covering for a fornicator – to symbolically turn him over to Satan, '*so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord.*'"

"Tough love," summarized Clark. "If it causes them torment every time they engage in sin, they'll be more motivated to turn back to God."

"Yes. But the key to 'marking' someone comes from Matthew 18, as Jesus outlines the procedures for confronting a brother in sin. '*If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.*' At that point, the

person is marked, and everybody is instructed to pray a hedge of thorns around him – turn up the heat, so to speak." I paused. "Like I said, I'd seen others marked. I'd also seen them come back in brokenness and repentance."

"But that's not what they did to you."

"Hardly." I shook my head slowly. "They marked me, so to speak, without 'due process'. I was never confronted with the alleged 'sins of my rebellion'. I just heard it through a third party that I'd been declared to be in rebellion, and had been marked from the body."

"It does have a bizarre logic to it," Clark commented. "You'd left his church, so you were outside of his sphere of influence. If any others would've talked to you, they might've learned the truth you learned, and that would've endangered his power base. So you were marked, and everybody else was instructed not to even communicate with you." He paused. "*Ingenious.*"

"That's not exactly how *I*'d put it," I replied dryly. "But it did make me wonder about all the others who had been marked. I wonder how many of them knew too much."

"So, they left you alone?"

"For the most part. Occasionally I'd get a crank call in the middle of the night, or find an obscene message on my voicemail. There was nothing I could point my finger at, but I suspected. And then, one day, I heard that they weren't in Oregon anymore. And that was it ... until now."

"Bonnie told me we're on our way. We'll likely have satellite coverage long before we actually arrive. It'll give us an idea of what to expect."

I nodded.

"We'll get your friend out of there," Clark said, reassuringly.

Of that I had no doubt.

CHAPTER FOUR

Miner's Bowl, Montana
Morning

How it was created, only God knew.

Perhaps, when the earth was shapeless and void, God threw a great rock at the ground – sending molten lava splashing high around the impact crater – then froze it in place before it could settle back. The rock then settled into the ground, providing valuable minerals for those who would find them later.

In the late 1800's, it was named *Miner's Bowl*, due to the high walls surrounding its bowl-shaped valley. It was surrounded by four small towns, three of which were still inhabited. The valley had been desolate and abandoned for some time, until *he* and his group moved in. Now there was life in the valley, more beautiful than anyone could've ever imagined.

In the midst of that valley was an octagonal structure. It was called the tabernacle, and it had been the first new building the people had erected in their new land. At this time of the day, as the sun was just greeting the valley, everyone gathered together in the tabernacle to give praise to the God who provided it all.

Among the worshippers was Belinda Kandell.

As she dutifully joined the queue, she tried to emulate the happy and expectant looks on the other's faces. *Yeah*, she thought, *everybody loves to get together*. It was very hard for her to feel that way right now.

Ahead, Elder Archie Hazelwood held the door open for the others; he was a tall, brawny man, who'd been a bar bouncer before coming to the Lord. Belinda thought she caught a look in his eye that told her he was doing more than greeting people. *He's probably taking notes*, she thought, *making sure everyone is behaving like we're supposed to*. He gave everybody a smile she thought made him look like a hyena.

"Sister Belinda," he greeted as she came to the door.

"Elder," she addressed with a half-smile suitable from someone who'd lost a loved one, and continued inside.

She made her way to her seat – the same seat where she and Jim sat as long as they'd been here – and eased onto the hard wooden pew. *Padded pews weren't of God*, her mind echoed their reasoning. *Why should we worship Jesus in luxury after all the suffering He did for us?*

She could hear the others around her, greeting one another and chatting about the new day. But she didn't feel like joining them.

The tabernacle had been constructed like a theater-in-the-round, with a raised stage in the center, and the rows of pews surrounding it looked like the rings of a target. Indirect lighting came from overhead skylights, bright enough not to necessitate additional lighting from oil lanterns. There were no windows in the walls, nothing to distract anyone from the stage.

There was an order to the seating that had been carved into stone over the years. Families sat at the back, near the doors; should any children start making a fuss in the midst of the service, they could be extracted quickly, disciplined efficiently, and returned without distracting the others. A single aisle, covered in a red carpet, stretched from a small anteroom, up a ramp to the stage. On either side of the ramp, sitting like attentive lap dogs, were Adam and Maya.

Nobody talked to her; she interpreted their silence as respect in her time of mourning. It was just as well, since she didn't really feel like talking.

The doors closed to the tabernacle; there was a certain finality to the sound. Nobody would be late; they knew what the punishment was for tardiness – they and their family would be brought before the rest of the congregation and publicly chastened for being slack and lazy.

The elders joined their families, and the room got quiet.

The door of the anteroom opened with a gentle squeak, and Pastor Steve Winter strode into the room. His tall, muscular frame was dressed in coveralls and a denim work shirt. He smiled at the

congregation as he approached the stage, reaching out a hand to receive his guitar, a steel *Dobro*. With practiced ease, he slung the guitar strap around him as he stepped onto the stage and eased onto a wooden barstool.

No one made a sound, looking forward to Pastor Steve's first move.

He plucked at his guitar, then adjusted the tuning while beaming out a warm smile to all those who followed his every move. He gently strummed the steel resonator guitar, randomly shifting chords and humming a few notes casually. Then, without preamble, he started singing an old familiar hymn. The congregation jumped in and soon the tabernacle was filled with the sound of worship and praise. Songbooks weren't needed; all of the songs had long since been committed to memory.

The singing was one of the few things that Belinda really enjoyed, as she joined in.

As the tune came to a close, the congregation burst into spontaneous praise – hands shot skyward and voices echoed words of adoration to God. Pastor Steve waited a few seconds before moving into the next song. This continued for twenty minutes. Finally, the big man smoothly removed the guitar strap from around him and handed the instrument over to Adam, who received it with almost a holy reverence.

A hush fell over the congregation as they waited for Pastor Steve to speak.

"PRAISE THE LORD!"

The audience echoed his booming words.

"PRAISE THE LORD!"

The audience repeated, with even more fervor.

"PRAISE THE LORD!"

The audience repeated, almost screaming it.

The big man smiled and nodded. ***"God is good, isn't He?"***

The audience responded with resounding affirmation, voicing echoes of praise.

The big man became silent, and the congregation went silent with him, locked onto him with rapt fascination.

"Have any of you ever thought about ***murder?***" he asked, slowly and deliberately.

The congregation responded with overwhelming denials and violent shakes of heads.

His posture relaxed slightly. Then he slowly posed the question, "Have any of you ever been ***angry*** at your brother?"

There were a few honest – and ashamed – affirmations from the audience.

"But," the big man continued in a softer tone, "doesn't the **Word** say that, if we've been angry at our brother, it's just as if we've wanted to **murder** him?"

The audience reluctantly agreed with him.

"And doesn't it also say that if we have anger against a brother, we are separated from God? Do **you** want to be separated from God?"

"**NO!**" they cried in unison.

"Well ... I'm sure glad to hear that," he commented, his smile melting some of the tension. "What should we do when we start to feel anger towards a brother?"

"**We need to repent!**" a man answered loudly, with conviction.

"Repent to whom?"

"To God, then to our brother!" said another man.

"Exactly," the big man smiled. "What keeps us from repenting to our brother?"

"**Pride**," answered Deanna Robertson exuberantly from the back.

The service abruptly came to a screeching halt.

Belinda grimaced within herself, feeling sorry for Deanna.

"Men ... *only*," said Pastor Steve in a low voice, his expression judgmental. "Women are to remain silent in the church **except** when praising God."

"Pride," quickly repeated Elder Ray Poole.

"Correct, *Brother* Poole," Pastor Steve acknowledged him. "Pride keeps us from doing what is right." He paused. "God has given us this valley of safety, and the symbols of His protection. While the rest of the world burns with the wrath of the Savior, we are safe under his wings. But pride is a cancer that can destroy even His own people, eating them from the inside. What do you do with a cancer when you find it?"

"You cut it out!" answered another man.

"Exactly! You cut it out. If you don't cut it out, it'll continue to grow until it kills the body. Have you ever seen someone dying of cancer? It's not pretty. There's a lot of pain ... a LOT of pain. And that's what happens when pride eats at us. Pride left unchecked eats at the body, destroys people, destroys the Body." He paused. "What should we do when we see pride in ourselves?"

"**Cut it out!**" most of the men cried out.

"How?"

There were a few moments of uncertain silence as the big man's words hung in the air.

"You *can't* do it," he answered his own question. "You aren't strong enough! You've got to fall to your face and cry out to God to take it *from* you! And don't get up until it's *gone*!"

The reaction from the congregation was spontaneous. Several people chimed in with affirmations of "Amen!" and "Thank You, Lord!" A few faces were tearful, and others spontaneously dropped to their knees and began begging God for forgiveness.

This hadn't been the first time Belinda had seen Pastor Steve produce this effect from the congregation. It was a common tactic to bring the people into line. She lowered her head to avoid the elders' scrutiny, and watched Pastor Steve's performance. His arms were high in the air, as he waited for things to build. Then he loudly dropped to his knees, the sound of the impact echoing briefly, and began praying loudly and tearfully. His emotion spread like a wildfire, quickly sweeping through the congregation.

All it did for her was make her want to leave there as quickly as possible. But that wasn't possible yet. Not until Perry arrived. *Thank God for Perry.*

Pastor Steve's emotional upheaval subsided after a few minutes. He finished the morning service with a group prayer, and then dismissed the congregation.

As Belinda left the tabernacle with the rest, many of the other wives approached her with gentle embraces and kind words. She appreciated their concern, but it didn't lessen her desires to leave this valley.

"Sister Kandell?"

She turned to see Elder Ray Poole. He smiled at her.

"Hello, Ray," she returned.

"How are you feeling?" He actually sounded concerned.

"As well as can be expected," she admitted.

"Pastor Steve would like to talk to you."

"Certainly," she agreed, and followed Ray to the house next to the Tabernacle, adjacent to the center of the valley.

He did not make conversation as they proceeded into the house and stood outside the Parlor. The heavy wooden double doors were closed, and they could hear faint voices from within. Belinda couldn't make out what was being said by those inside, but the tone was unmistakable; it had the harsh, brutal, and accusatory sounds of being reprimanded in the Principal's Office.

Finally, there was a moment of silence, and the doors opened. A man and a woman came out; the woman was Deanna Robertson, the one who had spoken out of turn in services and had been publicly rebuked by Pastor Steve. She was crying uncontrollably. Her husband, Don, guided her out of the parlor, repeatedly apologizing, "It'll never happen again, sir! It'll never happen again!" They moved past Belinda and Ray, not acknowledging their presence as they hurried out of the house.

This, too, was not unfamiliar. The public chastening hadn't been enough for Pastor Steve. Her analogy of the Principal's Office hadn't been exaggerated. She hoped Deanna would be all right. But a shudder of fear crawled up Belinda's back, as she wondered for a moment if this private meeting had anything to do with her call of help to Perry.

"Come in, Sister Kandell," summoned Pastor Steve from within the parlor.

Belinda and Ray stepped into the room, and Ray closed the doors behind them. Pastor Steve stood before the left couch of three in a U formation in the room; he gestured her to have a seat on the center couch. Reluctantly, she complied. Ray Poole took a seat on the unused couch, and the three were seated.

"Is Deanna okay?" she asked innocently.

"Yes," Pastor Steve gently replied. "Sister Roberts simply needed to be *reminded* of her place." He paused. "I wanted to see how *you* were doing. Is there anything you need, anything we can do for you?"

"No," she softly replied. "I'm ... fine. Everybody's been very gracious to me."

"Good," he nodded. "I'm glad. However, a matter was brought to my attention that we need to discuss."

"What is it?"

"*This* was found in your quarters." He produced her cell phone.

"That's *mine*!" she blurted with shock and surprise. "Why did you search my quarters and take my things?"

Pastor Steve and Elder Ray Poole said nothing for a moment. Then Pastor Steve's voice lowered and he said, "Sister Belinda, do you hear your own words? '*These are MY things!*' '*It is MY quarters!*' Can you hear the *selfishness*? Whenever we give place to selfishness in our hearts, we step *farther* and *farther* from God. He wants us to be naked before him, to hold no secrets from him and from those he has given authority. Why is it that you feel that you must hide things from God?"

"I wasn't hiding them from *God*," she admitted in a moment of boldness. "I was hiding them from *you*."

"God has put me in authority in this valley," Pastor Steve reminded. "When you hide them from me, you *ARE* hiding them from God. With your husband gone, *we* are now your head covering. And, as your covering, our only concern is doing what we feel is in your best interest. But that puts the responsibility of submission on you. When you are not submitting to us as your covering, when you hold things back from those God has put in authority, you are exercising *rebellion* ... and you know full well that rebellion is as the sin of *witchcraft*. Do you want to be known as one who practices witchcraft?"

"No," she sighed, her boldness drained from her.

"When you hold things back from us ... when you behave selfishly ... you step out from under the covering that God has put over you, and you put yourself on the pathway of eternal separation from God."

Belinda felt beaten, pummeled by his verbal barrage. She knew there was no point in fighting back ... not now. "The cell phone was James'," she admitted. "I thought you knew about it. I'm sorry."

"We weren't aware he had a cell phone," Pastor Steve acknowledged, then probed deeper. "Did you use it?"

"I don't believe it even works anymore," she lied, praying they'd believe her. "It was ... just something to remind me of James. Can I have it back?"

"I'm afraid I cannot allow that," the big man shook his head, his eyes trained on her. "Let's pray." It was more than a suggestion when it came to him; no one could refuse him without incurring his subtle wrath.

She went along with him, but didn't pay much attention to his words. She couldn't stop the shock at the discovery of the phone, but she thanked God for the steps she had taken to cover her tracks. After finally getting through to Perry, and knowing he was on his way, she reformatted the phone's memory, drained its battery, and finally buried the sim card deep within a pile of compost. She wished she could've had the nerve to bury the entire phone in the compost pile, but, like she'd said, it was something to remember her husband by. And now it was gone, and she despised the man who had her hand in a death grip as he "spoke" to God.

But it wouldn't be long. Perry was on his way. She just needed to be patient a little while longer.

Elder Ray Poole escorted Belinda Kandell out of the house. When he returned to the parlor, Winter was sitting on the couch, staring at the cell phone in his hand.

"Was she lying?" Poole asked casually.

"Yes," answered Winter. "Somehow she did make contact with the outside world. She called Perry Liston."

"Who's he?"

"He used to be a member of the church, before we came here. He was found to be in rebellion and was marked."

"Why would she contact him?"

"He and Brother Kandell used to be friends."

"Is this Liston-person on his way here?"

Winter nodded. "I'm sure of it."

"What do we do when he shows up?"

"I'm ... not sure," he muttered vaguely, then looked up. "Besides, we got this place because it was well off the beaten path. Give him a week. In the meantime, I'll come up with something."

"Shall I dispose of the cell phone?"

"Yes." He handed it across.

"It never existed, sir," he promised, putting the device into a pocket. "Anything else?"

"Yes. Get Adam."

"Be right back." And Elder Poole left the room.

Adam Galen was in his 40's, but people thought he was a lot younger. Most of that was due to his short stature and youthful face. It helped him when he lived on the streets, enabling him to talk people out of their money or possessions so he could buy drugs.

But that was before Adam met God.

Here, in the Promised Land, he was one of the few who didn't have a specific job designation; he could pretty much go wherever he wanted, which made him available to help whenever someone was in need. It also gave him the ability to blend in and become invisible.

He had a special relationship with God.

He, like Moses, had been granted the privilege of talking face to face with God.

Like now.

When Elder Poole told him that HE wanted to see him, Adam dropped what he was doing and ran as fast as he could to HIS house. He dropped to his knees and knocked lightly on the parlor doors.

"Come in, Adam," came the voice from inside. HE always knew.

HE knew because HE was God.

Adam opened the doors and crawled in on hands and knees before HIS presence, his eyes averted. When HE taught in the tabernacle, of course, HE made his presence more human. Had HE not done that, HIS presence would've struck everyone else dead in an instant. After all, HE was a loving God.

"I am yours, O Lord!" Adam declared.

"Be seated, my son," HE directed.

Adam quickly squirmed around into a cross-legged position on the floor at HIS feet.

"You have done well, my son," HE commended Adam, smiling. "Do you remember when you saw Sister Kandell with the cell phone?"

"Yes, my Lord," he quickly replied. "I remember."

"Tell me again exactly what happened."

"I was in the field when I saw Sister Kandell walk towards the valley wall. She looked around – she didn't see me, for I was invisible – then she took out the cell phone. She looked at it and smiled, then dialed a number." He covered his face with his hands. "Forgive me ... I did not see what the number was."

"That's all right," HE absolved Adam. "Continue."

"I'd seen her in that place for several days in a row. I-I didn't think anything of it because I ... I thought she was just working off her grief at the death of her husband."

"You did fine," Winter smiled patiently. "Continue."

"She said a name: *'Perry.'* Then she asked, *'Is that you?'* Then she identified herself, and said, *'I need your help, Perry! Jim's dead!'* She paused, then she said, *'They said it was an accident, but I don't believe them!'* She paused again, then she said, *'Pastor Steve and the elders!'* She paused again, then she said, *'Montana. Miner's Bowl. I need your help, Perry! They won't let me leave!'* She let out a sigh, then she said, *'Okay, thanks.'* She pushed some buttons on the cell phone, and put it back in her pocket. After her work, she returned to her quarters. I waited until she was gone, then searched her quarters for the cell phone; I found it in a drawer. I left it there and summoned the elders."

He lowered his head in piety.

"You have done well, my good and faithful servant," HE praised Adam, smiling from HIS holy seat. "Thank you. Continue to watch her, my son. Do not be seen."

"I am invisible when I do Thy will," Adam declared.

"Go now."

Adam left the room as he had entered – on his hands and knees – until he was outside the parlor. The doors closed themselves behind him.

Adam Galen was certain he glowed with the presence of God, as Moses had. Others couldn't see this, however. That was okay, he realized. God moves in mysterious ways.

As he disappeared into the afternoon to carry out his holy instructions, his mind brought back to remembrance how he first met HIM. At that time, Adam had been living on the streets, abusing himself with drugs and drink and mocking God in his activities.

Then HE found Adam and preached unto him the Kingdom of God. HE didn't give up on Adam, despite the times he was gone for weeks at a time. Every time he returned, like the Prodigal Son, having realized his own wretchedness, HE was there to welcome him back with open arms.

That was when Adam realized 'Steven Winter' was God.

After all, he rationalized, there was no way HE could know all the details of his sin if he *wasn't* God. HE had been secretly at his side, walking with him in his sin. And when they finally left the sinful cities to come here to the Promised Land, the temptations came to him no more. He was finally free of them. And he could give all of him to HIM, to become HIS instrument.

Adam Galen was truly blessed among men.

After the subservient Adam left the room, Winter disconnected the hidden cord that allowed him to close the parlor doors. It was a simple deception, and, since Adam never looked up, he'd never know what was really happening.

Adam Galen made such a *good* pawn.

He'd been the classic troubled youth back when they'd first met, heavily into drugs and booze and whatever he had to do to get them. He'd steal from his own mother in order to feed his habits, and he'd vanish for weeks at a time. But there was something about him, something *special*, that made Winter keep close tracks on him through his street contacts.

When Adam would return, fully convinced that he'd gotten away with his garbage, Winter would give him a "Thou art the man!" speech, nailing him to the wall with every sinful detail. And, just as with King David, Adam didn't try to deny his wrongfulness, but it prompted him to repent with tears and brokenness.

And then he'd be accepted back into the fold, and shown the real love he never grew up with.

Winter's tactics proved successful. Adam's periods of running and screwing up grew shorter and shorter, and he found more and more comfort in staying with the church. And, as a side benefit, he and Winter developed a close father-son relationship.

Winter knew the relationship had grown into a hero worship. But he didn't feel it was wrong. *Nobody was being hurt by it*, he rationalized.

Winter suddenly heard something in his mind.

We need to talk.

Without hesitation, he rose and left the room. He swiftly walked through the valley to the caves leading to the mine entrance. Others saw him pass by, but they respected his haste.

He was being summoned by God, and nothing else mattered.

Winter paused to grab one of the wind-up lanterns resting on a shelf. It still had enough charge to guide him to the elevators. He stepped into the old wooden elevator car, closed the door, and pulled the rope to start the descent. There was a creak that he'd heard more than a few times over the years, but all it did was reinforce his faith in God's protection.

He passed the 90 seconds from the ground level to his 'special' level to fully wind the lantern. He raised the door and held the lantern high as he walked to a particular cavern. This was his prayer closet, and this was where God would talk to him.

"I am here, My Master," Winter announced, dropping to his knees.

The light.

Winter quickly switched off the lantern, throwing the cavern into sudden and total darkness. Then a gentle glow appeared in the middle of the room, growing and coalescing into the form of a man hovering above the ground. It was a tall, middle-aged man with a smiling, pudgy face. His voice was smooth and low, comforting, and he was dressed in an ordinary suit.

When God had first appeared to him in this form, it had confused him. But then He explained that this was not uncommon. After all, hadn't He been walking in the garden in the cool of the day when He confronted Adam and Eve with their nudity? And didn't He come as an angel to Jacob? And, in modern times, He'd come in a form that he would be more comfortable with, like George Burns had done with John Denver in the movie *Oh, God!* Since He could come in any form that He chose, He had chosen one that would be harmless to Winter.

Be seated, my son.

Winter shifted into a seated position on the stone ground, and God spoke to him.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Orion

Conference Room One

Conference Room One resembled a lecture hall, in that it had an open area in the center surrounded by a pitched floor so that those in the rear were elevated higher than those in front of them, giving them visual access to the stage. The stage was sunken, and encompassed some of the most state-of-the-art holographic gear in the world. Desks with flat-screen computers were provided for our use, but most of us preferred to bring our own personal high-tech toys.

I sat down next to Dot, a couple of rows up from the stage, and glanced around at the others present. Clark was there, of course, and Bonnie.

And then there was Major Bixby ... *ahem*, Major Raymond Louis Bixby. He was in his late 40's, with balding brown hair and a round, almost cherubic, face. He barely cracked a smile. And his idea of dressing casual was a camouflage BDU shirt and trousers, accented with a black beret.

Major Bixby had played a major part in taking Caroline Island back from Daniel Franklin – and, incidentally, rescuing yours truly from certain death – and was now the commander of our resident military force. He wasn't exactly the easiest person to get used to, mostly due to his orthodox militaristic attitude. But it was ... *interesting* ... when I finally got to see his more mischievous side.

"Perry?"

I looked over at Bonnie with a 'huh' expression.

"As I was saying," she emphasized, grinning at catching me daydreaming. "At our present course and speed, we'll reach Miner's Bowl after nightfall. However, we'll be in satellite range in about fifteen minutes. So, while we're waiting for this, I was hoping you might be able to give us a little more information about this group."

"Yeah," I replied, a bit reluctantly. "Sure."

I didn't like exposing myself like this. There were things from my past that were nobody's business but my own. But these people were willing to give 110% of themselves for me. So I got up and walked over to the glowing stage area.

"I'm not going to go into how I got to be part of Pastor Steve's group. Suffice it to say that I was at a low point in my personal life, and I became a Christian as a result of his preaching. But, over time, Pastor Steve was the one who changed. His teaching became distorted. For example: what did John the Baptist eat in the wilderness?"

"Locust and wild honey," casually replied Dot.

"Exactly," I pointed to her. "We're talking Sunday School stuff. And just *what* were the locusts?"

"Insects." This time Major Bixby answered. "More specifically, the swarming phase of short-horned grasshoppers of the family Acrididae. They're known for their ability to travel great distances in swarms, and have a tendency to rapidly strip fields and destroy crops."

"Nicely put, Major," I acknowledged and gave him a grin. "What do they taste like?"

"Chicken," he replied with a knowing grin.

"Chicken," I repeated. "Again, any kid who's been to Sunday School knows this stuff, right?"

The others affirmed my statement.

"Well, a few years back, Pastor Steve tried claiming that the 'locust' John ate was some sort of rare *tree* that existed back then in that region."

There was a scattering of laughter.

"That's how we reacted, too. We thought it was silly, and thought he was just trying to get us to be vegetarians," I elaborated. "But a few of us dared try to correct him. Even when we showed him printed proof that he was wrong, he flared up in anger at us, accused us of being 'pawns of the devil', used of Satan to try and disrupt the congregation." I shook my head sadly.

"And then there was the toilet paper affair." I paused to recall the details accurately. "At the time, I was living in a ministry house with several other men *and* women, and we all got along relatively well. Of course, we all shared the facilities – including the bathroom. Well, one evening Pastor Steve brought us all together and announced that toilet paper was being wasted – and that the women were responsible. Then he explained in *great* detail how men needed only one sheet – one little square – of toilet paper when doing 'Number Two', and didn't need *any* when doing 'Number One'.

I could see everyone was looking at me incredulously. I paused, then continued with the question, "Now, you may ask, where was all the toilet paper going? Well, Pastor Steve declared that the *women* were using 'handfuls of toilet paper' every time they used the facilities ... and he demanded that the women pay for all the toilet paper."

That elicited a few low chuckles. "The whole thing was totally absurd, like a scene from *The Caine Mutiny*. But this gives you an idea of what kind of lifestyle we were subjected to by the time I left. Eventually, the toilet paper incident blew over. But Pastor Steve's 'eccentricities' continued."

"Sounds like a serious abuse of power," observed Major Bixby.

"And then some," I agreed. "But we put up with it because we had a home and friends ... and a family." I gave them a thin smile. "And that brings us to the present. One of my closest friends, Jim Kandell, passed away in this Miner's Bowl place. His wife, Belinda, was somehow able to contact me by cell phone. She wants out, that's why we're here."

"*Attention!* We are now within satellite range of Miner's Bowl," announced Sebastian.

"Good timing," commented Bonnie, "Sebastian, dim the lights and bring up the display."

I returned to my seat as the room lights went down. In the middle of the room, the stage began to glow and coalesce into a distant landscape of lines and shadows. It sharpened into four arrays of buildings and other structures surrounding a natural formation that was amazing. It had the vague lines of a crater, but its walls were unnaturally high and had points that made it appear like the edge of an uneven picket fence. For a moment I wanted to ask if there wasn't a problem with the holographic imagers. But I kept silent; this was *real*.

"*Sebastian?*" addressed Bonnie.

"The geographic formation in the center is known as Miner's Bowl," the AI narrated smoothly. "There are four towns surrounding it: Shrader to the north, Pick Axe to the south, Creighton to the west, and Albany to the east." Block letters hung in the air over the towns, identifying the towns. "According to public records, Albany went bankrupt in 2006 and is currently deserted. And if I may speculate, there is a high possibility that the other towns will also fall if there is no significant economic improvement to the region."

While we looked on, Sebastian recited facts about each town, including their population and source of economy.

"Do any public records exist for Miner's Bowl?" asked Dot.

"There is a recorded deed of possession, in the name of *Victory Haven Inc.*, plus land and soil records."

"Why so few?"

"I know," I offered. "Pastor Steve believed that the Federal Government would come against the church in the End-Times. Therefore, he rationalized that they couldn't take the church's assets – meaning *his* stuff – if he placed all of the church's holdings into a corporation, with the elders as

its 'board of directors'. Personally, I believe he was just trying to keep the IRS from collecting taxes on his toys."

"*Sebastian*," asked Clark, "do you have enough information to be able to take us into the valley?"

"Yes."

The high cliff walls surrounding the valley became opaque, then semi-transparent, then became just an outline. The valley beyond was lush and verdant, and reminded me of the Valley of the Vanished.

"Impressive," commented Clark.

"How did Pastor Steve ever find it?" I mused aloud.

The image stopped rotating. It centered in at ground level. Then the walls of the valley faded away, allowing us to see the landscape within the valley itself.

"What th—?" I sputtered, my eyes narrowing. "Are those statues?"

"Not just any statues," answered Bixby. "They're golems."

"You mean, like in that old silent movie?" I probed.

"Yes," he acknowledged.

"*Sebastian*, what can you tell us about those golems?"

"There are forty-nine of them," reported the AI, "identical in size and mass, approximately 2.25 metric tons. They are positioned equidistantly across the floor of the valley to within a one meter margin of error."

"What kind of manpower would it take for that kind of accuracy?" asked Bonnie, looking to me.

I simply shook my head. "I haven't a clue. This whole thing with these statues are messing my mind up as it is. You see, Pastor Steve had always been *rabid* when it came to graven images; he wouldn't even let us keep photographs of family. Now unless he's had a *big* change of heart, I can't picture him having *anything* to do with 'graven images' ... and certainly nothing on *this* kind of scale."

Clark speculated, "Either the statues were created somewhere else and moved here, or they were formed right where they now stand. What could do that?"

"A lot of manpower?" offered Bonnie. "Like they built the Pyramids. *Sebastian*, what's the population count of Miner's Bowl?"

"Three hundred and twenty-five."

"Could that many people move that much rock?" Dot asked.

"With enough time, perhaps ..." I could see Clark was on the verge of trilling.

"I think it's time we consult an engineer," I suggested.

"**Holy cow!**" Renny exclaimed after we'd explained the situation. "Solid or hollow?"

Sebastian answered the question: "Solid."

"They're probably a couple of tons apiece."

"2.25 metric tons, to be exact," corrected Sebastian offhandedly.

"What would it take to move them and put them in place?" asked Clark.

"It wouldn't be easy, that's for sure," the big engineer conceded. "I can see three options. **One**: heavy haulers – cranes, flatbed trailers, or even some of those heavy lifting helicopters. **Two**: a lot of manpower, you know, like they used to move the blocks of the Pyramids."

"And the third way?" I asked, jumping the gun.

"Somebody **real** strong," he answered with a knowing tilt in his voice. "Like Hugo or Kal. Did you say there were some surrounding towns?"

Sebastian summarized the data on the three inhabited hamlets.

"Have you asked them?" inquired Renny.

"No," Clark answered. "We won't be in range until nightfall, our time."

"Okay," Renny acknowledged. "Any other questions?"

There was silence all around. Bonnie finally said, "Not until we get there. Thanks."

"Anytime. Keep me in the loop, willya? Sounds like an interesting adventure."

Adventure? I coughed lightly. This wasn't what I'd consider an adventure.

"Thanks, Renny," signed off Clark.

I moved closer to the holographic stage, staring intently at the golems.

"It just doesn't make sense," I muttered. "Why would he do something like this?"

"Maybe it would make more sense if we had more information about the significance of golems," commented Major Bixby. "I must admit, my own knowledge in this area is limited."

"I'm calling Johnny," announced Dot, pulling out her cell phone.

William Harper Littlejohn was sitting in his cottage on Professor's Row, looking out at the light of the evening sun occasionally bursting through the clouds over Lake Chaac. He was fascinated by the light shining on the ripples of the rain-pattered water. Suddenly, his attention was distracted by a familiar Gilbert and Sullivan melody chirping through his cell phone. Smiling, he didn't need to check the Caller ID, but immediately answered the call.

"Good evening, Dot! And to what do I owe this call?"

"We need your expertise. A friend of Perry's is in trouble. The *Orion* is on its way there now, but the satellite data of the destination shows something very odd."

"Odd?" Johnny repeated, his interest piqued. "How odd?"

"Golems ... forty-nine of them, in a remote valley in Montana."

Johnny's mouth opened; the sound followed a moment later. "Did you say *golems*? Statues?"

"Exactly. We need an archaeologist's perspective. If you can get to the telepresence chamber, you can see them for yourself."

"Okay, give me fifteen minutes. I'll call you from there." And he disconnected.

"Well, I'll be superamalgamated," he muttered under his breath.

He sat in his chair for several seconds, not moving. Then it was as if he'd become charged with new energy. He went over to a leather shoulder bag and carefully poured out the contents on the floor. Then he went over to an extensive library and selected three volumes from it. As he put the books in the bag, he heard the pitter-patter of rain on his roof; the books would be protected by the bag. He grabbed a coat for himself, slung the bag over a shoulder, and headed outside.

As he rode CSI's internal transit system, the Flea Run, he called his young friend and protégé Elena Inez Garcia de Ybarra, and instructed her to meet him at the telepresence lab. She beat him to the destination; he saw her talking to technician Freddy Maars. Johnny wasn't surprised to know that Freddy was already aware of the situation, and was making the connections with the *Orion*.

"It'll be just a couple more minutes, Prof," the sandy-haired tech informed them.

"What's going on, Professor?" the young Honduran woman asked.

"Golems, my dear," he replied with an amused grin.

He unloaded the leather bag on a nearby counter and began skimming through the books, dog-eared pages as he did. By the time Freddy had finished the connections with the *Orion*, Johnny had what he needed. They moved over to the rectangular viewport and saw an image coalescing into an odd geographical formation.

"Just a minute more, Professor," informed Freddy.

"Have you ever used this?" Johnny asked his protégé.

Elena, fascinated at the image beyond the viewport, shook her head.

"It's all pretty much intuitive. The concept is reminiscent of *Star Trek's* holodeck, but not nearly as advanced. As soon as you step into the chamber, it'll be as if you're there. You'll see them, and they'll be able to see you."

They approached the door, and it slid open. After they'd stepped inside, the door closed behind them. Elena turned around, but couldn't see the other side of the viewport. Instead, she turned and saw the others looking at her. She smiled and waved at them. "Hi, guys!"

Before them, in the middle of the chamber, was a smaller version of the landscape under scrutiny from the satellites. Johnny bent over slightly to examine the high walls of the valley.

"What did you call this place?" he asked.

"Miner's Bowl, Montana," informed Clark.

"Dot said you're on a rescue mission. You mentioned golems?"

"Yes," answered Bonnie. "*Sebastian?*"

The walls of the valley became transparent, and then expanded. Johnny and Elena passed through the hologram like ghosts, and the golems grew up around them. Elena's eyes grew wide, like a kid at Disneyland. Johnny, on the other hand, merely absorbed it all. But even this was too much for the elderly archaeologist, as he muttered, "Well, I'll be ... superamalgamated!"

"*Johnny!*" exclaimed Elena, distracted from the images around her. "You said you were going to stop saying that!"

"My dear Elena," quietly chided the elderly archaeologist. "That little habit has been around *far* longer than *you* have been. In other words, it'll take more than a stake to the heart to put this habit to rest."

The Honduran girl had been trying to break her mentor of this habit, but she was ready to concede that he would take it to the grave. So she tabled the discussion in lieu of the situation at hand, and turned her attention to the holographic statues surrounding her.

"So, Johnny," spoke up Bonnie. "What can you tell us about them?"

He turned to her. "Are you asking about this particular collection, or golems in general?"

"Golems in general," responded Clark, adding a smirk. "Beyond that would be nice."

"Well," he started as he stood next to one of them, "did you know that golems have Biblical roots?"

Many in the room admitted they didn't.

"Psalm 139:16," he cited. "*Thine eyes did see my substance, yet being unperfect; and in thy book all my members were written, which in continuance were fashioned, when as yet there was none of them.*" The word golem is used in the Bible to refer to an embryonic, unformed, or incomplete

substance: Psalm 139:16 uses the word 'gal'mi', meaning 'my unshaped form'. In Jewish legend, a golem is an image or form that's given life through a magical formula. It can also be associated with a robot or an automaton.

"Its present meaning developed during the Middle Ages, when legends arose of wise men who could instill life in effigies by the use of a charm. The creatures were sometimes believed to offer special protection to Jews. Although the creature was mighty in strength, supernatural in prescience, and ever alert in following the orders of his Cabalistic creator, so that he saved the Jews of Prague from many a calamity. The best-known of the golem stories concerned a Rabbi Löw of 16th-century Prague, who was said to have created a golem that he used as his servant. In the end, however, the creator decided to 'unmake' him because he had grown afraid of the creature he had created. You see, the golem, now with a mind of its own, got swept up in its own power and threatened the rest of the Jewish community."

"Sounds like Frankenstein's Monster," Dot observed.

Elena eagerly added, "It's certainly possible that the golem legend may have helped tweak Mary Shelley's already-*fertile* imagination." Mesmerized by her surroundings, she reached out to touch one of the stone statues, but her hand passed through it.

"This doesn't make sense!" Perry suddenly exclaimed. "Aren't golems a pagan symbol?"

"Usually," Johnny replied.

"Then how could Pastor Steve order these to be created?"

"Have you considered the possibility that he didn't?" asked the archaeologist.

Clark added to the train of thought. "You said it's been ten years since you last saw him, right?"

Perry nodded.

"Well, a lot can happen in ten years – most evidenced by the people in this very room. What if one of their people had been an artist, a stonecutter? I mean, even in the Bible, God used stonecutters to adorn the temples. What if this artist gave your pastor a *really* good argument, one he couldn't just back away from? And then the artist made the golems. *Voila!*"

"I don't know," admitted Perry. "That would have to be one *serious* argument to change his hard head."

"Anything's possible, Mr. Liston," Elena called out lightly. "Just look at us!"

It was a hard argument to dismiss.

"There's also something else to consider," offered Bonnie. "What if your old pastor isn't quite the evil mastermind you believe he is? I mean, we've seen enough leaders who've been influenced, even controlled, by those near to them." She paused. "Or what if God 'overhauled' his heart, and it's someone else pulling the strings?"

"But why *golems*?" Perry questioned. "Doesn't that seem somewhat ... bizarre?"

"At this junction," rationalized Johnny, "all we can do is speculate based on the information at hand. With more information will come a clearer understanding."

"Agreed," added Clark.

"Possibly," nodded Perry, repeating his mantra. "It just doesn't make sense."

Twenty minutes later, Johnny and Elena had left the discussion, and we were examining Miner's Bowl using thermal imaging.

"There are only four ways in and out of the valley through the rock walls," Bonnie noted. "The way they line up with the outlying towns, it looks like the towns may have been built to coincide with the closeness of the tunnels."

"When the mines in the valley were active," added Dot, "the towns probably serviced the valley, like some of the towns that were built during the California gold rush."

"*Sebastian*," I addressed. "Are those tunnels large enough for a truck to pass through?"

In answer to my query, Sebastian suddenly changed angles on the image, zooming in on one of the entrances. With the walls still transparent, several holographic vehicles materialized and, one-by-one, passed easily through the tunnel.

"Perry," addressed Major Bixby. "Would you say your former pastor was a survivalist?"

"Definitely," I confirmed.

"Can we assume he chose this location to survive the End-Times?"

"Probably."

"If that's the case, his logic is flawed. It may be a fortress from the outside, but the top is wide open. It's completely vulnerable from above."

"Could they build some sort of ... roof over the valley?" asked Dot.

"They've been there for ten years," I reminded her. "There would've been some evidence by now."

"What if *that* was the reason for the golems?" offered Bonnie. "The stone would act as a buffer against bombs, and could hinder paratroopers. Or it could limit the places where a helicopter could land."

"That's a stretch," countered Bixby.

"They could always retreat underground," suggested Dot. "Remember, they *are* over a mine."

"*Sebastian*," asked Bixby. "Does it look as if they've built rooms into the deeper mine shafts?"

"Thermal imaging to that depth is currently unavailable," the AI informed us.

"That would make sense, though," Bonnie commented. "Their main habitat is on the surface, but they are capable of moving things underground in case things got hot."

It was an interesting point.

Turning our attention to the valley itself, it appeared that most of the land had been taken up by farmland, including a good portion for vineyards. All the roads led to a town center, where an windowless octagonal building stood. Considering all, it was most likely that the building was some sort of church. Next to the town center was a house, presumably the residence for Pastor Steve. Then, scattered throughout the rest of the valley were buildings resembling multi-family dwellings and/or dormitories. The lack of barns and other surface sheds supported the theory that the caverns and mine shafts had been turned into storage areas.

It had a definite Amish influence to it. There didn't appear to be any motorized vehicles; even the farming equipment was animal-powered. There were several cows in a grazing field, along with a single bull. There was also a considerable number of chickens, turkeys, and a few sheep. The elevated methane levels suggested the manure was used for fuel as well as fertilizer for the many crops.

It was all very impressive.

"Now, as far as rescuing your friend," proposed Major Bixby, pressing ahead. "I suggest we take advantage of the closed design of the valley, and flood it with anesthetic gas in the middle of the night. Then, while everybody's sleeping peacefully, I can take a couple of my men down into the valley, grab the girl, and bring her back safe and sound." He paused, smiling. "In the morning, the rest of them wake up as if nothing has happened. All they'll know is that the girl is gone and their doors are all still locked from the inside."

"Faced with a mystery," I mused, "they'll eventually make up their own answer to what happened to her, and get on with their lives."

"Maybe not," countered Bonnie, expressing her concern. "What if they don't move on with their lives? What if they put the blame on the surrounding towns and turn on them?"

"Wait a minute," I spoke up. "I have a personal stake in this. A friend of mine was killed down there. I have a lot of questions. And I need to confront Pastor Steve. So I'm going down first – *alone*."

"With all due respect, Perry, I wouldn't advise it," warned Bixby. "It could be dangerous. At least don't go alone."

"I have to," I defended. "Belinda's expecting me to come alone. Others may know I'm coming, too, and they'll be expecting me to be alone. But I have no doubt that you'll keep me suitably covered."

After the meeting was dismissed, Major Bixby returned to his office.

The lights automatically sensed his presence and turned themselves on. He placed his tablet PC on his desk.

"Coffee," he said aloud.

From a nearby food dispenser – one of his few luxuries – a mug with the *Burpelson Air Force Base* logo filled precisely to one half inch from the lip. A portion of creamer and a teaspoon measure of sugar were added, and the mug was gently vibrated, blending the mixture perfectly.

"Synchronize with tablet," he instructed Sebastian, reaching for the coffee. "Main screen up. Display Seraphim roster."

A large flat-screen computer monitor on the wall facing his desk came to life, displaying a graphic file folder. Documents began to file out of the folder, arranging themselves in neat rows of icons, like soldiers preparing for inspection on a parade ground. Once the roster had presented itself, Bixby leaned back in his executive chair, took a sip of coffee, and mulled over the group.

"Isolate a group. Select by munitions experience, sort by years of experience."

The roster documents rearranged themselves on the left half of the screen. Several documents separated from the group and gathered on the right side of the screen. The larger group retreated back into the original folder. Finally, the smaller group rearranged itself and expanded to fill the screen. Each document now showed the picture and summary of a man or a woman.

Bixby stood with his coffee and walked over to the screen. He reached out and touched one of the documents with a well-trimmed fingernail; it expanded to fill the screen. He looked it over, then tapped it again to reduce it. He repeated the action with the others, examining their qualifications and whittling them down to a select five.

"Good," he said approvingly. "Sebastian, copy the selected files to my tablet. Then message each of them, requesting a meeting in my office in –" He glanced at the display on the screen. "– let's say forty-five minutes."

"Do you wish to prepare a presentation based on what was discussed in the meeting?"

Bixby's lips formed a thin smile. For a long time, he didn't like computers ... especially computers that tried to out-think him. But *this* one ... impressed him.

"Yes, thank you," he accepted.

The main screen began to show images of the earlier meeting.

"*Hence we know that the leader of the army is in charge of the lives of the people and the safety of the nation,*" he said aloud.

"Sun Tzu," responded Sebastian, identifying the quote. "The Art of War."

"Correct," smiled Bixby.

As head of security for *Orion*, the safety of everyone aboard was his primary concern. And right now, he didn't feel so good about the upcoming confrontation.

Awaiting them: several hundred people led by a charismatic, pseudo-Christian survivalist who's probably turned that valley into his very own private kingdom. Odds were high that he was a cult leader.

He'd seen it before, in 1993, on the scorched earth of the Branch Davidian compound, as he was part of the detail removing bodies of women and children killed in the massacre. If Perry's former pastor was a cult leader, he might not necessarily be rational. And the rest of the people could be just as irrational. Under the right circumstances, they could be more determined than a pit bull, and the right leader could turn his followers – a peaceful group of men and women – into a rioting mob or a military force.

Too many things could go quickly wrong. Too many people could be put in danger: first of all Perry, then the people in the valley, the surrounding towns, and the *Orion*.

And Perry was going down into the midst of it.

But he's not going alone, or unprotected, Bixby promised himself. Not if I can help it.

"Sebastian, open a new file. Cross-reference to Strategies. Given the circumstances that we are heading for, I'd like to do a little planning ahead ..."

"Expecting trouble?" asked the AI in the Morgan Freeman voice.

Bixby answered him from *The Art of War*, "*If you can strike few with many, you will thus minimize the number of those with whom you do battle.*"

CHAPTER SIX

The next morning, several trucks rolled into the towns around Miner's Bowl. The men and women identified themselves as from *The Savage Foundation*, and that they were in the area checking out seismological activity in the area. They stayed for most of the morning, taking readings and indirectly asking questions about the strangers who lived in Miner's Bowl.

The responses were interesting.

"Don't see them young fellas often anymore," said a woman in Pick Axe. "They used to come into my store and trade their wine for things. Last time was ... lemme see ... close onto a year and a half ago."

"If they intended on keepin' others outta that *fortress* o'theirs," said another, "they sure got themselves a big enough fence for it."

"Those young men and women in that monastery? Oh, they're just *wonderful*! Always smiling and treating us so nice! It feels like God is just blessin' us from *right* next door!"

"Frankly, they terrify me," reported one old man in Creighton. "And I know I'm not alone when I say that. I know what it's like. You're old enough to remember Charlie Manson and his followers, aren't ya? Yeah, I thought so. Well, I was living in L.A. when they brought them to trial. And I

tell ya, that <bleep> *really* scared the <bleep> outta me. You know what I mean? That's one of the reasons why I left California and settled here. I don't really know those guys in the valley, and, frankly, I don't want to! They're all cults as far as I'm concerned!" He pantomimed firing a shotgun from the hip. "And the first one that makes a move towards me is gonna get a load of buckshot in their belly!"

"You ask me *who* they are," repeated a mother of three, with fear in her eyes. "I want to know *what* they are! They rarely come outta that commune into town, unless they need something, and then they never talk unless they have to; it's like we're carrying some sort of *germ* they're afraid of catching."

That afternoon, in Bonnie's Ready Room, we went over some of the data from the recon teams.

"It doesn't look very good," I summarized.

Clark nodded. "Nobody remembered anything but building supplies coming into the valley when they settled in."

"There's always the remote possibility," suggested Bonnie, "that the golems were brought in through the town that went bankrupt."

It didn't seem likely, but we couldn't refute the thought.

"You know, maybe what this needs is a personal touch. Since I'm supposed to have driven from Oregon to here, maybe I do just that. Take one of the cars and drive into one of the towns. Get to know the people. Stay the night. Ask a few questions. Then in the morning, drive to Miner's Bowl and make my appearance."

Shrader
Late Afternoon

My silver Porsche 904 pulled into the small town. I immediately slowed down in order to get a good look at things. It looked like every other little town in America, but was in severe disarray. It wasn't hard to see peeled paint on buildings, and repairs that had been ignored due to apathy. There were only a couple of people outside.

It wasn't surprising that one of the towns had already fallen.

Ahead was a gas station that looked to be open. I figured it was a good enough place to start. I pulled up to the pumps and climbed out. I made exaggerated motions of stretching; after all, I was supposed to have been driving for hours. An old gentleman wearing grey coveralls casually came out of the station. The nametag on his coveralls read BOB.

"Evenin', stranger," he greeted.

"Evening," I returned with a groan. "Could you fill it up, please?"

The old man seemed to know what he was doing. I unlocked the gas cap for him, and he started filling up my tank. While he did, I looked around with curious interest.

"We don't get too many strangers here," he observed.

"I'm here to pick up a friend of mine. She's at a place called Miner's Bowl. It's supposed to be somewhere around here."

"Sure is," he responded with a grin, then pointed at the massive geological structure. "That's it, there."

"**Holy cow!**" I exclaimed as if I had never seen it before. "Who the heck lives there?"

"Ah, they got some religious group livin' inside it."

I gave him a deliberate double-take. "You mean it's hollow?"

"Nope," he replied with a crisp laugh. "There's a valley in there. They took it over a few years back."

"Okay," I muttered, incredulously. "So, how do I get in there?"

"There's doors on the outside. Nearest one is a couple miles thataway." He pointed. "Can't miss it."

"Okay," I acknowledged.

"You come a long ways?" he asked.

"Oregon."

"You gonna try gettin' your friend tonight?"

"I had thought about it," I said, deliberately sounding doubtful.

"Might not be the best idea, young fella," he cautioned. "It's getting' kinda late. When's the last time you ate?"

"I stopped off at a McDonald's and got something for breakfast."

"Then you might wanna consider stayin' the night here and takin' care o' your business in the mornin'."

"I think that's a great idea," I agreed, feigning a tired stretch. "What can you suggest?"

"Well, *Shrader Inn* is just over thataway. And *Mabel's* has good eats."

"Thanks." I walked around the car and looked up at Miner's Bowl. "You know anything about the group that lives there?"

"Not much. They pretty much keep to themselves. Hardly see 'em anymore, 'ceptin for that big preacher fella."

"His name Winter?"

"You know him?"

I released a sarcastic chuckle. "A long time ago."

Bob finished filling up my car. I paid him, trying to add something to it for his help, but he refused to accept it.

"Bein' friendly's free," he said with a smile. "See you over at *Mabel's*."

I nodded. "Thanks, Bob."

I got into my car, turned around, and drove over to the inn. I checked in for the night and was shown a room on the second floor facing Miner's Bowl. It was a small room, more Spartan than luxurious, but homey.

I doubted that it was really necessary, but I made a cursory sweep of the room for bugs. As I did, I felt the weight of the cast encasing my left wrist, and flexed my fingers.

The cast was supposed to make it appear as if my wrist had been injured, but it actually housed a number of high-tech spy goodies. Among the preparations Bixby had suggested was this. It made sense. I was expecting to be searched and having my possessions taken away, so this would make sure I wasn't unarmed.

As I suspected, my scan came up empty. I activated the subcutaneous transceiver planted in the back of my head and contacted Bonnie aboard *Orion*.

"It's a nice place to visit," I summarized. "I'd hate to see the town go under. Have you been listening?"

"Yes," acknowledged Bonnie. "*You're doing good.*"

"Thanks. Anyhow, I better get something to eat before it gets too late. I figure this place closes up around sundown."

"Enjoy." And she disconnected.

I left my room and walked down the street to *Mabel's*. It was pretty much full; it looked like the whole town ate here.

"Over here, stranger," gestured the waitress, Kate. "Saved you a table."

I smiled and headed over there. It wouldn't surprise me if the entire town knew about me by now. Small towns were like that.

"Special tonight is beef stew," she informed me with a smile and a slight Southern accent.

"Sounds good," I agreed.

I knew I was the center of attention, but I didn't let it bother me.

"You with that group from the *Savage Foundation*?"

I looked over at the man who had spoken gave him a questioning look. "Excuse me?"

"There was some young people from the *Savage Foundation* here in town this mornin'. We don't get too many strangers here, so I was wonderin' if you was with them."

I gave him an apologetic look. "Sorry. I'm just here to get a friend of mine from Miner's Bowl."

That got people's attention. Several of them stopped in their eating.

"They're actually going to let you inside?" asked a woman.

"I don't know," I admitted honestly. "I certainly hope so."

"Ain't nobody from here's been in that valley in at least two years," someone else said. "What makes you so special?"

"I'm not saying I'm special," I excused, looking him straight in the eye. "My friend called me and told me she wanted me to get her. And that's what I'm going to do."

"They don't have phones in there," a man sitting near the back wall grunted. "How could they call you?"

I angled my head back. "I don't know. But she did."

"Well, didn't she tell ya?" the man pressured. His tone was annoying.

"Lem, hush up!" said someone man at another table. "Stop bein' so damn nosy!"

The man growled and went back to his meal.

The one who quieted him looked at me with an apologetic look. "We don't get many strangers here. Some of us are more *curious* than others."

"It's okay," I dismissed. "So ... what do you know about Miner's Bowl? Are the people friendly?"

"Wouldn't know," answered someone. "Most of the time they keep to themselves. If anybody comes out of there, it's usually the preacher and the elders."

"They make wine in there," said Kate the waitress. "Occasionally they'll bring some out, trade it for stuff."

"I remember when the Bowl used't be wide open," said an old man named Thomas sitting with his white-haired wife Dora. He spoke slowly and thoughtfully, and everybody else looked at him as if he were the town elder, with respect, rather than the town eccentric. "Ev'ry Sunday, I'd take the missus to this restaurant in Creighton. *Good* food. But then *they* showed up and closed up th'

Bowl. Now we're lucky if we can make it over there once a month. All 'cause of them. Durn shame, too ... good food." Other voices around him sympathized with him.

"Are the people in there dangerous?" I asked gently.

I got a lot of responses. Most of them were negative. One woman summarized their sentiments: "They just keep to themselves. They could be doin' all sorts of evil in there and we'd never know it."

The communication center of the *Orion* consisted of two sections. The main section had multiple consoles directed towards a segmented screen against one of the walls. The secondary section had enclosed and soundproofed cubicles for individual workers. In one of those cubicles was a young woman, barely in her 20's, with sharp purple hair. Her cubicle was decorated with a variety of pictures, photos, and stuffed animals. Clark approached and tapped gently on the outer door; it hissed open and the girl looked back over her shoulder at him.

"How's he doing, Lizzy?" he asked.

"Sound's coming in loud and clear, Doc," she smiled. "Telemetry from the sensors is good. He's eating dinner at the local diner, and the other patrons are giving him the fifth degree. It's not exactly a love fest, but he's handling them well. I've not caught anybody deliberately lying to him."

"Good," he acknowledged, encouraging her. "Keep at it. Thanks."

They were right about the beef stew. I wished I could've taken some to Dot. I talked with some of the townsfolk for an hour beyond dinner, until Kate scooted us out so she could close up. I had a peace about what I'd heard, and Lizzy confirmed it. Realizing that tomorrow would be a busy day, I returned to the inn. As I undressed, I gave the place a casual scan, reinforcing what I had found – or not found – earlier.

The bed was old-fashioned, and very comfortable. I sat on it while I spent some time in prayer, then settled in and fell asleep.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Shrader

Morning

I started up my Porsche 904. Everything looked good.

"Lizzy?" I whispered under my breath.

"*Mornin', Perry,*" she responded, accompanied by a sipping sound. "*How'd you sleep?*"

"Too good," I admitted. "I think it spoiled me."

She giggled.

"We had surveillance on your car all night. A few people came near, gawking at it, but nobody did anything suspicious."

"Thanks. Okay, here we go."

"I'm patching you in to the bridge," Lizzy informed me.

Bob's directions were as clear as Sebastian's estimates. The door at this end of the tunnel was certainly hard to miss. There was a smaller door for foot traffic, inset in the larger one, and the smaller door had a peephole slit. I turned the car around in order to make it easy for me to drive away, then parked and climbed out. I kept my face impassive as I looked at the size of the door, just in case they were watching.

But beneath my face of flint, I couldn't help be impressed.

I pounded on the door with my cast-less fist and waited. After my third time, the slit opened to reveal a pair of not-too-friendly eyes.

"What do you want?" asked a man's voice gruffly.

"I'm here to see Pastor Steve," I calmly informed him. "My name is *Liston* ... Perry Liston."

"Who?"

I repeated my name. "He'll remember me."

I was sitting on the trunk lid of the Porsche when they finally decided to show themselves. I wondered if they'd chosen to ignore me, but Bonnie assured me that I had indeed gotten their attention. With a loud clank of a steel bolt being thrown back, and the *creeeeeek* of aged hinges, the smaller door opened and three men stepped out.

I recognized one of them, and I greeted him. "Hello, Archie."

The man glared at him. "What the hell are you doing here, Liston?"

"Such language out of ... I assume you're still an elder, Archie," I rebuked. "I'm here to see Pastor Steve."

"He doesn't want to see you," the other man said flatly.

I knew Archie Hazelwood. He was a braggart and a bully, and there'd been more than a few times in the past that I'd been intimidated by him. I wasn't about to let that happen now. "Look, Archie – I don't have time to play your little games," I said with a smile. "I was summoned here. So why don't you curb your swaggering and let me in?"

He stood up to me. "And ... if ... I ... don't?"

I simply looked him straight in the eye and whispered, "I'm ... not ... alone."

The three men looked around, but I knew they wouldn't see my 'escort' unless they wanted to be seen. I didn't move. I wished I could confirm that their tough-guy attitude was just a façade, but Lizzy wasn't giving me any feedback from her sensors.

I suspected they were more afraid of me than I was of them. But they were the ones carrying the guns – Colt .45 automatics in hip holsters – with retention straps unsnapped to allow fast drawing if necessary.

I didn't want to feed their paranoia, but I couldn't back down now.

Archie Hazelwood finally blinked. "Okay, have it your way, Liston. We'll settle this inside. But we're gonna search you."

"Of course," I complied, raising my arms.

Archie gestured for the other two to search me, while he stood there with his hand resting on the butt of his automatic; I assumed that was supposed to be threatening. They looked through my wallet, and the items in my pocket, examining them more with curiosity than suspicion. While they did this, one of them looked at my cast.

"What happened?" he inquired.

"I tried breaking up a fight, and somebody swung a chair at me. I put my arm up to block, and ..."
I raised my arm to mimic the action.

"Ouch," he replied.

"Okay," said Archie. "Enough jabberin'. *Inside.*"

Archie led me through the door into the tunnel; despite the light coming from the other end, it was still very dark. The others joined me and guided me through into the valley. I could see that the roads were a solidly-packed mix of dirt and gravel. As I headed towards the center of the valley, what one of them called the 'town center', I glanced around at all the golems; they were a lot more intimidating from this perspective, so I didn't have to do much acting to make it look as if I was captivated.

I also noticed that we had company. My appearance had drawn a reluctant but curious crowd of men and women. I recognized a few older-yet-familiar faces, and acknowledged them with a nod and a smile. I wondered if mine was the first outside face they'd seen in several years.

Outside the towering walls of Miner's Bowl, a trio of well-camouflaged commandos emerged from hiding; while one kept watch, the other two quietly attached small but powerful limpet mines to the door. Then they were gone, retreated to their places of concealment.

"The charges are in place," Tom Lomax reported from his science station.

"Thank you," acknowledged Bonnie.

She sat quietly in her command chair. To her left was Dot. To her right was Clark. It was a toss-up as to who was more concerned over Perry's safety.

In her B.C. days, Bonnie had been a mercenary – a soldier-for-hire – and she'd seen a lot of action. She'd also seen her share of men and women thrust into fighting situations. And she'd seen Perry go from a reluctant newbie to a confident warrior.

Now, she was mission commander, and allowing one of 'her own' to walk into a potential hostile-fire zone unarmed simply wasn't an option. Despite the firepower *Orion* could deliver at a moment's notice, Perry had a few aces-in-the-hole of his own to draw from.

Besides, Bonnie had a peace about Perry's success.

"That was close," commented Dot. "I thought they were going to turn him away at the door."

"Was it wise for him to admit that he wasn't alone?" added Clark. "That bluff could have compromised his safety."

"Not necessarily," corrected Bonnie. "If questioned, he could've simply used the same ploy David used on Goliath – an inference that God was right there with him. But now he's inside, and that's what matters." She grinned. "Now, both of you hush; I'm trying to watch."

There he was. For the first time, after all these years, I saw Pastor Steve. All those years after leaving his church, after being marked, after losing touch with everyone. He still looked imposing as he stood there, a full head taller than those on either side of him. He was dressed in coveralls, denim shirt, and boots. He still carried the same bodybuilder physique he had back then, but he was a few pounds heavier and a bit greyer than I last remembered him.

He didn't move closer to me; he expected me to come to him. *Okay*, I thought, *here we go*.

"Heart rate's jumped," alerted Lizzy. "Respiration up by 20 percent!"

All those on the bridge who heard the report knew what to do: pray and pray *hard*.

I felt a sudden peace wash over me, and God brought His word to me for comfort.

From Psalm 18, I heard: *'It is God who arms me with strength and makes my way perfect. He makes my feet like the feet of a deer; he enables me to stand on the heights. He trains my hands for battle; my arms can bend a bow of bronze. You give me your shield of victory, and your right hand sustains me; you stoop down to make me great.'* And from Psalm 40: *'He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand.'* From Matthew 24: *'And many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but he who stands firm to the end will*

be saved.' And from Ephesians Chapter 6: *'Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place.'*

I thanked God, and prayed that He would keep my anxiety from those about me ... **all** those around me.

As I continued, I focused on God's promises.

From Psalm 20: *'Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God. They are brought to their knees and fall, but we rise up and stand firm.'* From Proverbs 10 and 12: *'When the storm has swept by, the wicked are gone, but the righteous stand firm forever.'* *'Wicked men are overthrown and are no more, but the house of the righteous stands firm.'* From Matthew 10: *'All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.'* From 1 Corinthians 15: *'Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.'*

I suddenly realized something. Pastor Steve – at least in physique and height – reminded me of Clark. And, from all my time around Clark, I was no longer intimidated by a person's height.

I held back a laugh of freedom.

As Winter's face filled the main viewscreen, Clark's eyes went wide, and his stomach tightened.

He had seen this man before.

I was about ten feet away from Pastor Steve when I was compelled to stop. I stood there, unmoving. Suddenly, Pastor Steve's face broke into a beaming smile, and he released a hearty laugh. He cleared the distance between the two of us in a few large strides, and his big arms wrapped me up in a bear hug.

"Praise God, Perry!" he boomed. "It's good to see you!"

Considering how we'd parted company, I was surprised – even shocked – by his joyful behavior. "Uh ... you, too," I grunted.

He released me, but kept an arm draped around my shoulders. He turned to the crowd and addressed them. "Brothers and sisters, this is Perry Liston, a past member of our church!"

There was an almost-instantaneous release of tension from around us, as people relaxed. Some of them came over to us, offering hugs and handshakes of greeting. The two elders who had been with Archie Hazelwood, and who had stuck close to us, reattached the retention straps on their holsters and moved away to other duties; Hazelwood continued watching suspiciously.

When the greeters had disbursed, Pastor Steve turned to me and asked, "So, what brings you to my valley?"

His use of the personal pronoun when referring to the valley hadn't escaped me. "Belinda Kandell called me," I stated bluntly. "I'd like to see her, if I may."

I was expecting resistance to my request. But, instead, Pastor Steve kept a cool demeanor and nodded, "Certainly. Let's go to my house; I'll have someone fetch her."

I was suspicious of Steve's intentions, but I went along. We started walking.

"What happened to James?" I asked bluntly.

Pastor Steve stopped. "How did you know? Sister Belinda?"

I didn't answer.

He nodded. "Of course, it had to have been her. To all outward appearances, it looked like James had been trying to climb the inside valley wall, and had fallen to his death. Why he was doing it is a complete mystery. Are you here to take Sister Belinda out of here?"

"Yes, I am," I said, bracing myself inwardly. "Will that be a problem?"

"No, I suppose not," he replied, a little apprehensively. "What's it like on the outside?"

I stopped and lowered my voice a little. "If you're asking if the End-Times have happened like you said they would ... no, it hasn't."

My words didn't seem to faze Pastor Steve. But, from years of deciphering Clark's body language beneath *his* stoic façade, I was reading him like a comic book. And I knew my news hadn't been what he wanted to hear. Mercifully, I changed the subject. "If I may, before I leave, I'd like to see where James is buried."

"I'm afraid that's not possible, Perry," he countered. "You see, we do things differently here. Since the body is merely a shell for the spirit, there's no use for it after we've passed on. So we recycle it, mulching the body and returning it to the land. We feel, in the long run, it's a better way of remembering those who have gone before us."

I'd hoped that I could see the body, to be able to use the sensors in my cast, and find out a little more about how he'd died. But that was now taken away from me.

"I'm sorry to hear that," I replied, disappointed. "But I understand. So, what's with all the statues? Last I remember, you were *seriously* against graven images."

To my surprise, Pastor Steve laughed. "You're absolutely right ... I *was*."

"So where did the statues come from?"

Pastor Steve looked at the nearest golem with a kind-of nostalgic look in his eyes. "About four years ago, God inspired me to teach on the meaning of golems in Jewish history, that they were

created as instruments to protect the Jews. And then, On October 19th, we woke up ... and there they were!" He spread wide his arms. "It was a true miracle! And God showed me that we were the 'new circumcised' of God, worthy of this extraordinary form of His protection."

"*He's telling the truth,*" reported Lizzy after a moment.

I didn't respond for a second or two. Then I asked, "In what way are they protection? I mean, forgive me, but they're only statues."

"They are *now,*" Pastor Steve replied. "But God showed me that, on the day that we His people should be put in peril, or face division from outside, the golems would come to life and defeat our enemies."

In the back of my mind, I didn't really expect a straight answer to my question. But here ... I was starting to have my doubt as to my former pastor's sanity.

"*Perry,*" reported Lizzy soberly. "*He believes he's speaking the truth.*"

I nodded thoughtfully and changed the subject. "How did you find this place? I mean, it's a bit off the beaten track."

Pastor Steve laughed. "It was during one of the rides with the *Knights,*" he said, referring to the *Christian Knights,* the biker group he had once been associated with. "God directed us through Montana, and we ended up within view of this place. I was fascinated, so I looked into it further. And God showed me that this would be the sanctuary for His people during the End-Times."

"How long did it take you to work it into shape?"

"A few years. We were like pioneers in a new frontier. It was amazing to see everybody working together." He paused, and asked me, "So, did you just arrive?"

"No," I shook my head gently. "I got in late yesterday afternoon. I stayed in Shrader last night, at the inn on the main drag. Nice place."

We continued into the house next to the building in the middle of the valley. As we entered, a familiar woman came into the room. She greeted Pastor Steve with a kiss and looked in my direction.

"Perry? Is that you?"

"Yes, Ginger," I smiled back. "How are you?"

"Fine."

"He's here because of Sister Kandell," Pastor Steve informed her. "Could you bring her, dear?"

"Yes, Lord," she replied without hesitation, and left through another door. As she did, another familiar woman entered the room. She, too, greeted Pastor Steve with a kiss, and handed him a glass of some green juice.

"Perry?" she recognized me.

"Julie," I responded.

"Is he staying for lunch, dear?" she asked Pastor Steve.

"I'm not sure." He looked at me with a questioning glance. "Are you?"

"I can," I conceded. "It depends on how things go with Belinda."

"She called him," Pastor Steve told Julie. As she turned, I saw the wedding band on her finger; the last time I saw her, she was single. *Didn't I see a similar band on Ginger's finger?*

"Poor girl," commented Julie sadly. "She's been so distraught ever since losing her husband. I don't know what I'd do if I lost my Steven."

"You're ... married to Pastor Steve?" I ventured.

She smiled proudly. "Five years now. Seven years for Ginger. And ... three for Paula?"

"Yes," Steve acknowledged.

"You're married to *three* women?" I queried.

As she headed for the door, Ginger answered casually, "Of course. All of the patriarchs had multiple wives."

After Ginger had left, I gently pointed out to Pastor Steve, "You are aware that bigamy is *illegal?*"

He just smiled at me, "That was the *old* law, Perry. We're under the *new* law."

I wanted to argue the point, but decided this wasn't the time or the place for it. It was clear that he was making up his own rules in this land of his. And as he had before, he was still twisting the Bible to his advantage.

"I see you, too, are wearing a wedding ring," he observed. "Did you reconcile with Brenda?"

"It's Barbara," I corrected. "And no; I got remarried back in 2000."

"That's good to hear! How many children do you have?"

"None," I replied, choosing to redirect rather than elaborate. "You?"

"God has blessed us with nine," he answered with a big grin. "Four boys, five girls."

Just then, Ginger returned with Belinda. Despite the years since I'd last seen her, I could see the stress on her face. As soon as she saw me, though, she beamed, called my name and ran into my arms. By the way her body was shaking in my arms – Lizzy said her life signs were jumping off the charts – Belinda's distress call hadn't been an exaggeration. I sincerely believed that we'd arrived in the nick of time, and I couldn't wait to get her away from here.

"As you can see," commented Pastor Steve. "She's deeply troubled."

"It's okay," I comforted Belinda. "We'll leave after lunch."

"You're leaving?" asked Ginger, surprised.

"Yes," I answered, making eye contact with Pastor Steve. "If you have no objection."

"No, of course not," he responded, a little too easily. "But first, we break bread together."

It was a large dining room. It had to be, to accommodate a table big enough for Pastor Steve's family. I was amazed that all the children were so well-behaved, even the smaller ones; they ate quietly and politely. Whenever something needed to be passed down the table, it was always accompanied by 'please' and 'thank you'. And the wives came together as a well trained team, serving and managing with ease.

It was impressive. So was the meal. There were steaks, potatoes, plenty of fresh vegetables, and an apple pie that was still warm from the oven. I felt a rock in the pit of my stomach as I remembered how many times we had to eat beans three times a day while Pastor Steve privately dined on steaks. I was tempted to ask him if things were still that way, but tactfully held back and focused on my mission.

I sat across from Pastor Steve, with Belinda to my immediate right. Occasionally, as if to confirm that I was indeed there, Belinda reached over and touched my arm.

"*She's agitated,*" Lizzy read my mind. "*Not surprising, given the circumstances.*"

As the children finished their lunch, they asked to be dismissed. Soon it was down to just Steve and Julie, and me and Belinda; the others were taking care of the dishes.

Julie noticed my cast. "What happened to your arm?"

I gave them a sheepish expression. "I tried breaking up a fight at the Mission, and somebody hit me with a chair." I put my arm up to illustrate a blocking pose. "You remember the Mission, don't you?"

"I do," Pastor Steve acknowledged. "You're preaching there?"

"There was quite a void after you guys ... left," I informed him, choosing my words carefully. "I stepped in."

"*Momentary spike in heart rate and respiration,*" reported Lizzy. "*He didn't like your comment.*"

Yeah. I could tell that myself.

"Well," Pastor Steve responded to my statement, "I'm glad they got someone willing to speak the truth." He paused. "You've got quite a few signatures on that cast. Friends?"

"From church," I supplied. They actually were signatures of the med techs, put there to add a personal touch; since I did see some of them at church services aboard the *Orion*, I wasn't lying.

Pastor Steve took a big bite of food and changed the subject.

"Sister Belinda, you told me you didn't use the cell phone. You lied." The words were intended to strike hard.

Belinda, strengthened by having me near, boldly countered, "I was afraid that you and the elders would hurt me!"

"Sister Belinda," barked Julie in defense, her eyes flaring. "How *dare* you talk to him like that!"

Belinda turned on the other woman. "Why not? He's just a man – he's not a *god*, like the rest of you want to believe!"

Through this heated exchange, Pastor Steve and I silently searched out each other's face for weakness. He sat patiently detached from their words, looking like the gracious father letting his children get out their fussing before he laid down the law. I looked at the two women with concern, as if I was afraid they would soon come to blows.

"*Pastor Steve is breathing faster,*" reported Lizzy. "*Hold your ears!*"

A heartbeat later, Pastor Steve's booming voice blasted, "***IN JESUS' NAME – QUIET!***"

It was as if someone had fired off a pistol. The two women instantly became mute, and I hoped Pastor Steve hadn't seen my reflexive flinch of deep-seated fear.

After a few moments, as the dust settled, Pastor Steve ordered Julie to leave the room; without hesitation she got up and went into the kitchen where the other wives had gone after dinner. Then he turned to Belinda and addressed her in a calmer tone. "Sister Belinda, I know you are distraught at losing your husband. I'm sorry you feel badly about me. I hope that, in time, you can forgive me. In the meantime, I *will not* have talk like this in my home." His demeanor was sharp, but in control. He didn't wait for a response from Belinda, but turned to me. "Perry, forgive me for allowing this to happen in my home. Would you like to go for a walk, see some of my valley before you leave?"

"Yes, I would like that," I accepted.

As I started to get up, Belinda clutched at my arm. "*Don't,*" she hissed anxiously, her eyes full of fear.

I put a hand on her hand and assured her with a smile, "It's *okay*, Linda. I'll just be a little while, then we'll go."

She reluctantly let go of me, and I followed Pastor Steve out of the house.

As we headed in the direction of the vineyard, I heard Bonnie report, "*The bugs are working just fine. If anybody tries to put the moves on her, we'll blow the whistle.*"

I smiled to myself. I'd been planting pinhead-sized audio and video transmitters from a cache within my cast from the moment I entered the valley. Since it was a safe bet nobody here had sophisticated detection devices, I was sure the little snoopers would never be found.

As we walked, Pastor Steve commented offhandedly about my cast, "Still not trusting Jesus to heal you, huh?"

In the past I would've taken such a comment as an offense, responding in anger. And Pastor Steve knew this, tempting me with his quip. Instead, I gave him a thin smile and replied, "Well, I noticed you didn't have the faith to raise James from the dead. Losing your touch?"

Pastor Steve didn't say anything.

As he continued showing me 'his' valley, I could hear the pride in his voice at how he had taken a deserted valley and had turned it into this lush oasis. He confirmed that the mine shafts were used for storage. He also explained that any electrical power was due to a hydroelectric generator from the underground spring.

"I'm very impressed," I complimented Pastor Steve. "You know, there's a movement that's encouraging people to be more ecologically-minded; they call it 'going green'. You've got a lot of things here that you've proven over time, that would really be helpful on the outside. If you ever care to share any of them –"

"I won't," he replied, his voice like ice. "I'm not here for the world."

And I knew there was no point in continuing.

Our last stop was the building in the middle of the valley. As we had suspected, it was a church. Pastor Steve called it the tabernacle. It was very nice, with a theater-in-the round look to it. There was a central stage with bench seats radiating outward in concentric circles. Pastor Steve bragged that the acoustics were perfect, eliminating the need for electronic amplification.

"As I seem to recall," I quipped, "you never had a problem projecting *your* voice."

We both laughed.

As I sat for a moment on one of the hard wooden pews, I realized that I needed to ask Pastor Steve something important. And, considering this was the most private place in the valley, I would have to ask him here.

I joined him on the stage.

"When I left your church all those years ago," I started casually, "it was not on hostile terms. But, after I left, I found out that you'd had me marked. Now, I remember well what you taught us about the procedures for marking an individual." I proceeded to quote from Matthew chapter 18. "*If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat*

him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. 'I was not confronted, but I was still marked. And I would like to know why.'

Through all this, Pastor Steve's face seemed impassive. "I don't know what you're talking about," he finally replied. "You were never marked from this church."

Lizzy gave a hard whisper, "**Lie!**"

Thank you, Lizzy, I thought. "Pastor Steve, you and I both know you're lying. The Holy Spirit bears you witness."

Pastor Steve responded by exploding at me. "**HOW DARE YOU SPEAK TO ME THAT WAY? THIS IS MY VALLEY!**"

I didn't move. I didn't flinch. I was back at the farm in Portland, again face-to-face with the intimidating monster of my nightmares. I saw the rage in his eyes and yet was filled with God's peace.

Pastor Steve wasn't going to scare me off ... not this time.

He took a couple of massive steps towards me, callused hands reaching for me. And, for a moment, I flashed back to a similar moment, several years ago, in the Valley of the Vanished.

Pat Savage had been rescued from APEX's clutches. Queen Monja, Clark's *long-time* love, had become young again due to Pat's silphium treatment. With Clark's enemies far behind him, the hope of a happy ending with his beloved Monja seemed within reach at last. But then, unexpectedly, Queen Monja's weakened heart gave out on her, and she died. The loss was more than Clark could bear. Something in his mind *snapped*. Filled with a juggernaut-like rage which no mortal man could touch, he turned on the one person he blamed for it all – his cousin Pat.

But before this bronze juggernaut could reach his petrified victim, God had me literally stand in the gap and face down this Goliath.

A moment later, it was over, and God had triumphed – as I knew He would now.

Pastor Steve appeared to move slower than I expected. I took a step back, then stepped off the stage and stood on the front row pew; Pastor Steve's lunge missed me by a good country mile.

"You don't want to fight me!" I tried to reason.

But he wasn't listening at the moment. He stepped from the stage to the floor in one giant step, intent on pursuing me. I had a number of options at my fingertips, but I wanted to end this peacefully.

I took another step backwards.

Aboard the *Orion*, Bonnie was in communication with Major Bixby.

"Are you watching?" she asked.

"Just give the word."

"Thank you, Major. Stand by."

The word they were waiting on was not Bonnie's, but Perry's. All he would have to do is say 'help' and the elite team would move in.

"**STEVE!**" I shouted. "If you continue with this madness, *everybody* will know, and you will have lost face in their eyes! Is this what you want?"

Pastor Steve stopped, and the expression on his face became less angered.

"*He's calming down,*" reported Lizzy. "*I think you got through to him.*"

Inwardly, I let out a sigh of relief. Outwardly, I didn't let on. Pastor Steve stood tall, but the expression on his face was hard. I could tell he was still angry at me.

"Steve," I said. "I don't want trouble. I don't want to mess up what you have here. I just want the truth from you."

The big man was silent. Then he lowered himself onto the edge of the stage. He looked up at me. "This is my valley."

"I know," I reassured him. "And from what I've seen, you've done a remarkable job. But I have to know, did you mark me because I threatened your authority back in Portland?"

Pastor Steve didn't say anything.

"*He's thinking it over,*" Lizzy interpreted the signs.

"You're right," said Pastor Steve slowly, taking a deep breath; he looked tired. "Do you know how many people left the farm every month? Some of them, the ones who had jobs on the outside, were one paycheck away from taking off. And when they run, they blow all their income, then come back two weeks later, broke and hurt and expecting us to take them back in. *You* were working. *You* were stable. And then you decided to leave us. When anyone like you left, people doubted. And people who doubt don't stay. Nobody needed to know why you really left, to follow in your wake. So, after you left, I had you marked."

"And nobody had the guts to stand up to you," I said, my voice low.

Pastor Steve nodded. Even he didn't want to say it aloud.

I had asked my question. I got the truth. And I had witnesses.

"Thank you, Pastor Steve," I said, maybe a little less sincere than I could've. Then I turned my back on him and left the tabernacle.

As promised, Pastor Steve didn't restrain us from leaving. He even provided Belinda with a couple of wooden boxes for her clothing and personal possessions. Back in the tunnel between the exterior door and the valley, we exchanged hugs and goodbyes with Pastor Steve and his three wives.

"The outside is clear," reported Bonnie. *"The only ones out there is your support team."*

"Now remember, Perry," smiled Pastor Steve. "You're welcome back anytime. And Sister Belinda ... we'll be praying for you."

"Thank you," Belinda squeezed out dully.

We stepped through the door and outside. As we walked away, the four of them waved goodbye to us, then closed the door behind them.

"They're going to try and follow us," informed Belinda.

"No, they won't," I assured her, shifting the wooden box in my arms. My cast was starting to itch; I couldn't wait to get it off.

"How can you be sure?"

"I've got friends in high places," I grinned.

She looked over at my Porsche, still parked where I had left it. "That's your car?"

"Nice, isn't it? It's pre-owned, but it's got a few tricks under the hood."

I pointed my electronic car lock at the car and pressed the button. The trunk lid popped open. We put our boxes in the trunk and I secured them with bungee cords.

"Expecting rough roads?" she asked, regarding the bungees.

"You might say that," I grinned, closing the lid. Then I unlocked the car doors.

We climbed in and I started the Porsche's motor; it growled with a power belying appearances. We pulled away from Miner's Bowl and passed through Shrader, stopping briefly at the gas station to say goodbye to Bob. As I did, I introduced him to Belinda.

"Nice meetin' you, young fella!" he replied, shaking my hand and giving Belinda a casual salute. "You, too, ma'am."

"Tell the others thanks for me, too."

"Sure will," he nodded. "Drive safe."

We shared a grin, and I drove out of town. Eventually we turned onto the main highway; after a few miles, I was convinced we were alone, so boldly stopped.

"Okay," I said enigmatically. "Let's get out of here." I reached over and pressed a button on the dash. "*Orion*, do you read me?"

"Loud and clear, Perry," came the reply over the car's speaker. "Airspace is clear, and the light's in the window."

"Thanks, Bonnie."

"What was that?" asked Belinda.

"Just checking the roads," I answered with a grin. "I have a bit of a confession. When I came to get you, I didn't come alone. But I didn't want *them* to know that. There have been quite a few changes since we last met, and now it's time to show 'em to you. You might want to hold onto something."

Her right hand went up to the handle above the door.

"Okay, here we go!"

With practiced hands, I operated the controls. The car shuddered briefly as we raised a couple of inches off the ground. Then the wheels of the Porsche pivoted into a horizontal position and we went straight up.

Belinda, as I had expected, gasped loudly. When she was able to breathe again, she exclaimed, "What in God's name *is* this?"

"*Welcome to Wonderland, Alice*,'" I quoted from *Star Trek IV* as I shifted into horizontal flight. "You'll be able to see our destination in about three minutes. In the meantime, you might as well relax and enjoy the view."

She started opening her mouth for a reply, but changed her mind.

"*The backup team is on their way back to base, Commander*," reported Major Bixby.

"Thank you, Major," replied Bonnie.

"I'm going to head down to the hangar level to meet Perry and Belinda," announced Dot, standing.

"I'll go with you," added Clark, following her to the elevator.

I gave Belinda credit for one thing: she didn't panic.

"That's our destination," I informed her. "Her official name is *Orion*. I call it home."

"Home?" she repeated, her voice wavering.

"It's okay," I assured her. "There's nothing to be afraid of. *Okay?*"

She nodded. "Okay."

"Were you aware of my connection to Doc Savage?"

"James ... told me. That's how he got your cell number. Did he know about *that?*"

"No, he didn't," I answered. "Very few people know of *Orion's* existence. I'm sure this is quite a bit of a shock to you. But let me assure you, this is probably the safest place you can be, save for the arms of Jesus. Let me take you on a quick tour before we land."

I radioed *Orion* to let them know what I was going to do, then took the Porsche into an orbital pattern with the passenger side facing the station. I slowed down as we passed by the main dome, and pointed out my house. I came around again and sailed into the main hangar bay, hovering briefly as the wheels rotated back into their original position. Then I drove ahead and parked in the Porsche's designated space. As I stopped, I noted the four objects rotating upward out of the 'deck' and clamping onto the Porsche's wheels. They were safeguards in case – God forbid – *Orion* got hit by some turbulence violent enough to cause the vehicles on the flight deck to bounce about.

Belinda was still flabbergasted when I climbed out of the car. I went around, opened her door, and offered her a hand. I wasn't surprised to hear the whir of an electric golf cart approaching, but glanced back to confirm. It was a four-passenger model; Dot was at the wheel, with Clark next to her. As they stopped, Clark climbed out first. He went over to Belinda and introduced himself.

Belinda just looked up at him, dumbfounded.

Dot moved in close to her. "Don't worry about Doc; he gets this reaction from everybody. I'm Dot Liston – Perry's wife."

Belinda turned to Dot and gave her a hug. "Perry mentioned you at lunch. It's good to meet you."

"**Perry**," Clark addressed me. "I need to talk to you." The tone of his voice was oddly somber.

Dot announced, "I'll take Belinda up to the Bridge and introduce her to Bonnie and the kids."

I nodded.

Dot and Belinda climbed into the cart, and headed off towards the exit.

I turned to Clark. "What's up?"

"I recognized your former pastor," he informed bluntly.

"How can that be?" I blurted.

"It was in the alternative timeline."

"Okay," I breathed a sigh of relief. "That makes more sense. We've seen a lot of people who existed there."

"This ... was different. I had been researching the basis for their anti-religious policies, and one event stood out. It had been an act of terrorism carried out on the Disney World complex in Florida. Almost two hundred thousand people were killed with nerve gas. The terrorists chose to commit mass suicide to keep from being captured. The only thing they left behind was a video taking responsibility for the act."

I didn't say anything. I couldn't see how any of this had to do with – and then it hit me like a pile of bricks. "Pastor Steve?"

"He never identified himself by name, but *his* was the face in the video. It was unmistakable."

I knew there had been a lot of things from the alternate timeline that had seriously diverged from this timeline. Good guys were bad guys, and bad guys were good guys, and ...

"One question, Perry," asked Clark deliberately. "From what you know, and what you've seen, could your Pastor Steve be capable of doing something like that in *this* timeline?"

"I ... don't know," I muttered under my breath. "I can't believe he'd do anything that ... evil, but, then, I really don't know what he might be capable of."

Miner's Bowl

As soon as he and his wives had closed the door behind Perry Liston and Belinda Kandell, Steve Winter felt himself compelled to his prayer closet deep within the mine shafts. Excusing himself, he soon was in the cavern, on his knees before God.

"What is thy bidding, my Master?" he asked, his face to the ground.

What did you find out?

"Surely you know, Lord. He's not the same man he was ten years ago. He's more confident ... more self-assured. I couldn't intimidate him like I used to. And he said the End-Times haven't happened yet. Is that true?"

He lies. He is in league with my Enemy.

"Witchcraft?" he blurted.

Yes.

Winter nodded. "It makes sense."

He and his kind are dangerous. They will be back. You must prepare your people to defend themselves against these invaders.

"Yes, Lord," Winter agreed. "I will."

Winter gathered together the elders in the parlor.

"Despite the fact that Liston had been marked from the church, you took him in and entreated him like a brother!" exclaimed Archie Hazelwood. "You even let him eat with you!"

Winter didn't respond with anger at the accusation, but with composure. "Yes, Archie, I know. And it was my responsibility. The fact that Sister Kandell had actually been able to get a signal out of this valley was proved when Liston showed up. And I didn't know if he was alone. For all we knew, he could've had an army right outside that door, just waiting for him to give the signal to attack."

"He said he wasn't alone," informed Hazelwood. "But we didn't see anybody. He was probably lyin' to us."

"It doesn't matter. I didn't want to put this body in jeopardy, so I decided that it was better to take him in and appear to befriend him than treat him as an adversary."

"We didn't find anything when we searched him," reported Darrell Wayne. "He had car keys, wallet, change, and nothing more. He had nothing on him that could be used for communications."

"What about that thing on his key ring?" posed Ray Poole. "Maybe it was some sort of fancy signal device?"

"That doesn't mean anything," countered Archie Hazelwood. "He could've arranged it so that, if he didn't report in within a certain time frame, they'd assume he was in danger and attack!"

"Yes," agreed Winter. "And *that's* why I invited him to lunch. If he had reinforcements waiting to hear from him after a certain amount of time, and he's delayed just because he's having lunch with us, eventually he'd tip his hand. After all, it wouldn't look good for him if somebody busted down the door if he wasn't in danger."

The other three men agreed with him.

"I used the time we had together to ask him questions, to see if he's a threat to us."

"And is he?" asked Hazelwood.

"At first I believed that, once he got what he came for, he'd leave us alone. But God showed me otherwise. We are coming to a time of great trial. Our faith will be greatly tested during this time. But we must be strong ... we must be united ... we must be on guard at *all* times." His eyes went from man to man. "If Liston could find us, anyone could. And if Liston could take *one* of the flock from us, then *others* could be taken from us. This is a threat to our way of life, a threat to everyone near and dear to us. Remember, we are *in* the world, but not *of* the world."

"But won't the fact that one of us has left cause dissention and concern?" asked Darrell Wayne.

"I will explain that to the body tonight."

"And if Liston returns?" asked Archie Hazelwood.

"He has no reason to," Winter reminded them. "However, if he does, we will not allow him in. And we must be prepared to do *whatever* is necessary to ensure the protection of this valley and our families."

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Orion

Evening

After dinner, I excused myself and made my way to a small observation blister at the front of the *Orion*, where I could sit and meditate with God.

We were still hovering over Miner's Bowl. I couldn't see it from where I was sitting, but I knew it was right below. We weren't planning on leaving the area quickly, not until we had fully assessed the situation and had done all that we could.

I was thinking about what Clark had told me about Pastor Steve's 'alternate' self, and asking myself if he were capable of performing such a horrible deed in this timeline. Remembering how just one small event in my life had turned my 'alternate' self into a global terrorist, I knew that anything was possible.

Still, I couldn't help admire Pastor Steve for what he'd done with this valley. It was truly remarkable, and it was sad that he'd turned his back on the rest of the world like this.

Suddenly the transceiver in my head softly blipped for attention. "Go," I spoke aloud.

It was Clark. "*Perry, can you come down to the comm center?*"

"Sure," I sighed. "What's up?"

"Lizzy recorded Pastor Steve's evening devotions. I think you should hear this."

I didn't like the way that sounded. "I'll be right there."

It didn't take me long to reach the comm center. Clark and Dot stood outside Lizzy's cubicle, and Belinda sat next to the purple-haired tech; they insisted that I take the other seat in the already-crowded workspace.

"I recorded this from their evening devotions," Lizzy prefaced, and I could feel her anxiety. "I listened to some of it as I set up things for presentation, then called for the four of you. You ... may not like what you hear."

"Go ahead," I said, reluctantly.

Two of the screens showed pictures from the micro-bugs planted in the tabernacle. The images were slightly skewed, but were not obscured: Pastor Steve was standing on the stage. His bass voice projected clearly from the speakers in the cubicle.

"You have heard," he started, "of the visit today from a former member of this body, Perry Liston. He had been declared to be in open rebellion against God, and was marked from this body several years before we came here. He came here under the guise of removing our own Belinda Kandell from here." He paused. "You may have heard that I welcomed him with open arms, and entreated him as a brother – even choosing to allow him to eat with my family! Now why, you may ask, with him being in open rebellion, would I do that?" Another pause. "I acted in love, hoping that Liston had repented for his rebelliousness; that is what love does. The word says that we must be wise as serpents and harmless as doves. I took him in and ate with him in order to find out his true motives. And God showed me that he was here in order to disrupt this body – to break it asunder, to cause separation and division, and to bring **death!**" There were several gasps of surprise from the congregation. "That is also why I allowed Belinda Kandell to leave with him – she has demonstrated her rebelliousness, so I have turned her over to Satan for the destruction of her flesh!"

"The question arises, how did Liston find us?" Pastor Steve posed. "After all, we're not exactly on the main drag, are we?" Laughter came from the congregation. "He said that Belinda Kandell contacted him. How can that be? There are no telephones here – no ways of communicating. There isn't even a carrier pigeon. So **how** could this be possible?" He paused, staring outward thoughtfully. "Wait, of course! Maybe there **is** a way of contacting the outside world ... through the Prince of the Power of the Air!"

Gasps of surprise arose from the congregation, mixed with voices agreeing with him.

"What if Belinda Kandell – a woman we have called **sister** – had been secretly in league with the **Devil**? What if her husband's **accidental** death was not as **accidental** as it had been assumed? What if she and Perry Liston had been conspiring for some time? What if there was more going on between them than any of us knew? After all, we remember what King David did to Uriah the husband of Bathsheba ... how he had Uriah murdered, so that he could have Bathsheba to himself?"

More gasps of surprise and shock.

"I took them into my home ... fed them ... and waited for their repentance. But –" His voice choked with emotion. "– it ... never ... came. So I had no choice but to cast them away from here! They were part of us, but they were **not** part of us. They were with us, but they were **not** of us. 'If thy eye offends thee, pluck it out. If thy hand causes thee to sin, it is better to cut it off than to have the rest of the body thrown into the fires of Hell.' It was best to cut off one member than have their poison spread throughout us, the true body of Christ."

I stood there dumbfounded at the blazing accusations, my breath coming more rapidly.

"Brothers and sisters, I beg you – have faith! God is in control! He continues to protect us, his people! This is but a sign that the End-Times are nearly upon us, and our reward draweth nigh!" He paused, and his voice was once more heavy with emotion. "I implore you **all** to pray and fast. Pray for Sister Belinda Kandell's salvation! And pray and fast that God tightens the hedge of thorns around both her and Perry Liston, that they may repent and return to God before it is too late and they are thrown into outer darkness! And **pray ... pray ... pray** that God will continue to protect us, his chosen ones!"

Then he led a group prayer, and dismissed the congregation.

Lizzy ended the playback.

We were all quiet. Nobody knew just what to say. I wasn't aware that everybody was looking to me for comment. All I could feel was the blood pounding in my ears. I couldn't think.

I got up from the console and took a step or two back, between Clark and Dot, out of the cubicle. My mouth was open, but I couldn't speak.

Then I ran from the room.

"I'll keep an eye on him," Clark commented quietly, and took off in pursuit.

Belinda stared ahead at one of the vacant monitors, while Lizzy tried her best not to stare at the distraught woman. She still felt guilty when something on her watch caused others distress. She met Dot's eyes, and they silently communicated the urgent need for prayer. Dot paused briefly, then slid into the chair vacated by her husband.

"How *could* he say what he said?" Belinda suddenly exclaimed, still staring forward. "A *lot* of people knew Jim had a cell phone!"

Dot put an arm around the other woman's shoulders, giving her a reassuring hug.

Belinda turned and buried her head in Dot's shoulder.

"And then, to suggest that Perry and I were –" Her voice cut off as her body shook with sobs. "My *God*, Perry and Jim were best friends!"

"It's okay, Linda. Pastor Steve's just showing his true colors."

"Can I make a suggestion?" asked Lizzy.

The timing was good. Both women looked over at the purple-haired tech.

"Why don't you guys get something to eat? The cafeteria makes a mean Banana Split."

"She's got a good idea," Dot agreed, offering up a smile. "Let's go. My treat."

Belinda hesitated, then slowly nodded.

"Hey, Dot?" spoke up Lizzy. "I get off shift in twenty minutes. Mind if I join you? I could use the fellowship."

Dot gave the younger woman a smile. "Sure thing, Lizzy. You want us to order one for you?"

"Extra whipped cream, please."

Dot and Belinda backed out of Lizzy's cubicle and headed for the exit. The young woman smiled, offered up a quick prayer, then went back to work.

There were several facilities for recreation aboard the *Orion*, including gymnasiums of various sizes, an Olympic-sized pool, and even a modest bowling alley. Sebastian confirmed Clark's suspicions, and it took him only a few minutes to reach the small gym on the lower level.

He quietly cracked open the door and slipped inside, keeping in the shadows where he could observe unseen. Not that it mattered, he realized, given the volume and randomness of flesh smacking into leather, the source wasn't paying attention to anything else in the vicinity.

The only lights in the room were a couple of ceiling lights illuminating the area where Perry was taking out his frustrations on a heavy leather bag supported between the ceiling and the floor. Clark knew it took a lot of force to get that particular weight of bag to move as much as it was doing now, so Perry was really exerting himself. But his movements weren't calculated. They were wild, fierce, blows – hammering into the leather bag with no regard for self. The words that came out of Perry's mouth varied from guttural grunts and utterings to bursts of vile and profane language that Clark had never heard from his friend before.

He didn't fault Perry for his outbursts. There had been times in the past when his own emotions had gotten the best of him, and where 'savage' was more than just his family name.

Clark saw a glint of metal on a nearby bench, and smiled. Even in his moment of rage, Perry had had the conscience to remove his rings and put them somewhere safe. If he hadn't, Clark might've entered the room to witness an invisible man beating on the heavy bag.

Even though Perry had been working on the bag for only a few minutes, his shirt was ripped, and there were streaks of red on the bag where Perry's knuckles had opened and bled. Clark didn't like to see his friend injured like this – even if it was at his own hands – but he'd rather have this than have Perry take out his frustrations on his former pastor. *At times*, Clark reflected, *this man has been to me more than a brother or a best friend. It reminds me of David's relationship with King Saul's son Jonathan. We've been through a lot.*

Perry momentarily froze in place, and Clark wondered if he had been discovered. But then he took in a ragged breath and resumed his attack on the leather bag. This continued for several more minutes, until Perry suddenly spun around and looked in Clark's general direction. His damaged fists were balled up in defense.

"Come out of there!" he demanded.

Clark stepped out of the shadows; he said nothing.

Perry didn't lower his hands. "Are you here to try to stop me?"

"Are you kidding?" Clark replied. "I'm here to make sure you don't hurt yourself *too* bad."

"Okay." And he turned back to the bag. His attacks weren't as fierce knowing that somebody was watching, and he seemed to run out of steam after only a few minutes. Clark didn't move.

"God DAMN that man!!!" Perry suddenly roared. "You know, I thought – I *really* thought – that, after all this time, he might've changed! But NO! He's still leading everybody by the *nose* – just

like he's *always* done! And they believe it – hook, line, and sinker! You know, I wish I could go down there with a canister of Verity-3 and make him tell me the truth in front of *everybody* ... expose him with his own lies!"

"It wouldn't matter," Clark pointed out. "The sensor scans showed that he's fully convinced he's telling the truth. Verity-3 wouldn't change that."

"Then how about something a little more *persuasive*? Why don't I take a flight suit and a 40mm grenade launcher with a bag full of shells, and *personally* reenact the fall of *Jericho* on Miner's Bowl? Maybe if *those* walls came tumblin' down, it might make them take things *seriously*!" He hit the bag for emphasis.

"Imaginative," Clark replied calmly. "But doubtful. And people would get hurt."

The look in Perry's eyes was somewhat less than rational. "I don't know ... could be *FUN*." He smacked the leather bag to emphasize his sentence; the sound was less intense than before, and Perry's face grimaced with the pain that was catching up to his nervous system. "He's convinced them I'm the *Antichrist*, an *adulterer* and a *murderer*!"

"Would you mind if I made an observation?" Clark asked.

Perry grunted, which Clark interpreted as an affirmative. "It really hurts me to see you tortured inside like this. I mean, I may be able to put on a face of flint, but you're the one who's had it all together regardless of how you believe. I've always seen you as closer to God than I think I will *ever* be."

Perry grunted again.

"What you're doing here, despite what you may think, is constructive. And I might note that, for you *not* to do what your flesh wants to do is a sign of *real* strength."

"It's not easy," muttered Perry.

"No, it's not," Clark agreed. "But at this moment, you're *not* following your anger. You're redirecting it into something else."

"Yeah," Perry agreed. "Self-destruction!" He illustrated by backfisting the heavy bag; it jiggled weakly. "I let myself be deceived by him!"

"*No*, Perry – you *didn't*!" Clark countered sharply. "You suspected right from the start that he might try pulling a fast one, so you came prepared. You planted the bugs. You asked questions. You carried the scanners to check out his *reactions* to your questions. When he asked *you* questions, you didn't give out any more information than you wanted to, rather than full disclosure. You could've told him everything about us ... invited him on a tour of the *Orion* ... but you didn't. Your suspicion of him tempered your actions." He paused. "Perry ... you did well."

"Not by my reckoning," he groused.

"Of course not." Clark took a step closer. "You're angry because he stabbed you in the back after you left. What did you expect? He's been in charge of everyone and everything in this valley for *ten years*. How many times did he refer to it as 'his' valley? That place is his very own personal

kingdom, and he's the sovereign ruler. He's even justified *bigamy*! The last thing he expected was to see you at the front door – just like you figured! It probably took him by surprise. And when you told him that the End-Times hadn't happened? He was truly disappointed."

"Yeah ... he was," Perry agreed. "Frankly, we came here to get Belinda, and that's what we did. I say we kick the dust off our shoes and move on – let them live with the consequences of their actions. As Steve used to say, they've paddled their own canoe – it's not my fault that they don't see the waterfall they're heading for."

"Do you remember the *Twilight Zone* episode about Captain Benteen?"

"What does that have to do with anything?" Perry replied.

"Do you?" Clark persisted.

"'On Thursday We Leave For Home'," he finally answered.

"Isn't it one of your favorites?"

"Yeah."

"Do you remember the plot?"

"Of course."

"Tell it to me."

"Why?" Perry protested, but eventually gave in and began to recite the plot from the classic science fiction series. "*Okay*. You've got a bunch of colonists on this armpit of a planet that's been pretty much forsaken by the rest of the universe. The only reason why the colonists haven't blown their collective brains out is this one man, Benteen. He's been their leader, counselor, spiritual mentor, father figure, and cheerleader ... and is the only thing that's kept them hanging in there all these years. Unfortunately, he's a megalomaniac who treats the rest of them like children.

"But then one day a rescue ship arrives to take them all back to Earth. *Happy days!* But Benteen believes that, since he's been their leader *here*, he'll continue to be their leader back *on Earth* – remaining one big happy colony for all eternity. But that's not the way the colonists look at it. They appreciate Benteen, but they've got their own idea of what they want to do back home. Well, Benteen doesn't take this well. When his attempt to persuade everybody to stay together falls flat, and his attempt to sabotage the rescue ship is foiled, he plants his feet and holds his breath and believes everybody else will join him and stay behind in the end.

"Of course, nobody joins him. And because he's hiding, they can't even haul his butt into the rescue ship. So they leave without him. As it goes out of sight, Benteen tragically realizes – in true *Twilight Zone* style – that his only hope is gone, never to return, and he is *truly* alone now." Perry paused. "I suppose Pastor Steve is Benteen, isn't he?"

"Yep," Clark nodded. "And you shook up his little kingdom ... *again*. So in order to keep his hold on the people, he had to make you and Belinda the bad guys."

Perry didn't answer. He just looked down at his bloodied knuckles.

"Pastor Steve will get his in the end, right?" Perry reached. "Like Benteen?"

"God always has the last word," Clark commented. "Do your hands hurt?"

He tried flexing his fingers; his face grimaced with pain. "Yeah."

"You'll heal," he reassured his friend. "So why don't you get yourself cleaned up, patched up, and let's get together in the conference room to talk about our next move. Or ... I can leave you here, and come back in a couple of hours with a medical team to patch you up after you've beat the crap out of yourself." Then he stood there, silent, his face wearing a stoic *Mr. Spock* expression that he knew Perry found hilarious.

And it worked. Perry laughed until the pain from his hands got his attention.

"Let's go get that taken care of," Clark suggested. "Then we can meet in the conference room."

Perry looked at the clock. "No. It's late. It'll wait until morning."

"You want to pray?"

"Honestly, *no*," he answered flatly. "But I probably need it."

The two men bowed their heads in the silence of the gym and took their situation before *The God Who Sees*.

The Orion Morning

Clark had made sure Diane Cunningham was in sick bay, and that she had been the one who had tended to my self-inflicted wounds. She sprayed something sticky on my hands and wrapped them in gauze. "You'll heal faster if you don't move your fingers. In the morning you can have Dot take them off; if you've been a good boy, nobody will be able to tell how much you've wasted my precious time." She smiled at me and gave me something for the pain. "You better get to bed soon," she cautioned me. "You'll start feeling the meds in a few minutes."

Clark made sure that I made it home, and told Dot about my 'workout'. Then they prayed over me. The prayer was fuzzy, and so was I. I don't remember much after that.

I guess it worked.

In the morning, feeling far less sore than I deserved, Dot and I went to the meeting in Conference Room Seven. It was a different configuration than the other room. This one was more conventional – there was a semi-circular table with chairs that faced three large telepresence screens. Somebody had decided this was going to be a breakfast meeting, so a simple buffet had been set up for us. Clark moved in next to me as I helped myself, and asked me how I was doing.

"I haven't changed my attitude towards him, if that's what you're asking," I whispered. "I can't wait until we're out of here."

"Well, the decision's not entirely yours, is it?" Clark leveled.

I was rather surprised that Clark would be so harsh towards my opinions, and it haunted me as I went to the table where Dot was already munching.

On the wall, the center screen was active. A black man sitting at a table similar to ours was talking with Clark.

I recognized him. His name was Jay Ackerman. In the field of apologetics and cults, he stood alongside such luminaries as Hank Haanagraf and Walter Martin. The first thing that impressed me about him – after his reputation – was his style in clothing. He wore a plaid vest over a light colored shirt, and a dark tie.

Bonnie – at the center desk of the semi-circle – stood to call the meeting to order. "I know we're still eating, but I thought I'd get things started. The reason for this meeting is to decide what to do next in this situation. First of all, I'd just like to thank everyone for a great job in getting Belinda here." She turned to Belinda, who blushed briefly. "So, are you settled in yet?"

"Yes, thank you," she replied. "I didn't have much, so there hasn't been much to 'settle in' with."

"The Sit Room assures me," Bonnie continued, "that there are no major-league disasters that need our attention. So for the next few days, we're going to remain parked right where we are. *What* we're going to do is the reason why we're all here. I want your opinions. Perry, let's start with you."

I stood. "I say we move on. These people have made it clear that they don't want any help from the outside, so I say let's leave them with their choice." I sat.

"I disagree," said Belinda, her hand raised. She stood. "Last night, after listening to what Pastor Steve said about me and Perry in evening devotions, I would've been in complete agreement with what Perry had suggested. But, overnight, I started realizing that there were others there in the valley ... others who I've lived with for almost ten years ... others who, subtly, have shown that they feel as I do. They want to be free of Pastor Steve's hold on them." She paused. "Yesterday, at lunch, I wouldn't have said a tenth of what I did if it hadn't been for Perry being there. Without him I would've remained as silent as one of those statues down there. But now I want to give the rest of the people in the valley a ... second chance to be free, to change their minds and to choose to follow Jesus Christ in a way other than through Steve Winter's *cult!* That's my opinion."

And she sat. I was both offended and impressed at the same time. I didn't like the fact that she'd disagreed with me, but I was reminded of how bold she had been when she used to go on street ministry with James and me. I was proud of her.

"Thank you, Belinda," said Bonnie, turning to the telepresence screen. "Jay, she made a good point. Would you say, from what you know here, that the situation below is a cult?"

"Without a doubt," the black man replied. "And I have to applaud the two of you – Perry and Belinda – for getting out when you did."

"Jay," Bonnie added. "I don't know if everybody here as knowledgeable as you on the workings of cults. Can you give us a quick crash course to bring us all up to speed?"

"Certainly," he agreed, then jumped right into it. "Let's say you're young, on your own, without any sort of solid spiritual foundation. You're looking for something to believe in, or you're looking for someone who's not like the religious hypocrites you've encountered before. You might've just gone through a life event or a personal crisis and are looking for answers. Or you're just floating there, in transition or limbo, without a plan for your life.

"Somehow you find out about this preacher. Maybe somebody on the street hands you a gospel tract and tells you about his church. Or this guy's preaching on the street and you stop to listen. Or a friend invites you to church with him or her. Either way, you get curious. And so you check it out, you listen to what he's saying. And it's *amazing*. It's like he can read your mind, as if he's preaching right to you and you alone. And it seems like he's got all the answers. If you have a chance to talk to him face-to-face, you're taken in by his charm. He's a real nice guy, and he acts like he's interested in you. And he invites you back to his church.

"You like the feeling you get from this new preacher. There's no pressure to conform, to join. So you come back to visit. You get to know the others in the church. Everybody's friendly, and you don't feel so alone anymore. Somebody invites you to join them in sharing your faith to people on the streets. You take them up on it, and you have a great time. You have friends now who have the same interests as you. You start feeling like you're in a family. When you're not at work, you're with your church friends and ministering to others. And when you're not ministering to others, you spend hours reading your Bible and praying.

"Your life starts getting simpler. Worldly activities don't hold much interest for you anymore. The material world starts to make less and less sense in the light of the spiritual world. You continue to work, but most of your money goes to support the church. Your lifestyle has declined to just the basics ... eat, sleep, church. You start to isolate yourself from society. You can't afford to live where you were, so you may choose to be homeless, living as a nomad, dumpster diving for food, or move in with others of the church. You believe this to be a good thing, citing that Christ also had no place to lay his head.

"The preacher starts warning you about 'the rest of the world'. He says that there will be those who will call them a cult. He says they are 'deceived pawns of the devil'. He quotes passages from the gospels about how true Christians will be persecuted by those who believe they're doing God's will. He tells you that only those who endure until the end will be rewarded. He instructs you not to listen to them, but to pray for them. You start preaching 'Turn or Burn' to your non-church friends, family, and acquaintances. And when they don't immediately drop to their knees and pray the Sinner's Prayer, or, instead, they call you a religious nut or a Jesus Freak, you declare them to be damned and you drop 'em like a hot rock in the name of 'spiritual purity'.

"Every aspect of your personal life eventually becomes directed by the preacher. You do what he tells you to without question because you know he loves you and wants the best for your life. If you find someone you're attracted to, it's up to the preacher to determine if you can see one another, or marry. The preacher makes all the rules, but he doesn't have to live by them. And everything he does has a good and logical reason which he can always back up with Scripture.

"You neglect your health, believing that God will keep you healthy, and that suffering is a way of getting closer to God. You forsake any medical attention, even over-the-counter medications. If you're not getting better, it means that your faith isn't strong enough. You spend days in prayer,

fasting, and Bible reading, believing that God will heal you. And if He doesn't, it means you're being punished for your lack of faith.

"But then you start seeing things about the preacher that you hadn't noticed before. At first he was like a spiritual Superman, having a special pipeline straight to God. For some time he's pushed his belief that *his* church is the *only* true church. All other churches are false, serving false gods, and deceiving the people, and only *his* church will survive the End-Times. You see him making mistakes, but nobody has the guts to speak to him about them. If he bends the rules for himself, he's always right. If something is wrong, it's the other person's fault.

"You don't want to leave the church. You've seen what happens when others tried to leave the church. The preacher declares them to be in rebellion against God, and they're damned if they don't return and repent. The church is instructed not to have anything to do with them, and pray that they return and repent for what they've done. You've seen a few who have returned; they're treated like the Prodigal Son and all is forgiven. Others who haven't returned are never heard from again, or they've died under tragic circumstances, and are now burning in Hell for all time because they didn't repent to this body.

"Something happens that finally helps you make up your mind. You've got to leave. So you do. You might sneak out in the middle of the night, or just not show up one day. You don't tell anyone for fear the preacher will find out and try to stop you. The longer you've been with the church, the harder it will be to leave, and the harder it will be to return to society. If you haven't turned off all your friends, you might be able to find some comfort there. You probably won't have any money. You might not have any 'marketable skills', so you'll be forced to live on the streets and/or performing day labor.

"You might not have any identification. If you thought of your Social Security Number as 'of the world', you might not be able to remember it anymore. You might have legal difficulties, like criminal violations, tickets you haven't paid, or taxes you haven't filed; you might end up looking at heavy fines or even jail time. If you had to lie or deceive others in the course of doing the preacher's will, it's going to be real difficult – if not impossible – for others to trust you. If you'd been taught that goals, ambitions, and plans weren't of God, every day will be a struggle to survive – alone and aimless.

"When you started off, you looked at the church – at God – as the answer to all your dreams, but now your life's been shattered into a million pieces. You feel like there's a hole in your heart, a great sense of loss at what was supposed to have been. You feel like you've been burned and rejected. You find it hard to trust anybody anymore. If you had had a problem with drugs or alcohol, you might return to there as the only alternative. You have no direction. It might come down to two choices – return to the cult ... or suicide. And if you *do* commit suicide, you'll always be an example to the others of what happens when somebody leaves the group. End of story."

We all sat there stunned.

"What can we do?" asked Bonnie, a little drained.

"Belinda had the right idea," replied Ackerman. "Talk to them. Show them an option that's better than what they have. Then let them make up their own minds."

"There will be resistance from Pastor Steve and the elders," pointed out Belinda.

"She's right," I added. "Even the elders carried sidearms."

"Mr. Ackerman," Major Bixby interrupted. "What would you say would be the odds of such a group turning against anyone trying to confront them?"

"Depending on the degree of confrontation, it could be quite strong. If they believed their security was threatened, there's no telling what they would do to defend it."

"Might they take out their hostility against the adjacent towns?" asked Bixby.

"Anything is possible."

"Commander," Bixby turned to Bonnie. "I concur with Mr. Ackerman. There's no telling how this group would react under the wrong circumstances. I would like to prepare the Seraphim in case a non-violent response is required."

I stood. "**Hold it!**" I exclaimed, getting everyone's attention. "This is all well and good, but, realize, they've closed off their borders to us, or to anyone from the outside for that matter. How are you going to get past reinforced steel doors?"

"I can," Major Bixby answered with a grin that couldn't decide whether it was impish or fiendish.

"**Ray?**" Bonnie gave him a sharp stare. "**Not** funny."

"I can have a few of my men enter the valley from above, by night, and simply open the doors," he explained. "In the morning, just walk in and talk to them."

"And, in the process, convince them all that Armageddon's arrived!" argued Belinda.

"I have to agree," said Bonnie. "It's a good plan, Major, but we need something more subtle."

Clark stood and boldly announced, "**I** will talk to Pastor Steve."

There was a momentary silence, which gave Clark time to explain himself. "Perry, didn't you tell me that Winter used to be part of a motorcycle gang?"

"I did," I nodded, starting to see his logic.

"When Bonnie and I were riding with the *Southern Riders*, we had their respect because we were capable of matching them muscle for muscle. Maybe I can use that experience to my advantage."

"It could work," agreed Bonnie, remembering their experiences. "Just in case, Major, prepare the Seraphim."

"Yes, ma'am," he acknowledged.

"Clark?"

Everybody looked up at Jay Ackerman on the telepresence screen. "Yes, Jay?"

"Could you use an extra hand on site?"

Clark smiled. "Of course. We'll make the arrangements. Thanks."

And with that, the meeting was adjourned. The others stood. Major Bixby stopped off at the buffet for a few final snacks. Dot went over to talk to Belinda and Bonnie. Clark stood and talked to Jay.

I sat and fumed.

I finally stopped waiting for someone to notice me. So I left the conference room and went for a walk.

I didn't want to have anything to do with the plans they were making. It would only result in trouble. I was frustrated, and I needed to find some way of taking out my frustrations. I didn't want to return to the gym – I was still hurting because of that, and I didn't want to make it worse. I stopped at one of the observation ports, and stared out at Miner's Bowl far below us.

And I knew what would help bring me from my funk ... I needed to feel the air around me.

I headed forward to get my flight suit.

Aboard the *Orion*, flight suits were a significant operating item. At times, they were to us in the same way firemen's uniforms were to firefighters. To that end, there was a complex set of rooms one had to pass through prior to entering the forward domes for flight preparation. First there was the locker room – a storage area where each suit was kept secure behind biometric locks keyed only for the individual owner. Major Bixby's Seraphim had their own locker room apart from this one. The individual would change into the flight suit, leaving their civilian clothes in the locker. Then, with the suit on, the individual would go into the preparation room where the mechanics of the suit would be applied, and the individual biometrically linked to the gear.

I found my locker and pressed my hand against the recognition plate. It would read my handprint and glow green to indicate that it was open.

But this time it didn't glow green. It was red, which meant that it had rejected my handprint.

I tried it again, with the same results. After the third time, I received a signal in my head letting me know that someone was trying to communicate to me through my transceiver. I answered it.

"Perry," greeted Sebastian. "I'm afraid you've been denied access to your flight suit."

"Why?"

"Commander Savage has restricted you to the station."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing! Bonnie was keeping me from leaving the station, like a teenager being grounded to his room.

"Why?"

"Due to the unresolved strife you have with some people within Miner's Bowl, she is concerned that you might do something irrational and violent, and interfere with Doc's plans to make contact below. Once this mission is complete, full access will be restored."

I was starting to get upset ... really upset.

"Look, I'm not planning on doing anything to them. I just want to go for a fly – it relaxes me."

"If that is the case, you can use either of the aft domes."

I sighed. "It's not the same, Sebastian. I want to feel the open air. It's like swimming in a pool and swimming in the ocean – there's a big difference in how it feels."

"I'm sorry, Perry." I knew the AI couldn't feel actual remorse, but it made me realize it wasn't his fault.

"So what *can* I do?" I sighed. "I'm frustrated – more now than a few minutes ago – and I want to find a way of working some of it off."

"One suggestion would be physical activity, such as exercising."

"No, thanks," I replied. "I'm still sore from last night."

"Then why not consider weapons practice?"

I did. It wasn't a bad idea. "I like that."

"Do you have any preferences?"

I thought about it, and grinned. "I want to blow things up."

"Demolition charge or explosive projectile?" he asked calmly.

"Projectile," I replied. "*Napoleon's Alley*."

"I can do that. I assume you wish privacy. Would you like me to set it up for you?"

He sounded so confident about it all, it surprised me. "Please."

"If you would proceed to the nearest elevator, I'll take you there."

CHAPTER NINE

Miner's Bowl

Winter was leading songs during morning worship when God spoke to him.

I need to talk to you – now!

Winter paused in his singing. This had never happened before; whenever he'd spoken to God, it had been in his prayer closet, or when he was alone. For him to communicate to him here and now, it must be urgent. But he couldn't let on that anything was wrong. Since everybody else had continued singing as if nothing had happened, he was able to return to the song and finish it without difficulty. He gestured to one of his elders and instructed him to take over; the man didn't ask why, but just announced the next song and – as Winter left the building – began singing it as if it had all been planned. Running as fast as he could, he reached the caves in only a few minutes. The angelic apparition manifested itself before him and stood there; his expression was one of urgency.

"What is thy bidding, my Master?"

The Enemy is near!

"Liston?"

No. Someone worse. It was foretold in Scripture. Acts, chapter 20. 'For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God. Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears. Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.' A 'savage' will come into this flock to mislead you. He is coming, and you must be ready!

"What should I do when he arrives?"

Capture him.

The Orion

I stood at one of end of a gauntlet.

I was in a dark jumpsuit, and carried two weapons. The first one was a familiar one: the latest version of Doc's classic Superfirer, carrying standard mercy bullets. The other was a little bit stronger. It looked like a big six-shooter, but each shell in the chamber was a compact missile.

The lights in the arena simulated evening, just after dusk. And it was quiet. But I knew the silence was deceiving. Between me and the other end were a host of attackers hiding behind walls, in doorways, and behind obstacles. And all of them wanted to get me. But they weren't the only ones in the gauntlet. There were innocents who were there to keep me from just walking through and blindly shooting anything that moved.

All of the shooters had 'live' ammunition. My jumpsuit would translate their 'bullets' into jolts of electricity meant to get my attention. They would also briefly desensitize the area to simulate the incapacitating effect of bullet wounds. There was no way I could be seriously injured, but it was not going to be a picnic, either.

Apart from surviving the gauntlet, my goals were accuracy and discernment.

I could start at any time. I made a final check of my weapons, and made sure my reloads were accessible.

Then I took that first step.

Clark rose from his knees.

He had finished praying here, but he hadn't finished praying.

Bonnie had let him use her Ready Room, and she was there at his side. She gave him an embrace and a kiss, and they went onto the Bridge. Dot was sitting in the command seat; she shifted over to give Bonnie her rightful place.

"The chopper's waiting," Dot informed them. "It's fueled and ready when you are."

Clark nodded. He leaned over and gave Dot a hug. "Where's Perry?"

"Napoleon's Alley. He's taking out his frustrations on the combat simulator."

"I wish he could've been here to see me off, but ... I understand."

"I had to do what I did," defended Bonnie. "The way he was so headstrong about getting out of here, I didn't want him to do anything that could endanger this mission."

"Yes, I understand. I'm sure he'll get past this."

Up ahead was the *Seventh National Bank*, the *Shady Rest Hotel*, and the *Sick-In-A-Cup Restaurant*. As I passed before the hotel, two gunmen opened fire on me from the second story window. Their first mistake was in missing me with their opening volley. I quickly dove behind a car, and the sedan took the brunt of the automatic weapons fire. I paused and took a breath, then took careful aim with the missile launcher and fired. Twin explosions followed by silence told me my aim had been successful.

Behind me was a storefront. I caught a flash of movement from within and cursed myself for putting myself in a possible crossfire. I whirled and prepared to fire, but froze as I saw that the flash of movement was due to a frightened worker getting ready to close up shop. She gasped and raised her hands. I raised the muzzles of my guns to telegraph the fact that I wasn't going to shoot her. I got to my feet and moved on.

I remembered the first time I went through a gauntlet like this.

It was 2000. Dot and I had barely been newlyweds. Pat Savage was being held hostage by Jill Woodward's APEX group in the Valley of the Vanished. Doug Martin had introduced us to a friend of his who could help us – Mitch Drake. And we went to Mitch's Florida base, where we

prepared to take on Woodward's small army. Looking back on it, I was amazed at all God had done from then until now.

Anyhow, one of the things I needed to do was to learn how to use firearms in combat situations. And that was how I was introduced to 'Napoleon's Alley,' a tactical combat simulator, and my instructor, Lieutenant Robert Groce. It was rough, grueling work, but it made a difference. I didn't give up then, no matter how exhausted I got. And I was determined not to give up now.

The helicopter signaled departure. The information was relayed to the Bridge.

"Departure acknowledged," returned Bonnie, adding, "Godspeed."

Clark wasn't going to take the same route as Perry had. The helicopter would take him past the deserted town of Albany, and land him close to the exterior entrance. There would be no immediate backup, since all of *Orion* would come down on them should there be trouble.

It was supposed to be late, long after normal business hours. That's why the lights coming from an office building didn't make sense. The unlocked side door was the other thing that didn't make sense. I sneaked in and strained my ears for anything odd. My ears caught foreign conversation, and I knew my instincts were good. A moment later I rushed a team of Middle Eastern terrorists in the process of putting together vests with explosives, intending them to be used as human bombs. My Superfirer chattered, and the mercy bullets dropped them in their tracks. I had no doubts of the effectiveness of the mercy bullets, so I moved outside and continued down the street. I didn't need to make sure the bombs were disarmed; my job was just to clear the path.

The helicopter touched down a few yards from Miner's Bowl, and Clark climbed out.

"Godspeed, sir!" shouted the pilot.

Clark took a few steps to get clear of the helicopter, then turned, smiled, and waved back. The helicopter rotors sped up, and the machine lifted off the ground. Clark knew that it would wait a few minutes, making sure that he got inside safely, then return to the *Orion*.

"Doc to *Orion*," Clark said aloud.

"*Orion here*," replied Bonnie; he heard her clearly through his subcutaneous transceiver.

"I'm on the ground. The chopper's holding. How am I coming through?"

"*Sound is good. As far as the video, give me a little 360.*"

As casually as he could muster, Clark turned in a circle. "So?"

"*Looks good, hon.*"

"Okay, I'm heading for the door."

"Copy."

Clark approached the door and knocked loudly. After repeating it a couple of times, he got a response.

"Yes?" asked a male voice through the slit in the door.

"My name is Clark Savage, Jr. I would like to speak with Pastor Steve Winter. I come alone and unarmed."

"What did you say your name was?"

"Clark Savage, Jr.," he repeated. "I'm also known as 'Doc' Savage."

"Please wait," the man instructed him. And the slit closed with a metallic snap.

I approached a used car lot. It was quiet, but I knew that was deceiving. Here, you had to expect to be attacked at every turn, from every possible angle.

Suddenly I felt a sharp electrical jolt in my right shoulder as my suit translated an attack into physical sensation. I grunted at the pain – it *did* hurt – and fell sideways to the ground behind a pickup truck. Despite the fact that it wasn't bleeding, it would be debilitating, and it would throw off my aim. That made me vulnerable. I looked under the cars to see if there was any clue as to where my shooter was. It was still, which was bad. It made me wish that these simulations could include anesthetic gas – I could fire a round of gas under the cars which could spread out and, hopefully, affect the shooter. I made a mental note to mention that to the ones in charge.

In the meantime, I needed to do something.

I caught a sound, and held my breath. A moment later, I heard it again. The shooter was moving, and I was able to hear where he came from. I decided to do something desperate. I programmed one of the small missiles in the six-shooter for a timed explosion, then fired. It went up, curved to come back down, and exploded above the lot like a flare. At that moment I looked – not at the explosion, but at who might be paying attention to the explosion. And that's when I saw the shooter, about a hundred yards away from me, barely visible, his face illuminated by the missile's flash.

I smiled. *Gotcha, sucker!*

I kept low as I got to my feet and crept around the cars, always keeping my face towards the shooter but not ruling out the possibility that he had a partner. He wasn't following me. *Good.* I got within range, took aim, and coughed loudly. The shooter turned in my direction, standing a bit higher as he did. At that point I fired twice from the Superfirer and hit him square in the chest. He fell back, and I knew I had him. Not wanting to stick around and gloat, I moved on and out of the lot.

The door opened and Clark was allowed in. However, as they closed the door behind him, several men with automatic pistols came out of the shadows.

"Raise your hands," explained one, his weapon poised to fire. "And submit yourself to a search."

"I will comply," Clark replied, his arms raised. "I wish no trouble."

They led him out of the caves and into the light. They surrounded him as Winter came into the picture. He kept at a distance as the others searched him. They put all of his possessions into a woven wicker basket. The basket was handed to Winter, who looked through the items before putting it on the ground.

"Bring him along," he instructed, coldly.

"I'd like to talk with you, Pastor Winter," Clark asked.

Winter suddenly spun on him, his eyes flaring with anger. "***Silence, spawn of the devil! 'Savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard!'*** You're the one I was warned of – he who would try to divide the church with his mouth that drips honey!" He turned to the others and yelled, "***CONTAIN HIM!***"

Clark's arms were pulled together behind his back and were restrained with wrist manacles connected by heavy chains. By this time, his appearance had been made known to all. People drew closer to the scene, yet kept a safe distance from him; their expressions were fearful, as if he were some monster they'd captured. He didn't fight them, nor offer resistance, as he was guided over to one of the golems just off of the town center; the statue already had chains surrounding it. His restraints were interlaced with them to anchor him to the golem; even without testing them, he knew they'd be impossible to break.

And yet, Clark remained calm.

I was following a couple of shooters into a mini-mart when the sky started flashing red and the air was pierced by the sharp sound of klaxons. Sebastian's mellow Morgan Freeman voice had been replaced by the more authoritative tones of 24's Keifer Sutherland.

"RED ALERT! RED ALERT!"

This was different. For a moment I wondered if this was part of the simulation, a precursor to a new attack.

"Sebastian!" I yelled above the klaxons. "Situation!"

Sutherland's voice responded, "Commander Savage has put the station on Red Alert!"

This wasn't part of the simulation! It was real! ***"Abort gauntlet program!"*** I commanded. ***"Exit!"***

The lights came up and the nearest door became visible. I dropped my weapons on a table by the door as I rushed towards the elevator.

The colorful Sesame Street montage of the Bridge had been replaced by a utilitarian grey. In the command seats, Bonnie and Dot leaned forward anticipatively. I followed their line of sight to the main screen and saw the reason for their concern.

"Oh, God," I whispered.

In *Forward Dome One*, Major Bixby and his Seraphim made last-minute checks of their equipment as they waited for the order to deploy. At that point, the dome over their heads would retract, and he and the Seraphim would take to the air, and fly at full throttle into Miner's Bowl.

As they waited for the order, adrenaline roaring through their veins, they watched the same live video feed as we were seeing on the Bridge.

"Clark, talk to me!" Bonnie called. "Are you all right?"

We heard a few coughs through the speakers. Since it was mandatory that the bridge crew be trained to understand Mayan, translation wasn't necessary. "*I'm okay.*"

"The rescue team is ready!" informed Bonnie. "Do you need help?"

"No," he replied. "*Wait.*"

Bonnie's voice softened a bit. "Are you sure?"

"*I want to be able to talk to them.*"

"Okay," she sighed, her hands gripping the arms of the command chair. "*Sebastian ... stand down from Red Alert.*"

The environment changed to a more friendly color, and Morgan Freeman's voice informed us, "*Red Alert has been cancelled.*"

"Major Bixby," Bonnie commanded. "Hold at Yellow Alert."

"Acknowledged," we heard Bixby's reply. I could've sworn it sounded disappointed.

"Hon?" Bonnie returned to Clark. "We're holding at Yellow Alert, and monitoring."

"*Thank you,*" he returned.

Bonnie muted the audio so Clark wouldn't be able to hear our conversation. She leaned back in her command chair and softly sighed. I knew she was concerned. But she was forcing it off to one side while she dealt with the situation at hand.

She touched my arm, getting my attention. "What do you think?"

I wrestled with my answer. "Forgive me, but I'm not surprised; I knew there'd be trouble. If you want, I can take a flight suit down there, land invisibly, and keep close to him."

She thought about my proposal for a few seconds. Then she shook her head, "No. Right now we have him on full surveillance. Bixby's men can be there in sixty seconds. Besides, we both know that Clark has gone through far worse than this."

I tried to remain casual as I stared at the screen. "You're the boss."

And we continued to watch.

For the first hour, Clark was the center of attention. From this perspective, I felt like we were inside a cage, looking out. The others stayed at a distance, as if Clark was dangerous. They didn't talk to him, but they also didn't try to hurt him, either; remembering all the rocks in the area, I prayed that nobody considered stoning him to death.

I finally started to get uncomfortable in the feedback jumpsuit from my combat simulation, so excused myself from the Bridge.

It felt good to change back into my normal clothing. As I dressed, I reflected on this whole mess.

What are they waiting for? I asked myself. *All they've done is put him on display like a captured animal. If they're intent had been privacy, all they would've needed to do is not answer the door. But instead, they let Clark in, only to capture him. What's on their mind? Then something else occurred to me. They knew he was coming – how? Is it possible ... a spy, here? But the only one who isn't part of Orion is ... Belinda.*

I froze. Suddenly feeling very heavy, I sat on the dressing room bench. "No," I squeaked out reluctantly.

I called the Bridge. "Bonnie, do you know where Belinda is?"

"No, I don't," she replied. "Why?"

"She might be able to shed some light on why they captured Clark."

"Good idea. I'll call her up here."

"Okay," I acknowledged. "I'll join you in a few minutes."

When I stepped onto the Bridge, Belinda was occupying the seat I had been sitting in earlier, to the other side of Bonnie's command seat. The three ladies were busy talking when I approached Belinda and drew the small aerosol can I had hidden in my hand. As I sprayed it in Belinda's face, the expression on her face instantly became blank.

"*Perry!*" exclaimed Dot.

"*What the Hell are you doing?*" exploded Bonnie.

"Verity-3," I calmly identified the contents of the aerosol can. "I'm finding out the truth."

I ignored all other comments from Bonnie and Dot, and did what I needed to do. "*Belinda,*" I began. "Have you communicated to Miner's Bowl since coming aboard the *Orion*?"

"No," she replied woodenly.

"Have you, in any way, shape, or form, spied on us for anyone on the ground?"

"No."

"Did you tell anyone not aboard the *Orion* about Clark's visit to Miner's Bowl?"

"No."

I was satisfied. I turned to Bonnie and Dot, an apologetic look on my face. "Somehow the people down there knew that Clark was coming. Belinda was the only one aboard who had any possible connection with them. Forgive me for my choice of methods in discerning the truth, but this does take away any possible doubt on the matter." I address Belinda. "*You won't remember anything about this exchange, do you understand?*"

"I understand," she replied. Then she blinked twice and continued talking as if nothing had happened.

The others tried to continue as if nothing had happened. But if looks could kill, I would've been a puddle on the deck as a result of Bonnie and Dot's glares.

"So how could they know that Clark was going to be arriving?" I brought up my earlier concern. "You all heard the language that Pastor Steve used. He quoted Scripture. Sebastian, can you play back that part of Pastor Steve's dialog?"

A moment later, his voice came through the speakers: "*Savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard!*" The reference is Acts 20:29-31."

"Something about that ... doesn't sound right," mentioned Belinda. "Is that from the King James Version?"

"*Sebastian?*" Bonnie relayed.

"It is not," replied the AI in Morgan Freeman's voice. "It is from the New International Version."

"What would it be in King James?" I asked.

"In the King James Version, the verse translates as, '*For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them. Therefore watch, and remember.*'"

"Why would Pastor Steve quote from New International?" I asked. "He's still a straight King James man, isn't he?"

"Of course," confirmed Belinda. "Any translation other than the King James Version is a lie from the pit of Hell."

"Then why would he be quoting it *from memory*?" asked Dot.

"Maybe it has something to do with what he said after that," mused Bonnie. "*Sebastian*?"

The playback continued: "*You're the one I was warned of – he who would try to divide the church with his mouth that drips honey!*"

"*Warned of*?" I repeated. "Who could have warned him?"

"It probably came from someone he trusted," supposed Belinda. "A family member, or maybe one of the elders?"

"There's no telling," said Bonnie.

"So what are they going to do with him, now that they have him? And when?"

"Whatever it is," commented Bonnie, a determined look in her eyes. "We'll be ready."

CHAPTER TEN

Miner's Bowl

Afternoon

"*Hey there, Sparky!*"

Clark recognized the voice instantly, as he swung around to face the source.

There, sitting on a rock, was an amiable-looking plump little man. He was dressed in a 70's style leisure suit.

"It's not possible," hissed Clark. "*Wail!*"

The other man smiled. "Well, I'm certainly glad you recognized me; I was afraid that after fifty-some years, we would have to go through the introductions all over again. And those things are *so* tiring, don't you think?"

"Are *you* behind this nightmare?"

"Is that the proper way to greet an old acquaintance, Clark? 'Are you behind this nightmare?' No 'how've you been all these years, Wail?' or 'what've you been up to since I got thrown into cold storage?'"

"You *are* behind this nightmare," hissed Clark.

Wail stood and sighed. "Yes, Clark, I am. And a *brilliant* nightmare, if I say so myself. I've firmly convinced this dope that I'm his God." He laughed. "He is *such* a sucker! All I have to do is come to him with this 'ethereal voice' from heaven, tell him what he wants to hear, tell him how special he is, and he falls for it hook, line, and sinker! I think it's one of my best scams."

"One of ...?" Clark asked. "You mean there have been others?"

Wail spun to face him. "Well, of course there have been others! You might've been in a Birds-Eye wrapper for fifty years, but I've been keeping busy! Certainly you've heard of some of my assignments: Charles Manson, Jim Jones, David Koresh, Aum Shinrikyo, Yahweh Ben Yahweh, the *Alpha Disciples*, Woo Jong-min, *Heaven's Gate*, the *Order of the Solar Temple*, the *Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God*, the *Hype Jingleberries*, and most of the suicide bombers from the last ten years."

"*You monster!*" hissed Clark between his teeth.

"*Exactly!*" he exclaimed, his smile replaced by a cold sneer. "I *am* a monster ... that is what I do! And these people are next! They are cattle ... sheep ... just like all the others! And when I'm done, they'll be meat for my master's table!"

He moved closer to Clark, but just out of reach of the bronze man. Clark thought he could smell brimstone from the demonic presence.

"Clark," Wail addressed him gently, almost tenderly. "*Clark. You need me. I complete you. It's what I like to call the Nemesis Constant: to every hero, there must be a villain. To every Jesus there must be a Judas. To every Superman there must be a Luthor – you've seen that one personally, haven't you? To every Holmes there must be a Moriarty. This is what keeps heroes going, doesn't it? Make them believe their existence is necessary in the universe. And I have been here for you. Did you actually believe that John Sunlight acted alone?*" He laughed. "I was there, whispering in his ear, giving him visions in the night, inspiring him to do the things he did. I was with them all, challenging you with the machinations of villains all over the world. And when you were at the end of your wits, I gave you the greatest challenge – *me*. And you did just what I expected – you rushed in without thinking. I directed Sloan to ambush you, and gave you that last little push that would send you into his arms. You were *so* easy to manipulate."

Clark didn't say anything for several breaths. Then he declared, "God had other ideas. I'm one of *His* now."

The demon's face took on an expression of distaste. "Yes ... *that*. Well, it just made *my* job a bit more complicated."

"More than you want to admit. You are aware that Satan – *your* master – has already been defeated?"

"Yeah, I've heard that," he scoffed. "So the Nazarene would like you to believe, and those ... *imaginative* fiction writers. However, since the future has not yet been written, I don't have anything to worry about. You're defenseless."

"So *you* would have the rest of the world believe," Clark countered. "But since your master is a liar and the father of lies, you'll understand if I don't believe you." He paused and coughed. "And as far as my being defenseless, you forget who's ultimately in control. Therefore ... in the name of my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, in whom I serve – I command you, Wail, to *begone!*"

The smile on Wail's face vanished, and his eyes rolled up in his head. Then he staggered back as if he'd been punched in the stomach, and his body jerked like he was having an epileptic seizure.

But he didn't go away.

After several seconds, he stopped shaking. He steadied himself and pretended to dust himself off, all the while giving Clark a nasty glare. Then he walked around and stood defiantly before Clark.

"Did you actually think you were going to hurt *me*?" he sneered.

Instead of the reaction Wail expected, Clark coughed, and smiled back. "I just needed to know what would happen. And now that I do, I'm going to crank up the volume. **BONNIE – NOW!**"

Thirty seconds earlier, aboard the *Orion*, Bonnie recognized the Mayan shorthand for urgent prayer cover. Seeing what Clark saw, she knew what he had in mind. With his command, she punched the button for ship-wide intercom. "**ATTENTION, ALL PERSONNEL! THIS IS A PRAYER INTERCESSION RED ALERT – REPEAT, A PRAYER INTERCESSION RED ALERT! DOC SAVAGE NEEDS PRAYER NOW! ALL PERSONNEL! IF YOU CAN DROP WHAT YOU'RE DOING – PLEASE INTERCEDE IN PRAYER ON BEHALF OF DOC SAVAGE! WE NEED TO COME INTO ONE ACCORD – NOW HEAR THIS!**" And then she began praying aloud, unabashedly calling upon Jesus Christ to intercede on Clark's behalf and specifically drawing God's wrath upon Wail.

Wail's expression seemed to go blank for a moment. Then his eyes opened wide and he opened his mouth and released an unearthly shriek of pain. Since nobody came running from their homes, Clark wondered if God was keeping this a private bout. The demon, his hands balled up into fists, fell to the ground and screamed in pain as if his body was ablaze. He rolled about on the ground, and suddenly vanished.

Clark could practically feel the silence. He wondered if he'd suffered temporary loss of his hearing.

"Clark?"

He heard that.

"Clark?"

He heard that, too. "Bonnie?" he answered in English.

"*We're here, Clark! Are you okay?*"

"Yeah," he sighed. "Whatever you did up there, it worked. He's gone – hopefully for good."

"*Do you want us to get you out of there?*" Bonnie asked urgently.

"No. I still want to try and reason with Winter."

"*Okay. We'll be right here.*"

"I know." He smiled. "Thanks ... to all of you."

Bonnie slumped back in her command chair and silently mouthed her thanks to God. Then she got on the intercom and updated the crew. "*Continue to keep Doc Savage in your prayers,*" she added, "*for strength, especially during this time of heavy spiritual warfare. Thanks again.*"

I made a suggestion to Bonnie. "You look like you need a break. Why don't you take a couple of minutes and check on the kids?"

Bonnie looked up at me and gave me a tired half-smile. Then she glanced over at the other women on either side of her; they encouraged my suggestion.

"Sounds good," she finally agreed, standing. "I'll be just a few minutes."

"Mind if I sit in your chair?" I asked.

"As long as you remember to give it back when I return," she ribbed me as she rose. She gave me a quick hug to let me know there were no hard feelings.

I gave her a sincere smile. "Take all the time you need."

I moved over into the center seat. It *was* comfortable. I looked at the others, then stared ahead.

"Did you say that was an actual *demon*?" gawked Belinda.

"Oh, yes, and – from what I understand – he's very familiar to Clark," I provided. "A long time ago, prior to Clark's hibernation, he 'encountered' a character named Wail who described himself as a demon from Hell. From what I've heard, there was nothing Biblical about Wail's origins – it was more literary, along the lines of Dante. Regardless, Clark arrested Wail and threw him into a makeshift jail. A short while later Wail mysteriously vanished from the cell, and that was the end of the story."

"Apparently not," appended Belinda. "And that's him?"

"Yes." I paused. I took a deep breath and released it in a sigh. "I've got to go down there."

"You can't," Dot gently informed me. "You're still under restriction."

I looked over at my wife. "We both know I'm the only one aboard who can safely go down there without being discovered."

"What do you mean by that?" asked Belinda.

I turned to her. "Do you remember me ever talking about my uncle Perry, the one I was named after?"

"He was a journalist, right?"

"A newspaperman," I clarified. "Anyway, when he died, he willed this ring to me." I held up my hand, showing the silver ring with the hematite stone, giving her a knowing grin. "It has ... special properties. I can go down into the valley and not be detected."

"You always wanted to be a spy," she grinned back.

"A spy *and* a superhero," I returned. *And now I can be both*, I reminded myself.

Just then, Bonnie came out of the nursery; she looked more relaxed than a few minutes earlier. I gave her back her seat and made my request.

"I'm not saying that you dismiss any of our other precautions," I defended. "I just think we'd all feel a little bit better if we had someone on the ground covering Clark's back, especially now that we know that Wail's got his hand in this situation. You *know* I'm the most qualified to do this. If you want, I won't even let Clark know I'm there."

Bonnie looked up at me and gave me a scrutinizing gaze. "And if he asks for you?"

I shrugged. "I don't know ... tell him I'm in the bathroom," I quipped with a smile. "Bonnie, I still have strong feelings against Pastor Steve – I won't deny that. But with Wail here, it's a whole new ballgame – *and* a common foe."

Bonnie started opening her mouth, but then she closed it. I knew she was thinking about it. Then she tilted her head up slightly and commanded, "*Sebastian?* Rescind all restrictions against Perry Liston."

"Acknowledged," replied the AI.

"Thank you," I said sincerely.

"I'll let Major Bixby know you're on your way. One thing, Perry – the battle is the *Lord's*. Never forget that."

I appreciated her simple words of wisdom. "Thanks."

I kissed Dot, then left the Bridge. The elevator ride wasn't fast enough for me, and Major Bixby met me just inside the forward starboard dome. As I stepped into the open area, I couldn't believe what I was seeing. "What in the –"

Bixby turned to me and gave a cherubic grin. "Impressive, isn't it? Just in case some of your pals down there decide to turn violent, they might need a little ... peculiar ... persuasion."

I agreed with him. We proceeded to the locker room where I donned my midnight blue flight suit and antigrav rig. As I did, Major Bixby informed me they were going to be adding a couple of superfirers and a holster rig to my arrangement. "Mercy bullets only," he clarified, "just in case you need a little bite to back up your bark."

"How do you think mercy bullets would stack up against that demon?" I asked, slightly in jest.

"I don't," he replied bluntly. "That's where we depend on God to fight our battles."

"Amen," I agreed.

I could've done this alone, but it went faster with my pit crew helping me. A tech moved in and checked my connections, while another one helped me with the holster. He handed me the superfirers; I gave them each a quick check, made sure the safeties were on, and secured them in the holsters. Additional clips fit snugly into leg pouches. I activated the helmet, which quickly extended around my head.

The techs gave me thumbs-up, and I started walking towards the dome. Regardless of how many hours I'd spent in the suit, I still needed to give the antigrav a quick test to keep me from getting smug. Staying clear of the Seraphim, I smoothly lifted off the ground and casually performed a series of aerial *Tai Chi* exercises.

I landed gracefully next to Major Bixby, and retracted my hood. "It's good. I just remembered one last item I'll need before I head out."

Five minutes later I walked to the nearest airlock. There was no reason for them to retract the dome just to let me out, so the airlock was convenient. I signaled Bonnie that I was ready to go, then opened the outer door and jumped.

I drifted down through the cloud layer that kept the *Orion* from being spotted as a strange spot in the sky. I waited a few seconds before activating my ring and becoming invisible, extending the aura beyond my flight suit. Passing into the crater of Miner's Bowl, I cringed at the sharpness of the walls.

I slowed my descent and scoped out the area looking for an area where I wouldn't run into one of those golems. From this perspective, seeing all of those golems gave me an involuntary shudder. Despite what Pastor Steve had told me, there was something about them that creeped me out. I touched down quietly and looked around; my landing hadn't attracted attention. I made a quick check of the countdown chip in my head that told me how long I had until I would become visible; it was just under nineteen minutes.

I walked to the center where Clark was, and extended my helmet around my head. It would allow me to talk to *Orion* without being overheard – even with Clark's sensitive ears.

"Perry to *Orion*," I greeted. "I'm on the ground and in sight of Clark. He looks a bit tired, but none the less for wear."

"*We see him*," Bonnie reported. "*We concur. How are you?*"

"Fine. I need to find a place to make the transition back to invisibility."

"*You're near the tabernacle, aren't you?*" asked Belinda.

"Yes ... *yes!*" I understood. "As long as nobody's using it, I can. And when they're using it ..." I looked over at Pastor Steve's house and smiled. "I can use Pastor Steve's house. Just think of it as poetic justice."

I heard Belinda laugh.

"I'm going to check out the tabernacle while nobody's around."

I drew closer to the octagonal building and retracted my helmet. As earlier, none of the doors had locks, so I was able to slip inside. Nobody was inside, and I thanked God for His providential favor getting me this far. Several minutes later, I transitioned back into invisibility, and slipped out of the tabernacle. I found a place where I was certain I would be out of the way when the people came for evening services.

It didn't take long until people started showing up for evening services. It started with Adam and another girl, then men and women trickled in until the building was full. Pastor Steve's family had been among the first to arrive, but the man himself was the last one in. I waited until I could hear Pastor Steve's voice singing, then made a beeline for his house. I walked in boldly, not fearing discovery; it would be a cardinal sin for anyone to miss services. I had a plan, and I didn't hesitate to carry it out. Belinda had told me that the parlor was a central place for action in this house, so I went in and planted microbugs and hidden cameras where they'd do the most good.

Before I headed out, I planted a few of the bugs in the master bedroom. Then I left the house and returned to outside the tabernacle.

Once evening services were complete and the people had abandoned the tabernacle, I felt comfortable enough to return to the building

Then came the hard part: the waiting. I hated it, because I couldn't let my guard down once lest I become visible and somebody see me. The last time I went for any length of time was back in that parallel timeline, and it was only for God's intervention through an angel named Greg that I was able to get any sleep. As I sat on the stage, invisible, my fingers running across the top of the ring, I prayed that God would somehow change things to give me more control over how long I could remain invisible.

I knew the ring somehow produced an aura that enveloped me and made me invisible. I knew the aura could be expanded to encompass my clothes or anything I was carrying – even someone who was standing close to me – or contracted to allow my clothes to show. But I couldn't pull it in any closer so that it would exist under the skin and I would be visible. But then again, I hadn't really tried much ... had I?

I thought about trying it here and now, but I didn't want to risk messing things up and putting any of us in danger. Maybe later, back aboard Orion, I'd experiment with it. In the meantime, I'd be patient and take it one hour at a time.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Steven Winter woke up in the middle of the night and couldn't get back to sleep. After a few tries, he finally gave up and went into the living room.

He sat on the couch and reached behind him, drawing open the curtains just enough to allow him to see the golem in the town center and its reluctant prisoner. The large bronze man was sitting on the ground, and looked to be sleeping.

For a moment, Winter considered going out there and waking him up. *After all, he rationalized, why should he sleep when I can't? It's his fault. That ... menace. He filled my head with dreams of the two of us, sitting and talking as if we were good friends. It's not possible. The man's a threat, an interloper, an evildoer. He intends to divide my people. I can't let that happen.*

I won't let that happen.

Because *Orion* was keeping a close watch on the tabernacle, I was able to get a few hours of sleep without shifting back and forth between visibility and invisibility. When people started heading in my direction for morning services, I was alerted, and was able to slip out of the building unnoticed. I looked in on Clark, then shifted locations to Pastor Steve's house. A little over an hour later, I was informed that services were concluding, and so I refreshed my invisibility and moved back outside.

"Pastor Steve, your sermon was amazing," a man commented, shaking his hand. "Forgive me, but I've not heard you this passionate in some time."

"Yes," Winter said, somewhat detached. "Praise God."

Another woman came up to him, tears streaking her face, her voice cracking. "Your words – how you talked about forgiveness and God's mercy – were beautiful."

Others approached Winter, talking about how amazing his morning message was.

If only Winter could remember what he had said.

Sometime during song-leading, his mind drifted from what he was doing, and didn't return to him until after it was all over and he was hearing the responses from the closing prayer. Not wanting to jeopardize himself by admitting that he could be absent-minded, he just smiled and kept silent.

Waiting outside the tabernacle, God had impressed upon me the need to follow Pastor Steve and observe him. He could conceal the indecision from the others, but not from me. Something was bugging him, and it had to do with Clark. From my vantage point, I was able to see both men, expecting that they would soon come together.

Clark, still chained to the golem, was doing his best to exercise.

Pastor Steve was watching from a safe distance. He didn't move for several minutes, as if sizing up the situation, or getting the nerve to approach. Finally he moved closer, to where Clark noticed him.

"Good morning," greeted Clark in mid-stretch.

"If you're thinking about breaking the chains," cautioned Pastor Steve. "Don't bother. They're very strong."

"I wouldn't think of breaking them. I'm just doing my exercises. You interested?"

"It looks somehow familiar."

"Two hours a day, rain or shine, ever since I was a kid," Clark informed him.

"It looks like it's worked."

"It does," Clark replied. "I assume your muscles are due to all the farm work here."

"It keeps me busy."

Clark shifted positions and subjects. "Perry told me you used to be a biker. Y'ever heard of a group called the *Southern Riders*? Leader's a guy 'bout our size by the name of O'Neal?"

"*Irish*?" he recalled. "Looks like a Viking minus the helmet?"

Clark nodded. "I think we're both talking about the same man. A few years back, my wife and I rode with them. Irish put up with us, but some of the others didn't. They put sugar in the gas tank of my wife's Road King, and drugged our water supply."

"That wouldn't surprise me," Pastor Steve smirked. "At least they didn't cut your tires. Had that happen too many times for me to keep track. What kind of a bike did you have?"

"Boss Hoss."

Pastor Steve's eyebrow lifted. "A what?"

"A Boss Hoss."

"What size engine?"

"Three-hundred-and-fifty cubic-inch Chevy V6."

"You build it from scratch?"

"I found a dealer in Idaho Falls who had a real unique one."

"Tell me about it."

Clark stopped his exercises and stood erect. "Well, the saddlebags were huge and custom made – heavy-duty fiberglass covered in quarter-inch black leather. The seat was nice and wide and had a cover of white wool. And the basket over the rear wheel was made of inch-wide welded steel bars. Of course, the thing that impressed me was what was on the back. It was –"

"– a cross, three foot tall and two foot wide," Pastor Steve finished the description. "Solid steel, with the words 'JESUS CHRIST' on the crosspiece, and 'GOD SON SAVIOR' running from top to bottom."

Clark froze in mid-description and stared at Pastor Steve, his head at an angle, and a grin spreading across his face. "Are you telling me that *I* bought *your* bike?" Then he burst out laughing. "God really *is* good!"

"Amen," Pastor Steve agreed.

"You got rid of it when you settled here?" Clark asked about the bike.

The other man nodded. "I kept trying to warn people about the End-Times. But when they stopped listening and started mocking, that's when God told me it was time to climb in the ark and close the door. So I sold the bike for some supplies, and came back here for good." He paused, and lowered his voice. "Perry told me the End-Times haven't happened yet. Is that true?"

"Yes. Did you hear about the attack on the World Trade Center towers in New York?"

He nodded. "I figured that would be the beginning of the end."

"There have been a few tense years ... wars and rumors of wars, of course ... but not quite the nightmare of Revelation."

Pastor Steve changed subjects. "What's your connection to Liston?"

"He led me to Christ. I can give you my testimony if you'd like."

"Sure," he nodded.

"Have you ever heard the name *Doc Savage* before ... a long time ago, maybe?"

"Yeah, but – like you said – it was a long time ago."

"Well, believe it or not, that's me. Almost sixty years ago, I got ambushed by some enemies of mine. Do you know what suspended animation is?"

Pastor Steve nodded.

"Well, I'm proof that it works. I was like Rip Van Winkle from 1948 to 1999. When an accident freed me, I found myself in Portland, Oregon. Perry said you guys used to live there."

Pastor Steve nodded. "It was our home base."

"Well, I wandered around for awhile until I ended up at the Mission there in Old Town."

"I know the place." The expression on his face was nostalgic. "I used to preach there."

Clark continued. "I was hungry, and I saw the Mission as a place to get something to eat. So I went in. But I had to listen to the sermon first. Well, there was something in what the preacher said that got my attention. I guess you'd say that God finally got through to me. And I responded to the altar call."

"Praise God," Pastor Steve muttered sincerely under his breath. "Perry was preaching?"

Clark smiled. "Yes. Afterward, he invited me to stay at his house. We've been good friends ever since. We travel the country, ministering like the old circuit riders."

Pastor Steve just nodded. But Clark could see he'd believed him.

"Did you see something different in Perry when you saw him this time?" Clark inquired. "Honestly?"

"I ... did see a change in him," Pastor Steve admitted. "He seemed to be ... more confident, more peaceful."

"Thank you."

Pastor Steve looked up. "For what?"

"**You** gave Perry a strong foundation. I owe my salvation to you as much as I do to him."

The other man just looked at him.

Clark changed the subject. "May I ask you something? Have you spoken directly to God, or to one of his angels?"

"I have spoken to God," he stated plainly.

"Have you spoken to him face-to-face?"

"Yes."

Clark then proceeded to describe Wail in precise details, down to the tone of his voice. As he did, Pastor Steve's face drained of color. Clark finally asked, "Is that him?"

The other man nodded.

"I'm sorry to tell you, but he is *not* God. His name is Wail, and I have encountered him before. He's actually a demon." He paused. "When you captured me, you quoted me a Bible verse from the 20th chapter of Acts that included the words, 'Savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock.' Did I quote the verse correctly?"

"Yes."

"And it is my understanding that you accept nothing here but the authorized King James Version of the Bible?"

"All others are flawed by the hands of man."

"Then you're aware that the word 'savage' – or any variations on the word 'savage' – is not found *anywhere* in the text of the King James Bible."

"Of course it is," Pastor Steve shrugged off.

"I assume you have a Strong's Concordance of the Bible?"

"Of course."

"Then please do me a favor. Double-check that verse, if you will. And if ... *if* ... you cannot find it in the Bible or the Concordance, ask yourself why God would give you a scripture from a 'flawed' text."

Pastor Steve didn't react. His face did not give away his thoughts. Then he turned and headed towards his home.

Clark continued exercising, praying as he did.

I extended my helmet around my face and contacted *Orion*. "Are you following him?"

"*Sure am,*" replied Lizzy, back on duty. "*I'm gonna patch you in to what I'm reporting to Clark.*" There was a pause, then Lizzy was back on. "*Okay, Doc, I've got him. He just went into the parlor. He closed the doors and went to one of the bookshelves. He's pulled down a big volume – I'll assume that's the Strong's – and a leather-bound Bible. He's sitting down on one of the couches. He's going through the Bible ... yeah, he found it. It doesn't look like he's too pleased with what he's found. Heartbeat and respiration are elevated. I'd say he's agitated. Now he's picking up the Strong's ... he's going through it ... again, heartbeat and respiration elevated. I'd suspect, by the way he's flipping through those pages, he's not found what he was looking for. Doc, I think you made your point. He's just sitting there now, thinking. Now he's getting up; he's leaving the books on the couch. And he's left the parlor.*"

I picked up the action from there as Pastor Steve left his house and headed rapidly away from the area. I debated about following him, but I was running out of invisibility. I had to stay back in order to transition. But I wished I could follow him.

Pastor Steve arrived in the cavern in the mines, but didn't respond with his usual humility.

"**Wail!**" he shouted.

The figure coalesced before him and slightly higher, floating inches from the ceiling. His face was sour.

Why do you call me by that name? he asked pointedly.

"That *is* your name, isn't it? Savage – he knows you! He described you!"

He is working with the Enemy. He must die. You must kill him.

Winter paused. "What?"

You must kill him.

"I can't just murder another human being."

People have already been murdered, Steven. What's one more?

"W-Who?"

Kandell.

"But ... his death was accidental. Wasn't it?"

He was trying to get away. He would have exposed us all. He had to die, as must Savage.

"I can't kill another human being."

I must know if you are loyal to me, he declared. You must kill him.

He stood firm. "I can't."

Then I will have the golems do it. But I will not be responsible if innocent people are hurt in the process.

"The golems? But they're just statues."

Go to the one Savage is shackled to. And take a gun.

I had transitioned back into invisibility, and was within sight of Clark.

He was praying, and I was silently supporting him, when we both felt a sudden vibration in the ground beneath us. Nothing else appeared to be involved, and *Orion* hadn't warned me of seismic activity in the area. Before I could respond and contact *Orion*, the impossible happened.

The left leg of the golem statue Clark was shackled to ... moved.

It didn't move far – just a few inches – but the inescapable truth was that the golem had moved under its own power. Then, as if that hadn't been enough of a shock for our senses, the other leg stretched ahead a few inches and took another step. As it did, Clark was carried along with it, as easily as a child hanging onto an adult's leg. After this second step, the golem stopped. We both held our breath, waiting for the statue to continue ... but it didn't. It stood just as immobile as it had been a few seconds earlier, just several feet over.

Watching Perry's transmission from the surface, Major Bixby said nothing. But his eyes narrowed and his mind was working. Finally he turned to his lieutenant.

"Morse, I think we're going to need something a *little* more powerful than mercy bullets."

"Yes, sir," the younger man agreed.

"*Clark!*" called Bonnie. "*Are you all right?*"

"Yes," he replied.

"*Did that statue just move by itself?*"

"Yes, it did."

"*Now do you want me to send down the rescue team?*"

He hesitated. "No ... not yet. I want to see what this means. Is it a limited action, or some predecessor of a larger possibility? Stand by ... Pastor Steve's returning."

Winter ran up the path to the golem and stopped several feet short. The expression on his face was shock and surprise.

"How did you move that golem?" he barked. "***Tell me!***"

"If I were strong enough to move this golem," Clark rationalized, "don't you think I would've snapped these chains and gotten away?"

"Then how –?"

"The golem moved itself."

"That's impossible!"

"I won't argue with you there. But that's what happened. Do you have another explanation?"

"***It's witchcraft!***" he declared. "Satan has put you here in our midst, and he enabled you to move this statue!"

"That's not true," Clark defended.

"***Silence, heathen!***" He ran to his house, returning a few minutes later. He had a pistol in his hand. "In order for my people to survive, you have to die!"

Clark cautioned, "You don't want to do this, Pastor Steve!"

"You're right, I don't," he admitted, his gun not wavering, "but I must."

He pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened. Winter looked at the gun, surprised. Then he made sure the safety wasn't on, checked the action, chambered another round, and aimed carefully.

Again, nothing happened.

Winter looked at the pistol, then turned and ran back in the direction of the caverns.

Alone, Clark wondered what had caused the pistol to malfunction.

"*Peekaboo!*" a voice whispered in his ear.

Clark's face broke into a big grin. "Perry!"

"Thought you might need an ace in the hole. After your meeting with Wail, I got my flight suit and got down here as quickly as I could."

"You saw this move?"

"Yes," I acknowledged. "There's no explanation for it ... except for the obvious one."

"Wail?"

"Given everything we've seen so far, it's the only option that makes sense. Unfortunately, it would mean that he's not completely gone." I paused. "But what puzzles me is, why isn't this golem moving now?"

"Maybe it just moved as much as it had to."

"A puppet."

"With Wail as the puppet master."

"That would explain how they all got into this valley without external means." I started to lift his chains to remove them. "Let's get you out of here."

"No, don't! If I suddenly escaped, they'd never listen to me. I have to stay."

"What if he comes back with another gun, or a knife?"

"You brought the *Fuego*?"

"Good guess." The *Fuego* was the nickname we finally gave Long Tom's device used to burn off firing pins and making guns ineffective. "But it's not much use against a knife."

"Did you bring anesthetic gas?"

"No. Didn't think it would be necessary, since we wanted them conscious."

"Yes, of course. You may have to tip your hand then."

"Let him know I'm here and invisible? Oh, he'll take that well," I added sarcastically.

"How long do you have left?"

"Twelve minutes." I paused. "Let's see what happens."

"Wail!"

Yes, Steven?

"The golem moved!"

Did you kill Savage?

"No. The gun wouldn't fire!" He hesitated. "Wait! Wouldn't you have known that?"

You're wasting my time, Steven. Are you going to kill Savage or not?

"Who are you, anyhow?"

You're wasting my time, Steven. And he vanished.

Winter stood in the empty cavern for several seconds. He didn't know what to do.

I was standing near Clark when Wail appeared. Seeing the expression on his face made me intuitively compare it to Satan's reaction to the empty tomb.

"IT'S YOUR FAULT!" he screeched as he angrily jabbed a finger at Clark, his red eyes glowing with supernatural hate.

"Winter saw through you?" Clark replied calmly.

Wail responded by unleashing a score of obscenities directed at Winter. "Well, I've had it with these people! I'm going to move on. But first I'm going to use these people to make a statement to the rest of the world ... to please the boss." He grinned. "First I'll have my golems wipe out this valley. Then I think I'll send them into the nearest big city. Can you imagine what the general public would think of religious freaks – especially those Sons of Abraham – if all these symbols of Judaism went on a destructive rampage?"

"Won't it be a dead giveaway if people start seeing a column of 30-foot-tall stone giants marching down the Interstate?"

"How stupid do you think I am?" Wail scoffed. "When I put the golems in this valley in the middle of the night, nobody heard a thing. I can just as easily move them into downtown Butte or

Bozeman. Or maybe I'll drop 'em in the middle of Cheyenne Mountain, and see if they can find something thermonuclear to play with. And while the world's falling apart, I'll be looking for my next pigeon."

Effortlessly, Wail's feet left the ground, and he hovered high above the valley floor. Then he raised his arms and spoke in a language Clark couldn't understand.

"Whoa!" I exclaimed. "What's he saying?"

"I ... don't ... know. Bonnie?"

The response came through our transceivers. "We see it. It doesn't translate on any –"

The ground suddenly began to vibrate under our feet.

"I've got a bad feeling about this," I muttered.

So did Clark. "Get me out of these manacles, quick!"

I had come prepared to do just that. With the device already in my hands, I quickly pressed one end of it to the shackles. There was a brief high-pitched whine, and the metal shattered. As I finished the second one, we both started feeling a familiar vibration around us, and looked up to see the arms of the golem slowly rising.

"Run!" And we split off in separate directions.

I ran a few yards, then turned back. As I did, I felt more vibrations coming from all around me.

"Oh, no!" I muttered as I saw all the golems now beginning to move.

"Oh, no!" muttered Dot.

Bonnie urgently hit the communicator button. **"MAJOR BIXBY! DEPLOY! DEPLOY!"**

As soon as the golems started moving, so did the residents of Miner's Bowl. After all, it wasn't every day that the earth started shaking. They came out of their homes and workplaces, looking around in surprise and horror. It didn't take long for them to realize that the golems had moved ... and *were* moving.

Winter had returned to Clark's side, his tone demanding.

"What's going on?" Winter asked.

"Your precious golems have begun to move of their own accord!"

"How?"

"Wail – that *demon* you've been associating with!" Clark shot back. "*He's* the one who's been sent to corrupt you and destroy this place! *He's* behind these golems – they are *his* puppets!"

"But ... how?" Winter repeated dumbly, looking around. "And how did you get out of those shackles?"

Oh, God! I closed my eyes and urgently prayed. There's too much going on right now to add in-fighting! If I were visible, I could support Clark and help focus us on the real enemy – but I can't stall that long! I really wish I were visible!

I opened my eyes ... and I *was* visible! I turned my hands over and stared at them with disbelief. Instinctively, I triggered the chip in my head; it reported that I still had several minutes. Then I heard Pastor Steve repeat his demand for answers, and I ran towards them.

"*I freed him!*" I called out.

"How did you get here?" Winter asked. "And what's that you're wearing?"

"Pastor Steve," Clark interrupted. "Your people are in danger if we don't get them to safety!"

Winter took a quick look around to confirm Clark's statements. His expression changed to one of determination. "What can I do?"

"The golems are too big to fit into the caves and the mines!" Clark pointed out. "If we can get the people in there, the golems won't be able to follow! Let's just hope the golems can't crawl!"

"But how can we fight stone statues?" Winter asked.

"We've got backup coming," Clark answered.

"Backup? From where?"

Both Clark and I pointed skyward. "*There!*"

Winter looked up. In the distance, he saw a number of black specks that looked like a swarm of bees, then gave us an incredulous expression. But before he could say anything, we heard a crashing sound behind us. One of the golems had uprooted a tree and was bringing it down on Winter's house like a club.

"Let's get your family to safety!" Clark ordered. "Perry, can you fly up there and distract it?"

"I'm on it!" And I took to the air.

Thankful that the flight suit's controls could be operated hands-free, I moved around the golem until I was behind him. Extending my suit's helmet over my head, I used my suit's external speakers to amplify my voice; last used to talk to the natives during the wildfire Search-and-Rescue, it made a perfect bullhorn. I drew my superfirers and put them on full automatic; I didn't expect the mercy bullets to have any effect on the statues, but I was betting that enough of a barrage might get make me a more attractive target.

And I was right.

I yelled and taunted and peppered the golem from behind, and the animated statue swung the uprooted tree at me like a flyswatter; I felt the brush of the leaves as I barely avoided being swiped out of the sky.

"Missed me, missed me," I sing-songed

I looked down at the activity below. Clark and Pastor Steve had gotten his family out of the house, and were now rushing them towards the nearest exit. They were facing an army of golems between them and safety, and I wished I had more than just mercy bullets in these superfirers.

Suddenly we heard a sound that caused us all to stare skyward.

It was a single long blast ... from a horn.

I looked up to see Bixby's Seraphim swooping down, appearing more like their heavenly namesake due to the metallic wings on their backs. This was Bixby's element of surprise I'd witnessed before leaving *Orion*. And leading the way with a blast from the *Shofar* – *my* suggestion – gave the scene an apocalyptic emphasis.

I suddenly heard Major Bixby's voice through my transceiver: *"Heads up, Perry! We're going to blow the outside doors! Since it looks like these overgrown lawn gnomes don't possess a hive mind, we don't have to worry about a coordinated attack! And you've got the right idea – distract the golems and get the people clear. Once we have a clear target, we can pick 'em off like fish in a barrel!"*

"Clark's helping Pastor Steve get his family out of the valley!" I informed. "They need cover!"

"We've got 'em!" he responded.

"Please tell me you have reloads for my superfirers!"

"And have you miss out on all the fun? Janssen will meet up with you in a few minutes!"

"Thanks, Major!"

I settled back on the ground in order to avoid being hit by the Seraphim as they followed Clark's route. I saw two groups come through. One pair flew high and overhead, making a beeline for the exit. As they did, their speakers boomed out a warning: ***"FOLLOW US OUT OF THE VALLEY! WE WILL BLAST THE DOOR! THE GOLEMS WON'T BE ABLE TO FOLLOW YOU!"*** Frightened people watched them, then followed them.

The flying soldiers arrived at the tunnel connecting the valley with the outside world. One of the Seraphim landed, ran through to the other end, and attached something to the inside of the door, while the other Seraphim kept people clear. A moment later, the first one ran back, yelling, ***"FIRE IN THE HOLE!"***

The blast obliterated the metal door, pushing it outward, and clearing a path to freedom.

In the meantime, two other Seraphim ran interference for Clark and Pastor Steve; they fired on the golems, leaving a trail of rubble in their wake.

All across the valley, the Seraphim spread the word. "***WE WILL DISTRACT THE GOLEMS! WHEN WE DO, PLEASE HURRY FOR THE NEAREST EXIT FROM THE VALLEY, OR SHELTER INSIDE THE ENTRANCES TO THE MINES! THE GOLEMS ARE TOO TALL TO FOLLOW! IF YOU LEAVE THE VALLEY, YOU WILL FIND SAFETY IN THE NEARBY TOWNS! AS SOON AS THE DANGER IS OVER, YOU WILL BE ABLE TO RETURN TO YOUR HOMES!***"

I grinned and thanked God.

Just then, God directed my attention to another threat.

Before arriving, we'd seen the limited number of animals in the valley – mostly chickens and turkeys, a few cows, and one bull. When the golems started moving, the animals were spooked and started moving. One of the golems busted part of the fence that kept the cattle corralled, and prompted a stampede. If left unstopped, they could cause additional destruction and potential loss of life. They needed to be stopped, and I was the only one who carried non-lethal ammunition.

I swept down and opened fire on the bull with my superfirers. I didn't need to conserve ammunition. I had emptied two full clips of mercy bullets before the bull finally got the point and went down. The stampede averted, I used my mercy bullets on the rest of the cattle while waiting for the Seraphim to find me.

It didn't take long. As I stood next to the sleeping cattle, one of the Seraphim gracefully landed behind me and retracted his helmet. His ID tag read *Janssen*.

"Good idea, using the mercy bullets on them," he commended.

"Thanks," I returned. "And I like the idea of the wings." I helped him release a pack he carried and lower it to the ground.

"Thanks." He handed me a couple of ammunition clips. I ejected the half-spent ones from my superfirer, and took his. He explained, "These are high explosive loads. They consist of two chemical compounds that mix when they splat against a target. A half-second later, ***boom.***"

"Simple enough," I acknowledged.

I put the rest of my mercy bullet clips in a ditty bag he provided. While he put the ditty bag in his pack, I filled my pockets with the new HE clips. As I scanned the valley, watching the golems moving above the treetops, I suddenly felt compelled to head in a particular direction. After making sure everything was secure, I shook Janssen's hand, thanked him and wished him Godspeed, and took to the air.

Steven Winter wondered if he was going mad!

First those golems – *his* golems – started moving, running amok and destroying things. Then Perry Liston ... flew? He diverted the golem while the bronze man Savage helped him get his

family out of their house. Then those winged men – angels? – swooped down from Heaven itself. They destroyed the golems that were attacking his family, and they blasted the metal doors to the outside world with childlike ease.

Was this the Beginning of the End?

It was all happening too fast – *too* fast! He couldn't think clearly. Ten years of doing things without rushing ... he didn't have time now to think things through. He needed to act, and act fast. So, inside, he did what he needed to do – trust God, and keep going!

His family was now outside the valley, for the first time in ten years! But the golems were not following, as the bronze man had said. *Where was he, by the way?* he thought. Then he saw him running back towards the valley. He turned back to his family and managed a grin of reassurance. *"I want you all to stay here!"* he ordered. *"I have to go back in and help the others!"*

He didn't wait for them to acknowledge them. He didn't want to see their pleading faces, for fear he'd succumb to them. Instead he turned and headed in the direction of the bronze man. He recalled what Savage had said, that Wail was an actual demon from Hell, and he had been deceived by him. It made Winter angry – first at Wail, then at himself for letting himself be duped by such an ungodly creature.

But he didn't have the luxury of meditating on the events around him. This was *his* valley being threatened – *his* people! Maybe he couldn't stop them single-handedly, but he had to do *something!*

He ran after Savage.

Adam Galen was *euphoric!*

As he watched the action take place around him – the golems moving and bringing such marvelous destruction, his church family running haplessly, screaming – he clapped and cheered enthusiastically, like a child waking up on Christmas morning.

And then there was the sound of the trumpet overhead, and the sky spilled forth winged men with weapons. Adam Galen's euphoria vaporized, as he shook his fists in the air and angrily screamed, *"NO! NO! NO!"*

Adam, my son.

Adam heard the ethereal voice and froze. There was no one around him.

Adam, my son, the voice repeated.

He paused, then reluctantly said, *"Lord, is that you?"*

Yes, Adam, the voice responded. *It is I. You have been faithful to me, my son. I require your help.*

"How can I help, Lord?" Adam asked, more confident.

Steven Winter has rejected me and has sided with the enemy, Liston and Savage.

"But he ... *is you*, Lord ... isn't he?"

No, Adam. He is not me, the voice countered. *He is only a man – a man who has lied to you, made you believe he was me all these years. He has betrayed everyone here ... and he has betrayed you. He is a false prophet and a deceiver.*

Adam looked up at a shimmering figure above him. "What do you want me to do?"

And as the voice spoke to him, he felt electrified; he knew it had to be the glory of God.

"**Look!**" Clark pointed. "Do you see him?"

"My God, that *is* him," Pastor Steve muttered. "Is that the one you called Wail?"

"Yes, it is. Who's that with him?"

"It's Adam ... Adam Galen. He's a very impressionable young man."

"If he's talking to Wail," concluded Clark. "It's not good."

"No ... it is not," Pastor Steve agreed soberly.

Spontaneously, both men began sprinting towards in that direction with identical speed. As soon as Wail spotted them, however, he rose high into the air and away. Clark and Pastor Steve caught up with Adam, who faced them with rage.

"GET AWAY FROM ME!" he yelled at Clark. **"GET AWAY FROM ME! YOU'RE OF SATAN! YOU'RE HERE TO BRING DESTRUCTION!"**

"Adam, please –" Winter started to say, but Adam turned on him as well.

"I BELIEVED IN YOU! BUT YOU'VE LIED TO ME! YOU'VE LIED TO US ALL! YOU'RE THE BETRAYER! YOU'RE THE BETRAYER!"

With both men momentarily stunned into silence, Adam ran from them. They heard laughter, and saw Wail several hundred yards away, hovering above the valley and laughing at them.

Clark met Winter's eyes. Then, with determination, they took off in pursuit.

I was impressed by the Seraphim in action.

Working in pairs, one would distract the stone juggernaut from its intended target while the other swung in and planted an explosive charge in the middle of its back where it couldn't reach. I had to admit a certain satisfaction in seeing the golems blow up. Earlier, I had observed the destroyed

golem to see if the pieces would reform like the advanced automatons in *Terminator 2*; I thanked God as I saw that, once they were in pieces, they stayed in pieces.

I followed some gunshots to a couple of the elders using their automatics against the monsters.

"**HEY! Stop that!**" I yelled to them, landing in front of them. "All your bullets are going to do is ricochet off and hit somebody else!"

"**Liston!**" barked Elder Archie Hazelwood angrily. "Are you behind this?"

"No, Archie, I'm not," I reassured him.

"That's Elder Hazelwood to you, Liston!" He defiantly jammed his thumb against his chest.

"Look, Archie," I sighed. "If we get through this day alive, I'll be happy to call you **Elder** Hazelwood! In the meantime, though, stop trying to shoot those golems with ordinary guns!"

"**Ordinary?**" He held up the automatic with a surprised look. "This is a .45! What did you have in mind?"

I don't know how he could've missed seeing the superfirers, but I drew them and held them muzzle up before him. "**These**. Now, stand back and watch them in action!" And I took to the air.

Since there weren't any others being threatened by the golem, I could take a few additional seconds planning my strategy. I came around behind it and fired several bursts at the back of the stone head. I pulled back and the head exploded. A moment later, the lower half of the statue fell forward with a dull thud.

I returned to Archie and the other man, and showed him the superfirers again. "The loads in these guns are high-explosive – and they do the job! We **are** going to need your help! Keep an eye on us and let us distract those monsters! Then, when they're looking at us, **you** grab the people and get 'em to the exits or into the mines. The golems are too tall to follow you. **Okay?**"

Archie gave me a discouraging glare, but nodded.

Suddenly, I heard screams. I pointed. "That way – **c'mon!**"

Without looking back, I took to the air and followed the sound. I didn't see any of the other Seraphim heading in that direction, so I knew it was up to me. The sound came from a family of four being menaced, surrounded by an equal number of golems. The woman was on the ground, shielding her two children with her own body. The man was swinging a hoe and moving around them, trying to keep the stone monsters at bay.

Their time was running out, so I put on the speed. I started yelling at the top of my lungs, amplified through my suit like I'd done to distract the golem attacking Pastor Steve's house. Two of the statues reacted to me, but I needed to stop the other two – they were more immediate threats to the family.

"**HEY, YOU, ON THE GROUND – DUCK!!**" I yelled.

After a moment of staring up at me with surprised eyes, he dropped to the ground and used his own body to protect his family. I attacked the latter two golems first, laying down a HE pattern before concentrating on the other two. All I remembered was making sure I cleared the blast area before the action. Seconds later, the threat was over, and I went to check on the family. Retracting my helmet and holstering my superfirers, I started to carefully but quickly clear away some of the larger debris from around the family.

"Those golems are gone!" I assured them. "Are you all okay?"

As they straightened up and took stock of each other, I looked around for other threats. I checked to see if Archie and the other man back there had followed me; they hadn't. I gave a sigh and turned my attention to the family. They seemed to be shaken up; apart from a few minor bumps and scrapes, there were no serious injuries, thank God.

Once the man knew his family was okay, he turned to thank me. He introduced himself as David Madison. His wife was Ana, and their children Billy and Tracy.

"You ... you're Perry Liston," he identified me cautiously. "Pastor Steve spoke about you."

"What did he say?" I asked innocently.

"He said ... you were involved with witchcraft."

"What do you think?"

He paused a moment, looking around. "Right now, I'm not sure what to believe."

I grinned. "That's a good, honest answer. Tell you what, you keep seeking God and getting your answers from Him. Right now I'm here because those things –" I gestured at the piles of broken golems. "– were trying to hurt you and your family. And it's not over yet. You know this place better than I do, David. Which is closer, an exit, or the mines?"

"The mines," he answered, pointing. "That way."

"Okay. The golems are too tall to follow; you'll be safe there. We better get going."

"Can you fly us there, mister?" asked the little boy.

I grinned. "Only if it's okay with your parents."

David grimaced. "I'd rather walk, if it's all right with you. Maybe another time, Billy."

Good answer, I thought. And we started walking.

After making sure the Madisons were safe, I returned to surveying the area from above.

In the vineyard, several people had trapped a few of the golems on the tenacious vines, swinging at them with sledgehammers. One golem was down, its legs shattered; it still moved and flailed defiantly. I yelled for them to move away, and finished the statues off with high-explosive. It was

encouraging to see the people of this valley using whatever they could to protect themselves and their families, and to actually get some advantage over these monsters.

It was eighty-seven minutes since the first golem started moving. I don't know how many of the statues had been destroyed, but it didn't feel like enough.

I was hovering in the midst of this conflict, when something on the ground caught my eye.

I recognized Adam, but he wasn't running from the golems – he was running *from* Pastor Steve! And I descended. But rather than stopping Pastor Steve, I landed ahead of Adam, cutting him off and bringing him to a clumsy stop. Pastor Steve arrived behind us a few seconds later.

"Adam," panted Pastor Steve anxiously. "You were talking to that demon! What did he tell you?"

Didn't see that coming, I thought to myself. Wail was talking to Adam?

"**NO!**" the younger man yelled back, angrily trying to get around me. "**YOU'RE BOTH IN ON THIS! YOU CAN FLY – YOU'RE NOT OF GOD, BUT OF SATAN! AND YOU –**" He pointed accusingly at Pastor Steve. "**– YOU'VE LIED TO ME! YOU'VE LIED TO US ALL! YOU'VE BROUGHT THIS PLAGUE ON US! BUT I CAN STOP IT! I-I WILL BE LIKE PHINEHAS!**"

As I wondered what he was talking about, he suddenly lunged at me and shoved me down. Then he took off, continuing towards the mines. Pastor Steve reached down and helped me back to my feet.

"Perry, what's going on here?" he asked. "How can you fly? And those clothes, those weapons – what in God's name is going on here?"

I held up my hand for silence. "I'll explain it all later, Pastor Steve – I promise! In the meantime, what was he saying about Phinehas?"

"It's a Biblical reference, of course. Old Testament. But I can't recall where it's from."

"Okay, I'm calling for help," I announced, touching the side of my head. "Perry to *Orion!*"

"*Orion here,*" replied Bonnie.

"I need a quick Biblical check on the name Phinehas." I spelled it for her. "What does it mean?"

"*Checking!*"

"They're checking it out," I informed Pastor Steve.

"**Who** is?" he asked, not being able to hear the conversation in my head. "Who are you talking to?"

"I'll explain it later," I repeated.

"Perry," Bonnie replied to me, and I relayed the information to Pastor Steve. *"It's from Numbers, chapter 25. Phinehas was the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest. There was a plague on the people of Israel. One of the children of Israel had brought a Midianitish woman into the camp, and was fornicating with her in his tent. Phinehas saw what was going on and took a javelin and ran both of them through while they were in the act of fornication, killing them both. God looked upon what he did as justified, and the plague was stopped."* She paused. *"Does that make any sense?"*

I relayed the story to Pastor Steve. As I did, his face took on an expression of terror. "Oh, God, **no!**" He suddenly broke away, heading in the direction Adam was heading, towards the mines.

"Thanks, Bonnie," I quickly said, then took pursuit.

I caught up with Pastor Steve inside the mines. He was waiting for an elevator to return to our level. We both had grabbed wind-up lanterns from a table; he wound it with practiced ease, while I took a little longer. He switched his on first.

"What's going on?" I demanded. **"What do you know?"**

"I've got to stop Adam!"

"Stop him from **what?**"

His face fell, but his eyes didn't drift from mine; he was telling me the truth. "Five years ago, I ... secured a canister of nerve gas."

Clark's words about Pastor Steve's 'alternate self' echoed sharply in my mind, and I realized with horror that this man actually **was** capable of such a nightmarish deed.

I lost it.

"YOU MANIAC!" I yelled at him, the words echoing in the enclosed space. "You always said you'd rather kill us all than have us fall into the hands of the government! And then you actually got something to do it with?"

"It was ... on impulse." His expression was mortified, but it was too little too late. "I hid it down in the mines, and forgot all about it until now. I don't know how Adam found out about it. We've got to stop him!"

"You were willing to kill everybody here because of your delusions!"

There was shame on Winter's face, but it didn't deter my anger. "Yes. I'm sorry, Perry. You're right, and I'm wrong. What do you want me to do? Do you want me to feel pain as you've felt pain? Feel hurt as you've felt hurt? Suffer as you've suffered? Feel fear as you've felt fear?"

"Yes," I said through gritted teeth, "and more!"

"Do you want me dead?" he asked me point-blank.

I couldn't answer that. But my face gave away the condition of my heart.

"Well," he said softly. "You might just get your wish."

The elevator stopped. Pastor Steve pulled open the door and led the way.

CHAPTER TWELVE

While Winter took off running after Adam, Clark followed Wail through the valley.

It appeared that the demon was staying close to the ground – he probably figured it was too dangerous to be flying, what with all the armed Seraphim above them. In the midst of the chaos, he seemed to be trying to blend in with the others and headed towards one of the entrances to the mines.

A voice suddenly came through his transceiver. "*Clark? It's Bixby.*"

"Yes, Major."

"The flabby one down there in the polyester leisure suit ... is that your bogey?"

"That is affirmative," Clark confirmed.

"And he can fly, right?"

"That is also affirmative."

"Could he be staying on the ground because he's trying to avoid us?"

"I would say so," he agreed.

"I'd like to see what would happen if I took some potshots at him. Wanna see if we can run him to ground?"

"I need to catch up with him. Can you slow him down?"

"That's an affirmative," Bixby replied, and issued a couple of quick commands to nearby Seraphim.

In a smooth move, the small group circled Wail's position, causing him to react nervously. Not surprising that the demon would be spooked by the angel-like apparitions. Clark wouldn't be surprised if there were real angels involved in the spiritual side of the warfare taking place around them. Every time Wail was distracted into looking above him, Clark darted ahead, taking advantage of natural obstacles and slowly gaining ground. It didn't take long for Clark to get within a couple of yards of him. As he lunged for Wail, the demon actually let out a yelp of surprise, and took off straight up out of the bronze man's reach – and right into the trap.

"FIRE! FIRE! FIRE!" directed Bixby without hesitation.

The major and four others – all well-trained marksmen – fired as one, showering Wail in a hail of explosive bullets. For several seconds, the demon was suspended in mid-air, within an active

cloud of pyrotechnics. Since none of them – on the ground or in the air – had seen a body fall to the ground, they were wondering what had happened.

"**Cease fire!**" commanded Bixby after several seconds. "*Repeat, cease fire!*"

The attack stopped, and everybody waited to see what lay beneath the cloud. As it slowly dissipated, they could see that Wail was still hovering in the air, his body curled up in a fetal position. As he unfolded, it appeared that he was unharmed.

"No effect," one of the Seraphim commented. "Repeat, no effect!"

"**NEGATIVE, sir!**" suddenly interrupted another of the Seraphim, identifying herself as Fernandez. "*During the assault, the golems stopped moving! When you stopped, they started up again!*"

"*You heard her,*" relayed Major Bixby. "**COMMENCE FIRE!**"

But it was too late. Wail shook himself off, treating the barrage as lightly as if it had been a summer rain. Then he gave off with a forced laugh, and flew into one of the entrances to the mines.

"I'm going after him!" announced Clark, and ran in pursuit.

He grabbed a wind-up generator flashlight from a rack just inside the mine shaft and tried getting a fix on where Wail had gone. He strained his hearing and sight, in hope that he could detect the demon's location. But then he remembered the last time he and Wail had met, deep in the caves of Maine, the demon had been able to maneuver through the caverns with a prowess he'd never seen before. Now he understood. Wail's 'prowess' had been supernatural, and the demon would use it again to his advantage, unless ...

Clark stopped and prayed. "Help me, Lord Jesus," he whispered intently, his eyes closed. "You know I won't be able to find him with *my* eyes."

Seconds passed. Clark didn't move. Oddly enough, he didn't feel anxiety at the fact that his prey was getting farther and farther away.

Then he opened his eyes. And he saw a light ahead. He didn't ask where the light was coming from. He just thanked God, left the flashlight behind, and followed the trail as fast as he could go.

It didn't take long before he stepped into a large cave. Sure enough, there was Wail. And he was surprised.

"Wait a minute!" the demon asked. "How did you find me?"

"God led me to you. Your time is up. This battle ends here and now!"

"Are you sure, Savage?" His voice took on an oily tone, slick and persuasive. "I mean, are you **really** sure? After all, look at your track record. You thought you had me. You had taken me in, put me in a jail. And I got out easier than Houdini." He grinned. "And now you actually think this battle is over – that I can't disappear from this cave with a snap of my fingers?" He snapped his fingers, but he did not vanish. "But **you**, on the other hand, are once more deep, down in the

bowels of the earth. Miles and miles of rock and dirt surround you. The air ... doesn't it feel a little ... *thin*? Aren't you starting to feel just a little ... uncomfortable? After all, wasn't it in caves like these where you were so terrified that you screamed like a little girl? Like a ... little ... girl, Savage?" The demon cackled; it echoed roughly in the hollow cavern.

"Your poor pride was bruised," he continued, mocking. "Your manhood was besmirched, your ego tarnished, and you wanted to come back and kick my butt! You *actually* thought that I'd be there, waiting for a rematch, like in some *Rocky* movie? I was long gone by then! But I had others there ... and *they* were waiting for *you*. They put you on ice for fifty years – *fifty years!*" He laughed again. "You missed out on a half-century, big guy! And when you got out, your precious Crime College had been busted wide open, and you were Public Enemy Number One! You couldn't even show your face in public! You, the great Doc Savage, the Man of Bronze, idolized by millions, were a criminal!"

And Wail laughed again.

However, all through Wail's diatribe, Clark just stood there calmly.

"Can I say something?" he finally spoke.

"Sure, big guy. Got a Bible story for me?"

"As a matter of fact, I do," he smiled. "Have you ever heard the story about Joseph and his brothers?"

"Not on my required reading list," the demon sneered.

"I won't bore you with the details. The moral of the story is that, what man had meant for bad, God meant for good. In the end God gave the main character far more than he started off with – both him and his family. But in order for it to have come to that happy ending, he had to go through a whole lot of bad stuff." He paused. "You're absolutely right, what I did was a grade-A blunder, a major stupid thing, and that I deserved to be ambushed. But you forget is that God was in control of *all* of it. And He had other plans – *eternal* plans – that couldn't take place if I hadn't gone through what I did. I am a Christian now. All of my team are Christians, too. We have the promise of heaven now. If you hadn't done what you did, there would be no promise. So in one respect, I owe you my thanks. And, if you haven't been paying attention to the news over the last few years, I now can show my face and say that I am Doc Savage ... and I won't be arrested for it." Clark paused. "So if your big plan was to attack me with my own past, *demon*, Jesus Christ has forgiven me for all of it, and all *you* have left are *blanks*."

Wail stopped hovering. He settled on the ground, and glared at Clark for several seconds.

"Okay," he finally said. "I can see this isn't going to get either of us anywhere. So why don't we settle this like – if you'll forgive the expression – men."

"What do you have in mind?"

"You're a strapping strong lad; why don't we duke it out?"

Clark grinned. "Fight?"

"Unless you want to bore me with another Bible story. Of course I mean *fight*, you bronze bozo!"

"Would you accept the outcome if I defeat you?"

"As if you can ... but, yeah, I'll accept the outcome," he sighs. "Let's rumble!"

"Not *just* yet." Clark held up a finger. Then he dropped to his knees and started to pray. "Lord Jesus Christ, in your precious name I call, and whose faith I stand, I ask you to fill me with the same spirit of power you gave Samson to defeat his enemies and the wisdom and strength you gave to the young King David to have the advantage over the giant Goliath. I ask that you give me the same protection you gave Daniel in the lion's den, and gave Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace. I ask you to give me the victory against this demon of Hell. And yours is the power and the glory and the honor forever. In the name of Jesus Christ, the one and only true Lord of All, I pray – amen."

Wail stood nearby, leaning against a wall of the cavern. "Are you quite ready now?" he yawned dramatically. "Or are you going to sing a couple of hymns?"

Clark, now standing, was a bronze statue, his face an impassive face of flint. His gold-flecked eyes had an intensity that made Wail blink.

"**Okay, demon,**" Clark said, getting into a fighting stance. "Bring it on!"

Wail reached up and pulled an imaginary cord. "Ding, ding," he announced.

The two individuals put up their dukes and started circling the cavern. The demon ducked and weaved as he mocked and taunted Clark, trying to get the bronze man to react emotionally. But Clark's face of flint was unyielding. Wail threw a couple of weak punches in Clark's direction before he slipped in and delivered a solid right to Wail's midsection, followed by a left cross that smacked hard into Wail's face. The air in the demon's lungs exploded from him, and he went down.

Clark backed up a few steps and – his fists still up and ready for action – waited for Wail to get up. Personally, he didn't want this contest to be over so quickly; he wanted the demon to feel pain for the pain he'd given others this day.

Wail looked up at Clark, then shook off the blows and stood back on his feet. He looked shaky, and Clark's shoulders momentarily relaxed. At that moment, Wail – a maniacal grin plastered on his face – let out a scream and launched into a series of *Jeet Kune Do* strikes. Clark was hit over and over about the head and body, and he did his best to deflect the blows, but he eventually got caught off-balance. Wail continued to kick at him while he was down, until Clark was able to catch his foot and toss him backwards.

They both got to their feet, but the next attack was down-and-dirty pit fighting. They exchanged punches, kicks, and knee and elbow strikes. Wail charged Clark, who swept him up and spun in a circle, throwing the demon into the cavern wall; a shower of rocks and dust was dislodged by his impact. Wail twisted into a crouching position, the grin on his face replaced with a snout, and he morphed into a large wolf. It extended its claws in Clark's direction and pounced.

Other men would've been stunned into letting their guard down by this supernatural act, but Clark didn't flinch. Instead, he sidestepped an instant before the wolf would've connected, and swung a

roundhouse punch into the wolf's head. The creature's momentum carried it forward, becoming a crumpled heap on the ground.

"Give up, *demon*?" Clark challenged.

The wolf form morphed again. This time, however, it was into a human form ... *Perry's*.

"What's the matter, *Brother*," Wail said in Perry's voice. "Afraid to fight your best friend?"

Pastor Steve and I reached a cavern at the end of the line.

Adam's lantern gave a supernatural glow to the area, especially the open crates of weapons around us. I recognized the concussion grenades, and figured he'd gotten them several years ago. But I had no doubt that they were still quite powerful.

Ahead of us, cornered, was Adam. In his arms was a metal canister about eighteen inches in length and sporting a **Danger-Biohazard** label. His hand was resting on the release valve. Pastor Steve stood about ten feet ahead of Adam, his hands up in a gesture of surrender.

"Adam," Pastor Steve tried rationalizing. "It's not what you think!"

"*Yes, it is!*" he stubbornly countered. "*Those winged men ... they're fallen angels, here to exterminate us!*"

"No," Pastor Steve implored. "They're here to help us against the golems."

"You're *wrong*! The golems are here to *help* us! They stopped James Kandell when he was trying to run away!"

"*What?*" Pastor Steve and I exclaimed simultaneously.

"He was trying to sneak out of the valley," Adam explained, the tone of his voice child-like. "The golem stopped him so he couldn't betray the Body! Smashed him good!"

"My ... God!" whispered Pastor Steve. "Adam, my son ..."

"***DON'T CALL ME SON!***" Adam screeched in anger, his eyes flaring with rage, his voice echoing in the enclosed space. "***YOU ARE NOT MY FATHER! YOU ARE NOT MY GOD! YOU LIED TO ME! YOU DECEIVED ME! AND I HATE YOU!***"

Adam was seconds away from snapping altogether, and Pastor Steve didn't have a ghost of a chance of stopping him.

I had to do something. I still had my superfirers, but they were holstered; by the time I could draw them, he could release the gas. The only thing left was to become invisible.

I brought my hands together, and pressed the top of my ring.

And nothing happened.

My worst fear had occurred: I couldn't become invisible. I briefly wondered if it had been related to what had happened earlier ... if the fact that I became visible before the time ran out meant that the ring had run its course, and I wouldn't be able to become invisible again.

It was a moot point if I didn't do something to stop this, however drastic.

I lunged for the open crate of grenades and grabbed one. Without a second thought, I pulled the pin while still holding down the lever. "***Put that canister down now, Adam!***" I said forcefully. "***Or I'll seal this cavern with us and the gas!***"

Time stood still.

But Pastor Steve didn't.

While Adam had been looking at me and the grenade, Pastor Steve had been slowly closing the gap between him and the younger man. When he saw his opportunity, he rushed forward like a linebacker and slammed into Adam; the two of them crashed into the cavern wall with a thud, then fell to the ground in a cloud of dust.

I scanned the near-darkness, looking for the canister. All I could tell was that Adam didn't have it anymore.

"Perry ...," Pastor Steve whispered.

I saw that Adam was momentarily out of commission, so I drew closer to Pastor Steve and knelt beside him.

"I'm here," I announced.

"Landed ... on the canister," Winter explained weakly. "Regulator ... broke off. The only thing keeping the gas ... from escaping ... is me. Gas ... has already leaked out; it's only a matter ... of time until it gets to me." He paused, summoning strength. "Give me ... the grenade, Perry. Then get Adam ... and get the Hell out of here."

I looked down; my hand was still holding the explosive in a death grip, despite the fact that I'd forgotten it was there.

"**No!**" I exclaimed, starting to see what he was planning. "There's got to be another way!"

"I'm ... open to suggestions," he groaned, causing me to reflexively smile. "Perry, please ... just get Adam and **GO!**"

I hated to admit it, but he was right. I glanced over to Adam and saw that he was still breathing. Then I carefully transferred the grenade to Pastor Steve's open hand, and gently closed his fingers around it.

"Do you have it?" I asked.

"**Yes.**" His breathing was getting shallow, and his eyes were half-closed. "**Perry ... can you ... forgive me?**"

My heart stuck in my throat. "I forgive you."

A smile appeared on his lips. "**Go!**" he forced out. "Can't ... hold ..."

I flipped Adam him over onto his back, grabbed the shoulders of his shirt and, in the diffused light of the lantern, began dragging him towards the cavern entrance.

Pastor Steven Winter heard everything through a cloudy haze. He was too tired to hold his eyes open to see, but hoped that Perry would get Adam clear of the cavern before letting go of the grenade. He was so sorry for misleading Adam, letting him believe he was God. He didn't think it would result in such tragedy. He had been deceived by Wail, and he had deceived others. It was very bad, and he was sorry ... so sorry.

"*Jesus ...*," Pastor Steve whispered as his breathing became ragged. "*I'm ... sorry. Please ... forgive me ...*"

He couldn't feel his fingers anymore. He didn't know if he was still holding onto the grenade. So he did the only thing he could – he turned it over to Jesus Christ.

And Steven Winter closed his eyes.

Clark continued punching at the image of his best friend. Finally, Wail returned to his original form and staggered back. It appeared as if he might actually have the demon against the ropes.

There was silence in the cavern.

Then they felt an explosion somewhere below; it vibrated the air around them.

A second passed ... then two ...

And suddenly the world caved in on Clark.

It came so quickly, he couldn't get out of the way, as the ceiling caved in on him. With his arms only minimally protecting his head, he landed on his stomach, pinned to the ground by a ton of rock and dirt. For an eternity it felt like every nerve in his body was on fire and he couldn't help screaming in pain.

He forced his arms to clear away enough rock to allow him to breathe, although it was difficult. And to make things worse, he was in darkness; the supernatural night vision God had given him earlier was now gone.

All he could hear was his own breathing.

And then he heard Wail laugh.

"Aw ... are we having problems, Clarkie?" the demon mocked.

Clark didn't answer. Every move brought searing pain across his back.

"Well, what do you know? I think you're going to die here!" He laughed. "Listen, Savage! I have lived for millennia. I will live for millennia yet. In a thousand years, *you* will be long dead. But I will still be alive."

Wail paused. "Well, don't you have any last words to say, Savage?"

And then Clark laughed. It was so out of place, it actually shook the demon's sensibilities.

"What's ... so funny?" he hissed.

Clark forced out the words. "In a hundred *thousand* years ... I will *still* be in Heaven ... and you'll be no closer to there ... than you are *today*." And, even though it hurt him to do so, he laughed again.

The demon was silent for several seconds.

"Are you still there, *creature*?" Clark forced between his lips.

Then he heard Wail's voice echo in the darkness: "*You think you've won, Savage! But the last laugh will be mine!*"

Then, his demonic laughter echoing in the cavern, Wail was gone.

And Clark was alone – isolated, underground, and in absolute darkness.

The Orion

"**Commander Savage!**" reported Bixby. "**The golems have stopped moving!**"

"Good job, Major!" Bonnie commended. "What did you do?"

"I wish I could take credit, ma'am, but it was not my doing. I would suggest, though, that we evacuate the rest of these overgrown lawn gnomes before they decide to wake up."

"I concur. Mr. Elric, send down whatever heavy lifters we can spare, to pull the remaining golems out of the valley!"

"Demolish them?" Bixby inquired.

"*With extreme prejudice,*" she hissed, quoting the oft-used *Apocalypse Now* phrase. "It's the only way to be completely sure they won't attack again. Have you seen Clark?"

"Not recently, ma'am. The last I saw, he was chasing that demon into the mines. Do you want me to send a search party in?"

"No ... not just yet. What about Perry?"

"He and that pastor were pursuing another man. They also disappeared into the mines."

Bonnie remembered Perry's last conversation, the strange reference to Phinehas. "Okay. Let me know if you spot either of them."

"Will do, Commander."

I knew that the explosion would come any moment, and I didn't have time to waste. Using the waning light emanating from the lanterns still inside the cavern – unfortunately, I couldn't carry both them *and* Adam's dead weight – I got as far away as I could before the grenade went off. Due to Adam's low profile, he had a better chance of escaping possible shrapnel. I wasn't expecting the same for me. I extended my helmet around my head to add to the protection of the flight suit, and continued to pull.

Then came the *flash-BANG* of the explosion.

The lights went out. Despite the fact that I was wearing my helmet, I still closed my eyes against the concussion. I went back hard, knocking the wind out of me and – as I would soon find out – damaging my suit's power pack. Debris rained down on me, and all I could hear was the sound of my own breathing.

"*Emergency lights!*" I addressed my suit's AI. "*Emergency lights!*"

I was still in darkness.

"*Diagnostic!*" I ordered. "*Diagnostic?*"

Silence.

By the way I'd landed, I had suspected that my power pack had been damaged, and this confirmed it.

"Perry to *Orion!*" I said through my subcutaneous transceiver. "Perry to *Orion!*"

Silence.

"Okay, Lord," I sighed. "At least *you're* there, and you'll get us out of here ... whenever you're ready. In the meantime, I better check on Adam. But first, me."

I moved around easily, feeling a bit sore but, otherwise, none the worse for wear. *That's good.* Now to see how Adam was doing.

I used the manual controls to retract my helmet away from my face. The air was dusty, and I coughed as I took in a tentative breath. On my hands and knees, I felt around in the darkness until I felt his leg. I felt around. Apart from considerable dust and a bit of rocky debris, he was pretty much uncovered. His head had been turned to the side, and his breathing seemed to be steady, so it was a good sign that he didn't take in a lot of dust. His pulse was strong and steady, and his

head appeared to be as hard on the outside as it was on the inside. God had kept him protected, and he was just unconscious.

I squirmed into a seated position, closed my eyes, took a tentative deep breath, and prayed. "Okay, Lord. We're lost and alone. We're in halfway-decent shape, and we've got air, so that's not bad. But we could really use your help to get us out of here. Thanks."

I waited a few seconds, then opened my eyes. When I did, I saw the light.

I blinked and looked again.

I actually *did* see the light ... *a* light. It wasn't a trick of my mind.

It was a few yards ahead of us, off to one side. I didn't bother with getting to my feet, but started crawling towards it on my hands and knees as fast as I could. I looked down at it. As impossible as it seemed, it was a small electronic device. It was glowing, and didn't appear to have sustained any damage. And what was strangest was that it wasn't even covered in dust like everything else down here.

I didn't hesitate in picking it up. As soon as my hands touched it, though, it appeared to come to life.

"Perry!" came a familiar female voice. "Clark has been injured! You're his only hope!" The voice gave me coordinates. "You'll be able to get a signal out if you get under one of the air shafts! This device should provide enough illumination to find one."

I looked up. A few yards away, there it was. I smiled.

"Thank You, Lord," I said, adding under my breath, "And thank *you*, Jenny."

"This device will self-destruct in fifteen seconds," the voice from the future announced.

I lobbed the electronic device in the direction of the air shaft. As it flared with its final light, I could clearly see the air shaft.

I also spotted something else – one of the wind-up lanterns. I glanced up towards the ceiling. "Okay, now you're just showing off!"

I cranked up the lantern for about thirty seconds, then switched it on; the glow was wonderful! As I looked around to assess our environment, I heard a faint groan to my left. *It sounds like Adam is coming out of it*, I thought. But then I stopped as I realized, *Adam's not over to my left, but on my right. So where is the sound coming ...?*

I angled the lantern to better see in that direction, and my jaw dropped.

"Pastor Steve?" I whispered, incredulously.

Getting to my feet and holding the lantern before me, I quickly went to his side and checked his vital signs. I saw several burns, cuts, and scrapes on the man's exposed skin, and he wasn't responding to my voice. But, by some amazing miracle of God, he was somehow *alive*.

I needed to get a message through to *Orion*. I moved under the air shaft.

"Perry to *Orion*!" I transmitted urgently. "Can you hear me?"

"*Orion here,*" replied Bonnie. "*We read you! Where are you?*"

"In the mine tunnels; you can follow my signal! I've got two injured men. But before you get me, you need to get to Clark!" I repeated his coordinates. "He's been seriously injured!"

"*What about you?*" asked Dot, her voice echoing with concern. "*Are you okay?*"

I mustered a grin. "I'll be sore in the morning."

"*Nothing new there,*" Dot quipped. I could hear the relief in her voice. *Where there's orneriness, there's life,* I reflected.

"We need serious help for Pastor Steve," I explained our situation. "Possible exposure to nerve gas."

"*Would you repeat that?*" interrupted Bonnie. "*Did you say **nerve gas**?*"

"That is affirmative. I believe it was contained, but there could be traces. It's a long story."

"*I'll bet!*" she acknowledged. "*Okay, we'll get a hazmat team to you STAT!*"

"What's going on with the golems?"

"*They're not moving,*" she reported. "*They haven't moved for several minutes.*"

"Has there been any sight of Wail?"

"*Nobody's reported anything. Clark was the last one seen with him.*"

"If the golems aren't moving, that might mean that Wail's gone."

"*Hopefully it's for good,*" Dot agreed, and Bonnie *amen*'ed.

"*The med crews have been dispatched,*" informed Bonnie. "*Hang in there!*"

"Okay. Thanks."

I cranked the lantern again, for a couple of minutes, and sat down under the air shaft while I waited. I was still sore, but I'd survive. As I ran my hands across my own fingers, I stopped at my Uncle Perry's ring, and recalled what had happened – or *didn't* happen. *Why did it stop working?* I asked myself. I was tempted to press it now to see if it worked, but I resisted. Now was not the time or the place – especially not with present company. It would need to be tested under more controlled conditions.

I heard a moan from Adam's direction. I angled the lantern in his direction.

"*Adam,*" I said. "It's Perry ... are you okay?"

He groaned and coughed several times. "*Where ... ?*"

"We're outside the cavern," I informed him. "Help is on the way. Just do me a favor and don't give me any trouble." The tone of my voice told him I meant business. "You do and, so help me God I'll knock you out and *keep* you out – *got it?*"

"Yeah," he replied weakly. "Pastor Steve?"

"He should've been trapped in that cavern with that nerve gas. But he got thrown clear. It's only by the grace of God he's still alive." My voice lowered. "Adam ... you're not alone. Pastor Steve lied to me, too. And I hated him for years because of it."

"He betrayed us all," Adam repeated his earlier complaint, minus the emotional outburst.

"I won't argue that. And he'll pay for it. But, as much as I want to see him pay for it, it's not up to me. What about you?"

"I ... don't know," Adam admitted. He sounded disappointed; I didn't blame him.

"Would you agree with me to pray and wait on God?"

There was a long pause. Then: "Okay."

I led us in a short but sincere prayer, admitting our human weaknesses, and asking for guidance and justice.

Adam didn't say anything, not even an *amen*.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

It was the calm after the storm.

Over the years, Pastor Steve had described the End-Times to the people of Miner's Bowl in graphic detail. They had been reminded over and over again how God had put the golems in this valley for their protection. And logic had told them that the golems were mere statues, incapable of actual movement. So when their stone guardians suddenly began to move, it took them totally by surprise. It seemed ... miraculous, an actual act of God.

But then they turned on the people they were created to protect.

As if this hadn't been a shock on their senses, but then *angels* – at least, they appeared to be angels – came flying down from heaven, attacking the golems and rescuing the people.

And then it was over.

The golems that had not been destroyed were frozen in place, still bent into menacing poses that no one dared approach. The angels continued flying back and forth over the valley, vigilant.

The people were visibly shaken. They searched for the others in the valley, first their friends and loved ones, and then their neighbors. Then they looked for answers, and that's what led them to the town center, the tabernacle, and Pastor Steve's house. The tabernacle had been mercifully spared the wrath of the golems, but the house had taken some damage. Those who went inside reported that there was nobody inside.

So they went into the tabernacle. Many of them prayed. Others talked quietly, sharing stories of horror and rescue.

"Major Bixby, the heavy lifters have been dispatched," reported Bonnie.

"Thank you, Commander," Bixby acknowledged. "It looks like everybody's gravitating towards the tabernacle."

"Makes sense," observed Belinda. "It's a common gathering place."

"Commander, we need someone down there who can talk to the people on their own levels!"

"Suggestions?"

"Mr. Ackerman," Bixby responded without hesitation. "He's had experience dealing with people involved with cults."

"Agreed. We'll get him down there as soon as possible. In the meantime, get the rest of those golems out of that valley, and blow them up as quietly as possible. I don't want anything down there larger than a briquette!"

"It'll be my pleasure," Bixby said with a grin in his voice.

Clark couldn't feel his legs.

The medical professional in him dismissed the possibility that his limbs were just asleep, and resigned himself to the fact that there was something seriously wrong. He had tried several times to make contact with *Orion* via his subcutaneous transceiver, but there were too many layers of rock and dirt separating them.

He had pressed through the pain in order to clear away some of the debris around him, but his movement was obviously limited. He didn't know if God would rescue him or take him home, but he had an odd peace about the outcome, regardless. He did need to get a message to those who would find him. He cleared an area next to him on the ground, and carefully etched the words WAIL FLED in the dirt. Then he stretched his arms and encircled his message, resting his head on the cavern floor.

They would understand.

He wasn't really concerned about blacking out. When he'd checked himself out – limited though it had been – he didn't find any sign of head trauma. Besides, God had given him a peace and an assurance that surpassed earthly understanding.

'Cast all your cares on Him, because He cares for you.'

All those years ago, that line from Peter's first epistle had been one of the first verses to impress itself on him. It put things in perspective, and gave him hope – then, and now.

Clark's brain started feeling ... fuzzy.

And he surrendered to it.

A moment later he opened his eyes ... and there was white everywhere.

The light startled him for a moment, and caused him to blink.

Perry's white place? he asked himself.

It certainly matched Perry's references to the mysterious oasis he'd experienced. Despite the fact that there was no indication of walls, floor, or ceiling, there was something beneath his feet akin to a floor. He took a step; it made no sound. He smiled and accepted his surroundings.

"Hello, Clark."

Clark spun to see a woman behind him. She looked vaguely familiar. Her skin was bronzed, as his, and her hair was long and coppery like Pat's. She was dressed in a white floor-length robe. She smiled at him. Then suddenly Clark understood, and he had to force the word from his brain to his lips.

"Mother?"

Her smile grew. *"Son."*

Jay Ackerman had requested a conventional helicopter instead of one of the antigrav transports. "These people need familiar references," he explained. "The less science-fictiony, the better." So the helicopter landed just outside the door closest to Albany. He waved to Major Bixby as he climbed down.

"Godspeed, Mr. Ackerman."

"Thank you, Major."

Jay walked through the blasted doors and connecting tunnel, and entered the valley. He left his fancier clothes behind, choosing simple jeans, a denim shirt, and cowboy boots instead. Tucked under his arms was a King James Version Bible that had seen better days; its leather cover was scuffed, and there were still stains on the page edges when the container of McDonald's sweet-and-sour dipping sauce opened up on it while both were riding in his backpack.

"Jay?" came Bonnie Savage's voice from the transceiver in his ear.

"Yes, Bonnie," he replied aloud.

"Just checking the connection. How do you read us?"

"Fine. And me?"

"Signal is clear," she reported. "How's it look?"

"Like a rock quarry. I haven't seen anybody else yet. I'll make my way to the town center and the tabernacle."

"Acknowledged. We'll be monitoring."

"Thanks. Out."

Wendy K'nije had been one of the first admitted to CSI's medical school. The missionaries in her home country of Angola had sponsored her. Prior to admission, she hadn't known anything about Doc Savage except what she had been told by the missionaries, but that had changed by the time she graduated. And when Doc Savage personally came to her and asked her to be part of *Orion's* medical staff, it was of the greatest days of her life.

She had led one of the first away teams on the ground after the golems attacked, and Commander Savage – Mrs. Savage to her – had given her the coordinates to find Doc somewhere in the mine complex. Having had some experience with mining accidents, she instructed her team of five to grab tools, ordered breath masks for all, and commandeered a couple of the strongest of the Seraphim – minus the wings for this mission – to help in case debris needed to be cleared out of the way. They used boosted transceivers and carried mini-cameras to send pictures back to the *Orion*, and they swiftly made their way through the mines down to where the coordinates converged.

They found Doc lying just inside the cavern. Wendy told the rest to hold back while she carefully moved in to check his life signs. She was relieved to discover that he was still alive – barely. As she turned to order the others into the cavern, she saw that his arms were encircling some writing on the ground. A *final message*, she surmised.

"Mrs. Savage," she radioed to the *Orion*. "There is a message written in the dirt. I'm turning the camera onto it."

"Yes ... we can see it!" came the response. "It says ... *WAIL FLED*. It must mean that the demon's gone – that's why the golems have stopped moving! The danger has passed!"

"That is good news, indeed! We're going to get your husband out of here!"

Wendy ordered the others into the cavern, to set up the area lights, and to quickly and carefully clear the debris from Doc's body. She remained close by his side, continually monitoring his life signs. As soon as they could, they attached wireless telemetry sensors to his body, while all who

could were moving debris to the outside edges of the cavern. Just beyond the cavern, two men were assembling a stretcher for them.

"*How is he?*" asked Bonnie, deeply concerned.

"He is alive, that is all I can say. By his position he could be suffering from internal bleeding and spinal damage. I would suggest having a stasis chamber waiting for us on the surface."

"*Dispatching it now!*"

It took several more minutes before enough debris was moved to allow them to begin moving the bronze man. He was still not responding; Wendy prayed for his safety. Finally they were able to move him onto the stretcher and secure him. By that time, she'd connected an oxygen mask and an IV to him, and her tricorder was relaying his life signs back to the *Orion*. A couple of her team led the way, making sure the path was clear for them, while the rest followed up.

Smoothly they rushed him to the surface, where – as promised – a stasis chamber and med tech were waiting there for them. They quickly got Doc into the chamber and activated it. Although they knew there was no hurry now, a Chariot was nearby to transport him to *Orion*.

"*Orion*," reported Wendy K'nije. "The Chariot is away."

"*Good job, Wendy*," sighed Bonnie. "*Thanks.*"

"We'll be praying for him."

"*Appreciate it.*"

Jay Ackerman casually approached the town center and the tabernacle. He wasn't noticed as he entered the tabernacle and looked around. There were a lot of people in there, some just sitting and staring at the stage as if someone would magically appear to speak words of hope and encouragement.

And he knew what he had to do. He moved around the tabernacle, and stepped onto the stage from behind. He opened his Bible, and, still towards the back, began to read in a loud voice that carried in the building's superb acoustics.

"Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan came also among them. And the LORD said unto Satan, Whence comest thou? Then Satan answered the LORD, and said, From going to and fro in the earth, and from walking up and down in it. And the LORD said unto Satan, Hast thou considered my servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil? Then Satan answered the LORD, and said, Doth Job fear God for nought? Hast not thou made an hedge about him, and about his house, and about all that he hath on every side? thou hast blessed the work of his hands, and his substance is increased in the land. But put forth thine hand now, and touch all that he hath, and he will curse thee to thy face. And the LORD said unto Satan, Behold, all that he hath is in thy power; only upon himself put not forth thine hand. So Satan went forth from the presence of the LORD.

"And there was a day when his sons and his daughters were eating and drinking wine in their eldest brother's house: And there came a messenger unto Job, and said, The oxen were plowing, and the asses feeding beside them: And the Sabeans fell upon them, and took them away; yea, they have slain the servants with the edge of the sword; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee. While he was yet speaking, there came also another, and said, The fire of God is fallen from heaven, and hath burned up the sheep, and the servants, and consumed them; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee. While he was yet speaking, there came also another, and said, The Chaldeans made out three bands, and fell upon the camels, and have carried them away, yea, and slain the servants with the edge of the sword; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee. While he was yet speaking, there came also another, and said, Thy sons and thy daughters were eating and drinking wine in their eldest brother's house: And, behold, there came a great wind from the wilderness, and smote the four corners of the house, and it fell upon the young men, and they are dead; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee.

"Then Job arose, and rent his mantle, and shaved his head, and fell down upon the ground, and worshipped, And said, Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD. In all this Job sinned not, nor charged God foolishly."

He turned to the book of Psalms and began reading Psalm 13: *"How long wilt thou forget me, O LORD? for ever? how long wilt thou hide thy face from me? How long shall I take counsel in my soul, having sorrow in my heart daily? how long shall mine enemy be exalted over me? Consider and hear me, O LORD my God: lighten mine eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death; Lest mine enemy say, I have prevailed against him; and those that trouble me rejoice when I am moved. But I have trusted in thy mercy; my heart shall rejoice in thy salvation. I will sing unto the LORD, because he hath dealt bountifully with me."*

By this time, Jay was the center of attention. Even those who had been outside came in to see this strange new occurrence.

"People of Miner's Bowl, incline your ears to me," he greeted loudly, smiling. "You may feel as if God has truly forsaken you, and has brought down destruction on your house. God forbid! God has brought defenders who have rescued you when you need it most!"

"Who are you?" asked a man in the front row.

"My name is Jay Ackerman. I am a Christian ... and a friend."

"Mr. Liston! Mr. Liston!"

"We're over here!" I yelled back, shining the lantern in the direction of the rescue team.

The rescue team was all dressed in yellow hazmat suits. The man in charge ordered the some to start setting up area lights, and others to check out Adam and Pastor Steve. He came over to me and knelt. "Darby Jones, sir," he introduced himself. "How are you feeling?"

"Sore," I replied with a smile.

"Tell me what happened."

I brought them up to speed, trying to give as many details as I could. I had to be a little indirect when making reference to Adam's mental state, but they understood.

Meanwhile, Adam was resisting the med team's attention. We saw that he was in pain, but was nonetheless loudly waving off the yellow suits.

"Adam!" I tried to reason with him. "All they're trying to do is help you!"

"*They're pawns of Satan,*" he ranted. "*I won't subject myself to the world's medicine!*"

"That's it!" I muttered, getting to my feet and pushing past Darby. "***Adam Galen! Shut up and cooperate!***"

Adam looked at me like I was crazy. But he took me seriously.

"*Now,*" I explained in a controlled voice. "They're not going to hurt you, but they do want to check you out. ***Let them!***"

I could see the resistance on his face mixed with fear. But then he relaxed and let the med techs get closer.

Now that Adam was taken care of, I concentrated on Pastor Steve. Three of the yellow suits had already checked him out. They'd given him an IV, put telemetry leads on his body, and strapped an oxygen mask on his face. Then they carefully placed him in a yellow containment bag and sealed it up. Gently placing him on a stretcher and securing him, they lifted him up and headed out of the mines.

I asked Darby, "What about us? Are we contaminated?"

He shook his head and smiled. "Doesn't look like it. Most of the gas seems to have been contained in the cavern. Nevertheless, we'll check you out back at base."

I sighed, "Thanks."

I walked over to Adam. He was reluctant to have me near, but I didn't make any sudden moves. "I'm sorry for yelling at you, Adam. They're not out to hurt you."

"***Stay away from me!***" he screeched, his eyes flaring, and ran from me, almost knocking over the med techs moving Pastor Steve.

I sighed and followed the group to the surface.

Delaney Matthews was the *Orion's* Chief Prayer Officer.

At the age of five, she developed advanced Poliomyelitis, often called polio or infantile paralysis. It entered her central nervous system and aggressively infected and destroyed motor neurons. In a very short time, she went from wheelchair to bedridden, and all the medical specialists were sadly agreed that she wouldn't live to see her sixth birthday.

To her parents, that was not an option. They believed strongly in the power of prayer. They spread the word to thousands of churches across the world ... and on December 25th, God honored their faith by healing their daughter.

As Delaney grew up with the nickname 'The Christmas Miracle', she also grew in her faith. She visited churches around the world with her parents, who spoke of God's grace and love, and the power of prayer. Eventually, the excitement waned, and her parents went back to serving God locally, starting with their home congregation. Delaney joined the youth group on missionary trips, and did the usual things a church kid did.

But her passion was prayer.

Years later, when cosmetics heiress Penelope Savage's kidnapping captured the attention of the world, Delaney spent several days fasting and praying for her safe return. But God had her praying for her mother, Patricia Savage, instead. In the end, when Patricia Savage reported the death of her daughter, God showed Delaney that she had a job for her on Caroline Island.

Two months later, she started working in the nursery, receiving infants and toddlers who'd been abandoned by their own countries. Many of those children were sick, and many were dying. And Delaney prayed for them day and night. Sometimes they would get better, and other times they wouldn't. Delaney knew not to question God's will when it came down to life and death.

Delaney became quite involved in the events of Caroline Island and Pat Savage. She was there when Daniel Franklin and his army took over the island and captured Pat. She was there when Jade was shot, and when Mr. Liston was whipped mercilessly and left to die. She also was part of the prayer coverage during the trial of Doc Savage. She couldn't say that her praying without ceasing was what turned the tide in these events – God *did* have the final say – but she did feel good about how it all turned out.

What she didn't know is that all of these events showed Doc Savage and friends that their new Fortress would have a basic need for prayer in the way it operated – spiritually, not physically.

At that point, God pointed them at Delaney Matthews and said, "*This is the one you're looking for.*"

If asked, Delaney would give a big smile and say that she had the best job in the universe. With her hand on the pulse of the *Orion*, and the greatest network of prayer warriors in the world at her disposal, she was where God could use her best.

Once she learned of the situation, she was quick to get the word out: "*PRAYER ALERT, AUTHORIZATION 4372 K FOR KITTEN. DOC SAVAGE HAS BEEN INJURED. HIS INJURIES ARE SERIOUS AND POSSIBLY LIFE-THREATENING. HE IS REMAINING IN STASIS AWAITING PROPER MEDICAL ATTENTION. MORE TO FOLLOW.*"

I continued walking to the surface. The others had moved ahead of me, and so I was alone. As soon as I could make a connection, I radioed *Orion*.

"I'm almost to the surface," I reported. "How's Clark?"

There was a hesitation in Bonnie's reply. "*It's not good, Perry,*" she said heavily. "*They've got him in stasis; he's with Diane now.*"

I froze. Jenny's warning was that Clark was injured, but she didn't say how badly he was. Now I really thanked God for Jenny's warning; if she hadn't sent it, God knows how bad off he'd be now.

"*Perry?*"

Bonnie's call shook me from my somberness. "Do ... do you want me there?" I asked.

"*No, I don't think it's necessary,*" she answered. "*But I'll keep you posted.*"

"Needless to say, I'm praying." I changed the subject. "Is Dot there?"

"*I'm right here,*" she answered immediately; she must've been sitting with Bonnie on the Bridge.

"What else have I missed?"

"*Clark left a message,*" she informed me. "*Wail's gone. That explains the golems.*"

Just then I came out of the mines. I had to pause a few moments and use my hand to shield my eyes as they became used to the daylight. Once my eyes adjusted, I looked out on the valley. The first thing that stood out was how different everything looked without all those golems blocking the view. There were still a few dotting the landscape, but not as many as before.

Personally, it looked a *whole* lot better.

Then my eyes were drawn up to one of *Orion's* heavy transports shuttling an intact golem up and out of the valley; two Seraphim flew escort at a safe distance.

"I see you're getting rid of the remaining golems," I communicated. "Good idea. How are the rest of the people doing?"

"*Most of them have gone to the tabernacle,*" explained Bonnie. "*Jay's there. We needed someone who could talk to them, relate to them, and let them know we are their friends.*"

"Good choice. How are they taking it?"

"*Once he got his foot in the door, he did marvelously!*"

I stopped, and my face took on a quizzical look. "**No** resistance?"

"*Oh, sure, there were a few questions that took a bit of verbal maneuvering to answer in a way that wouldn't offend these people – such as where Pastor Steve was – but Jay did his best. And, with one exception, nobody tried to stop him.*"

"Dare I ask who?"

"Your old buddy Hazelwood. He went so far as to pull Jay off of the stage and threaten to beat him up. But Jay offered no resistance, and Hazelwood was shamed into walking away from the tabernacle."

"LISTON!"

"I think I know where he went," I muttered quickly. "Stand by."

I waited for Archie Hazelwood – looking typically angry – to close the gap between us; close by, trying to keep up with him, was the man who I'd seen with him earlier, when they were trying to shoot the golems.

"WHERE IS PASTOR STEVE!" he bellowed.

"Good to see you, too, Archie," I forced a smile. I was starting to get a headache.

Hazelwood stepped up to me and planted an index finger in my chest. His breath was hot in my face. **"Where is Pastor Steve,"** he growled.

That's it, I thought, reminded of Popeye's famous quote: *That's all I can stands and I can't stands no more!*

My hand darted up and snatched his finger from my chest. Then I bent it backwards and up, pivoting around him and forcing his body to shift where I wanted it. Holding him in submission with just the one hand, Hazelwood continued to struggle, spouting threats and curses.

"Such language, Archie," I quipped, keeping one eye on the other man; he didn't move, but he was as surprised at my actions as Hazelwood. I started to push him towards the ground. "Now don't force me to wash your mouth out with dirt. Okay?" His struggles lessened, and I leaned in, talking to him softly but intently as I did my best Jack Bauer impression. "Okay, Archie. I want you to listen very, very closely, or I'm going to start hurting you."

Hazelwood tried struggling; I increased the pressure a bit, and his knees buckled. "You're ... *already ... hurting me!*"

"*Trust me,*" I replied, my voice a harsh whisper. "*I'm not.*"

I could hear Lizzy giggling through my transceiver, and tried not to join her.

"Are you ready to talk?" I asked.

"Yes!" he grunted.

"Were you aware of Pastor Steve's doomsday 'precautions'?"

"No!"

I heard Lizzy in my ear: "*Lie!*"

"Now, now, now," I said, increasing the pressure just enough to get his attention. "You really don't want to lie to me." I paused, summarizing the last couple of hours. "You knew about the

cache of weapons down in the mines. One of those weapons was a canister of *nerve gas* Pastor Steve got from God-knows-where. Adam was just about ready to release the gas when Pastor Steve got it away from him. Unfortunately, the release lever was damaged, and some of the gas escaped. Pastor Steve got a dose of it. We were rescued, and now Pastor Steve is getting medical help."

"**Where?**" Archie grunted.

"That's my secret," I told him. "Trust me, he's in good hands."

"**Trust you?**" he spat, despite the pain. "It's because **you** came to this valley that any of this happened. And I am going to see that **you** pay for it!"

I took in a deep breath and released it in a sigh. "Archie, I am not the same man you bullied and intimidated ten years ago. I don't have time to play your childish games."

"You're going to **pay** for this, Liston!" he growled.

"And for my next trick," I suddenly smiled. "I'd like to show you something I learned from my friend, Doc Savage."

"What are you –"

I reached my free hand up to the side of his neck and pinched a particular nerve. With a final grunt, Archie Hazelwood's eyes rolled up in his head, and his legs turned to rubber. I released the submission hold in order to ease him to the ground.

I looked down at him. "That's for my friend, Jay."

Aboard the *Orion*, Bonnie and Dot were trying to figure out what happened.

"Lizzy! Do you have a visual of what just happened?"

Through the speakers, they could hear the young woman laughing and clapping enthusiastically. Dot, Bonnie, and Belinda looked at each other.

"**Lizzy!**" Bonnie repeated harshly.

"Sending it to you now!" she announced, laughing. "You're gonna **love** it!"

I looked at the man who had accompanied Archie Hazelwood. "Whose side are you on?"

"Yours, Mr. Liston. Archie's always been a hothead. And he had no reason to push you like that." He paused. "That was very impressive."

"Thank you. What's your name?"

"Poole ... Ray Poole," he answered calmly. "I'm also an elder. I knew about the weapons in the mines. But I had no idea that he had nerve gas. Is there any danger?"

"No. Pastor Steve made sure of that. Our doctors have Pastor Steve now, and we're hoping they can neutralize the effects of the nerve gas. Apart from that, it's all up to God ... as always."

"Amen," Poole sighed.

"Your family ... they're okay?"

"Yes. Those flying men, they kept us protected from the golems. When it was over, we ended up at the tabernacle. My family's still there; they're still a bit shaken up, but it's safe there. I followed Archie when he stormed out ... I wanted to keep an eye on him."

"Making sure he doesn't do something stupid?"

"Yeah," he agreed with a smirk that suddenly vanished. "Why did all this happen?"

I took a deep breath before I answered. "Pastor Steve, with all the best intentions, made some mistakes. He was deceived by, believe it or not, an actual demon of Hell. I don't think it happened right away, but was done over a period of years. Anyhow, it was the demon who made the golems and brought them to life. Once Pastor Steve realized what he'd done, and how he'd been used, he did his best to turn things around. But, in some ways, it was too late, and now we're picking up the pieces. I know this sounds amazing, but ... does it make any sense?"

"Oddly, it does."

"Regardless of anyone's opinion, Pastor Steve was human."

Poole nodded.

"I'd like to see what's going on in the tabernacle. Do you want to join me?"

"Not right now." He looked back at Archie. "How long is he going to be out?"

"A little while," I considered. "Maybe thirty minutes."

"You know he's going to be angry when he comes out of it."

"Yeah," I smiled. "Tell him I can handle myself."

"I will," Poole nodded. "You flew, didn't you? You *actually* flew. But ... how?"

Perry smiled. "It's done with antigravity. It's a lot of fun, once you get used to it. The guys with the wings – they have the same thing, but a little more sophisticated."

"So the other guy said. Can you show me how?"

"How I fly? Depends." I turned around a little and pointed to the unit on my back. "That's the power supply. Does it look like it might be damaged?"

"Yeah," he replied.

"Then I probably won't be able to fly until I get it repaired or replaced. I'll show you later, okay?"

"Okay."

We shook hands and I continued walking towards the tabernacle.

"Bonnie, the power pack on my suit got damaged down there in the mines," I radioed. "Not that I think I'll need it, but could you see what you can do about getting me a replacement and possibly a diagnostic?"

"*Will do*," Bonnie responded.

"I'm heading for the tabernacle," I repeated.

"*Acknowledged*."

As I headed for the town center, I looked around at the damage. Considering all, it really could've been worse. I reached the tabernacle, but didn't go in. I hung back by the open door and watched Jay in action. He was still answering questions, but he was sitting on the edge of the stage instead of being on his feet. And by the attention he was getting, he was definitely making an impression on the people.

Suddenly, someone roughly grabbed my shoulder and spun me around.

It was Ginger, the oldest of Pastor Steve's three wives. And the expression on her face told me she wasn't doing too well.

"***Where is Steven?***" she barked, her eyes flaring angrily. "***Where is my husband?***"

"Relax, Ginger," I addressed her in a calm, commanding voice. "Here are the facts. Pastor Steve had a canister of nerve gas down in the mines, and Adam would've released it on all of us if Pastor Steve hadn't intervened. He sacrificed his safety for all of us. For all intents and purposes, he should've died down there, and it's only by the grace of God he's still alive." I paused. "Right now, he's under the prayerful eye of some of the best physicians I know, who are just trying to *keep* him alive."

Ginger's jaw tightened. "He's in the hands of a *secular* physician?"

"No, he's in the hands of a *Christian* physician."

"*There's no such thing!*" she retorted angrily. "Doctors cannot be Christians, because they depend on medicine rather than on Jesus Christ!"

"Ginger, I'm not going to debate this with you. The doctor's name is Diane Cunningham; I'll let her know you want to talk to her."

Just then I saw one of the Seraphim land a distance from me; she tucked her wings behind her and made eye contact with me. She held up a replacement power pack, and I gave her a brief nod.

I turned back to Ginger. "Well, not that this little reunion hasn't been fun, but ... well, it hasn't. Now, if you'll excuse me, my mechanic's here to check under the hood. *Later.*" I came alongside the Seraphim without another word, stage-whispering to her, "*Let's walk.*"

We moved away from the crowd.

"*Orion*, is she following?"

"*No,*" answered Dot. "*Doesn't look like it.*"

"Good," I sighed.

The Seraphim identified herself as Alison Blakeley. We stopped near a damaged barn and she took a look at my back.

"Yeah, power pack's out of commission," she diagnosed. She took out a small tool and removed the unit. A few moments later she had the new one installed. Then she ran a cord from her suit to mine, and used her computer to run a diagnostic.

I tried not to move while she did her business. I did notice that she carried a bag. "Alison? Can you take a couple of things of mine back with you?"

"Like what?" she muttered.

"My superfirers, for example," I replied. "I don't really need them now that the immediate crisis is over."

"Good point," she agreed. A minute later she disconnected the cord. "Okay, you're all set! There were a few systems that needed to be bypassed; you best have the suit refitted back on *Orion.*"

"I'll do that."

After she completed her diagnostic, she opened her bag and I put the superfirers and their holsters inside, next to the damaged power pack. As she closed up the bag, I tested the suit as I had before coming down here.

"That's great," I thanked Alison. Then, suddenly, I heard something different. "Do you hear something?"

She looked around and then pointed. "Over there!"

We both hit the air moving.

His name was Caleb Behr, the youngest son of Emma and John Behr, and he was nine years old.

It didn't matter who first heard his cries for help; everybody who heard his cries didn't hesitate to respond.

One of the dormitories had collapsed under the combined barrage from three golems, now in pieces around the ruins of the building. It had been assumed that everyone had evacuated the building before it went down, so no one had considered searching the ruins for trapped individuals. But then little Caleb climbed out through the debris and started to yell for help.

The Seraphim, advantaged by their speed in flight, arrived first.

Major Bixby called on the *Orion's* scanners to search under the surface and locate Caleb's trapped parents. Once thermal imagery had found them under the north corner of the building, we all began pitching in to clear debris.

The Seraphim again had an advantage on the rest of the people, as they combined to lift large sections of the collapsed roof and carry them clear of the structure. The rest of us did what we could, as we grabbed boards, bricks, and slabs of concrete and moved them aside.

I was struggling with a slab of concrete when a pair of calloused hands suddenly darted in next to mine. I glanced over to see Archie Hazelwood grimacing with exertion. He jerked his head to one side, indicating the direction we should go in, and I followed his lead. As we dropped the slab, he just looked at me and nodded, then dove in for more.

Finally we were able to clear enough for a couple of people to climb through and guide Emma and John Behr out and to safety. As they emerged, one of the *Orion's* medics – a woman named Wendy – swung in with a med kit and began to examine the pair. She yelled back, "He needs water!" Several people ran off to get water, while a couple from the med teams pulled out plastic bottles from nearby packs and rushed them to her. Many others stood and prayed.

While the Behrs were being taken care of, Bonnie conducted a deep scan of all the structures in the valley to determine if anyone else might be trapped. She relayed her findings to Major Bixby, who quickly formed teams and attended to them. At the same time, the *Orion* dispatched a team of specialists to move through the mine shafts, scanning the tunnels for signs of explosives or other deadly surprises.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"Bonnie, it's getting late," commented Belinda. "People are going to be thinking about dinner."

"You have an idea?"

"Why don't *we* feed them?"

Bonnie didn't immediately dismiss the idea. "Any dietary restrictions I should know about?"

"None as a body," she replied. "What are you thinking?"

"A barbecue is hard to resist."

Belinda beamed. "That's a marvelous idea!"

Bonnie turned to her com panel. "Stores!"

"Stores, Lionel speaking," came the response.

"Lionel, how soon could you put together a barbecue for, say, a few hundred people?"

There was a pause. "You got grills?"

Bonnie looked to Belinda, who shook her head. "Sorry, Lionel. They're still picking up the pieces from the golems."

"We could always build a big fire pit from the pieces ... *nah!*" Lionel chuckled. "Okay, let me see what I can come up with. I won't disappoint you."

"I know you won't," acknowledged Bonnie. "Thanks!"

In the course of *Orion's* ministrations, there was the occasional need to feed a large group of people, especially in situations where disasters had viciously interrupted their normal lives. So it wasn't too difficult to come up with the makings for an on-the-spot barbecue. As people started recognizing what was going on, they started pitching in. Many provided additional food, fruits and vegetables, offered to operate the barbecues, or volunteered to serve. It was ironic, as the people who had been threatened by the golems now sat upon their ruins, feasting, using chunks of rock as impromptu tables and chairs.

Seraphim ate alongside villagers, dropping their guards and exchanging hospitality; by this time, many of them had rid themselves of their ersatz wings, making themselves a more-relaxed and acceptable presence among the people. I found Ray Poole with his family, and sat with them.

With my power pack now repaired, I was able to fly for them, showing them how I did it. They were fascinated, especially the children. I took the children for a short flight, as I had the native back in Africa; we didn't go far, or very high, but it was the highlight of their lives. And it made me the center of attention as other children flocked near. For an hour, I became a kiddie ride for all those who were interested; it was fun for all of us, and it made for good public relations with the parents.

During one of my flights, I looked down and saw Jay Ackerman; he was surrounded by a circle of the curious, answering their concerns in a more-casual atmosphere. Then later, several people kicked into spontaneous *a cappella* singing, filling the valley with harmonious praise. I couldn't spot Pastor Steve's family, but passed on inquiring into their whereabouts.

Meanwhile, aboard the *Orion*, food was delivered to the Bridge so they could satisfy their own hunger without missing any possible action.

Sunset

As the shadows of the sun started disappearing over the rim of Miner's Bowl, things took a turn for the strange.

It was towards the end of the barbecue, and all the people of the valley suddenly stopped what they were doing and began to walk *en masse* towards the town square. The rest of us looked at each other and shrugged at our confusion. It brought to mind the scene from the 1960 movie version of H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*, when the childlike Eloi were suddenly seized by a desire to head towards the sound produced by the Morlock's trap.

Unlike them, though, this group didn't appear to be mesmerized.

I contacted *Orion*. "Bonnie, are you seeing this?"

"Yes," she replied. "*What's happening?*"

"I don't know. I'll see what I can find out. Stand by."

I approached a man and asked him what was going on.

"Time for evening service," he answered nonchalantly, with a smile. "You gonna join us?"

"Pastor Steve's not here," I stated the obvious. "Who's going to lead?"

"Not sure," the man shrugged. "But God will provide."

I stopped, and the other man continued. I resumed contact with *Orion*, and gave them the news.

"*Belinda said that, too,*" Bonnie told me. "*Considering they've had two church services a day for the past ten years, without fail, it's second nature.*"

"Does Belinda know who'll lead?"

"*She said that Pastor Steve's always been there, in sickness and in health. It was only rarely that he'd turn part of the service over to one of the elders.*"

"Okay," I conceded. "Let's find out."

I continued to follow the crowd. Jay Ackerman found me and I gave him our conclusions.

"If nobody shows," I suggested. "It could give you another opportunity to talk to them."

Jay and I reached the tabernacle; we chose not to go inside, but to stand in the opened doorway.

During dinner, I'd mingled with the people congregated here, but God showed me new details now. Many of the people had been affected by the chaos today. A lot of their faces mirrored eagerness and anticipation, as if Pastor Steve would magically appear to encourage them. But there were other faces in the crowd, faces that showed apprehension, discontent, and even fear. Was this because they knew Pastor Steve wasn't around to bully and intimidate them? Were they thinking, as Belinda had, that Miner's Bowl wasn't the paradise Pastor Steve had led them to believe? I made a mental note to keep an eye on those people.

There were some absentees as well. Adam wasn't there; I prayed that he was okay. Pastor Steve's family was also missing; that wasn't surprising.

Just then, my train of thought was broken, as someone stepped onto the stage.

"**Welcome, brothers and sisters,**" he greeted, his arms raised high. "Obviously, I am not Pastor Steve. If you were unaware of what happened, Pastor Steve was taken ill. Exactly how he is, and where he is, I'm not certain." He smiled. "But I can say that he is well, and is very close, and will be returning to us soon."

I lowered my voice and asked, "Lizzy, are you able to scan?"

"Sorry, Perry," she apologized. "*Too many people and too far away to isolate.*"

"Okay. Thanks."

"**In the meantime,**" the man on the stage continued, his arms now lowered, "we need to pray *fervently* for Pastor Steve. As the Lord leads you, pray and fast." As an example, he bowed his head and led the group in a quick prayer for Pastor Steve.

"The house of God has been *severely* shaken," he continued. "We have witnessed a supernatural manifestation by the animating of the golems. While what happened isn't a miracle in any sense of the word, it certainly was miraculous." He paused. "We have also had newcomers enter our valley, who came to help us. They destroyed the living golems. I say to you now, please do not be afraid of these newcomers. They have shown themselves to be hospitable, providing food and shelter for all of us. Accept their assistance, as it is given in love." He paused.

"**God is good,**" he said slowly, emphasizing each word. "None of us have lost our lives. We have suffered damage, and, like the Apostle Paul, can declare, '*We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; Persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed; Always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body.*'"

"This body – *we* – are strong. We will recover. Now is the time to rest and replenish ourselves. Starting tomorrow morning, we will start rebuilding. But we will not be alone."

Then the man on the stage dropped to his knees and looked at me and Jay. "Forgive me for trying to hinder you ... both of you. I see now that my actions were wrong, and I repent to you both here and now. Can you forgive me?"

Jay and I glanced at each other. Then we turned to him and said, "Yes, of course!"

"Perry, can you and your friends help us?"

I heard Bonnie's voice in my transceiver say, "*Go for it.*"

"We'd be happy to," I declared with a huge smile.

The man on the stage, Archie Hazelwood, beamed and raised his arms upwards. "**Praise God! Praise God!**"

The sound of the praises caused the walls of the building to vibrate.

It was an hour after the church services, and things were tapering off.

Bonnie had gone down to sick bay to check on Clark. She and Diane Cunningham were standing next to Clark's stasis chamber. The atmosphere was somber.

"There's serious neurological damage to his back and both legs," Diane explained. "I'm going to keep him in stasis until we can transfer him to a proper facility."

"Do you have a specialist in mind?"

"I've made some calls. It's just a matter of seeing where God opens the doors."

Bonnie knew this was the best thing. "Keep me posted."

Diane threw the other woman a 'you think I wouldn't?' expression, which made Bonnie smile. The two women embraced, and Bonnie returned to the Bridge. As she took her seat, Belinda came out of the nursery with little Jason. "He wanted 'mommy'," she explained.

Bonnie held out her arms, and the child climbed up onto her lap; he cuddled securely against her chest. Belinda took the side-seat, and Bonnie filled her new friend in on the situation.

"I wonder what the people in the towns think about everything that's happened in Miner's Bowl?" Belinda mused.

"Excuse me?" replied Bonnie, stifling a yawn.

"Those towns surrounding Miner's Bowl," she clarified. "I wonder how much of things they saw. I wonder how *they* feel about it."

"Why don't you just ask them?" Bonnie queried.

"What?" Belinda's jaw dropped.

"Why don't you go down there and talk to them? See if they'd be willing to help Miner's Bowl on the repair work. They could probably use the commerce. We can see if Dot's available to go with you. What do you say?"

"And the people *in* the valley would see that the people *outside* the valley aren't the monsters they had been led to believe," she added. "Yeah, I'd like that. Could you talk to Dot?"

As she called Dot, she yawned a couple of times.

"How long have you been up, Bonnie?"

She glanced over at Belinda. "I'm fine."

"I can see otherwise. It's been a long day for all of us, and you especially. Your husband has been injured, which has got to be taking its toll on you. And you've got a sleepy child in your lap. You have a second-in-command, don't you?"

"Yes," Bonnie admitted reluctantly.

"So what stops you?"

She didn't have a logical answer. "I don't know if I can sleep."

"I've been there," Belinda admitted. "I couldn't sleep after James was killed. But I still tried."

Bonnie didn't respond for several moments. She stifled several yawns. Finally, she gave in, and pressed a button on the com panel.

Orion
Late Evening

Dot and Belinda were in Conference Room One. It was an odd feeling for Belinda, just the two of them in this large auditorium, but Dot seemed to be comfortable here. She spoke, and the lights came up. Then she started talking to someone named Sebastian, instructing him to bring up the display of Miner's Bowl. The idea of intelligent computers was the stuff of science fiction movies she remembered before coming to this church. It was fantastic, but everybody else was taking it right in stride.

Her attention turned to the circle in the middle of the room, which suddenly had an opaque representation of the area below; it appeared to be in three dimensions, and seemed to be so real she could reach out and touch it. Dot took control of the image, manipulating their view of it. It was amazing. The towering edges of the Bowl vanished into the ceiling, as they centered in on the base of the formation. Belinda was fascinated by the intricate details of the small towns surrounding the Bowl. Dot instructed Sebastian to rotate the image, and it suddenly began to move, the whole image slowly rotating like a wheel lying on its side.

"Okay," commented Dot, unaffected by this amazing sight. "We've got three active towns we need to reach. Any suggestions?"

"Which town did Perry visit?"

"Shrader." As if on cue, one of the towns rotating about the center suddenly glowed with a green hue.

"They know Perry there," continued Belinda.

"Of course," added Dot. "They've already been approached. And, besides that, they know you."

"Me?"

"When Perry came through, he told some of the townspeople that he was coming after a friend of his – you. Some of them thought he was joking because they didn't think he'd be able to get inside Miner's Bowl. If they see you and realize who you are, they'll see Perry succeeded in getting you out."

"And they might be a little bit more cooperative in helping us out."

"Exactly," she smiled.

"But what if they have questions about where we came from. Certainly you don't tell everybody about this place?"

"Who'd believe us?" Dot grinned. "No, in cases like this we identify ourselves by our operational name *Clark Savage Foundation*. The term 'foundation' is vague enough but acceptable by most people. When our scouting parties first checked out the area, they used the *Foundation* angle. And there wasn't any problems."

"Sounds good. What'll we need?"

"Since you're the newcomer, I'll have some official-looking credentials. Apart from that, why don't we use the car Perry picked you up in? It might help jar some memories."

"That flying sports car?" she did a double-take. "You know how to fly it?"

"Sure," Dot grinned. "It's really fun to fly."

"*Fun*," Belinda repeated. "Okay, so we start off with Shrader. Then where?"

Dot shrugged. "Wherever God leads us."

Belinda smiled.

Miner's Bowl

"Mr. Bixby?"

"That's *Major* Bixby, Elder Hazelwood," he corrected.

He gave an apologetic look. "Major. I have a request for you and your people. For years, these four doors have been the only thing separating the valley from the 'outside world'. Now they're gone, albeit temporarily. Now, I agree with you, most people will probably be too exhausted to think twice about it, but there might be some who will be nervous, even panicky, realizing that there is nothing separating them from the 'outside world'."

"Would you like me to post guards?"

"I prefer to think of them as 'watchmen', but, yes. Will you help us?"

"Consider it done, sir," the military man smiled.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Miner's Bowl

Morning

It was a rough night. There was so much to be concerned about. Many people stayed awake, talking or praying. Others were exhausted from the day's activities. Sleeping bags and tents had been provided for those who didn't have a bed or didn't trust the structural integrity of their quarters.

In the morning, Archie Hazelwood once more led services. Nobody questioned it, even Pastor Steve's family who was present. It seemed everybody was just appreciative for any semblance of normalcy. He repeated his thoughts from the previous evening, and encouraged the congregation to welcome us newcomers and work together to rebuild the valley.

He added a couple of passages from the Old Testament book of Isaiah to support their efforts: *'And they that shall be of thee shall build the old waste places: thou shalt raise up the foundations of many generations; and thou shalt be called, The repairer of the breach, The restorer of paths to dwell in.'* Then: *'And the sons of strangers shall build up thy walls, and their kings shall minister unto thee: for in my wrath I smote thee, but in my favour have I had mercy on thee.'*

Before we got busy with rebuilding, we enjoyed a stand-up breakfast buffet of eggs, bacon, fruit, veggies, and bagels. It had been decided to deliver building supplies and small transports to Albany; the abandoned town made a good staging area, and no one suspected that the supplies came from far overhead and not from out of town. Priorities were established, and work crews were organized. Several people volunteered to work on getting Pastor Steve's house repaired; they wanted to have their leader's dwelling-place ready for his imminent return.

Diane Cunningham stood next to the bio bed.

It wasn't the first time she had dealt with a comatose patient. It was just that this one was ... so ... hopeless. If he stayed aboard *Orion* (and God's will was in it, of course) she was confident he would recover from his injuries in time. But she was also familiar with the position and the will of the three women who had boarded an executive helicopter with *Clark Savage Foundation* markings a few minutes ago; the passenger section of the helicopter had no windows, and thus no way of revealing *Orion's* location. She respected their dedication to God's will, but she had her own idea of medicine's role in the Christian's life.

"Lord," she began praying aloud, still looking down on Winter's body. "Yours is the power of life and death, and it's your call on his fate. Still, you tell us to 'choose life', and that's what I'm trying to do with the talents you've given me."

Jesus' plea to the Father in the Garden of Gethsemane came to her heart: *'Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.'* She took a deep breath and released it in a slow sigh. Just then the communicator beeped for attention; she ignored it long enough to finish the prayer. "Please give me the strength and the peace to do what I have to do, despite what could possibly happen. Thanks, Lord. Amen."

She turned to the communicator and answered it. "Yes, Bonnie?"

"Winter's wife ... uh, *wives* ... have arrived," her friend informed her. "They're being escorted to Consulting Room One."

Diane took a deep breath and exhaled it through pursed lips. "Thanks."

"Hang in there," Bonnie appended. "You're covered."

"I know," smiled Diane. "Thanks."

She headed down the hall from the med center to the consulting room. She didn't like what she had to do, but her course was clear. She turned the knob for the room and went in. Since this wasn't a real hospital, there was no need for waiting rooms. Therefore, the only privacy could be found in small consulting rooms. Each room held a couple of medium-sized, utilitarian couches and a couple of small tables with lamps. Coupled with the light pastel colors of the walls, the intent was to project a feeling of comfort and ease, especially if the circumstance under which the room was used was stressful ... like now.

Comfort and ease for the family members, she reminded herself – but not for the doctor.

The three women sat on one of the couches, dressed in identical floor-length dresses and head coverings. For a moment, it looked quite humorous, like a casting call from the movie *Witness*; she held back a chuckle. Each of them – in ages differing from mid-20's to mid-60's – had the same dour expression on their face.

She anticipated a scuffle, and it looked as if these three weren't going to let her down.

"Good afternoon, ladies," she greeted with a smile. "I'm Dr. Diane Cunningham. I'm the Chief Medical Officer here." She sat on the couch opposite them.

The oldest of the three women spoke bluntly. "You have our husband."

"If you're speaking of Mr. Winter, then yes, I do. He's my patient."

"That's *Pastor* Winter," harshly interrupted the middle woman. "And he is being held against his will."

"He's in a coma. He was exposed to a very deadly nerve gas, and it's only been by God's grace that he's still alive. But he won't remain alive if you try to pull him from my care."

The older one spoke. "You have no right to hold him. You will release him into our custody now."

"On the contrary, I do have every right to hold him. At the moment, he is my patient, and I am his doctor."

"He is *not* your patient! If he is anyone's patient, he is the patient of Jesus Christ, the Great Physician. Your worldly medicines are not of God, but are of the Devil. Now we are requesting that you release him from your ungodly machines and take us back to Miner's Bowl."

Diane didn't blink. She paused only an instant before evenly replying, "Or ... *what*?"

"Or we will force you to comply," the youngest of the three said defiantly.

"Will you really?" Diane's eyes narrowed and her lips formed a tight smile. "Ladies, let's face facts. Right now, you and I are all operating apart from the rest of this world. If we were in the rest of the world, you could sue me and probably win. But we're not. You have absolutely no leverage on me – *understand?*" She paused briefly, not wanting them to get a word in. "I had no choice when I discovered that your husband was ill – I can recite the Hippocratic Oath for you, which says that my job is to preserve life – despite the fact that no one gave me permission to care for him. I can give you details of how I became a Christian, and how I probably pray more than the three of you combined. But that's not the issue. I don't need to let your husband go. He is my patient and I am his doctor, and I am here to make sure that he lives to see another day. That is the way I serve my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. And I *don't* have to give him back to you until I'm darn good and ready to."

The three wives had been building up for an emotional eruption that could've overshadowed Krakatoa. Detonation was imminent.

Then Diane said, "**But** ... God has shown me to turn him over to you."

In one fell swoop, Diane diffused them as easily as putting a pin in a balloon.

Prompted by their silence, she continued. "I will admit, I don't want to do this, and my professional opinion is that your husband won't live two weeks without help, but I will make the necessary arrangements." She stood up. "Please make yourselves comfortable. I'll be back in a few minutes."

And she left the room, holding back the emotion. She returned to the med bay and told her assistant, "Prepare to disconnect Mr. Winter from the bio bed and have him ready for travel in a half hour. I'll be in my office."

Five minutes later, Diane returned to the consulting room, where the three women were talking. "Your husband's being placed aboard the transport you arrived in. Before you leave, I want you to take this." She produced a small device the size of a pager. "This is a communicator. I will be on the other end. If you wish to get in touch with me *for any reason*, all you have to do is push this button. It's completely up to you; I just want to make myself available in case you wish to talk to me." She held it out to the oldest of the wives, who looked at it for a moment, then accepted it. "Would you allow me one last request?"

The three paused. Then the oldest one asked, "What is it?"

"Would you join me in a prayer for his health? I'll even let you lead." She gave them a sincere smile that broke through. Slowly, all three nodded.

Then they all got down on their knees and joined hands.

"The helicopter's left the station," Bonnie reported to Diane from her ready room. "They've asked their pilot to relay a message to Jay Ackerman. They want Jay to tell their people that they're on their way down."

"The triumphant return of their Messiah," Diane quipped sarcastically. "They're so optimistic. They believe that God will go their way."

"It's faith, Di," Bonnie sighed. "Misplaced faith, perhaps, but still faith."

"Yeah, I suppose you're right."

"You did the only thing you could."

"Probably the roughest decision I ever had to make. You know he's dying."

"There wasn't anything you could've done."

"I could've stood my ground," she defended.

"Sure you could. But if he stayed here, it would've seriously endangered our efforts to minister to the rest of the people at Miner's Bowl."

"I know. You know me – my patients are my first concern."

"I do," Bonnie empathized. "But you gave them a signaler in case they change their minds. And they took it."

"Yeah, they did. I just pray that they use it."

Miner's Bowl

Bonnie sent out an alert to us in the valley, letting us know that a transport helicopter was on its way from *Orion*, conveying the still-comatose Pastor Steve and his three wives. She included a summary of Pastor Steve's condition, in case someone on the ground asked or was given contradictory information, and his chances for survival.

Major Bixby reported that the landing zone would be clear by the time they arrived.

Jay Ackerman relayed the message from the wives to the congregation. The helicopter would be setting down just outside the door on the road to Albany. Most of the people dropped what they were doing and rushed towards the landing site while watching the skies.

It was only a few minutes before we all heard the sound of the helicopter coming down from above. As we waited, I could hear numerous utterances of praise or prayers, their arms raised. The Seraphim cordon kept the throng from getting in the way of the blades as it landed safely and the rotors wound down. The side door slid open and two attendants stepped down. As all the elders moved closer, they eased the wheeled gurney out. Then they helped the three wives out; Paula was crying, and Ginger was comforting her.

The crowd of onlookers went silent as the gurney passed, being carried by the elders. It reminded me of a funeral procession. They parted like the Red Sea, allowing the gurney and the family to pass through. Then it closed in and moved in behind. I walked with them, observing the reactions of the people around me. There were quiet prayers of intercession for Pastor Steve, and some reached out their hands towards the gurney while voicing prayers of healing.

The procession reached the house, which was mostly repaired now, and the elders carried the gurney inside. The people surrounded the house and continued to wait, until Archie finally came out and addressed them.

"Brothers and sisters! Our leader ... our *father* ... has returned to us! He has been stricken with a grievous malady, but he conveys his love and thanks to us!"

Lizzy, still monitoring things, informed me, "*He's still unconscious. If he conveyed anything to them, it was telepathically.*"

I held back a smile as Archie continued. "Let us come together in prayer for his health!" He bowed his head and spoke a prayer of healing for Pastor Steve. Then he dismissed them with a smile and a, "Why don't we get back to work, everybody?"

The crowd began to disburse, but not all drifted away. Some remained behind, on their knees or prostrate on the ground; their prayers for Pastor Steve filled the air. Nobody tried forcing them to return to work; everybody understood and respected God's leading for them.

Noon

Orion once more provided a buffet lunch for the people of the valley. As they returned to work, they were joined by people from the surrounding towns.

"Mr. Liston?"

I turned to see Kate, the waitress from *Mabel's*; she was dressed in a coverall and a denim shirt. I smiled at her.

"Welcome to Miner's Bowl," I greeted.

"Never thought I'd ever see the inside of this place," she admitted. "Your missus talked to us at *Mabel's* this morning, her and that friend o' yours. They talked a few of us into helping out. What hit this place?"

"A rockslide," I side-stepped with a grin. "The details would take too long to explain."

"Anybody get hurt?"

"A few. Nobody killed, though, thank God."

"That's good," she nodded. "So where can I help?"

"Why don't you just wander around and see if something calls your name?"

"Okay. I'll talk to you later, Mr. Liston."

"Call me Perry, please," I corrected. "Take care." And she moved along.

*The Orion
Afternoon*

"Bonnie, I've got a specialist for Clark. Her name's Miranda Schneider. She's a neurologist at Seattle Medical Center. She's the best; I was hoping she'd be available."

"That's great news!" Bonnie beamed. "Have you talked to her yet?"

"I have. She's expecting us."

"How do you want to transport him?"

"Gumball," she answered. "He's on his way. We can be in Seattle in no time."

"Okay. Thanks."

She disconnected. Bonnie thought a moment, then said aloud, "Have Malcolm report to me in my ready room."

"Perry?" I heard Bonnie's voice in my head.

I cupped my hand over my ear, not wanting it to appear like I was talking to myself. "Is Clark okay?"

"Yes," she responded to my direct question. "*Diane's found a specialist, a neurosurgeon. She's in Seattle. Gumball's on his way here to take us there.*"

"How soon will he be arriving?" She gave me his E.T.A. "Good. I want to join you."

"*That's why I'm calling. Dot and Belinda are on the surface; they've been making contact with the other towns around you.*"

"So I heard. Good idea."

"*They'll meet with you at the entrance leading to Albany.*"

"That's okay," I replied. "The power pack on my flight suit was replaced, so I'll fly up to you."

"*We'll be expecting you. Bonnie out.*"

I disconnected and considered what needed to be done before departing. I said my goodbyes to the families I had interacted with and had helped.

I walked outside of the valley on the Pick Axe side. There was nobody around. Then I switched on the flight suit, extended my helmet around my head, and silently went up and away.

Three hours later

Clark Mayfair, known to his friends as 'Gumball', arrived at *Orion*.

The distinctive blue Osprey V-22 descended to the flight deck, and the engines whined down into silence. I met him with a handshake, and gave him an update as to our situation; by that time, I'd changed out of my flying suit and into jeans and tee shirt. Since Clark was still in stasis, there was no urgency in transporting him to Seattle, but we didn't want Clark to remain in there any longer than needed, either. Gumball lowered the rear ramp of the aircraft in anticipation of his payload. While Gumball took a restroom break and then refilled his travel mug with coffee, I supervised the loading of the stasis chamber; two technicians accompanied it, and made sure it was secure.

A few minutes later, Dot, Bonnie, and the triplets boarded the Osprey. A man followed them with a luggage cart; not knowing what to anticipate, we each brought what we thought we'd need. Gumball was just behind them; he conveyed hugs and words of consolation. The ramp was raised and everyone found seats; I moved forward to sit next to Gumball. He didn't need a co-pilot or flight crew – the advanced avionics of his craft didn't require it – but he appreciated the company.

They received clearance, and Gumball took the Osprey up through the open doorway. He shifted into horizontal flight, and slowly increased our speed.

Nicknamed *Blue Thunder*, Gumball's Osprey was unique on several levels. It was one of the few of its kind that was privately owned. It also had several 'modifications' that nobody at Boeing had ever conceived for their V-22, including inertial dampeners that allowed the craft to move and maneuver at amazing speeds.

Given the precious cargo he was carrying, Gumball increased his speed just enough to make good time to Seattle. As we traveled, I summarized what had happened in Miner's Bowl, and he shared the latest about their baby boy, Thomas Harper Mayfair.

We arrived at the Seattle Medical Center under cover of rain. The Osprey touched down easier than I'd ever witnessed, and Gumball lowered the rear ramp. Nearby, several people dressed in matching blue ponchos with the Center's logo watched the landing, then moved in and up the ramp; they pushed back hoods in order to see clearly. One woman, of medium height and with a mane of impressive red hair, approached us.

"Good morning!" she greeted us all. "I'm Dr. Schneider!" She glanced between Dot and Bonnie. "Which one of you is Mrs. Savage?"

Bonnie responded and moved closer, "That's me."

She shook Bonnie's hand. "We're going to transfer your husband to a surgical bay on the 4th Floor where we can release him from stasis and examine him." She looked over at the rest of her team and told them to go ahead. The two techs we'd brought with us made the chamber mobile, and covered it with a tarp provided by the hospital. They carefully wheeled it out of the Osprey and across to the building.

Dr. Schneider continued. "I'd suggest you all head down to the cafeteria and relax; I'll come to you when I've got something."

It sounded like a good idea. We thanked Gumball for the ride, and he promised to keep us all in prayer. Since we had known what to expect with the weather, we were dressed appropriately. So we followed Dr. Schneider out of the Osprey and into the building. She pointed us in the right direction and explained that we should follow the signs to the cafeteria, then we went in separate directions.

The cafeteria wasn't very busy at that hour, and we were able to secure a few tables for us and the triplets. I put the kids in high chairs while Bonnie and Dot performed reconnaissance on what the cafeteria had to offer. Dot returned a couple of minutes later with snacks for the kids. Then, while they were busy, I went into the cafeteria, passing Bonnie as I did. I wasn't really hungry at the moment, but secured something for later. Then I switched places with Dot. Finally we were all settled in.

A few minutes later, Dr. Schneider joined us.

"Well," she explained. "We released him from stasis and hooked him up to monitors. We're prepping him for exploratory surgery to determine the extent of his injuries. It's good you had him in stasis."

"Should we wait here?" asked Bonnie.

"If you like. However, you might prefer a waiting room on the floor." She glanced over at the triplets and gave us a grin. "It has a play area."

"*We'll take it!*" we all responded.

The fourth floor waiting room was barely occupied. A Romanian family quietly talked among themselves, while one small boy played in the play area. The triplets took one look at the play area and rushed in to conquer. Bonnie had to chastise Jason when he tried taking the toys the other boy was playing with.

After a few minutes I excused myself, "I'm going to give Jay a call."

I stepped down the hall and found a covered balcony nobody was using. I got through to Jay Ackerman and updated him on our situation.

"Some of the people around here have been talking to me off-side," he informed me. "They don't like what they've seen, and I think they want out."

"That's great, Jay! What made the difference?"

"You, for one. The way you put your life on the line for theirs – especially after Winter portrayed you as Satan incarnate – impressed them. That, and mixing with the people from the outside. They've started questioning their environment. So I asked Elder Hazelwood if I could speak to the congregation."

"How was that received?"

"He didn't hide his distain well. But he agreed."

"Be on your guard, Jay. When do you make your pitch?"

"Evening services. Keep me in prayer, okay?"

"Same here," I added. "Talk to you later."

I disconnected with Jay and went back into the waiting room. There were a few more in there now, sitting in groups of two and three. Bonnie and Dot were sitting together, talking. I found myself focused on little Jenny as I sat down by myself.

Having been a Christian for several years, I didn't have a problem acknowledging (and appreciating) that God was constantly watching over me. Nothing escaped His vision.

However, having received that device, I had to realize that God wasn't the only one watching me. The adult version of that little girl playing with the plastic tea set and an audience of stuffed animals had been observing me and Clark via the *Time Tunnel*. The device had activated when I touched it; had it been keyed to my fingerprints, or my DNA? Not that I wasn't appreciative of what she did, but I had to ask: *why*?

The last time she and her brother had interceded in our lives, it was because the timeline had been thrown off and needed to be set right. *Was that what was happening again? Had the timeline somehow become messed up and needed to be corrected?* My mind followed the possibilities. She had sent me a message to tell me how to contact *Orion*, and to inform me that Clark was in trouble. Since my exposure to the nerve gas hadn't been that serious, maybe it was Clark who had been in severe danger. If the future had been changed, how? Maybe Clark hadn't been rescued. Maybe he had died here, in *this* time.

This was starting to sound like a Nicolas Cage movie.

Since I was the only one aware that our rescuers from the future had been Clark and Bonnie's grown children, I was the only logical choice for a way out. But it still was a startling revelation: by changing the past, Future Jenny had changed the future. My mind spun with visions of transparent aluminum and time paradoxes and ... I was starting to get a headache.

It was spooky. As I looked at that little girl, playing just a few yards away, I wondered if *she* was looking at *me* from the future. And then, as if things weren't strange enough, little Jenny's head suddenly turned from her tea party, and she looked straight at *me*. I smiled lamely, hoping it was convincing. It hadn't been. She abandoned her tea party and crossed the room to me. I automatically placed her on my lap.

"Unca Perry okay?" she asked sweetly, her eyes wide with innocence.

I smiled at her, but admitted, "No, sweetheart, I'm not. I'm concerned about your daddy."

"Pray, Unca Perry?" she suggested. "Pray for Daddy?"

I smiled, sincerely this time, recalling Jesus' words: "*I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children.*" "*Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.*"

"Yes, Jenny," I replied. "Pray for Daddy."

And, still sitting on my lap, she put her palms together and bowed her head. I was humbled by her childlike faith. Then I followed her lead and we prayed together.

People came and went through the waiting room for the next several hours. Doctors came in and talked to the other people, but no one came for us. By the time Dr. Schneider joined us, everyone else in the waiting room had left. She was with another woman, a young nurse; Dr. Schneider instructed the nurse to keep an eye on the triplets while she talked with us.

She looked at Bonnie. "Your husband's in recovery. We'll be monitoring him through the night." She paused, and her expression became serious. "I won't mince words. He suffered a great deal of damage, and I've done my best to repair it. Now it's up to him."

"What kind of damage?" asked Bonnie.

Through the technical medical terms, we understood clearly what she was telling us: the damage to Clark had produced paralysis from the waist down.

"I don't want to get your hopes up," Dr. Schneider said. "It doesn't look promising. But, on the other hand, I've seen patients who've turned things around over time. And, of course, I've seen God's hand perform miracles. Despite the fact that it doesn't look good at this point, there's still a long way to go. I don't have to remind you to keep praying. We will do everything we can for him here." She paused. "I would suggest that he remain here for a few days while we work with him. In the morning we'll let him know what happened; I won't tell him anything until you're all present. There's a hotel nearby that the families of many of our patients have taken advantage of; they have a shuttle van that goes between there and here. I'll give you their number. I know the last thing any of us wants to do is get some rest, but that's exactly what we – you – need."

"The stasis chamber ...?" I asked.

"All the stasis chamber did was to keep the damage from getting worse."

"Will he ever walk again?" asked Bonnie, her voice soft and cautious.

"It's unlikely," boldly replied Dr. Schneider. "The damage is serious. But anything is possible."

"PRAYER ALERT UPDATE, AUTHORIZATION 4372K FOR KITTEN. DOC SAVAGE IS IN THE CARE OF A MEDICAL SPECIALIST. INITIAL REPORTS SAY THAT HE MAY BE PARALYZED FROM THE WAIST DOWN. KEEP A LID ON THIS. MORE WILL FOLLOW."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Late evening

We checked into the Drake-Frazer Hotel, just a few blocks from the medical center, where we secured a couple of suites on one of the upper floors. The view from the suites was familiar, having grown up in Seattle. I thought about calling my mother, but decided against it because it was so late. We found that the hotel's room service operated around the clock, mostly due to the odd hours from guests with connections to the medical center. After a late meal, the triplets blessed us by going straight to bed, and giving us grown-ups a chance to reflect on the situation and look at what we might need for the next few days.

"We're going to need help with the kids," commented Dot.

"I was thinking that, too," agreed Bonnie. "Gumball told me he'll be staying on *Orion* in case we need him. He can fly one of the nannies in."

"You might see if he can bring us some of our things," I added. "These overnight bags won't last very long."

"There's always room service," Dot suggested.

"Sure," I agreed. "But there're a couple of personal things that I didn't think I'd need, but now I've changed my mind."

"Same here," nodded Bonnie. "I'd like to bring some of the kids' favorite things."

"So," offered Dot. "Should one of us fly back to *Orion*, get the stuff, and come back? Or do we have them pack a few specific items from our rooms and put them on the Osprey with Gumball and the nanny?"

Our dilemma was interrupted by a call on my satellite cell. It was Jay Ackerman. I put him on speaker.

"How did the meeting go?" I asked.

"As we thought," he reported. "There were a few interested in moving out of Miner's Bowl. Out of that group, there are some who don't want to go too far – they don't want to leave the area. The suggestion was made that they take over Albany. They cited passages from the Old Testament where the Israelites took over cities that had been built but were now vacant. The rest want to get as far away from here as possible."

"Any opposition?"

"Oh, sure. That was to be expected. Got a lot of harassment from people, claiming that outside of here was a wasteland. I reminded them they'd seen people from outside, worked alongside them, even broken bread with them. I told them there is no proof to the claims that the outside is a wasteland. They still didn't want to hear, so they walked out on the meeting. I've got a hunch that, once they make their final decision, we may have to move them out in a hurry."

"I'll let Malcolm know," replied Bonnie. "Whatever you need is yours."

"Thanks. Just be praying that things don't get ugly. Regardless, we'll be on our guard tonight in case there is resistance."

"How did Archie Hazelwood respond to the initial decision?" I asked.

"Surprisingly well. Actually, when they first started shouting me down, *he* was the one to shut them up. He said that it was better that a few leave than harbor strife from within the body. And then he rebuked anyone who would stand in the way of a brother leaving here to follow his own way with God. It was impressive."

"Don't let your guard down, Jay," I pushed. "I've still got a bad feeling about him."

"Will do. Anyhow, I better let you go. Take care."

We said our goodbyes and disconnected.

Despite the late hour, none of us were very tired. Once the triplets were asleep, Bonnie contacted Malcolm Foyle and took care of business. Arrangements were made for Mary Anne Crews to join Gumball aboard his Osprey in the morning. In the meantime, she packed a few things for Bonnie and the kids, while Gumball did the same for me and Dot.

With that settled, we began to feel the day's fatigue. For tonight, Dot would keep Bonnie company in her suite to help watch the triplets, while I had the other all to myself. I fell asleep while praying, but came wide awake when my cell phone rang.

I looked at the time – not even three in the morning – and lunged for the phone.

It was Malcolm Foyle. "What's up?" I blurted, frantic at what could've happened at this hour.

His voice was somber. "I know the Commander's a strong woman, but she's been through a lot, and I didn't want to add this to what she is going through."

"What is it?" I asked with dread.

"It's Mr. Littlejohn," he reported. "He's dead."

"Johnny had been taking his evening constitutional when he spotted a fire in one of the cottages. They may be fireproof on the outside, but the inside was burning, and there was a lot of smoke. The alarm had gone off, but the fire department hadn't shown up yet. Johnny went in and rescued the occupants before he collapsed."

"Sounds like him," commented Dot.

"How's Elena taking it?" asked Bonnie.

"Like you'd expect," I replied. "She chose CSI specifically because he taught there. Plus, she's been his shadow and good right arm for the last two years, ever since he tapped her to be his assistant. It's hitting her especially hard. Sunni's with her, though."

"That's good," nodded Dot.

We prayed for Elena and Sunni.

I changed the subject. "I found a voicemail on my phone from Karleen when I got out of the shower. The news media's picked up on Johnny's death. They hit her up for a quote, and tried to pry Clark's location out of her for an interview. She told them to take a hike."

"Good for her," acknowledged Bonnie, now sober and businesslike. "I don't want the word to get out that Clark's in the hospital ... not just yet. Since we didn't get a call from Dr. Schneider, I think we can safely assume he got through the night. I'll give the doctor a call and give her a heads-up on the situation with Johnny."

"I'll let Monk and Renny know, if they don't know already," I announced.

"I'll get breakfast for the triplets," added Dot. "Then call Gumball to let him in on things."

I suggested prayer again, and the others agreed. After that, we split up to take care of business.

Ninety minutes later we were at the medical center. At this hour, many of the patients were being fed breakfast. Televisions in rooms were tuned to various local and national morning news shows. I recognized the face of Barry Ottey, Dean of CSI, and the on-screen headlines reflected the news of Johnny's death. We were directed to the Critical Care Unit on the fifth floor, where we identified ourselves. The nurse behind the glass acknowledged us, then informed us of the rules of the ICU: visitors were limited to two at a time, and young children were prohibited due to the sensitive nature of the other patients.

"How 'bout I take the kids back to that waiting room on four?" Dot volunteered. "They seemed to get along well there."

Bonnie agreed. "Thanks."

Just then, Dr. Schneider arrived. "Glad I caught up with you before you went in."

"Is everything okay?" asked Bonnie.

"Yes. I just wanted to bring you up to speed. He woke up a couple of times during the night, and was asking the orderlies what was going on. He finally persuaded one of them to show him his chart. When I came on shift, I stopped by and talked to him."

"How did he take it?" I asked.

"Rather well," she replied. "But then he, too, is a doctor. He was able to describe what had happened to him, and what he was feeling. It was very helpful."

"He might just not be showing it," commented Dot. "He's good at that."

"Yeah," Bonnie agreed absently.

"Is he awake now?" I asked.

"Yes. He's having breakfast now."

We thanked Dr. Schneider, then Dot and I took the triplets to the waiting room while Bonnie went in ahead of us. After making sure everybody was okay, I returned to Critical Care and found Clark's room. It wasn't hard; I recognized Clark's voice easily. He was in the hospital bed with Bonnie sitting in a chair next to him; she was holding his hand and was talking to him.

"Is this a private party, or can anyone join in?" I quipped lamely.

"Hey, Perry," Clark greeted with a smile.

I came over to the other side of the bed and took Clark's outstretched hand. I felt a sudden wave of emotion, and fought to hold things back.

"So ... how are you?" I asked.

"As well as can be expected," he replied stoically. "I assume you're aware of my condition?"

"Yes."

"Well, to quote Captain Kirk, I don't believe in the no-win scenario. Right now I may be paralyzed, but I don't believe that God will allow me to stay that way for the rest of my life."

"Amen," I agreed. "So what happened with Wail?"

"He challenged me to a fight."

My eyes narrowed. "A *physical* fight?"

"Yes," he sighed. "Seems foolish now, but at the time it seemed to be the right thing to do. We fought, and it appeared as if he was going to concede. Then there was an explosion, and the ceiling came crashing down on me."

"An ... explosion?" I repeated. "I know what caused that explosion. Pastor Steve and I had followed Adam into the mines; Pastor Steve, in all his wisdom, had purchased a canister of nerve gas as a final option if the government caught up to them. Anyhow, Adam was going to release the nerve gas, and Pastor Steve and I tried to stop him." I paused as I remembered those critical last minutes. "We ended up in a cavern with explosives, and we had Adam cornered with the nerve gas. I did something drastic: I grabbed a grenade, intent on sealing up the cavern, trapping all of us – *and* the nerve gas – inside." I paused again. "But before I could use it, Pastor Steve moved, rushing Adam and knocking the both of them down. Adam was out, but the release valve for the nerve gas canister had been broken; it was only because Pastor Steve's body was against the canister that kept the nerve gas from being released."

"What did you do?" asked Clark.

I looked away. "Pastor Steve had breathed in enough of the gas to know it would eventually kill him. He begged me to give him the grenade and get out with Adam. I didn't want to leave him, but ... he didn't give me a choice. I was dragging Adam out of the cavern and into the mines when ..."

"The explosion," concluded Bonnie, a look of fear on her face.

"I'm sorry, Perry," added Clark.

I met Clark's eyes. My breathing was labored. "If that was the what caused ... I'm ... so sorry."

Clark gripped my hand. "Perry, *don't!* It was a chain reaction. You couldn't have known."

I gave him a thin smile. "You'll be back on your feet in no time."

"Amen," he smiled back. "Dr. Schneider suggested that I remain here for a few days while they continue to monitor my progress. They'll also start me on physical therapy."

"That'll help," commented Bonnie.

For a few minutes, there was silence. Then Bonnie said, "There's something else."

"It's about Johnny," stated Clark. "Isn't it?"

"How did you know?" I asked.

"I couldn't hear all the details, but I caught his name," he supplied. "Is he ... home?"

"Yes," answered Bonnie. Then she relayed the story of the fire and Johnny's heroic rescue of the occupants before the smoke overcame him. Throughout the story, Clark's expression was grim, and his eyes were fixed on his wife.

"I need to talk to Elena," Clark said afterward.

"I'll make the arrangements," Bonnie nodded.

I suddenly felt like I was missing something. I'd turned off my cell phone when going back into ICU, but I wished it had been on. "I'm going to check my cell phone," I announced. "I'll be right back."

Bonnie and Clark both nodded, and I walked out of ICU.

A few minutes later, I moaned, "*Oh, boy!*" in response to a voicemail from Jay Ackerman, and returned to Clark's room.

"Jay had met a few people who were like Belinda – they didn't like how things were in Miner's Bowl and wanted out. Trying to draw out as many as he could, he spoke to the congregation at last night's worship. He asked them to think about the idea, and give their answer this morning. Well, he got quite a few positive responses, and one bad one: Archie Hazelwood didn't stop them, but he did declare that anyone who wanted to leave the valley had to be out by sundown *today.*"

"Why so quickly?" asked Clark.

"That's Archie," I shrugged. "Personally, I think he's just flexing his muscles. But I'd take him seriously."

"They're going to need help moving!" commented Bonnie, looking at her watch. "Thank God we made contact with the surrounding towns! I need to talk to Malcolm!" She started to rise, but gave Clark a regretful look. "Forgive me, darling!"

Clark returned with an understanding smile, "Go."

Bonnie gave him a kiss and headed out. I moved around to the chair Bonnie had been using, and sat.

"When it rains, it pours," I muttered, reflecting on all the things occurring at one time.

"Amen," Clark agreed.

I looked over at my friend. "So, just between the two of us, how *are* you feeling?"

"I'm ... not quite sure," he answered. "I need to talk to Elena, see how she's doing."

"From what I understand, Sunni's staying with her."

"That's good. They're close."

My head lowered. "Gonna miss him."

"Me, too."

I switched places with Dot so she could visit with Clark, and kept an eye on the triplets in the waiting room. It also gave me a chance to call Jay back.

"Yeah, Hazelwood was all encouraging when the people voiced their decisions, in spite of the hecklers. He said it was better to have a few loyal members than a divided house. He admonished everyone to, ultimately, follow God and not man. And if that meant that they lost a few, then so be it. He said they started with a few, and they'll continue if there are only a few left. I am very disappointed by his 'get out of town by sundown' order."

"Don't worry. We'll get it done. Bonnie's working with Malcolm to get you the support you need."

"What was interesting was that only a handful decided to go with us. Most of them decided to assume control of the fourth town. Here's something interesting: one of the ones who decided not to stay was a friend of yours – Ray Poole. I guess you made more of an impression on him than you know. Anyhow, the ones who are going to take over the fourth down picture themselves as Israelites fleeing Egypt and taking over abandoned villages in the Promised Land."

"How did they take to the sundown order?"

"Like you'd expect," Jay explained. "Most of them were shocked; they feel they've been deserted by the people they have been living with for the past ten years."

"I know that feeling," I agreed. "Well, you're covered."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Still in ICU, a very determined Clark attempted to continue his normal two-hour exercise regimen. He didn't get far. Dr. Schneider was on him and reading him the Riot Act before he could get out of the starting gate. She explained that, although she empathized with his 'commendable habit for physical fitness', it was imperative that he fully heal from his recent surgery before attempting anything strenuous.

Then she threatened to put him in a body cast for a month if he pushed it.

Clark surrendered.

In turn, Dr. Schneider told him that she'd continue to monitor his progress, and then start him on *moderate* physical therapy in a couple of days if his situation didn't get worse. She'd also move him to a private room away from the Critical Care Unit.

As expected, our stay at the Drake-Frazee became an extended one. By the end of the second day we had two of the triplets' nannies sharing Bonnie's suite (and the babysitting duties).

For that first week in Seattle, Gumball and his Osprey clocked in a lot of flight time. If he wasn't shuttling Monk from Oklahoma, or Renny from Kansas, he was taking Dot and me to *Orion* for supplies and stuff.

It was during that first trip back to *Orion* that I touched bases with Jay on what happened in Miner's Bowl.

The exodus of refugees went off smoother than expected due to *Orion's* considerable assistance. People and possessions were swiftly moved into the deserted town of Albany (now renamed Zion) and the people were provided with camping gear to keep them comfortable until they could establish something a little more permanent.

The refugees aboard *Orion* were informed of where they were, how secret it was, and then were provided with quarters.

Meanwhile, things inside the valley went from strange to *really* strange. Those remaining to stay had, as we all, had witnessed the golems demolished into nothing more than busted rock. Now, all the rock outside the valley was being brought back *into* the valley.

I wondered if Archie Hazelwood had lost his mind and had hatched some mad scheme to somehow rebuild the golems. For details, I went to Lizzy.

"They're sealing up the place," she explained. "As soon as the last of our people had left the valley, they closed those heavy steel doors faster than God closed the door on the Ark. Then they took all that golem gravel and filled in the tunnels behind the doors."

"Don't they remember the flying machines that dropped in from above?" I mused. "Why would they do a dumb stunt like this?"

"That one I *can* answer," she replied as she worked the controls of her console. "For that I turn to your buddy Hazelwood; here he is, condemning us all." Then she played back a section of Archie's address to the congregation. "**They did this. They entered this valley and brought division to the body of Christ. But what if they were the ones who'd animated the golems and turned them on us in the first place?**" Gasps of surprise. "*The ones who left us could very well have been undercover agents of the government, waiting and watching.*

*"But, you might ask, how can we explain the supernatural appearance of the golems? I can't. Maybe those undercover agents somehow knocked us and moved them in. They separated the wheat from the chaff from our body, and took it from us. But now – now – all of them are gone from here. I declare them all to be **anathema** ... they are not to be remembered, even in our prayers."*

He paused. I groaned.

*"Furthermore," he continued, "it came unto me by revelation of the Holy Spirit that this was all foretold in prophesy. In Matthew chapter sixteen, our Lord Jesus Christ declared, 'Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.'" He paused for effect. "Regardless of how the golems became part of our valley, it was God who allowed it. And the rock from those golems has now been used to seal up this valley from the **immoral** world outside. Those rocks have been used to fortify our defenses, to further separate us from them, so that we can live in harmony with God. It has been bound on earth, and therefore in heaven, and it will last forever. Amen."*

He finished up by declaring a prayer and fasting vigil for everyone, "so that God would purge the filth that remains here in his holy land."

He had twisted the truth like piece of poisoned salt water taffy, its sweetness disguising the real peril.

"Thanks, Lizzy," I said. "Has there been any word on Pastor Steve?"

"No. But I'll keep you posted."

Johnny's death had generated a modest exposure in the media. Since he wasn't a superstar like Michael Jackson, coverage of his life became limited to a couple of specials shown on *Biography*, *National Geographic*, *Discovery*, *The Science Channel*, and *The History Channel*. I was pleased to find out that Karleen Bush had provided the documentaries.

As promised, Clark was moved to a private room where we set him up with a notebook computer and a cell with a Bluetooth headset. He kept in touch with Monk, who was coordinating Johnny's

memorial service. At first, Monk had been hesitant in setting a date for the service, not wanting to tax Clark unduly. But Clark was adamant: "I will be there, brother. I *have* to be there."

To that end, Clark pressed himself into physical therapy. He got one of those wheelchairs with the cambered wheels that angled outward at the base, and took to it with enthusiasm. It wasn't an unfamiliar sight to see the bronze man wheeling through the hallways of the hospital, mingling with doctors and other patients, and sharing the love and grace of Jesus Christ. He tried not to push himself, in deference to Dr. Schneider's instructions, but there were a few moments where his activity went to painful extremes.

When Bonnie wasn't involved in *Orion* business, she and the triplets were at Clark's side. The triplets were active as usual – sometimes *too* active, as demonstrated by Jason jumping on Clark's bed with him in it.

Sarah made up for her brother's raucousness by presenting Clark with a teddy bear she had named Apple. She (Sarah said it was a girl bear) was a white bear with curly fur and hearts on her feet. She also had magnets in her hands that could make it appear as though the bear was praying.

"Apple a day make doctor go 'way ... right, Daddy?" Sarah squealed.

Within the week, a story was leaked to the press:

"It was confirmed today by associates close to Clark Savage, Jr., that the evangelist/adventurer has been hospitalized due to injuries received from a mountain climbing accident. Also known as "Doc" Savage, he is reported to be in stable but improving condition in a Seattle, Washington, medical facility. He is also mourning the death of his close colleague, 'Johnny' Littlejohn, and promises to be at the memorial service later this month."

Lizzy diligently monitored events at Miner's Bowl, waiting on Pastor Steve's imminent death.

Because of the bugs I put in his bedroom prior to the golems' attack, she was able to accurately follow his progress. It wasn't good. His last twelve days were spent in excruciating pain, despite all the prayers that went out to him. Two days before he passed away, he slipped into a coma, and that's when Lizzy contacted me.

"There's a meeting going on in the parlor," she informed me. "The only ones who are there are the wives and Archie Hazelwood."

I listened in on the meeting.

"He's not going to live much longer, you know," declared Archie Hazelwood. "We have to consider what to do next and, even more, what to tell the others. In Deuteronomy 25:5, it says, 'If brethren dwell together, and one of them die, and have no child, the wife of the dead shall not marry without unto a stranger: her husband's brother shall go in unto her, and take her to him to wife, and perform the duty of an husband's brother unto her.' This arrangement is known as

Levirate marriage, and was the basis for the story of Ruth and Boaz." He paused. *"I've always considered Pastor Steve to be closer to me than a brother, and therefore I believe it is my obligation to be responsible for you, his family. That means that, when he dies, you will become my family ... you will become my wives."* The tone of his voice wasn't hiding a thing. *"It's what Pastor Steve would've wanted."*

"Proceed, Elder Hazelwood," acknowledged Ginger.

"As to what to tell the others," he paused dramatically. *"I have a plan."*

And I continued to listen.

Two days later, Pastor Steven Winter died.

Several hours later, the congregation was brought together for the announcement. There was no hint of sadness in Archie Hazelwood's voice as he spoke. *"Steven Winter came into this world as a mortal man, and he was faithful to God. Rather than allow himself to be abused by the ungodly medicine of man, he yielded himself to the tender mercies of Jesus Christ. And ..."* His voice was suddenly choked with emotion. *"... as his wives and I witnessed, God transfigured his mortal body into ... a **divine** body!"*

After the stunned reactions from the congregation, he continued to explain that the deified Pastor Steve laid his hands on his wives and they began to prophesy. *"They are not here because they are in private meditation."*

I didn't believe that for a second, and the aerial scans from Orion confirmed it. Augmented by Sebastian, we watched the three women outside the tabernacle, dragging several large burlap bags from the house to the compost pits. A quick spectroscopic analysis showed the contents to be of an organic nature, with a combined mass equal to a fully grown human male.

They were getting rid of the body.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

It was just a few days before Johnny's memorial. The breakfast dishes had just been taken away. The triplets were with me and Dot on Four. Bonnie was sitting with Clark.

Dr. Schneider came into the room; closing the door behind her. Something was up.

After exchanging greetings and pulling up a chair, she got right to the point. "Clark, I'm ordering your release. You've gone as far as you can here. As far as your condition goes, I've got to be straight with you, and I don't think you'd expect less. I'm sorry, but it'll be only by the hand of God that you'll ever be able to walk again."

There was silence for several seconds.

"I appreciate your candor, Doctor," said Clark. "And all you've done for me."

"I wish it could've been more," she smiled. "Who knows? Maybe there's technology out there, somewhere, that'll eventually allow you to walk again."

"If it's out there, we'll find it," promised Bonnie, adding a grin. "Or we'll *create* it."

"You know, I believe you will" Dr. Schneider agreed with a smile.

"When will I be able to leave?" asked Clark.

"Is lunchtime too soon?"

"No," replied Clark.

"I'll let Perry and the nannies know," informed Bonnie. "We can start packing. I'll also let Gumball know we'll need transportation."

*The Orion
Evening*

As I dropped off our luggage to our house, I had an urge to swing by Lizzy's and have one last look at Miner's Bowl before we 'left orbit'. She was glad to see me.

"It's been fun and roses down there, Perry. Ever since they put the transfiguration badge on Pastor Steve, they've been fasting and praying that God would resurrect him into a human form again. Hasn't happened yet."

"And it won't, either," I commented sadly. "We're getting ready to break orbit and move on to our next destination."

Lizzy gave me a sober look. "CSI?"

I nodded. "Yeah."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

*Clark Savage Institute
Morning*

I stepped into the covered stadium from one of the lesser-used accesses, and looked around.

As expected, it was already filling up. Had been for the last couple of hours. But this wasn't the usual rowdy crowd here to see the *Savage Warriors* play.

They were all here to say goodbye to Johnny.

I didn't need a backstage pass to get past Security; I was a familiar face. Still, I flashed it to them as I headed up to the control booth high above the action.

From here, I could see it all. Towards one end of the stadium was a stage platform. A giant video screen had been erected behind it. Four men were placing more and more flowers on and around the platform; it was quite an impressive sight. Folding chairs had been set up in neat rows radiating out from the platform; I could see the group of seats where Dot and I would be sitting, near the front on the floor level. The platform had been reserved for the ones who would be speaking.

In the control center, Rachel Kelly, directing her team of techs, was more focused than I'd ever seen her. I was certain that she would pull this off without a hitch or die in the attempt.

She glanced in my direction and we exchanged quick greetings.

"Okay, everybody," she addressed her group. "Let's bring in the weebos."

It was impossible to see them from this high up, but I knew exactly what she was talking about. The weebos were small aerial drones capable of extraordinary maneuverability, as well as being able to transmit audio and visual. They'd been introduced last year during the football season, and were quite popular with the fans. When they were on the field, it felt like you were right there in the midst of things. And, despite the single incident when one accidentally intercepted a forward pass, their record was spotless.

I could understand why Rachel wanted to bring them into play early on: most of us were used to the little critters, but strangers might freak out if a flying silver softball suddenly headed towards them – especially if they'd ever seen the movie *Phantasm*. I grimaced as I remembered my first sneak attack; I nearly had an accident when one of them suddenly swooped in and stopped a foot from my nose. Fortunately, it wasn't a public humiliation, but the guys had a good laugh at my expense.

I got over it.

On the wall before them, monitors were busy showing the perspectives of the flying cameras; it made me dizzy to look at them all. Rachel maneuvered one of the weebos towards the stage platform; she got the attention of one of the men arranging flowers. She redirected his image to her central console.

"Ben?"

The man with the flowers saw the floating camera. "*Hey, Rachel,*" he addressed her as if seeing her face-to-face.

"How's about giving me a mike check, Ben?"

"*Sure.*" He faced the weebo's camera and casually counted to ten. Several people in the audience heard him and gave a thumbs-up in response. Rachel moved the weebo slowly around him, and we got a smooth 360 view of him.

"That's got it, Ben," announced Rachel. "Thanks!"

"*Anytime,*" he acknowledged casually, and turned back to the flowers.

Things looked like they were well in hand. "See you later, Rachel," I said.

"Later, Perry," she acknowledged without looking up.

I left the command booth.

The services started at 10am.

Dot and I sat in the front row before the stage platform. On the platform sat Clark, Monk, Renny, Pat, and Dean of Students Ottey; they were conversing quietly. A ramp had been built around the platform to allow Clark's wheelchair to access it.

The lights had lowered a little, and soft instrumental music drifted in from hundreds of compact speakers scattered about the stadium. On the large screen behind the platform, one picture transitioned into another, showing highlights of Johnny's life.

I recognized one in particular: Johnny and actor Harrison Ford on the set of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, facing the camera and smiling. Monk had told us that Steven Spielberg had used Johnny as the model for adventurer/archeologist Indiana Jones. Clark had even disclosed to me that Johnny had *actually* found the Ark of the Covenant, although he hadn't known *where* it had ended up.

To my left, a few seats over, was Elena. She was flanked by Sunni and Dot, with Bonnie nearby; the Honduran woman was in good hands. On my other side were Kathleen and Bartholomew Olsen; they were the ones Johnny had rescued on that fateful night. Kathleen was a Physics teacher, and Bart was her grandfather. He was in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease, and had admitted to getting up in the middle of the night to fix himself a snack. That night, during his midnight meal, he'd somehow started a fire in the kitchen. The smoke alarm's squeal woke Kathleen, and she discovered her grandfather lying unconscious on the kitchen floor, the arms of his robe afire. She quickly put him out, and was trying to get them both out when she succumbed to the smoke.

It was right after that that Johnny arrived.

Bart's arms were bandaged, and his expression was vacant; Kathleen held his hand and frequently glanced over to his face.

Clark had pulled a couple of strings and had arranged for NYPD Crime Lab Detective Mac Taylor to take charge of Johnny's autopsy. Taylor reported the cause of death as cardiac arrest aggravated by the smoke of the fire. "Considering Johnny's advanced age," he confided to us when he turned the body over to the funeral parlor, "and the facts that he had carried two people out of the house *and* was going back in for more, it's a miracle he lasted as long as he did."

My attention turned to the platform as Clark's wheelchair approached the podium. It was his first real 'public' appearance since the accident, and he was determined not to let the chair become the center of attention. He was dressed in a pearl white suit as he smoothly rolled into the speaker's area. A podium had been originally intended, but was removed at the last minute by mutual consensus of the speakers. Now, the two weebos that gracefully flanked Clark at a respectable image transmitted his image and words to the screens all about the stadium, and over the internet.

The crowd hushed.

"Good morning," he started. "And thank you all for coming. We are gathered here to celebrate the life of a man I was honored to call my friend: William Harper Littlejohn – 'Johnny' to those who knew him. If he were here right now ... he'd probably say something we'd need a dictionary to translate."

His comment brought scattered laughter throughout the stadium.

Clark smiled. "That was just the man Johnny was.

"Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." That's what Johnny did – he gave his life in order that others might live."

Clark then talked of Johnny's life, beginning with his childhood, where he was born and raised. Then he moved on to how the two of them had met, in the infamous German POW camp known as *Loki*, and his career as an archaeologist. He spoke with great emotion about the adventures they had together, and the little details of his life that both irritated and secretly touched him.

"I could say more," he finished, "but there are others here who have things to share. After they speak, we'll open up the microphones."

Clark's tribute was followed by Monk's, then Renny's, then Pat's.

Then Dean Ottey stepped up to the podium.

"This is a sad occasion for me," he began. "As a person, I've lost a dear friend and colleague."

He paused for a moment, while a soft smile crossed his face.

"And, as the dean of this Institute," he continued, "I'm slowly beginning to realize that I'm going to have to get used to dealing with a new department head. Very few individuals now living possess the depth of knowledge in both geology and archaeology that Johnny brought to this school. Fortunately, Johnny was wise enough to have his own chosen replacement waiting in the wings."

Dean Ottey turned slightly and gave a nod and a brief smile to Elena Inez Garcia de Ybarra. A soft chuckle flitted across the seated crowd as the dean drew a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed at the corners of his eyes.

"And now," he sighed, "I'd like to take a few moments to remember a friend.

"I remember the first time I met Professor Littlejohn. Clark had made the overtures to him, with regard to the position here, and he had accepted the offer with – as his letter put it, 'a singular degree of alacrity'. I realized two things, at that moment. The first was what a spectacular coup the Institute had pulled off, in gaining a world-class instructor. The second was that I was going to have to visit the college bookstore and invest in one of those little pocket dictionaries."

He paused, while the audience chuckled. Johnny's penchant for never using small, simple words when there was a larger and more complex one available was well known and much beloved among students and faculty alike.

"And then came the morning when I actually first met him," the dean continued. "He arrived promptly at nine in the morning, and was ushered into my office. I was expecting him to look the part of the typical elderly college professor. Instead, I was confronted by a man clad in a khaki work-shirt and trousers, and sporting a well-worn leather jacket and a five-inch, pinch-crown fedora. You can imagine the thoughts that sped through my mind in those first moments."

Again he paused to allow the audience a moment to chuckle.

"If you were paying attention to the montage of images being displayed on the screen before this service began, you might have noted a few photos of Johnny taken with some well-known individuals ..."

The big screen came to life again, displaying a pair of images: Johnny, with George Lucas and Steven Spielberg, and another, in which the professor stood next to Harrison Ford.

"I received a telegram, this morning. It reads," he shuffled a few sheets of paper on the lectern, "Please accept our sincerest sympathies and condolences on the passing of Professor Littlejohn. He was a delightful friend during our short time together, and far more an inspiration to us than you may realize. Indiana Jones would not exist, without him.' The telegram is signed, Steven Spielberg and George Lucas."

At this, he was forced to pause for several moments by a sudden and unexpected applause as the depth of that revelation sifted through the audience. When that eventually quieted, he continued.

"During our years of service together on the faculty, I heard more than a few rumors about Johnny's life over the years. If even a small percentage of those rumors are true, then our late professor lived a truly wonderful life, filled with adventures that would no doubt give even the intrepid Doctor Jones some degree of pause. Eventually, I worked up the courage to ask Johnny if anything of what I've heard was true. He nodded, and he actually blushed, and then I asked him if he – as many men of his stature do – would be preparing a set of memoirs.

"His answer surprised me, utterly. He noted that certain of his adventures were still under some sort of 'official secrets' confidentiality, and thus he couldn't speak or write of them. As for the rest, he felt that they weren't really worth writing a book about, and then he turned to walk away. I pressed him on the issue, and he turned to me and said, 'Out of all the things I ever discovered, the only one that has any degree of importance is my discovery that Jesus Christ died for me, as the propitiation for my sins.'

"Again, he turned to walk away, and I followed after him. 'But Johnny,' I pleaded, "The things you've seen, the discoveries you've made – if even a tenth of the things I've heard about your travels are true, then your life rivals that of Howard Carter, or William Flinders-Petrie, or Heinrich Schliemann. They wrote their own books, and others have written books about them! Surely, your life deserves equal treatment!"

"'I'm getting a little long in the tooth, to be sitting down and writing my autobiography,' he chuckled. 'I've already made arrangements to have my notebooks – the ones that aren't classified – donated to the Institute's library, when I'm gone. As for someone wanting to write a book about me? They're welcome to do so, if that's what they really want to do. For my part, the only thing I really care about is the fact that my name is written down in The Lamb's Book of Life.'

"That was the heart of our beloved brother and professor," Dean Ottey smiled. "And now he is gone, and we mourn his passing and celebrate his life among us, certain that the day will eventually come, on which we will be reunited with him and all the others who have gone on before us. Johnny spent much of his life uncovering tombs and sifting through the dust of history. Now he's gone, and we will lay his body in a tomb, of sorts, where it will *become* part of the dust of history. Genesis 3:19 tells us that this is so, and – in Johnny's case, it is more than fitting."

Dean Ottey paused at this juncture, his eyes briefly focusing on something at the rear of the auditorium for a moment. He nodded briefly, holding up a single index finger, and then cleared his throat.

"I could say so much more, about our friend, brother, and colleague," he told the students and faculty. "So could everyone else on this dais, and you'll hear from some more of them, shortly. There is one person, though, who couldn't be present with us today, who has asked to say a few words ..."

He nodded at one of the weebos and the lights dimmed as the big projection screen flashed into life. It showed a stretch of tropical jungle at first, and then the camera panned slowly to the right, coming to rest on the Kukulcan Pyramid at Chichen-Itza, in Mexico. A man entered the frame from the right, clad in a khaki work-shirt, leather jacket, and fedora.

"This is Harrison Ford," the image spoke. "I would have liked to be there with you, today, but you can probably see that I'm on location, at the moment. And I guess that I'm letting the cat out of the bag, that there will be another Indiana Jones movie. Unfortunately, we only have a couple days here, during which the Mexican government has agreed to close the area to tourists so that we can get our location shooting done, and I couldn't break away to join you.

"I envy those of you who had so much more time than I, to spend with Johnny. Even more, I envy those of you who were his close friends. I first got to know him when he arrived on the set of 'Raiders' as the chief technical advisor and Steven and George introduced him to me as the man after whom the character of Indiana Jones was modeled. In the brief time allotted us, I came to genuinely admire his knowledge and the easy way he had of imparting it to those around him. I just wanted to tell you how grateful I am that I had the chance to know your professor. I also want to tell you that these films I've done would not be the success they were, except for his assistance and coaching behind the scenes. If there is any justice at all, in this universe, history will remember him as well as he remembered history. Johnny, *vaya con Dios, amigo!*"

The screen faded to black and, slowly, the lights came up. Dean Ottey walked back to the seats.

Clark opened up the microphones to the audience. Things went smoothly, as Rachel masterfully guided the weebos around the stadium, respectfully positioning themselves before individuals, and projecting their sentiments on the great screen up front. I wanted to say something, share some of my stories, but I couldn't; most of what I had to say was confidential, anyway.

The sharing went on for close to a full hour, and Clark closed things up with an altar call.

"*In my father's house are many mansions,*" he started off, using the same quote I used at the funeral for Long Tom; it brought a tear to my eye. "*if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.*" Then Clark shared how Johnny came to accept Jesus Christ. "It's just that easy, as many of you know. It's just a matter of saying 'yes' to

Jesus Christ. Let Him into your heart. Let him do things with your life that you can never imagine – I can personally vouch for that. You can do this privately, or publicly. If you want to talk to someone about it, just look around you. Or you can talk to me, if you wish." He paused. "All it takes is a decision."

Several hands went up; attendants moved in to respond.

A few minutes later, Clark announced, "This concludes our services. Thank you again for coming."

CHAPTER TWENTY

Orion

One week after the memorial

There was one last matter we needed to take care of.

We felt that it was better to gather together aboard the *Orion* rather than in Douglas Martin's offices. We sat around a large oval table in one of the conference rooms. Despite the fact that we knew Johnny was with Jesus, and that we'd made our formal farewells, the atmosphere was still somber.

"Let us begin," started Douglas Martin, his voice taking on an official tone. "This is the reading of the Last Will and Testament of William Harper Littlejohn. I have the entire document here, but Johnny chose to record his own message." He lifted a remote control and pointed it at a wall screen. Johnny's image appeared; he was sitting in a high-backed leather chair, smiling out at us.

"Hello, my friends. If you are watching this, then I am no longer with you. I will not ask you not to weep for me, for that is the nature of man. But do not mourn over me for long." His eyes took on a mischievous glint. "There's a sentiment I learned of not long ago, that definitely applies here. All of us who live in Christ never really die – we just change neighborhoods. And in this new neighborhood, Ham and Long Tom have already gone before me, as has Queen Monja. So I'm sure they'll be there to welcome me, and we'll have much to talk about. And we'll be here when the rest of you join us.

"As to who gets what of my personal property: I know it doesn't really matter, but I officially grant you permission to go through the stuff in my cottage and office, and select those things of mine – that don't belong to the Institute, of course – that remind you most of me." He pointed out from the screen. "Monk and Renny, are you listening? This does *not* give you permission to auction the rest of it off on the internet!"

We all broke into laughter as Renny and Monk looked at each other with surprised expressions.

"In all seriousness, however," Johnny continued, "I know there are some things in my possession that are best kept in a museum where they can be admired by the world, while there are others that can best be categorized as *junk*. Douglas has my recommendations for the museum items. As for the junk? I'll leave that up to you.

"Gumball and Amy. You have honored me by making me Godfather to your firstborn son, Thomas Harper. I have, therefore, arranged for a trust fund that will cover his education *completely* as far as he chooses, in the hope that he will strive for greatness."

Gumball and Amy gasped at the magnanimous gift.

"Elena, my protégé. You've *far* exceeded my expectations of you, and I'm proud of you. Although I cannot guarantee your position with CSI, I have given my personal recommendation that you continue in my stead for as long as you wish." He paused. "In conjunction with this, Doc, I believe you're now short an archaeologist on the team. Can't have that, can we? Elena's proved herself capable to not only follow in my footsteps, but even surpass this old curmudgeon. She'll do you right."

Doc looked over at Elena. "I'd be proud to have you on board, Elena."

Elena opened her mouth to reply, but no sound came out.

"Doc and Bonnie," Johnny continued, and our attention shifted back to the screen. "You've brought three wonderful children into this world. And I think it's safe to say that you will have more. Should you have another *boy* ...," he got that mischievous glint in his eyes again, "... well, *Johnny* wouldn't be a half-bad name, wouldn't you think?"

I glanced over, and saw Clark and Bonnie's hands come together. And beyond Clark's face of flint, I saw his eyes misting over with tears.

"Perry," he spoke my name; I stared at the screen in surprise and anticipation. "If it hadn't been for you and your dedication to Jesus Christ, I daresay none of us would be where we are today. Thank you."

I heard 'amens' around me, and felt Dot's hand on my own. My own eyes started misting over.

"One final thing." An off-camera arm handed him a bottle of wine. He cradled it in his hands and looked at it. "This is a bottle of 1918 *Dom Perignon*. You recognize the significance of that year, don't you?"

"Loki," answered Monk softly.

"Shortly after we were returned to our respective units," he continued, "this bottle came into my possession. And, despite the many celebratory opportunities that have crossed my path, it's never been opened – until now." As we watched, he opened the bottle, sniffed the cork appreciatively, then poured an inch or so into a crystal glass. He held the glass near his nose and let the liquid swirl about as he breathed in the aroma. "And since it would be unlike me to keep this fine wine all to myself, I have chosen to share it with all of you. Douglas?"

The lawyer froze the picture. Then he produced a couple of trays containing crystal glasses identical to Johnny's, each filled to the same level as his. He handed the bottle – the same one from the video – to Clark, who looked it over appreciatively. Once we all had a glass, Martin continued the video.

"Thank you, Douglas," addressed Johnny. "I thought it would be proper to finish this video with one last toast together." He raised his glass, and we all followed. "*Here's to what could have*

been. Here's to what was. And here's to what will come." He brought it to his lips and took a sip. We all did the same.

For a brief moment – in that single moment, in that same place – we were all together.

"If you would allow me, I would like to conclude with a blessing from an eighteenth-century Egyptian dynasty." Johnny raised his glass one last time and said, "*God be between you and harm in all the empty places you walk.*" Good bye, my family."

Then he smiled at the camera, and the video ended.

"Goodbye, Johnny," whispered Renny.

EPILOGUE

*Miner's Bowl
Sometime later*

"Archie."

The man in the bed stirred. I repeated his name. He finally opened his eyes.

He saw nothing, of course.

"Archie."

"Who's there?" he asked softly.

And I appeared. The bioluminescent fabric of my flight suit gave me an eerie glow in the dark room.

"*Liston?*" Archie Hazelwood exclaimed as he recognized me.

"Good evening, Archie," I said cordially. "Would you like to go outside to talk?"

He looked over at the woman sleeping peacefully beside him – young Paula Winter – then at me. He slowly eased himself out of bed, and I couldn't help notice that both of them had been sleeping *au natural*. It gave me a sick feeling, especially when Archie didn't offer any apology as he reached for a robe. With him boldly walking ahead of me, we went outside. From what I knew, I really wasn't surprised that he had taken over Pastor Steve's house.

As soon as we got outside the door, he spun on me and reached out to grab me.

I wasn't there to grab. But something gripped his hand and bent it back, driving him down to his knees. He grimaced and muttered something obscene.

"You just don't learn, do you, Archie," my disembodied voice said. "If you'll behave, I won't do like I did the last time we tussled. Do you understand?"

"Yeah," he grunted. "Now let go."

I released him, and reappeared before him.

"How the hell did you do that?"

"I'm not here for that, Archie. I'm here to warn you."

"Warn me from what?"

"I know all about what you have done. You allowed Pastor Steve to die and lied to all these people about it. And while your ... accomplices ... were taking his remains to the compost pits, you told these people he'd become a god. And don't get me started about how you've conspired with his widows to make them your own concubines." I paused as I saw the look of incredulity on the other man's face. "You have sinned, Archie. And if you don't repent and make it good for everyone you will die in your sins."

"What gives you the right to judge me, Liston?" he shot back.

"Galatians 6:1: *'Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.'* And since there are so few people who aren't scared of you and who know the truth, it was up to me." I paused, and my voice softened. "Please, Archie ... do the right thing."

I looked at Archie Hazelwood. Neither of us spoke. His expression said nothing, and I would've given anything to read his mind.

All I could do is pray.

THE END

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Barry O., Karen M., Jenny A.: You and so many more have faced the cancer monster, and have overcome it. My heart has gone out to you in your struggles, I've supported you with prayer and encouraging words, and I've rejoiced in your victories.

A special dedication to writer Philip José Farmer, who passed away in his sleep on February 25, 2009. You made *Tarzan Alive*, and shared *Doc Savage's Apocalyptic Life*. Without your insight and influence, there would've been no Bronze Saga. You will be missed.

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