



# Shining Steel

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## Chapter One

*“He saith among the trumpets, Ha ha; and he smelleth the battle afar off, the thunder of the captains, and the shouting.”—Job 39:25*

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The brass casings gleamed golden in the firelight as he picked up the first bullet. He handed it to a waiting warrior and solemnly spoke the ancient and meaningless ritual phrase, “*Mekkit kant!*”

The warrior accepted it with equal solemnity, then stepped back to make room for the next.

The ten bullets were distributed to ten men, and each of the chosen carefully slid the precious cartridge into his rifle. When all had done so, they settled comfortably on the ground to await the order to attack. Some cast occasional glances at the eastern horizon.

Around them their less fortunate comrades, those who had not been chosen to carry firearms in the coming battle, covered the hillside. Many of them, as they polished swords and knives, also looked to the east.

“Won’t do no darn good watching the sunrise,” said the man who had passed out the ammunition. “We go on Captain John’s word, not before.”

“He told us we’d attack at dawn, same as always,” one of the riflemen replied.

“We probably will, then,” said the first, “but it’s at his word.”

The other shrugged and looked to the east. The sky was blue now, no longer black, and the first warm hints of pink were beginning to show. Whatever the signal, he told himself, it would not be long in coming. He cradled his rifle in his arms and looked down the slope at the waiting horses.

The tent-flaps behind him parted and the commander stepped out, already dressed in his riding leathers, his sword on his hip and his helmet on his head.

"All right, boys," he called. "Get your horses. We're riding out now. Got your bullets, riflemen? Habakkuk?"

"All set, John," answered the man who had distributed the cartridges. The ten chosen recipients nodded confirmation.

"Good; don't waste them. We want this village as a base; this isn't just a raid for the fun of it. Shoot to kill, and use your swords, not your lungs. We mean business, we aren't just out to scare them."

There was a muttered chorus of assent.

"Well, don't just stand there, then; get the horses!" The commander waved, and the men hurried down to their waiting mounts.

The commander's own horse was led up the slope by a young aide; it was beneath the dignity of the captain's office to fetch the beast for himself. That, at any rate, was what the Elders insisted, and that was why John forced himself to wait while the boy cajoled the reluctant animal. He would have preferred fetching his own horse, as the other warriors did, but that went against custom—and custom was very important, as no one could say for sure, in these benighted latter days when so many had fallen away from the True Faith, what was mere habit and what was the One Way.

Hiding his impatience, John waited.

The instant the animal was within reach he snatched the reins from the boy and swung himself into the saddle. A glance around assured him that at least half his men were astride; that was enough for the next step. The others could mount during the invocation or catch up later. This hurry would keep them on their toes; he could not allow anyone to get soft.

"Douse the fire," he ordered the boy, "and break camp. After today we'll either be in the village or we'll be dead." That said, he turned toward his waiting men and shouted, "Hear us, O Lord!"

The warriors watched expectantly.

"O Lord, it's me, John Mercy-of-Christ, who You've made the Armed Guardian of the True Word and Flesh, and I'm speaking for all these men here. We're about to go into battle, Lord, to fight against people who have left the true path, the way of the True Word and Flesh. We're fighting for You, Lord, to bring Your truth to those who have spurned it, and we ask that You bless this task, and these men who attempt it. And if any of us fall today, Lord, we know that You've got a special warm welcome waiting and an honored place in Heaven for us, because we're doing Your work. Amen."

"Amen," his men replied.

Satisfied, John took a final look at his advance unit of cavalry, more than a hundred strong, then turned and spurred his mount up the slope. "To battle," he bellowed. "In the Name of the Lord!"

"In the Name of the Lord!" his men shouted back. In a great rushing mob they stampeded up and over the crest of the hill.

John had not been foolish enough to make camp right atop his target, where any idiot chasing a lost pup might find it. Beyond the hill lay a short stretch of broken country, not fit for farming or much of anything else, consisting largely of gray stone speckled with scraggly red mosses. A mile or so to the northeast,

beyond this worthless expanse of rock, a long grassy slope led down to the marshes that edged the Little New Jordan. At the foot of that slope, nestled against the marsh, stood the village he intended to make his supply base and reserve headquarters for the coming campaign.

The village was not actually in enemy hands, so far as he knew; its people were neutral in the current conflict. He was not overly concerned by that, save that it meant the defenses might be weak. He knew nothing about the inhabitants of the town, not even their name for the place, and cared just as little; all that mattered was that they were in a convenient location and that the survivors would presumably make decent slave labor until the Elders could convert them. After all, they were heretics. If they had not been, they would have joined with his own people, the People of the True Word and Flesh, long ago. That went without saying.

The initial enthusiasm of the first riotous charge up the slope faded quickly in the intervening rough. John had expected that, and even planned it. This would provide him with an opportunity to gather his men into some sort of order, rather than letting them gallop down in threes and fours, wasting their numbers.

“Keep together!” he bellowed. “Bring it in, keep it tight!”

Those nearest him heard and obeyed; some of those further out, seeing the inward movement, copied it.

“Keep together! Pass the order on! We strike as a single group!”

The order was passed; reluctantly, the hotheads in the lead dropped back to join the main body, while the stragglers strained to catch up. The central group was moving at a steady trot, the best pace that the dim light and broken land safely allowed.

The glow in the east had spread across half the sky, and the edge of the sun's disc was beginning to show as a bloody red line on the horizon when the leading edge of the mass of horsemen reached the grassy slope.

“Hold up!” the commander bellowed. “Hold up! No one goes until I give the word! This isn't a raid!”

A few horses were already on the slope, but their riders reined in and turned them back. It took several minutes for the whole company to gather along the brink; by the time John was satisfied that all were ready the sun was showing a half-oval.

When he was certain that all his men and horses were where he wanted them to be, and all facing in the right direction, he glanced down at the village. There was no wall or stockade; small villages off the trade routes were usually not bothered.

Despite the noise his men had made, and the delay until nearly full daylight, he saw no sign of movement below, no sign that anyone suspected he and his soldiers were nearby. No one was working in the narrow grainfields squeezed in between the hillside and the marsh. It was utterly still, and he wondered if the inhabitants might have fled.

He drew his sword, the steel shining red in the early light.

“In the Name of the Lord!” he cried, and spurred his horse down the slope.

The first charge had been mere showmanship, to get the blood stirring and to fire up his men. This was the real thing, and he drummed his barbed heels on the horse's flanks, urging it to its fastest gallop. He raised his head briefly to call a final command, “Fire at will!”

Almost immediately he heard the report of a rifle, small and distant over the rush of wind around his

speeding mount. Despite all warnings and imprecations, there was always at least one impatient idiot who wasted his bullet.

A moment later the foremost, John among them, were riding past the edge of the village, their steeds easily leaping the surrounding ditch and charging down the streets that ran between the neat rows of stone and nearwood houses. John glimpsed faces in windows, saw doors open and close as he galloped past; the town was not empty. He looked for a foeman to strike.

A second rifle shot sounded, then two together, and he heard a woman scream somewhere nearby. Something crashed loudly to the ground, startling him; his horse broke stride and slowed, jerking him about in the saddle.

Then a new sound, a strange, heavy, threatening sound like nothing he had ever heard before, drowned out everything but the pounding of hooves. The sound was something like hoofbeats, but far louder and more even. It reminded John slightly of an ancient steam engine he had once heard run.

He judged it to be coming from somewhere behind him and to his left. He yanked hard at the reins, struggling to turn his mount in the narrow street.

Men were screaming—men and horses, and he had seen no trace of horses in the village. Now the street around him was jammed with milling horses as his soldiers, like himself, tried to locate and identify the strange new sound.

The thunder of the charge was gone. Instead of a steady roar of hoofbeats he heard the frightened cries of wounded animals and the hoarse shouts of men, and that constant rhythmic hammering. He thought he heard his name being called, but could not be certain over the din.

He had hoped to avoid any serious losses in attacking such a small and lightly-defended village; he had expected a quick surrender. It was plain that something was ruining his plans, and that if he did not regain control of events quickly the attack might turn into a disaster. Custom called for prayer at such a moment, but he did not feel that he could spare the time for that. He stood up in the stirrups, straining to see what was happening.

The lower part of the hillside was littered with downed horses and riders, some apparently dead, others still moving. Some horses, their saddles empty, were scattering and fleeing; a few of his men were fleeing after them. He could see no sign of what had wrought such carnage, unless it was the faint wisp of blue smoke that rose from a house at the edge of the village, the last house on the street where he rode, built close on the edge of the ditch.

Most of his warriors were still alive and ready to fight, but had become confused and frightened by the strange noise and the breaking of the charge. The noise continued unabated, but whatever had spread death across the slope had caught only the rearmost portion of the company. The rest were now riding up and down the village streets, uncertain what to do. The enemy had not emerged to defend the town in the usual way, as John and his men had expected. Ordinarily, when the defenders remained hidden, the attackers would have dismounted and formed squads, then gone from house to house, taking prisoners, killing anyone who resisted, and raping and looting as they went. After seeing their comrades strewn dead and wounded across the hillside, however, no one was eager to dismount and reduce his chances of fleeing safely from whatever had cut those men down.

No one who had reached the village had fallen. All the dead and wounded lay on the slope, well away from the houses. The hammering noise continued, and John saw puffs of dust spewing up from the hillside, a puff with each beat, as if bullets were tearing up the turf. Startled, he realized what the noise was, and what had torn up his cavalry; old stories and childhood history lessons came back to him in a

rush.

“Machine gun!” he called. “It’s a machine gun! Stay clear!”

The old stories had told him about machine guns, tanks, and aircraft, about bombs and artillery and computers, and a dozen other lost secrets of warfare, all left behind on Old Earth. They had not, however, told him how to deal with such weapons.

He saw bullets ripping through downed men and horses, finishing off any that might still have been alive, and realized that the gunner was wasting an incredible amount of ammunition by keeping up the steady stream of fire. The man was a fool; if he ceased firing, he might lure more targets—John’s men—back into range.

As if someone had heard his thoughts, the hammering abruptly stopped.

A good sniper should be able to pick the gunner off, John theorized, but some of his riflemen had fired their single bullets, and others were probably lying dead on the hillside. If any remained, John was not able to spot them.

Furthermore, he was not able to see the machine-gunner, either.

A rifle cracked nearby; he ducked instinctively and spurred his mount forward as one of his men cried out in pain. That reminded him very effectively that the machine-gunner was not the only man defending the village, nor even the only one with a gun and ammunition.

Ordinary weapons his men could handle, but someone had to stop the machine gun before the attackers could rally.

Or did he? After all, the gun was no longer firing. It might be out of ammunition. Even if it were not, it had not been turned against anyone who had reached the shelter of the village streets. Wherever the gun was concealed, its field of fire was apparently limited to the slope above the town.

As he came to that conclusion, however, he saw a window in the second story of the house at the end of the street explode outward in a shower of shattered glass, smashed from inside. One of his own warriors raised his rifle and fired, wasting his lone bullet and, so far as John could see, hitting nothing but the rafters of the house.

A dull metal snout, large and awkward and not quite like that of a rifle in shape, thrust out through the shattered window, trailing blue smoke and pointing down toward the street. That, surely, was the machine gun.

“Look out!” John cried. He was already moving, guiding his horse close to the house.

The gun fired a short burst, perhaps half a dozen rounds, and two warriors fell from their saddles while the rest scattered. The street cleared with amazing speed, leaving only John in the neighborhood of the terrifying weapon.

John, looking at the gun projecting from the window, guessed that it could not be tipped down very far. A gun like that, he was certain, would have too powerful a recoil to be hand-held. It would need to be braced somehow, and in that case it could not be brought forward and held vertically out the window. That meant that if he hugged the wall of the house, right under the window, he could not be shot—at least, not with the machine gun. He was already fairly close; he urged his horse forward and even closer, huddling directly beneath the muzzle of the gun.

A man leaned out and started to look down the street for new targets; John's sword swept up and hacked a red line across his throat. The angle was wrong to get any real power behind the blow; John doubted that the wound would be fatal even if left untended. Still, the man made a wordless noise of pain and surprise and fell back out of sight. Inspired by this minor success—the first blood he had drawn so far—John gripped the hilt of his sword in both hands and brought it chopping forward against the protruding gun-barrel. Metal rang loudly and the machine gun tottered back, aiming at empty sky but not visibly damaged.

Someone out of sight within tried to straighten it, and John chopped at it again, twisting it over against the windowframe. He thought wryly that he would need a new sword after this; the edge would be ruined beyond recovery by such misuse.

“Ho, the True Word!” he called.

“Aye,” a few voices responded; not all his men had fled beyond earshot.

“This house, last on the street,” he bellowed. “Take this and you take the machine gun! I’ll keep them from firing; you get inside and take the house!”

As if to disprove him, the gunner stopped trying to bring the gun to bear on anything, and instead fired a few rounds. They sprayed harmlessly across the rooftop opposite.

John laughed as he pressed his sword with both hands, forcing the gun aside. “Waste your bullets, heretic!” he called. “I don’t mind!”

His horse shifted under him; he risked a glance back and saw that four of his men had heeded his call and were clustered at the door of the house, led by his lieutenant, Habakkuk Doomed-to-Die.

When he turned his eyes back toward the upper floor a man's sword-arm was reaching out the broken window, preparing to slash at John's wrists. He parried, releasing the barrel of the machine gun; while the swordsman was blocking the opening the gunner would be unable to fire effectively in any case.

Fighting around the corner formed by the windowsill was awkward, but John had by far the better of it. In order to reach out far enough to strike at him or keep his blade away from the barrel of the gun the other swordsman had to put at least a hand out the window, giving John a good target, while John could remain safely out of sight below the sill and still interfere with the use of the gun.

“Damn you, pagan!” a voice shouted from inside the house.

Behind him, John's men kicked in the door of the house and ran inside. A gunshot sounded, followed by a short scream and much shouting.

The swordsman above locked blades with John, forcing both swords back against one side of the window, and John realized that he meant to snap the blade. He pulled his weapon clear, barely keeping his balance in the saddle.

“They’re inside,” someone called within the house. “Turn the gun around!”

Desperately, John slashed at the gun-barrel again, and the blade of his sword rang loudly as it struck. That did not prevent the gunner from pulling the weapon back out of sight.

“Captain!” a voice called.

John turned and saw Habakkuk standing in the doorway.

“John, we can't get up the stairs. There are five or six of them up there. We're going to burn them out.”

John glanced back at the window. Neither the swordsman nor the machine gun barrel was visible. He would have preferred to have captured the gun intact, but that appeared to be impossible.

“All right,” he said, “but try to keep it from spreading. I want this town as a base, not a ruin. If you can take anybody alive, take them, and don't hurt them more than you have to. I want to know where they got that thing. And once the gun's out of the way, go house-to-house; take all the prisoners you can, burn out anyone who gives you trouble, but keep enough standing for us to use.”

“Aye, Captain.” Habakkuk raised his right hand in salute, then vanished back through the doorway.

John watched the window, sword ready, but saw no further activity there. A moment later the smell of smoke reached his nostrils, and shortly after that his men came spilling out the doorway, coughing, swords bare in their hands. One blade was spattered with red, and only three men emerged where four had gone in.

He turned his horse, keeping one eye on the window. He heard renewed shouting inside as the defenders struggled to put out the fire. No sign of life showed at the window.

A few moments later the first two staggered out the door, choking and gasping. John's men were waiting, swords drawn; the villagers threw down their weapons and surrendered, to no one's surprise. This was not the first time John had seen smoke take the fight out of men.

A third villager emerged and was taken, but after him came a long moment of near-silence. The smoke pouring from the door grew thicker, and thin streamers began to leak from the upper story.

Finally, a fourth defender dashed out, sword ready, and not willing to give in easily. Two warriors pursued him, leaving John astride and Habakkuk afoot to watch the door and guard the three prisoners.

John shifted his grip on his sword; he was certain that the fleeing enemy was a diversion.

Sure enough, a few seconds later another man emerged. He swung immediately to the side and engaged Habakkuk, while behind him a sixth villager appeared, lugging a long, heavy metal thing. John spurred his horse and clouted this last man with his sword. The villager managed to duck at the last instant, but the blade gouged his scalp and he fell, dropping his burden—the machine gun, John was certain. One end was identical with the barrel that had protruded from the window; though the rest of the mechanism bore little resemblance to an ordinary gun or rifle, John had no doubt what it was.

Flames were licking at the doorframe; the defenders had waited until the last possible minute before making their break. John was sure that any who might remain within the house were doomed.

The three who had surrendered, upon seeing their comrades putting up a fight, attempted to join in, grabbing at Habakkuk from behind; John urged his mount forward again, trampling over the downed gunbearer to get at them, his sword flashing in the sun.

More of John's warriors, hearing the combat and seeing the smoke, were emerging from wherever they had fled, and in moments three of the six villagers were dead, another seriously wounded, and the remaining two captive. A horse's hoof had caved in the gunbearer's skull, and John saw, to his disgust, that the machine gun had been broken open somehow in the melee, scattering small bits of metal in the street.

“The machine gun is ours!” Habakkuk cried, and more of the invading cavalry reappeared. “Take the village, house by house!”

John did not bother to confirm the order; the men were obeying without his command. He stared down at the scattered fragments with regret. He had no mechanics with him. If the gun could be repaired at all, it could not be done here. Even the belt of ammunition, spilling from a box at one side, was of no immediate use; he could tell at a glance that the shells were far too large to fit the rifles his men carried. Eventually, of course, the gunpowder could be salvaged and used in ordinary cartridges—in fact, the ammunition belt probably contained a fortune in gunpowder. Perhaps a gun could be improvised that could use the shells.

A woman's scream distracted him; he looked up to see three of his men dragging her from her house, her skirts already torn away and blood running from a cut on her head.

“Keep them alive!” he shouted, “Take prisoners! I'll flog any man who kills an unarmed villager!”

One of the three men grinned at him and signalled an acknowledgement. “Yes, sir, Captain,” he called. “We won't kill her, we'll just pass her on!”

“You do that,” John replied. He glanced down at the pieces of the gun. “We need to know where they got this thing.” He grimaced with distaste. A machine gun—obviously valuable, perhaps an irreplaceable historical relic, maybe brought on one of the founding ships all the way from Earth itself, and now broken.

He cared more for its value as an artifact than as a weapon; this gun was a piece of Godsworld's history. As dangerous a weapon as it might be it was not to his liking, killing indiscriminately at a distance. He preferred more personal weapons. He wiped the blood from his sword, holding it up so that the blade gleamed bright in the sun.

Give him steel, he thought, shining steel, not the dull lead and brass of bullets.

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## Chapter Two

*“Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.”—  
Matthew 7:7*

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John looked at the little group in disgust. Out of perhaps as many as two hundred villagers, only two dozen had been fit to question by the time his men had finally calmed down. He saw just five warriors; the rest were evenly divided between men too old to fight and women of various ages.

Many others were still alive, of course—virtually all the children had survived, and most of the women. John disapproved of interrogating children, and few women were fit to question after a night of beatings and gang rape. Most of the men in the village had insisted on fighting to the death.

“*J'sevyu*, friends,” he announced. “We are good Christians, and mean you no harm; we ask your forgiveness for the violence done to you in the rage of battle, but we're fighting for the True Word and can't allow anyone to stand in our way.” He looked at the faces of the captives. Their expressions covered a wide range, from fury to sullen resignation, from dull apathy to intense interest. He had seen such faces before, but they never failed to fascinate him. He tried, as he had tried before, to decide what he himself would feel in such a position, but as always, he simply could not imagine ever being a defeated prisoner. He told himself that in a hopeless situation such as that the villagers had faced, he would have surrendered quickly—after all, he who surrenders lives to fight again, and fighting on against impossible odds would be suicide, and suicide is a mortal sin. Surrender would be the only reasonable thing to do in such a position. Still, he absolutely could not conceive of what he would feel when he had actually done so. As yet, he had never faced such a situation.

“I'm sure you all know what will happen to you now; you'll be taken back to our homeland, where you'll



be put to work and taught the way of the People of the True Word and Flesh. When you've accepted the True Word into your hearts, you'll join us as free and equal partners in the crusade to bring enlightenment to those who, even here on Godsworld, have strayed from the only true path to God's kingdom. I know that right now you're all hurt, you're suffering the deaths of your loved ones and the loss of your homes, you're probably full of hate for my men and for me, but I'm asking you to rise above that hurt and that hatred, to accept what's happened and to accept the True Word that we bring you. I'm no preacher, I'm not an Elder; I'm just a soldier. I can't teach you the way. But I can tell you that ours *is* the one true path, and that you can follow it with us. It'll help if you cooperate with us now, if you forgive as much as you can of what we've had to do to bring you your eventual salvation, if you can put aside your mistaken loyalties of the past and answer our questions as best you can."

Few of the expressions changed. He had expected that. He had made such speeches before, and only the youngest ever seemed moved by them. He smothered a sigh of disappointment. The aftermath of a battle was always depressing. He loved the careful planning, the preparation, and the chaos of the actual fighting, but when it came time to divvy up loot, bury the dead, and deal with the defeated enemy he invariably found himself hating every minute of it.

"All right, then, we're going to be taking you in one by one and asking a few simple questions. No harm will come to any of you, so long as somebody answers our questions. Those of you who refuse to answer—well, we'll note it down, and I can't say for sure what will happen if *nobody* answers us. Let's just see how it goes. You," he said, pointing to an old man in the front row. "You first. Hab?"

Habakkuk nodded, and led the man out of the room. They had taken over what appeared to be an inn as their base of operations; John had made his speech in the common room, and interrogations were to be carried out in the kitchen. Several carving knives had been neatly laid out on a side table; neither John nor any of his men intended to use them, but simply having them visible there would be a powerful threat.

John signalled to the men guarding the rest of the prisoners, then followed his lieutenant and his captive into the kitchen, closing the door behind him. Those few guards had been chosen as being the least-exhausted, least-battered of the invading company, but his last glimpse of them was not reassuring; two were leaning back against the wall, swords hanging down loosely.

In the kitchen Habakkuk had already seated the old man on the hard stone-capped stool they had selected earlier. "Well, mister," he said, "what's your name?"

"Joseph Walker-in-the-Valley," the old man replied. "And that's the last of your darned questions I'm going to answer."

"No need to be like that; we aren't planning to hurt anybody. At least, not anyone around here. We're at war with those heathen filth who call themselves the Chosen of the Holy Ghost; can you tell us anything about them? Any of them been around here lately?"

"I don't plan to answer that."

Habakkuk looked up at John, then glanced over at the display of knives. He shrugged.

"Whatever you like, Mr. Walker. So you don't know anything about the Chosen."

"Didn't say that."

"Do you know something, then?"

"Won't tell you."

The conversation went on in that vein; after a minute or so Habakkuk switched topics, and began asking about the machine gun.

“Caught you with your pants down, didn't we?” Walker-in-the-Valley gloated.

Habakkuk shrugged again. “Didn't do you any good, though, did it?” He waved at the heavy closed door and the table of knives. “You're here just the same. Wherever you folks found that gun, you might just as well have left it there.”

“Who says we found it?”

“Well, if someone sold it to you and told you it would protect you, you got swindled. You tell us where you got it, and we'll see about putting it right.”

“Won't tell you.”

Habakkuk sighed, and continued.

After about fifteen minutes, Joseph Walker-in-the-Valley had refused to say anything about the Chosen, the machine gun, the village leaders (if any), even the weather. With a final frustrated sigh, Habakkuk noted this down and dragged the old man back to the common room.

“This one stays,” he called to the guards. Then he pointed at random at another prisoner. “You next, please; come on back.”

John had watched the whole thing silently. He watched the second interview, with a warrior named Luke Bathed-in-Blood, just as silently, and the third, and the fourth. None of them yielded any useful information. The village leaders were dead, according to two of the prisoners, but John and Habakkuk had already expected that—heretic leaders usually fought to the death, since they knew they would be executed anyway for leading their people astray. Nobody admitted to knowing anything about the Chosen other than that they were there, and on the verge of war with the People of the True Word and Flesh. Both groups being heretics, as they saw it, the villagers hadn't paid much attention.

Nobody was saying anything about the machine-gun. That subject alone brought either silence or refusal from every prisoner.

Every prisoner, that is, until a young woman who gave her name as Miriam Humble-Before-God.

“Where was that machine-gun found?” Habakkuk asked, after a few preliminary questions.

“It wasn't *found* anywhere!” Miriam spat back.

Habakkuk stared at her coldly; John suppressed his reaction, forcing himself to remain silent.

“Then where did it come from, if it wasn't found somewhere?”

“The elders bought it, of course—and if they'd had any brains they'd have bought more weapons with it, and shot all of you, instead of just a few!”

“A *few*?” Habakkuk stared at her, quietly enraged. “Thirty-one of our men and twenty-six horses were killed by that infernal weapon, and more were wounded.”

“They deserved it, attacking a neutral village!”

“There *are* no neutrals, only the People of the True Word and the heretics.” He was in control of himself

again. "Where did they buy it? Were there other weapons for sale?"

"They bought it in Little St. Peter, I heard."

"Where is that?"

Miriam stared at him in surprise. "Don't you know?"

"Just tell me where it is."

"I don't know; I'm just a village woman, I don't travel. Somewhere east of here, I guess."

Habakkuk glanced at John; he nodded slightly. "All right," Habakkuk continued. "They bought the machine gun in Little St. Peter. Where did the people in Little St. Peter get it? Did anyone say? Did they find an ancient cache, or was someone hoarding this one gun?"

"They bought it from the People of Heaven, of course; it's not ancient."

"Oh?"

"Heck, no! You think we'd trust our lives to some rusty antique? That machine-gun was brand-new!"

"And your village elders bought this brand-new machine-gun from the folks in Little St. Peter, and they bought it from the People of Heaven?"

"That's what I heard."

"So where did the People of Heaven come by it, then?"

"They built it, I'd reckon—and they've built plenty more, I'm sure, and when you go up against them you'll get your heads shot off, just the way you deserve!"

Habakkuk glanced at John, then at the display of knives, then back at the woman. "You think they built it?"

"Somebody must have, and from what I've heard, the People of Heaven are the ones to do it."

Habakkuk leaned back on his chair. "And just what have you heard?"

The woman was suddenly quiet. "Not much."

"How much?"

"Really, not much; just that the People of Heaven are running a protectorate, with maybe twenty or thirty villages signed up in some kind of a pact without any conversions or tithes that I've heard of, and that they've got the guns and other stuff to make it work."

"Where'd you hear this?"

Defensive, Miriam said, "Well, the elders were thinking about joining, maybe; I heard my daddy talking, that's all."

"Your daddy was one of the elders?"

"Until one of your men cut his throat, he was."

“He wanted to join this protectorate?”

“I didn't say that; he voted against it. The others were all for it, said look how well Little St. Peter's doing, but Daddy thought we were just fine the way we were, and he didn't trust the People of Heaven. He thought we could get along fine as we always had, didn't think anyone would ever bother us.” Her voice broke. “I guess he was wrong.” She snuffled, all her earlier defiant appearance gone.

Habakkuk looked at John again.

He, in turn, looked at the girl. She was about twenty, he judged, of medium height and pleasantly plump, with soft brown hair that was currently dirty and tangled; a large bruise covered one cheek. She had apparently not escaped the soldiers' attentions, but all in all did not seem to have suffered excessively. “Is that all you know about the People of Heaven?” John asked.

“That's all.”

“How long have they been running this protectorate thing?”

“I don't know; a year or two, I guess.”

“You ever hear about them, Hab?”

“Not that I recollect,” Habakkuk replied.

John had in fact heard of them vaguely; one of the Elders had said something when preparing this expedition, though did not remember exactly who it had been. The People of Heaven had recently appeared on the scene in the southeastern hills, down toward Judah; nobody seemed to know their heritage exactly, so the Elders of the True Word and Flesh assumed they were a new group, gathered by a new false prophet who had somehow won adherents to his particular brand of heresy without any claim to birthright ministry. Such false prophets had arisen from time to time in the history of Godsworld; usually their cults fell apart as soon as the leader died.

The People of the True Word and Flesh had no quarrel with the People of Heaven, so far as John knew—other than the fact that, like all groups except his own, the People of Heaven were heretics, fallen from the True Path—but for his own part he disliked protectorates. The idea of villages and towns banding together as a mere business arrangement, without sharing one faith and without proving their value in battle, seemed wrong, somehow. A nation was meant to be a single people, united in their beliefs, and who had tested the strength of those beliefs against their enemies. God promised the final victory to the righteous—but how could the righteous triumph if their enemies banded together against them? And a league or protectorate could not possibly all be righteous, if its people were not in accord with one another.

Of course, most protectorates and alliances fell apart quickly enough; the stronger ally would absorb the weaker, or the client states would betray the protector or rebel against him. John saw the workings of God in such events. The mighty shall be cast down, he thought, so that the People of the True Word and Flesh may triumph.

He fully expected that his people would in time unite all of Godsworld in a single faith, as it had been when first men came there from Earth. The People of the True Word and Flesh were strong, because they had the true faith—and they knew theirs to be the true faith because it made them strong. Theirs would be the kingdom and the glory, John knew.

If the People of Heaven were really making machine-guns, however, the day of that kingdom's coming

might be long delayed, indeed.

How could they be making machine-guns? Quite aside from the lost knowledge involved, and the unheard-of machining skills, where were they getting the powder? Had the legendary mother lode of sulphur finally been found?

Or was it the brimstone of Hell itself they used? Perhaps the People of Heaven were the armies of Satan, come to subvert Godsworld as they did Earth, so long ago. John had heard a heretic explain once that the reason Godsworld had no sulphur to make gunpowder was that sulphur was a product of Hell, and Godsworld was too close to Heaven for such things. Certainly Earth had been closer to Hell, and sulphur was said to be cheap and plentiful there.

But then, many things were said to be plentiful back on Earth—sulphur and iron and plastic, and varieties of plants and animals. The stories told of a black stone that could be burned like nearwood, called coal, and black oil that came from the ground; Godsworld had nothing like that. Undoubtedly Godsworld had its share of things Earth had not.

None of that concerned him at present, however. The machine-gun did.

“We'll want to send someone to Little St. Peter to see if she's telling the truth,” he said.

Habakkuk frowned. “We don't have many men to spare for that,” he replied.

“If they're really building machine-guns over there, we'd better find out about it as soon as possible.”

“True enough,” Habakkuk admitted grudgingly.

John looked at Miriam with interest; she stared back defiantly. “Why did you tell us all this?” he asked.

“Because I want you to go and see for yourselves—and get your heads blown off by the People of Heaven.”

“You're sure that's what'll happen?”

“No, I'm not sure—I'm just hoping.”

“We'll send someone,” John said with clear finality. “Call the next prisoner and get someone to take this woman to my quarters; I want to keep her close at hand.”

Habakkuk glanced at John, then looked Miriam over. She wasn't to his taste—he preferred his women short, blonde, and full-chested—but she wasn't bad. He doubted that the captain's interest was strictly military.

That was all right, though; a man had his own life to lead, as well as his duties. He went to call the next prisoner.

### Chapter Three

*“Ye shall hear of wars, and rumors of wars.”—Matthew 24:6*

\* \* \* \*

John sat at the desk he had appropriated, frowning. He would have preferred to wait for word from Matthew Crowned-with-Glory, the man in charge of the party he had sent to Little St. Peter, before committing himself to the campaign against the Chosen of the Holy Ghost, but that did not seem to be something he could do. The Elders back in New Nazareth would never accept it. They would not believe

the testimony of Miriam Humble-Before-God, or any other heretical prisoner, without good reason. They would surely insist that the machine gun had been found somewhere, not bought—or at best, that the people of Little St. Peter had lied about where they got it. God had allowed the knowledge of such weapons to die, and would surely not now revive it only to turn it against His own people.

John was even willing to admit to himself that Miriam might have been yarning to try and distract her foes, but he could not be sure, and did not want to expend his people's resources in a long, bloody war with the Chosen if the People of Heaven were a more dangerous enemy.

True, the Chosen of the Holy Ghost were putting constant pressure on the trade routes of the People of the True Word and Flesh; they had publicly insulted and denounced the True Worders, and were vigorously proselytizing for their own false religion and its false prophet. Their conquests posed a growing threat to the security of even New Nazareth itself, and of course there was the great spiritual need to bring the light of the True Word to the darkness of the lands the Chosen held in thrall. Still, they were just another enemy, to be dealt with at any time; they were not manufacturing machine guns.

If the report of his scouting party were to prove that the so-called People of Heaven were, in fact, a greater and more immediate danger to the People of the True Word and Flesh than the evil empire of the Chosen, then he could send that report on to the Elders and postpone the inevitable conflict with the Chosen. He was not certain just what action he would take in such a situation; a consultation with the Elders would be needed. He was sure that they would defer to their commander regarding the need to re-think the situation, since it was he, not they, who was here in the field and in possession of the facts, but he was also sure that they would want to do the re-thinking.

The Elders would not, however, be willing to change their plans simply on the word of a captured woman; they would need some sort of convincing evidence. John had been hoping that Matthew would return quickly with that evidence.

He had not been idle since Matthew's departure; he would not have dared to be. His old main camp had been packed up and moved into the village, which was known to its inhabitants by the oddly secular name of Marshside. Some of the villagers were on their way to New Nazareth, under guard; others had been recruited as camp servants. Scouts had been sent out, not only Matthew and his men to Little St. Peter, but others to various points along the borders and even in the Chosen empire itself. The main force of infantry had arrived two days behind schedule, and getting the cavalry back into fighting trim after their post-battle debauch had taken time as well, so the campaign had been delayed already—but not seriously. Preparations had been made, the men were ready, the village's resources were strained—the time had come when the first real assault on the enemy should be made. The plan called for a march up around the marsh and across the Little New Jordan, taking the Chosen on their presumably undefended southeastern flank with a series of harassing raids on outlying settlements by the cavalry, while the infantry drove straight toward Spiritus Sancti.

The entire plan assumed that the Chosen had not discovered the True Worder troop movements in time to move their own main army; John had some doubts about that. He thought that he could win in any case, but knew that the victory would be very costly if the Chosen did, in fact, know that he and his men were coming. And if the People of Heaven were building machine guns, the People of the True Word and Flesh could not afford such a victory.

If the Chosen were truly as ignorant and their southeastern flank as undefended as the Elders believed them to be, then the entire war would be relatively quick and painless and would do little harm to either side—excluding, of course, those who persisted in their heresy—but John did not believe that the Chosen, who had built a respectable empire for themselves, could be that incompetent. He sighed. He did not mind fighting a protracted war; he had anticipated it all along, and accepted the Elders' plan to

come around through the southern badlands because it was as good a plan as any, even if the much-vaunted element of surprise was unlikely to amount to much. The People of Heaven worried him, though—perhaps more than they reasonably should. After all, he reminded himself for the hundredth time, the People of Heaven had no known quarrel with the People of the True Word and Flesh, unless they took amiss the seizure of Marshside. Still, John wished that Matthew had returned. With no word from Little St. Peter he would have to start the march north at dawn.

He was accustomed to operating without crucial knowledge; any military commander had to be. Misinformation about the enemy's forces, inaccurate maps, lying informants, all of those he was accustomed to dealing with, but the possibility of an enemy armed with the incredible super-weapons of legend attacking from behind while he fought someone else was unsettling. A machine gun in Marshside—what if somewhere else he were to run across the super-bombs that destroyed entire cities?

He pushed back his chair and arose, glancing one last time at the papers on the desk. Nothing there was really urgent, and he felt in need of distraction. He had been worrying about both the Heavens and the Chosen for too long without a break. In the morning he would be moving again, leading his men around the marsh, and there would be plenty of minor problems to deal with, taking his mind off the major ones; why wait until then to let the burden be lightened? He was doing no good sitting at his desk and worrying. He had minor problems here in Marshside that he could attend to.

He walked out of the room without consciously choosing a destination, but knew immediately where he was going—up the stairs to the room across from his own, where Miriam Humble-Before-God was kept.

He threw back the bolt, swung open the door, and looked in, then immediately stepped back. She was not on her bed, which stood against the opposite wall. There was no other furniture in the room, nowhere else she would reasonably be—which meant that she was somewhere unreasonable.

He had not bothered to post a guard here, since there were two at the door of the house; he did not feel he could spare the manpower, and the bolt had seemed adequate. Even had she managed to open or break it, where could she have gone? She might have escaped through the window, if she could find a way safe to the ground and avoid being seen by the people in the street below, or broken through the ceiling into the attic, but again, where would she go?

It was possible that she had escaped, but he doubted it. He had had two weeks now to learn something of her personality, and guessed where she was. Almost amused, he flung out his arm and slammed the door back against the wall with his full strength.

As he had expected, instead of the bang of nearwood against plaster, he heard the thump of the door hitting flesh. He strode into the room and turned.

Miriam stood behind the door, clutching a long, jagged splinter she had pried from the bare boards of the floor; it would have served quite as well as a dagger had he simply walked in and allowed her to reach his back with it. He had not been that careless, and robbed of her victim she looked rather dazed and foolish.

"If you *had* killed me," John pointed out, "my men would have hanged you."

"Only if they caught me," she spat back. She flung the splinter aside.

"They'd catch you," John replied as he stooped to pick up the fragment. "Where could you run?"

"Little St. Peter, maybe—they wouldn't follow me there."

“You don't know where it is.” After a final glance at the crystalline edge he tossed the splinter out the window.

“It's three days afoot east of here—and your man's been gone two weeks now, hasn't he, and on horseback? Looks like something happened to him, I'd reckon.”

“He's taking his time to look around, I'd say—I told him to.”

“You told him to be back in ten days!”

“You heard that? Or did someone tell you? No, doesn't matter, don't say anything. Even if I said that—and I'm not saying I did—he might have had some trouble; could have been taken sick, maybe. We'll see.”

“No, *we* won't; you're leaving tomorrow.”

“So are you; I'm taking you north with me.”

“What?” Her mouth fell open for an instant; she snapped it closed. “What are you talking about?”

“I'm taking you with me.”

“Why, in God's name?”

“Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain,” he reproved her.

“Why are you taking me with you?”

“Because I choose to do so.”

“But *why*? Why don't you just rape me here and have done, get it over with?”

“I don't intend to rape you.”

“You don't?” She was plainly startled. “Why not? Your men did; I thought you were just waiting for the right moment. What makes you different?”

“I prefer not to, that's all.”

“Are you queer, then? I've heard that some warriors are—that must be it.” Her mouth twisted unpleasantly. “Leviticus, Chapter Twenty, Verse Thirteen,” she said.

“First Corinthians, Chapter Seven, Verse Thirty-Seven,” he replied.

“Oh, so now you're holier than the rest of us?”

“Holier than you, heretic.”

She spat in his face.

He grabbed her arm with his left hand and backhanded her across the cheek with his right. “You're coming with me because I don't trust you out of my sight; is that reason enough for you? You're the only person in this stinking village with brains enough to worry me.”

She glared at him silently.



He released his grip on her arm; she pulled away fiercely.

“I came up here to see if you were ready to be reasonable, and to see if you would tell me anything else about the Chosen, or Marshside, or Little St. Peter, or that machine gun—and to tell you that you're coming north with me, too,” he said. “Well, I've told you, and it doesn't look like you're feeling reasonable, so I've done what I came to do.” He turned and marched out the door.

She slammed it hard behind him, as he had known she would; he turned back and threw the bolt, then went on down the stairs. He hesitated at the foot, then walked on out into the street, leaving the papers and plans on his desk for later.

The guards at the door saluted, and he paused on the step between them to survey the scene.

Marshside was jammed; his men were sleeping four to a room, the villagers themselves relegated to doorsteps and kitchens for the most part. The street was full of men and boys and horses—and a few women, both villagers and camp-following harlots. It was a safe assumption that these villagers, too, could now be called harlots—the women determined to remain respectable would stay inside until the main body of troops had moved on. John recognized several of the men; his own elite cavalry—what was left of it—had been kept close to his headquarters, with the vast horde of infantry filling the rest of the town.

One face suddenly stood out, a man waving to him; John shouted, “Ho, there!”

Faces all over the street turned to look at him; he pointed at the man he wanted. “Come up here!”

The man obeyed, the crowd parting before him. He saluted as he neared his commander, and then stood at attention a yard away.

“You're Timothy Gates-of-the-City. I sent you to Little St. Peter with Matthew Crowned-with-Glory,” John said.

“Yes, sir,” the soldier agreed.

“When did you get back?”

“Ah ... about an hour ago, sir; I was on my way to report.” The man tried unsuccessfully to hide his embarrassment.

“An *hour* ago?”

“Yes, sir,” he said unhappily. “I was tired and hungry, sir, and I got a meal and took a bath. I rode here without stopping, sir, almost killed my horse.”

“Well, darn it, soldier, next time, report to me *first*; another five minutes wouldn't kill you.” John glared at the man.

“Yes, sir.”

“You're here now, anyway. Come inside and report.”

“Yes, sir.” Timothy relaxed slightly; he knew he was still in trouble, but the captain was apparently not going to hang him on the spot. He followed his commander into the headquarters building and on to his office.

Timothy stood before the cluttered desk while John seated himself comfortably behind it. When he was

settled, John demanded, "Report!"

"Yes, sir; we made good time at first, sir, but Little St. Peter is further east than we had been told, sir. We reached it on March twenty-fourth, and found an inn, but it was late, so we just ate supper and went to bed there."

"Did you talk to any of the locals?"

"No, sir; there weren't any there but the innkeeper. Everyone was at home—they said it was Easter there!" Timothy made a show of astonishment.

John shrugged. "Heretics," he said. "Go on."

"Well, the next day was April first, and we didn't know if they kept Fool's Day, so Matthew wanted to be extra careful; he sent Barney—Barnabas Righteous-in-Wrath—out, while the rest of us stayed in the inn and talked to people there." He hesitated. "Ah ... we heard a lot of things, sir."

"Skip that for now." John was becoming impatient. "I'll hear the rest of the details later. For now you can answer some questions."

"Yes, sir."

"Did you see any more machine guns?"

"Yes, sir—there were machine guns mounted on the village walls, five or six of them at least. Big ones, bigger than the one they had here."

"Any others?"

"I didn't see any, sir."

"Did anyone talk about them?"

"Yes, sir—we asked. It seemed a natural thing for traders to ask about, so we did. They bought them from the People of Heaven—everyone agreed on that, sir."

John nodded. Miriam had told the truth, as he had believed all along; much as she obviously hated him and his men, he had not seriously doubted what she had said—including her motive for speaking. Five or six machine guns, bigger than the one in Marshside—an open attack on Little St. Peter would be a bloodbath. Her big mistake had been in assuming that John would be stupid enough to make such an attack.

There were other ways of dealing with enemies than frontal assault.

"Did you meet any of the People of Heaven, talk to them? Were there any of their traders or soldiers there?"

"I didn't talk to them, sir, but I think some of the others did. There were some of them in town, all right—very strange people they were. Tall, all of them, and there was something funny about their clothes, though I couldn't say just what it was. They talked funny, too—didn't pronounce things quite right."

"You *think* some of the others talked to them? Where *are* the others?"

"I ... I don't know, sir."

“What?”

Obviously miserable, Timothy repeated, “I don't know, sir. I told you, Matt send Barney out that first morning; well, he never came back. So the next day—Tuesday the second—Matt himself and Joey, Joseph Mother-of-Mercy, went out together. Matt didn't come back; Joey came back with a message, said that Matt was going on to the Citadel—that's the homeplace for the People of Heaven—and that we should stay at the inn and wait for him. The next day Joey and Mark Blessed-of-Heaven went out and never came back. I waited at that inn for them, sat around for days; I went out looking a few times, but never found any of them. I'll tell you, sir, I got scared after awhile. Finally I decided that I'd better come back, that they were all four gone for good, and here I am.”

John sat silently for a moment, then asked, “What's Little St. Peter like?”

“Rich, sir—very rich. It's sinful, it seems to me. Every bed in the inn had a mattress as thick as my arm. Clocks everywhere, people wearing watches, the women dressed up as bright as flowers. The food's good, and the beer the best you ever tasted; a cushion on every chair! And guns, sir—there were men walking the streets with pistols on their belts. And other things that seemed like magic—you wouldn't believe me if I told you about them.”

“I'll want to see for myself.” He leaned back. “I think the Elders better hear about all this. Our war with the Chosen of the Holy Ghost will have to wait. I think we have something more important to worry about.”

“What, sir?”

“The People of Heaven. I don't know who or what they are—not for sure, anyway—but I intend to find out.”

“Devil-worshippers, maybe?”

John nodded. “That's a possibility—or maybe they're people from Earth, come to destroy us after all these years.”

“Devil-worshippers all the same, sir, whether from here or from Earth.”

“True enough,” John agreed. “True enough.”

## Chapter Four

*“I am a man under authority, having soldiers under me: and I say to this man, Go, and he goeth; and to another, Come, and he cometh; and to my servant, Do this, and he doeth it.”—Matthew 8:9*

\* \* \* \*

The Elders were not pleased by the delay he requested; as John had expected, they doubted that the People of Heaven were actually a threat, or that Little St. Peter was actually guarded by machine guns on the walls. The letter answering his report suggested that Timothy might have been drinking, or that the guns on the walls were mere mock-ups intended to frighten the gullible.

John thought he recognized his maternal uncle's style in the letter's phrasing; old Lazarus Speaker-of-Gospel had a way with words. It was obvious that he and the others wanted to get on with the war against the Chosen. They did not want to hear about any threat less immediate, however dire that threat might eventually prove.

However, they had faith in their chosen representative, at least to some extent, and had not reached their current prominence by ignoring reality; they authorized him to leave his men encamped in Marshside, or wherever else he thought prudent, and get his scouting expedition over with as quickly as possible.

If John was not back by the first of June, Habakkuk would assume command and lead the attack against the Chosen, as planned.

He had to agree that that made a certain amount of sense, but it occurred to him that if the Heaveners were even more dangerous than he thought, then he might well not return—whereupon the attack on the Chosen would be more of a mistake than ever, quite aside from the unavoidable fact that the delay would give the Chosen more time to discover the True Worder plans. Still, he might be delayed by any number of trivialities; the Elders were assuming until shown otherwise that the Heaveners were harmless and that the attack on the Chosen should proceed, with or without Captain John Mercy-of-Christ.

He doubted the wisdom of that assumption, but he knew better than to argue further. He had won his main point; the attack would be delayed while he scouted out the new enemy.

He planned quickly. Matthew's party had been dispersed, and all but Timothy had vanished; perhaps they had somehow aroused suspicion. He would need to be very careful, and to avoid any appearance that might suggest anything out of the ordinary. Matthew's party had consisted of five men; that in itself might have drawn attention. His own expedition would consist of just three, not all men. He would go himself, of course; he would take Timothy, since he already had some experience of Little St. Peter; and he would need a woman to play the role of his wife. A family group would appear innocuous enough.

He dismissed the possibility of taking any of the camp-followers. There were none he could trust on such an expedition. None looked like a trader's wife, for that matter; all looked like what they were. Furthermore, they were the dregs of society, and were generally stupid and sloppy, quite likely to say the wrong thing at the wrong time. And he did not have time to send for someone respectable from True Worder lands.

That left the prisoners captured in the attack on Marshside. He would, he decided, take Miriam. He already knew her somewhat, and was convinced that she was intelligent. She had a proud bearing that would not be out of place in a trader's wife, and knew something of the area.

She hated him, but that would be no problem. Wives often appeared to hate their husbands, despite the Bible's teachings. She would nag at him, and if she got out of line he would beat her. She would not be stupid enough to expose the mission for what it was, since the Heaveners would surely kill her—if John didn't manage it before being captured or killed himself—along with Timothy and himself. That would be common sense on their part, in case her actions were part of some elaborate scheme. She might claim to be willing to die if she took her captor with her, but John did not believe it.

He would need to watch her closely, of course—but that, too, was in character for the role he intended to play.

Timothy could pass for a brother, a younger brother brought along to learn a trade at the family's behest.

A child or two might make the act still more convincing, but John did not think he could trust any child to stay in character.

Supplies—they would need supplies, both for the journey and as trade goods. Four horses, one for each of them and one for the packs. Good weapons—he would take one of the rifles and two, maybe three cartridges, as well as a good sword.

He sat back in his chair and planned carefully. He got only three hours' sleep that night, but the party set out at noon the following day.

Miriam had made no protest, had not commented when John explained to her why he was taking her and why she could not afford to betray him to the Heavens. She had simply stood staring at him, accepting it. She had said nothing at all.

When the supplies were packed and loaded she was brought out by two guards; she came without protest and mounted her horse silently. Someone had found her a riding skirt—John had not wanted her to ride sidesaddle for so long a journey, particularly since she had admitted to having travelled very little. She would be sore enough, he was sure, without having to worry about sliding off, and most of the traders' wives he had seen had ridden astride. After all, it was virgins and expectant mothers who were prohibited from riding astride, and a trader's wife would be no virgin. Nor was Miriam, after the battle, though she had been before.

Timothy put up more resistance than Miriam, oddly; he had obviously been badly frightened by his first trip to Little St. Peter and the inexplicable disappearance of his comrades there. John had considered leaving him behind, but finally decided against it. Although Timothy protested that he had learned nothing of any value waiting at the inn, John pointed out that he knew more than anyone else in Marshside—for example, just where Little St. Peter stood, and where the inn lay within the walls.

The conclusive argument, however, was that John was quite willing to *order* him to go, whereupon a refusal would become desertion, to be punished by either flogging or hanging. Still visibly unhappy, Timothy re-packed his travelling clothes and followed the others up the hillside from Marshside.

The journey was a slow one; Miriam was not an experienced rider, and although she did not complain, she kept slowing her mount, forcing the others to slow with her, and at times John caught glimpses of her grimacing in pain. She invariably tried to hide such lapses, such signs of mere humanity, and John made no comment on them. Timothy did not appear to notice anything amiss; he was only too glad to allow his own horse to dawdle.

They camped early that evening, after covering so little ground that John almost imagined he could still see Marshside in the distance. He knew that was nonsense; they had gone up and down several ridges and across some badlands, and had put enough distance behind them that even on a plain Marshside would have been below the horizon, but still he had the feeling that all he would need to do would be to walk back up the slope of the last ridge and there it would be, just as he had left it.

With that thought in mind, he considered the possibility of Miriam slipping away while he slept, and making her way back to Marshside. Even if his men there were to recognize her and demand an explanation—which they might not, as one female prisoner looked much like another to experienced soldiers—she would be quite capable of devising one. An ambush on the road, John and Timothy dead—that would do well enough until he got back himself.

Or she might cut his throat while he slept and *then* return to Marshside, which would be safer for her.

Accordingly, before he settled down to sleep, he wrapped the voluminous riding skirt around her, pinning her arms to her sides, and tied it securely in place. The trailing end of the rope he then tied to the handle of the cooking pot that hung from its folding tripod over the campfire. The skirt would keep the rope from chafing or cutting off her circulation. He thought she might well be able to work her way free in time, but her struggles, he judged, would bring down the pot and tripod with enough noise to wake Timothy and himself.

She made no comment at these preparations, and in fact had not said a word since their departure, but

when he had finished she sneered at him unmistakably.

Timothy seemed puzzled by such excessive precautions, but knew better than to say anything that might be construed as criticism of his commanding officer.

John was not bothered by Miriam's derision or Timothy's confusion. He knew that he was being more cautious than might seem necessary, but he preferred excessive caution to recklessness. Fewer men died of caution.

The next morning Miriam was visibly stiff, and awkward in mounting, treating John and Timothy to a flash of leg before she got the riding skirt in place. John toyed idly with the thought of raping her after all—but morning was not the time, and Timothy was with them. Timothy would have no objections, John was sure, to anything his commanding officer might care to do, but his presence still acted as a deterrent. John mounted his horse and led the way.

They camped that night on another undistinguished hillside, and by then John had forgotten his earlier lascivious interest in Miriam. For her part, she was utterly exhausted, her entire body aching, and John saw nothing particularly attractive about his dishevelled and dirty prisoner. He wrapped her up once again, though less carefully, and took no interest in the feel of her body through the heavy fabric.

The following day was similar, save that Timothy seemed to be growing ever more nervous. John tired of coaxing his companions onward, and they made camp early.

As they were eating a sparse supper of dried mutton and beans, John asked Timothy, "How much further?"

Timothy started. "How much further to what?"

"To Little St. Peter, of course."

"Oh. Ah, not far, sir. A few hours."

"Good," John said, lifting the meat to his mouth.

"Yes, good," Timothy echoed. He stared at the road stretching out to the east.

After they had eaten and tidied up and taken turns in the bushes John attempted to chat, to get to know his companions better, and to question Timothy further about his earlier journey. Miriam would say nothing at all, however, and Timothy's answers, which had to be carefully coaxed out of him, were brief, inconsequential, and often totally inappropriate to the question. John quickly gave up. He bound Miriam in her skirt for the night and went to sleep, leaving Timothy staring at the dying campfire.

The next morning Timothy and one of the horses were gone; hoofprints were visible on the road westward, back toward Marshside. John stared after him in disgust.

"He'll hang for this," he announced.

Miriam, still tied in her skirt, finally broke her long silence with a great barrage of howling, derisive laughter.

"Oh, the great warrior, such an inspiration to his men!" she called.

John suppressed an urge to slap her; instead he simply left her bound while he prepared and ate his breakfast. When he was done he released her and handed her the leftover scraps.

“Don't think this changes anything,” he said. “We're still going to Little St. Peter, and you still can't afford to betray me.”

“How can one betray an enemy?” she countered.

He made no answer, merely lifted her into the saddle.

It was mid-afternoon of that fourth day, the twentieth of April, when they finally reached Little St. Peter.

The town sat atop a hill, surrounded by a wall of stone braced with heavy beams of nearwood; at each corner stood a tower, and atop each tower a machine gleamed dully in the amber daylight. Looking at them, John was uncertain whether they were, in fact, machine guns; they appeared ridiculously large. There could be no doubt, however, that they were weapons. As the two travellers rode up the highway toward the western gate the guns on either side were kept trained directly at them.

Four soldiers were lounging at the gate; one called out perfunctorily, “In the Name of the Lord, Our God, state your business.”

“Peaceful trade, by Christ's mercy,” John replied.

“Name yourselves, and your faith.”

“Joel Meek-Before-Christ and my wife Miriam, of the Church of the Only God.” The Church of the Only God had been a small tribe comprising three villages along the westernmost extreme of the Upper New Jordan; John's cavalry had obliterated all three two years before. Since no one had escaped, he doubted the news had reached Little St. Peter.

“What are you selling?”

John shrugged. “A little of this, a little of that; woolens, mostly.”

The soldier asked one of his comrades, “Do you want to bother searching?”

“Ah, let him go in,” the other replied.

The first shrugged and pushed open the gate. “Pass, friend, into Little St. Peter, free in faith under the protection of the People of Heaven. Amen.”

“Amen,” John replied, startled by the open renunciation of any claim to the One True Religion. He spurred his horse and rode into the town, Miriam close behind, the pack horse trailing.

## Chapter Five

*“A faithful man shall abound with blessings: but he that maketh haste to be rich shall not be innocent.”—Proverbs 28:20*

\* \* \* \*

By the time they had made their way through the broad paved square inside the gate and found an inn John had decided that Timothy had grossly understated the opulence of the town. He had never seen such colors and textures. Almost every woman he saw seemed to be wearing a new color—every shade of green, blue, and yellow he could imagine, and a handful of daring young things in pink. Even a few men wore colors, blues and dark greens, and those who did wear the more customary browns and grays often used shades he had not encountered anywhere else.

Strange green plants grew in tubs and windowboxes on every side, including some with brown-grey

stalks that looked absurdly tall and thin; he saw no red plants anywhere, nor any of the more familiar green ones. Curtains hung in every window. A few rockers stood on porches, and as Timothy had said, every single one had a cushion—and some even had cushions on the back as well as the seat. Many were embroidered in vivid colors.

Strange plants, rich fabrics, new dyes, and incredible weaponry—John was more certain than ever that the People of Heaven were trading with other worlds. Where else could they get such things? Those tall plants were certainly nothing that had ever grown on Godsworld before.

The whole city was soft and decadent, he judged. What kind of warriors would men who sat on cushions make? Were it not for the weapons, he would have said Little St. Peter was ripe for plundering by men who still led the hard, clean life that God had intended men to live.

The guns on the towers were not the only firearms in sight; as Timothy had reported, many of the men wore pistols on their belts or had rifles slung on their shoulders. John wondered how much ammunition they actually had. He remembered the machine gun in Marshside and its feeder belt with almost three hundred rounds left, even after the wasteful spraying of the hillside during the battle; if the People of Heaven were trading with Earth or one of the other Satanic worlds, then they could probably get all the sulphur they would ever need to make more than enough gunpowder to provide every man in Little St. Peter with cartridges.

Were there any settled planets other than Godsworld that were *not* Satanic? John had never heard of any; he had been taught that all God's chosen people, the enlightened and saved, had come to Godsworld, leaving the other worlds to the multitudes of the damned. The People of Heaven could probably buy sulphur by the pound or even the hundredweight.

He reevaluated the town in that light; the people here could *afford* to be decadent. An open attack would be suicidal.

They found an inn readily enough, just beyond the market square inside the gates; the traditional banner hung above the open arch of the doorway, proclaiming “ST. PETER'S INN” at the top, the customary “ST. MATTHEW CHAPTER XXV VERSES 34-40” across the bottom, and “Zachariah Come-to-Grace, Prop.” in the lower right corner. A separate sign pointed the way to the stable entrance.

John lifted Miriam down from her saddle, then held all three horses while she straightened her walking skirt and removed the riding skirt. When she was fit to be seen he exchanged the reins for the riding skirt and folded it neatly, following along as she led the animals into the stableyard. A boy was waiting; John tossed him a coin and Miriam handed him the reins. John glanced at the baggage, then at the stableboy, then shrugged. Even among heretics there was honor, he supposed; the boy wouldn't steal anything. Or if he did, if anything was missing later, John would know who to blame.

Together, John and Miriam walked through the stableyard arch into St. Peter's Inn.

The interior was in keeping with the opulence of the streets; the stone walls were covered with bright banners, lace curtains adorned the windows, and pillows and cushions were everywhere. A clock hung over the hearth, the expensive variety with a red hand to measure seconds, and although the room was relatively quiet and the red hand moving, listen as he might, John could not hear any ticking.

Honor among heretics there might be, but he wondered how such a marvel could be in so public a place without being stolen. And the cushions, as well—surely a few of those would vanish each night!

A score or so of customers were scattered at half a dozen tables, talking and drinking quietly; they paid the newcomers no heed. A nearwood bar stood in one corner, a man behind it polishing a tankard; John



saw no one else, so he crossed to the bar.

“What can I do for you, sir?” the barman asked, putting down his tankard and towel as John approached.

“Are you the proprietor?” John asked.

“No, sir, Mr. Grace is away at the Citadel of Heaven today, and he left me in charge. James Redeemed-from-Sin is my name.”

“Joel Meek-Before-Christ,” John answered. They shook hands. “My wife and I are just in from North Dan, with a few yards of good woolens. We could use a meal and a room, but from the look of this place,” he swept his arm around to include the entire inn and perhaps the town beyond, “I’m not sure we can afford any.”

“Your first time in Little St. Peter?”

“Yes.”

“Quite a fine little place, isn’t it? Don’t worry, though; our prices are reasonable enough. We won’t turn you away.”

“We haven’t had a successful trip; forgive my bluntness, but what’s ‘reasonable’?”

“What currency?”

“True Worder dollars.” The money from any of the larger powers could turn up anywhere, so John saw no reason to hedge.

“Don’t get those much here.” He pulled out a chart from beneath the bar and consulted it, while John admired the hard, gleaming finish on the countertop—he had never seen nearwood look like that—and read the little plaque on the wall behind the barman, “Be not forgetful to entertain strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares, HEBREWS XIII.2.”

“Ah!” the barman said. “Here it is! One hundred and fifty for the room and bed, thirty for sheeting. House menu for dinner, forty-five dollars. The conversion rate for Heavener credits is fifteen dollars to one credit, if you want anything else.”

John was surprised; the prices *were* reasonable—in fact were slightly less than he would have expected to pay in New Nazareth. “You use Heavener credits here? I don’t know them.”

“The People of Heaven—Little St. Peter’s in their protectorate now, ever since St. Peter itself was sacked by the Chosen of the Holy Ghost last year. Best thing that ever happened to us, joining the protectorate—it was the People of Heaven sold us all these fabrics, that clock, everything! Here, look at this bar!” He tapped the countertop.

“I was just looking at it a moment ago,” John said. “Never saw anything like it.”

“It’s *plastic*! Do you believe that? Pure plastic! And all they wanted for it was an even exchange in raw nearwood!”

“That’s crazy,” Miriam said from behind John’s shoulder.

“Isn’t it? But they meant it, they did it! Traded even, no strings attached!”

“They want nearwood that much?”

“I guess they do! We've been swapping nearwood for everything you could imagine! Grain, too—I understand they'll pay top price for wheat, higher than anyone else around. And those woolens of yours—they've been buying raw wool, anyway. I'm not sure about fabrics; they've got enough of their own, it seems. Beef, leather, mutton, fungusmeat, fish, and if your little lady there's got nimble fingers, they even buy embroidery! The good Lord alone can know what they want with it all—begging your pardon, folks, my tongue ran away with me. It's been mighty good for the trade here, all this stuff coming through, and what's good for business is good for me—I'm paid on a share.”

“What do they *do* with it all? And how do they pay for it?”

“I haven't the faintest idea what they do with it, sir, and that's the truth, but they pay in credits, and their credits are good, solid money, good for everything they sell—plastic is just one little thing. They sell fabrics I never heard of, so fine that you can't even see the weave and with textures like nothing on Godsworld—take a look at the curtains, you never saw anything like that in North Dan. Those cushions, too. And gunpowder—they must have found sulphur's Mother Lode itself. You saw those guns on the walls, I reckon—the Heaveners put those up themselves when Little St. Peter signed on. I tell you, joining the protectorate was the best thing the town elders ever did here. Jesus must surely love the People of Heaven!”

“I don't know,” John answered. “It might not be Jesus. Seems to me there's something sinful in all this wealth. Where'd it come from? It's a lure and a temptation, that's sure, but it's not Jesus who leads men into temptation.”

The barman, who had been leaning forward over the bar, stood back, his tone suddenly unfriendly. “Now, sir, I'm not right certain that I take your meaning. Are you saying you see the hand of Satan in this?”

“No, I didn't say that—I don't know what I see. I do have my doubts, though. There's an old saying, that what's too good to be true *isn't* true, and it seems to me that all this wealth might be false, *might* have the hand of Satan behind it—but I can't say for sure. I'm just a trader in woolens, not a preacher.”

“Well,” the barman said, his tone slightly more conciliatory, “I can see how one might wonder. But we do have our preachers here in Little St. Peter, and our doubters, too, and the preachers have answered the doubters. God has smiled on us, in reward for three hundred years of righteous living. If it were Satan's work, now, what Satan does is to tempt men *into sin*; and while we might've been tempted by the riches of Heaven here, there's been no sin, no one's lured us into evil. It's still honest work, cutting the nearwood or growing the wheat and trading it to the Heaveners, it just pays better than we're used to. The laborer is worthy of his hire, though—you know the Bible says that. The customs say to charge what the market will bear—and it's the Heaveners who set the prices, not us. Some of our folk have even told them, out of Christian charity, that they're paying too much, and they've changed a few of their prices, but they still pay well, because they say they want our trade and will pay high to keep it.”

“But how did *they* get so rich? What if their wealth is the wages of sin, and you're sharing in it?”

“The wages of sin is death, friend. What sort of sin could it be that would bring wealth like this instead? No, what *I* think is that they've discovered the lost knowledge of the ancients—maybe they found the Mother Ship itself, as well as the Mother Lode. One of our scholars says that they might have found something called a ‘communication sat-in-light’, or something akin to that—I didn't catch the words, but it's something that the ancients hung in the sky when they came that might have fallen since. It's a strange and wondrous thing, certainly, but it's a blessing, not a sin.”

“Mr. Redeemed, I hope you won't take offense at this, but *I* wonder if perhaps they haven't been trading with sinners—trading with other worlds. Maybe with Earth itself.”

The barman stared for a moment, then burst out laughing. John and Miriam simply watched until he had calmed down.

“Other worlds? Mister, have you heard the histories? Don't you know *anything*? First off, our ancestors came to Godsworld fleeing Armageddon, you know that—Earth was in its last days, and was surely destroyed long ago. And even if they escaped Armageddon as we did, the other worlds wouldn't have starships any more than we do here, now, would they? They were settled by sinners and fools—they're probably savages huddled around campfires cooking and eating each other.”

“We can't be sure Earth...” John began.

“Mister, I wasn't finished,” Redeemed-from-Sin interrupted. “I didn't say my piece. The *important* thing is, that even if Earth is still there, even if the sinners and philistines still have starships, how far is it? It took our people *one hundred and eleven years* to cross the darkness to Godsworld! The scientists had to put them all to sleep, and the crewmen all died of old age on the way, leaving their sons to carry on until the folk were awakened. Now tell me, mister—you're a trader—what sort of a trade can you carry on when every voyage takes one hundred and eleven years each way? Would you come all that distance just for nearwood and wheat?” He shook his head. “Even if Earth is still there, we won't be hearing from them again.”

John stopped and considered that argument. He had not thought about it before. He knew the legends of the Crossing, of course, and how the People had been put into plastic coffins and made to sleep for over a century, but he had failed to think through what that meant to his belief that the Heaveners were from another world. The People had come to Godsworld; why couldn't others? And of course, they *could*—but why should they? Not for trade, certainly, not if the journey took a double lifetime each way. Not even for conquest—unless they had been driven off Earth and had nowhere else to go.

That was foolish, though; the skies were filled with stars. Why pick Godsworld?

Perhaps Satan's empire had conquered all the rest, and was now after the only remaining bastion of righteousness; Satan was said to seek power and domination for its own sake, to hate all who opposed him. But even so, to send a conquering army out on a journey that would last centuries...

But would it? Maybe some way had been found of shortening the trip. John was no scholar; he knew that the original People had supposedly travelled as fast as it was ever possible to travel, but he had no idea what the limit was. Might they have been wrong about it? They had been wrong about other things—they had thought their children would live in perpetual peace and harmony, all Christians together, yet the heretics had split the congregation within three years of the Landing, and only now were the People of the True Word and Flesh beginning to see the possibility of reunification within their lifetimes.

No, that didn't seem reasonable. The bartender's explanation made more sense. John still thought, however, that there was something wrong about the entire situation, something warped and alien. Wealth appearing out of nowhere was acceptable—but for that wealth to be in gunpowder *and* plastic *and* other, less identifiable things, fabrics and strange plants and dyes, seemed threatening. A single find, however magnificent, should not produce them all.

If not Satan's people, perhaps Satan himself had decided to try new tactics on Godsworld. It was undoubtedly the Devil who had split apart the People and dragged most of the population down into heresy; perhaps he foresaw that the People of the True Word and Flesh, armed in righteousness, would soon bring the world back together if he did not find a new way to stop them. The wealth of the People

of Heaven might come directly from Hell itself.

John had never believed that Satan intervened so directly in human affairs; he had always thought of the Devil, when he thought of the Devil at all, as working entirely through the hearts and minds of men. Perhaps he had been wrong.

The whole thing was a mystery, and John wanted to solve it. To do so, he knew he would need to get to the heart of it. Scouting out the military might of Little St. Peter was of only secondary importance. He had to find out who the People of Heaven truly were, and where they were getting their guns and wealth. To do that, he would need to see their homeplace.

He had to get to the Citadel of Heaven, that was the simple truth.

"You're right," he agreed. "I hadn't thought about that, but of course you're right. Even if you made the trip asleep, the goods might not be worth anything by the time you got back."

"That's right," the barman agreed, cheerful once again.

"That must be some find they made up there."

"I guess it must be, all right."

"I'd like to see if I can get a little of it for my woolens, then—what's the road to the Citadel like?"

The barman eyed him dubiously. "It's a mighty long walk, through some bad hill country—I don't know if horses could make it."

"But you said Mr. Grace is there, and the traders come and go..." John was honestly startled.

"They don't *walk*, though; they take the airship over the hills."

"Airship?" John was no longer merely startled, he was astonished. After a few seconds' confusion, he asked, "Well, then, why can't we take this airship?"

"I didn't say you couldn't; you asked about the road, and where you were worried about prices before, I thought perhaps you couldn't afford the airship."

"Oh." John was struggling to think about too many things at once. In the past hour he had seen weapons such as he had never imagined on the walls of an unimportant village, and wealth beyond believing—but had had his theory of offworld intervention severely damaged, leaving him with no good explanation for any of it. And now this innkeeper's assistant was calmly talking about an airship's fare as if it were an ordinary ferryboat. "How much is it?"

"Thirty credits."

"Thirty credits—oh." Well, John told himself, at least ancient scientific miracles don't come cheap.

"That's each, if you take your wife—they don't let women ride free—and one way. Same prices coming back. No horses—you'll need to carry your packs yourself, or else pay another twenty credits to send them as freight."

"Oh," John said again. He felt control of the situation slipping away from him, and grabbed it back. He had enough money—he had expected prices to be running rampant in Little St. Peter, and had brought enough for a three-week stay. He could not risk leaving Miriam behind, and the woolens would be needed to keep up his pose as a trader. That meant eighty credits each way. Eighty credits would be

twelve hundred dollars; twelve hundred dollars each way would take a chunk out of his funds, but would be well worth it if it cleared up the mysteries once and for all and provided him with proof that the People of Heaven were the real threat to Godsworld. "When does it leave?" he asked.

## Chapter Six

*"Thou art to pass over Jordan this day, to go in to possess nations greater and mightier than thyself, cities great and fenced up to heaven."*—**Deuteronomy 9:1**

\* \* \* \*

The airship made its pickup at midnight, the entire loading and takeoff carried out in full darkness; it did not come into the town itself, but made its stop a few miles to the southeast, in a small valley, where men with dim lanterns escorted the passengers to an unlit waiting room.

That seemed rather sinister to John. He was unable to get a good look at the airship—which, he realized, was probably the whole idea. It was simply a looming darkness surrounded by more darkness; no lights of any kind were allowed.

John wondered at that. Quite aside from its evil connotations, and even given that the Heaveners wished to keep the ship's exact nature secret, he was puzzled how anyone could steer an airship in the dark. He had only a very vague idea of what controlling an "airship" would be like, but he had pictured it as a high-speed craft, probably as fast as a galloping horse; he knew that he would not care to ride a galloping horse at night.

John wished that Godsworld had a "moon", as described in Genesis, to provide a little illumination. He had no clear idea what a moon was, only what the Bible said and that Earth had one and Godsworld didn't, but even a "lesser light" would have been welcome.

He and Miriam were not the only passengers; three others, all men, made the flight with them, all closed into a small windowless chamber with golden walls that appeared to be—but of course, could not be—plastic, furnished with benches upholstered in a strange, soft fabric dyed a vivid red. The other passengers ignored John, Miriam, and each other. One of them seemed to have a mild congestion of some sort, and could be heard breathing, but the others might as well have never been for all the companionship they provided.

John debated trying to strike up a conversation, but decided against it.

The two crewmen who oversaw the loading of freight and the embarkation of passengers were tall dark men armed with pistols, men who spoke slowly and in an oddly slurred manner; John guessed, from Timothy's description, that these were People of Heaven.

As he felt the airship shifting beneath him, John began to wonder if he were making a wise move. Perhaps he should have stayed longer in Little St. Peter, learned what he could there, before venturing on. The airship might be a trap of some sort—could there really be an "airship" on Godsworld? Such wonders were the stuff of old legends of Earth, not everyday reality.

But then, machine guns and the luxuries of Little St. Peter weren't exactly commonplace, either.

Miriam fell asleep resting her head on his arm; judging by the man's slumped posture and steady breathing, the congested fellow also dozed off. In the silent tedium, John lost all sense of time and was unsure whether he was still really awake himself.

Just when he was becoming certain that he had fallen asleep, and that recent events were all a dream and he would awake to find himself back in Marshside, the door slid open.

“Everyone off,” a voice called, “We’re here.” John noticed that it was a Heavener’s voice, with the odd slurring—the words were actually more like, “*Ehwhuh awh, wuh heh.*” There were some variations in speech among the various peoples of Godsworld, but John had never heard so extreme an accent.

He stood up, letting Miriam’s head fall; she awoke, and muttered in mild confusion.

“Come on,” John said, finding her arm and pulling her up. “We’re here.”

Dragging a groggy Miriam and the bundle of cloth that had occupied a third seat, John stepped out of the airship and found himself in a corridor. Startled, he looked closely, and made out a seam between the corridor and the wall of the airship. He marvelled that the pilot had been able to bring his ship in so close to the “dock”, or whatever it was, that the corridor matched up to the side of the vessel with less than a two-inch gap anywhere.

He wished he were able to see something through that narrow slit, but only darkness was visible. The walls of the passageway were of the same substance as the walls aboard the airship, he noticed, the stuff that looked like plastic.

Behind him the other three passengers were waiting impatiently, eager to be off the airship and on about their business.

“Welcome to the Citadel of Heaven,” said a man standing halfway down the short corridor. He spoke with the Heavener accent; John looked at him closely and noticed that the buttons on his shirt were absurdly small, less than an inch across. The texture of the shirt was odd, too, and the cut of the collar was strange. The jeans seemed all right, though they were tighter than customary. He wore a gun on a singularly narrow and unobtrusive belt, a gun not like any John had seen before—there was no cylinder, no hammer, no slide, just a smooth breech and textured grip.

“Have you been here before, sir?” the Heavener asked.

“No,” John admitted.

“Straight ahead, then.” He pointed down the corridor to a bright red door—hellishly red, John thought. He ambled slowly past the guard, or greeter, or whatever the Heavener was, toward the indicated door, taking in his surroundings and watching for any indication that he should take action somehow.

Behind him he heard the Heavener ask the next passenger whether he had ever been in the Citadel before.

“Yes,” the man answered, “I have a trade license.”

“May I see your card?”

John glanced back over both his own shoulder and Miriam’s and saw the passenger handing the Heavener something small and thin, something that fit comfortably in the man’s palm and gleamed silver. The Heavener accepted it and touched it to a spot on the wall that John had taken for decoration; letters appeared on the smooth surface of the wall above the spot, letters that John was too far away to read.

He almost walked into the red door at the end of the passage. He fumbled for the latch as the Heavener said, “Thank you, sir—first door on the right.”

There was no latch; instead he found a small button where the latch should be and pressed it. The door swung open and admitted him and Miriam to a good-sized room, again finished in golden plastic. John glanced around at it. How had that message appeared in the corridor? Was this stuff that the Heavers

used for their walls something other than a simple building material? Were there machines hidden on all sides? That was a frightening thought, reminiscent of nursery terror tales of the computers in the walls that watched everyone on Earth in the days before the Crossing.

The corridor had been windowless—and, John realized, he had seen no lanterns or lamps of any sort, yet it had been brightly lit. On the airship light had come from lamps set in the ceiling; he had been unsure whether they were electric or something else. Certainly they were brighter than any lamps he was familiar with; flames or filaments, however, had been hidden behind frosted glass.

This room he now found himself in, however, had a window—a very large window, taking up most of one wall in a single sheet of glass. John had never seen a single pane so large before. Beyond it the sky was still black—he had lost his sense of time and wondered if dawn might have arrived, but plainly it had not.

In the center of the room a plain young woman, clad in a traditional brown dress, stood behind a sort of lectern. She smiled cheerfully.

“*Hlo*,” she said, using a word John had never heard before. She continued, speaking with the Heavener accent, “Welcome to the Citadel of Heaven. May I have your name, please?”

“*J'sevyu*,” he replied politely. “I am Joel Meek-Before-Christ, and this is my wife Miriam, from the Church of the Only God, in North Dan.” Miriam, still drowsy, nodded agreement. She had not spoken since boarding the airship.

The woman drummed her fingers unevenly across the lectern, glanced down, then looked up again.

“Mr. Christ,” she said, “I’m glad to meet you. None of your people have come here before; are you here as a private individual, or as a representative of your tribe?”

Disconcerted by the peculiar mistake the woman had made in her abbreviation of his false surname—which would, of course, become “Meek”, not “Christ”, in conversation—John hesitated before replying, “Ah ... as a private individual—but I’m sure that my family and friends will be interested in what I tell them when I get home.”

She smiled. “I’m sure they will. I take it, though, that you don’t have the authority to make a treaty with our protectorate on their behalf.”

“No, ma’am, I’m afraid I don’t.”

“Well, that’s fine; we just had to ask.”

“No, ma’am, I’m here to sell woolens. A fellow in Little St. Peter told me that I could probably get a good price for them here.”

A flicker of doubt crossed the woman’s face. “Woolens? Not raw wool?”

“No, good woolens—I’ve got a hundred and fifty yards of the best weave you’ll find, without kinks or runs, either raw, bleached, or dyed blue.”

“Well, Mr. Christ, I’m not sure that you were well-advised, but since you’re here, you might as well see what you can get for them. I don’t know any buyer offhand; you’ll have to try the old town market in the morning.”

“That sounds just fine.” The woman had gotten the name wrong again; he was unsure whether or not to

correct her. No one had ever before gotten his name wrong—but then, he had never used the name Meek-Before-Christ before.

“If you'll take this booklet—you can read, can't you?”

“Ma'am, of *course* I can read; it's the duty of every man to learn to read so that he can study the word of God, and my parents saw to it that I learned my duty!” John's response was unplanned and completely sincere, a restatement of what he had been told almost every day of his life between the ages of six and ten, from his first learning the alphabet until he could recite back a chapter of the Bible after a single reading.

“Of course, I'm sorry. If you'll take this booklet, it will tell you about the protectorate that the People of Heaven operate—I'm sure that your family and friends will be interested.”

John accepted the little booklet and looked it over. It was printed on tan paper in incredibly small black type, but still clear and legible. The title was simply “The People of Heaven”.

“And if you'll go through that exit,” the woman said, pointing to a brown door near one corner, “the stairs will bring you out on the main road into town. The market's just inside the gate, and there are the usual inns and hostels.”

“Thank you,” John said. He started toward the indicated door, but stopped when he realized that Miriam was not following. He turned, and saw that she was still standing between the red door and the lectern, staring at the woman.

“Who *are* you people?” she demanded.

“Excuse me?” the woman said.

“Who *are* you people? What is this place? Was that really an airship? My dear Lord Jesus, what is going *on*?” She stared around. “Am I dreaming all this?”

“Ms. Christ, I...”

“What *is* that?” She pointed out the window.

John had not really paid much attention to the window; he had been aware of its presence and of darkness beyond, broken by lights, but he had not really looked at them as yet. Now he turned and looked.

They were on the second floor of a building, apparently, with an excellent view along a ridgetop road and of the peak at the end of that road. A walled town surrounded and covered the peak, lit by the usual miscellany of torches, lanterns, and an occasional incandescent lamp.

At the far side of the town, however, was a building, perhaps a fortress, that towered over the commonplace houses and shops. Its sides sloped up for five stories, and in every story lights were ablaze, patterning the walls with the squares of light and dark windows; the uppermost floor John estimated at a quarter mile or so in length, the lower floors somewhat larger. In the darkness he could not tell anything about its construction, but in the light that poured from its windows it was clear that its sides were unornamented and plain, its roof flat and featureless. It dwarfed the town below it, and in fact even the mountain itself seemed to be forced down and subdued beneath that vast blank weight.

Beside it stood something even taller, but narrow, something that gleamed silvery-gold where the light from the fortress reached it; John could not decide if the thing was another building, or a machine, or



simply an object of some unknown sort. He could make out very few details, due to the distance and the darkness.

“What *is* that?” Miriam repeated.

“Do you mean our headquarters building?” the woman asked politely.

Miriam turned to stare at her. “Building? That shiny thing?”

“Oh,” the woman said. “Oh, that's another airship—a long-range one.”

John was certain she was lying; the tone of her voice had been wrong, somehow. That thing was no mere airship.

Despite the impracticality of making hundred-year journeys, John was quite sure that the shining thing was a starship.

Two hours later John sat on the edge of his bed in a small nameless inn and stared at the pamphlet the woman had given him. He had read it through twice.

It said nothing about who the People of Heaven actually were, or where they came from, but only that they had “access to much of Earth's technology lost by the rest of Godsworld.” They welcomed trade, and would sell weapons and ammunition to any group that joined their protectorate by signing a simple agreement. That agreement required that the member group never attack another group—not just other members, but *any* other group. The weapons were for defense only. Members were not to discriminate on the basis of religion or race—heretics, or even agnostics and atheists, were to be treated as equals. All member groups were equal in status except the People of Heaven themselves. Anyone violating this agreement would be cut off from all further trade and would have all weapons repossessed—by force if necessary.

Anyone who wanted to was welcome to trade with the members for more common goods; only weapons and ammunition were restricted.

Those more common goods included fabrics, dyes, plastics (John had never seen the word in a plural form before), medicines, and machinery such as clocks and alarms.

He glanced over at Miriam, who was curled up on a chair in the corner. She had given no further trouble after he dragged her away from her frantic questioning of the woman at the airport (strange new word, “airport”—John was not accustomed to it yet and was self-conscious in using it even when only thinking). She had come along quietly to the inn, waited silently while John roused the innkeeper, and then settled in her current position when they reached the room.

She had hoped that the People of Heaven would wipe out John's own army, but judging by the pamphlet John concluded that, despite the fearsome appearance of their weaponry, the People of Heaven were pacifists, weaklings, decadent beyond all hope of redemption, with none of the steel of faith in them.

That was the first really encouraging news he had had since the charge into Marshside.

Of course, their weapons *were* formidable, even if manned by wimps. But believers in defense only, and toleration of atheists!

There was that note that misused weapons would be repossessed by force, though—perhaps the Heaveners themselves were not weaklings, but wished their followers to be weakened, so that there would be no resistance when they exerted real authority. The “defense only” rule might just be to prevent

some outlying village from involving the entire protectorate in an unwanted war against a major power, and the toleration edict might not apply in the Citadel itself.

Oh, it was tricky, trying to figure out what these people were up to, what their true nature might be, but John was certain of two things about them:

They were not from Godsworld.

They represented Satanic evil.

The former was clear from their vast alien resources—strange plants, plastics, and all the rest—even without that shining metal tower that could be nothing but a starship.

And the latter was clear from their pamphlet; they were working to undermine and destroy the Christian faith on Godsworld by allowing people of differing beliefs to interact, and forbidding their followers to war against those they knew to be in error. How could a man know the truth, if he did not see its power proven in battle? How could he believe that he had the one saving way, and allow those around him not to follow it?

He could bring this pamphlet back with him, and in itself it might well be sufficient evidence to convince the Elders that the People of Heaven were a greater threat than the Chosen of the Holy Ghost—but having come this far he was determined to venture a little further.

He had been awake most of the night, and would want to be fresh when he scouted out the enemy headquarters; he tossed the pamphlet aside, lay back, and was instantly asleep.

## Chapter Seven

*“For the lips of a strange woman drop as an honeycomb, and her mouth is smoother than oil:”—*  
**Proverbs 5:3**

\* \* \* \*

He thought it desirable to keep up the pretense of trade, so when he awoke, an hour or so before noon, rather than head directly for the looming gray fortress at the far end of town he gathered up his bundle of cloth and trudged down to the gateside market. He left Miriam locked in the room at the inn; she was still asleep, and after her behavior the night before he did not trust her in public.

An hour or two of attempting to sell his goods would be sufficient, he judged, and then he could go off to find himself lunch and work his way toward the Heavener headquarters.

He had been in the market perhaps twenty minutes and turned down one insulting offer when he spotted a familiar face in the crowd. He paused and looked toward it, but it had vanished.

He watched intently, and a moment later saw it again. This time he was able to place it. “Matthew!” he called.

Several people glanced in his direction; Matthew was a very common name, after all. The one he wanted was among them. He waved.

The man waved back, to John's relief. He had not been mistaken; this was Matthew Crowned-with-Glory, one of his missing scouts. The two of them pushed through the crowds toward each other.

They met in an embrace, slapping each other heartily on the back; John pulled Matthew out of the crowd into a quiet corner.

“What happened?” John asked when they were alone. “Where are the others?”

Matthew's expression shifted from delight to despair with astonishing speed. “Joey's dead,” he replied. “I'm not certain about the others. Didn't any of them report back?”

“Timothy came back, finally—but then he deserted when I tried bringing him back here with me. He'll probably hang for it.”

Matthew nodded. “Poor Tim didn't much like the Heavens.”

“What happened to Joey?”

“Oh, it was so stupid! He came out here to find me—I don't know why, not really, as I hadn't been gone that long. He didn't worry about the return fare; I had brought enough money with me, but someone stole it, picked my pocket I think, so that I was stranded here, couldn't afford the fare back to Little St. Peter, and I didn't dare tackle the roads alone, without a map or guide—and I didn't even have the money for a map any more. I've been working odd jobs, doing what I can, to stay alive; I was hoping to save up the fare eventually if nobody came and found me.”

“What about Joey?”

“Yes, I know, I was coming to that. Joey came here to see what was keeping me—disobeying my orders, I might add—and didn't think to bring the return fare, so we were both stranded. He reckoned that if we'd been robbed by someone in Citadel, then someone in Citadel owed us that money, and he wasn't picky about who it might be; so he tried to rob someone. He spotted this fellow with a bulge in his pocket that looked like a fat wallet, and a gun that looked like plastic instead of metal, without no moving parts that he could see...”

“I saw a gun like that myself,” John remarked.

“Well, Joey saw that one and figured it for a fake, a toy to make the owner feel like more of a man, and he tried to pick the fellow's pocket.”

Already sure he knew the answer, John asked, “What happened?”

“Well, Joey was a good scout, but he wasn't any sort of a pickpocket—that's not something a soldier learns. The fellow felt what was happening and pulled his gun; Joey called his bluff, but it wasn't any sort of a bluff at all. That funny plastic gun blew Joey's head clean off and sprayed bits of it all over the street.” Matthew shook his head. “Dang fool thing to try. I watched the whole thing, but there wasn't much I could do except claim the body and sign the petition for a Christian burial.”

John nodded. “Sounds like you did what you could. And you don't know anything about Mark or Barney?”

“Well, not really. Joey told me something, but I can't swear to it.”

“What?”

“Joey wasn't always the most truthful of men, sir, and he might have been funning, but he told me that he'd found Barney, and that he came looking for me to tell me that Barney had gone over to the enemy. He'd been so taken with the way they lived in Little St. Peter, with those fancy clothes and cheap guns and all, that he'd deserted and settled down there—Joey had found him by accident, and Barney had tried to talk Joey into staying with him. So Joey left Mark in charge in Little Pete and came looking for me, and you know the rest. Mark was supposed to watch the airship place, but if you didn't see him

there I reckon he gave up and moved on."

"I didn't see him."

"Well, then, he's probably dead, deserted, or lost somewhere."

John nodded agreement.

Heathen pacifists they might be, but the Heaveners and their followers were proving dangerous enough—out of a five-man scouting party they had killed one, trapped one, subverted one, driven one to desertion—and the fifth had vanished, and it had all apparently been done without anyone ever suspecting the scouts' true nature.

"So how long have you been here?" John asked.

"I'm not sure," Matthew admitted. "What day is today?"

"Monday, April twenty-second," John replied.

"It's been nearly three weeks, then, sir. I arrived on the second or third, I'm not sure which."

"Have you investigated that headquarters building?"

"Ah ... no, sir. I felt my first duty at this point was to return to Marshside with what I knew, not to risk getting myself killed."

"I can't fault you for that," John agreed. "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread—and you're no fool, Matt."

"Thank you, Captain."

"Somebody has to get in there, though. I won't ask you to go—after three weeks here you've done enough. I'll go myself."

"Do you think that's wise, sir?"

"It may not be. Look, I'll give you the fare back to Little St. Peter; if I'm not back by noon tomorrow you use it. I have a prisoner from Marshside, a woman, at the inn here—the Righteous House. She's locked in an upstairs room. Take her back with you. We left three horses in the stable at St. Peter's Inn, under the name Joel Meek-Before-Christ. You talk to a man there named James Redeemed-from-Sin, and he should let you have them. You ride back to Marshside and report to Lieutenant Habakkuk. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good." He counted out the money, then passed over his trade goods as well. "Here, take these darn woolens and see if you can sell any, and I'll go take a look at that fortress."

"Yes, sir." Matthew looked at the bundle. "What should I do with them?"

"Sell them—here in the market. You should get at least fifteen Heavener credits for them."

"Yes, sir." He accepted the woolens unhappily.

"I should see you back at the inn around sundown, I think."

“Yes, sir.”

John stepped back, then turned and strolled off in the direction of the headquarters building, leaving Matthew standing in the market looking confused and dismayed.

To his surprise, there were no guards. The strange glass doors were not only not locked, they stood open invitingly. He wondered if he had been misled by the building's massive appearance; perhaps this was not actually a fortress at all, despite the thick walls of smooth concrete. He ambled in, trying to look casual, as if he belonged where he was; nobody seemed to notice.

He found himself in a brightly-lit chamber—too brightly lit, and in an oddly yellow-greenish light that seemed to come from the entire ceiling. Three passages led off in various directions, and half a dozen closed doors were located in the various walls. The floor was covered by thick golden carpet, more luxurious than anything he had ever imagined; the walls were tawny plastic, the doors a darker shade of the same color. There was no furniture, and no people were anywhere in sight.

Puzzled, he chose a corridor at random and walked on into the depths of the building.

The corridor led past dozens upon dozens of doors, across intersecting corridors, endlessly; whenever he thought he saw the end of the passage through the harsh glare of the yellow-green lighting it turned out to be merely a corner.

His eyes adjusted to the odd illumination after a time, and he was able to notice details. None of the doors had handles, and there were no signs to indicate what might lie behind any of them; instead, a small red square of what appeared to be glass was set into the wall beside each one. The corners, he realized, were mostly to the left, so that he was actually following a large rectangle around and around; he had come in on one of the intersecting passages, but he could not identify which one. If he continued to turn only at the ends of the corridors, he would retrace his steps over and over forever.

He had just reached this conclusion after almost fifteen minutes' walk, and was about to pick a crossing passage at random, when a door a few paces ahead of him slid open and a woman stepped out.

He stopped, prepared to salute a lady, but did not nod his courtesy after all; this woman was obviously no lady. She wore a garment of rusty orange that accorded well with the yellow-brown walls, and with her sallow skin as well; it covered one shoulder, but dipped down on the other side well onto the curve of her breast. The skirt was a respectable near-ankle-length, but slit up either side, and the entire dress flowed as she moved, shifting about her so that John had occasional glimpses of far more of her anatomy than he felt he had any right to see.

“*Hlo,*” she said, “My name's Tuesday; what's yours?”

“Joel Meek-Before-Christ,” he answered shortly, cutting off his natural tendency to add, “At your service.” He was not ready to serve harlots. She had used that odd greeting he had first heard at the airport; he guessed it was a Heavener peculiarity. She had also given a blatantly false name—John knew of no one in the Bible, not even in the Apocrypha, named Tuesday or anything that resembled Tuesday. He looked her in the eye, refusing either to gawk at her body or turn his gaze away in embarrassment, and noticed that her eyes, like her greeting, had a peculiarity of their own, a very strange one indeed; each had a fold of skin at the inner corner that made them seem unnaturally far apart and somehow crooked. Her hair was very black and straight, and her skin an odd color. Distracted by her outrageous garb, he had not seen at first that she was apparently a freak.

“Joel,” she said. “Nice. Come here.”

“I’m busy,” he said, and turned away, intending to retreat back to the last intersection he had passed.

“Sure you are,” she said, “wandering around like a lost satellite. You’ve gone past my door four times now.” She had the Heavener accent even more strongly than most, in addition to her other quirks.

“I have?” He turned back.

“Yes, you have. Come on in, and I’ll tell you about it.” She motioned at the open doorway.

John considered quickly. He had no idea who this woman was—though her occupation was certainly obvious, probably something she had been forced into as a result of her physical peculiarities, which would have precluded a respectable marriage—but he also had no idea of where he would find any useful information. He had expected to find the building full of people he could follow, signs he could read, and other indications of where things were; these empty, featureless corridors had thrown him badly off-stride. This whore might well be able to tell him something of what was going on. He had never had much contact with whores, but his impression was that most were not particularly bright, and could be manipulated readily.

“All right,” he said. He followed her through the door; it slid silently shut behind him.

## Chapter Eight

*“But her end is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two-edged sword.”—Proverbs 5:4*

\* \* \* \*

The room was furnished in a degree of luxury John had never before imagined. The floor was broken into curving sections at various levels one step up or down from one another, all covered with thick red carpeting so soft and lush it seemed more like a low fog wafting about their ankles. The walls and ceiling were opalescent and softly glowing, and there were no windows. Velvet cushions in a hundred shades of red and gold were scattered about, ranging in size from puffs the size of his hand to pillows big enough for two to sleep on. Some were gathered together into couches, and John could not tell whether they were mounted on a frame of some sort, or merely arranged.

Pearly tables of various sizes and shapes—all curved—floated at various altitudes; John looked for the wires that supported them, but could not detect them. Several held bottles, glasses, or platters of multicolored crystal that contained strange food and drink.

There was not a single hard corner or rough feature anywhere in the entire chamber, no surface that was not either gleaming smooth or upholstered in rich fabrics. The woman, sleek and smooth in her flowing dress, fit in well with her surroundings; John, in his rough leather jacket and worn jeans, did not. It was all appallingly decadent.

“Would you like something to drink?” she asked.

“A little water, maybe,” he replied, to be polite.

“Oh, no, you must try this!” She handed him a stemmed glass of something a very pale blue in color.

Reluctantly, he accepted it and took a sip. He choked, gasped, and spat it out immediately.

The woman giggled.

He glared at her; when he had recovered his breath he asked, “What *is* that?”

“Just a liqueur.” She saw his anger and forced herself to stop smiling.

He stared at the glass in his hand. "Liquor? You mean distilled spirits?"

"That's right."

"I can't drink that! Strong drink is sinful!" He started to fling the glass away, then caught himself and placed it gently on a nearby table.

"You drink wine, don't you?"

"That's different."

"It's still alcohol."

"Only a little. That stuff—it *burns*!"

"You're not used to it, that's all. It's only about eighty proof." She sipped deeply at her own glass, then smiled.

He shook his head. "I'm sorry, I can't drink that." He was more certain than ever that the Heavens were not native to Godsworld; he had never heard of anyone on Godsworld, not even the most radical of heretics, who condoned strong drink. God had given mankind the gift of fermentation, so that alcohol might ease the strains of life, but it was Satan who invented distillation, to turn the blessing into a curse.

Not that distillation didn't have its uses—alcohol made a good fuel for lamps or even some machines, but not for men.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Tuesday said. "Against your religion?" The phrase seemed almost mocking, somehow. "Try this, then." The new beverage she offered was richly red.

John sipped it warily; it had a tangy, fruity taste and no alcoholic content that he could detect. "What is it?" he asked.

"Just a fruit punch." She smiled enigmatically.

"Thank you," John said, sipping again.

His hostess raised her own glass, still half full of the blue liqueur, then sank back onto a pile of cushions. John had not noticed them there behind her; it was as if they had slipped into place as she descended.

He found a large cushion of his own and seated himself gingerly. The thing seemed to shift about to accommodate him more comfortably, but he convinced himself that was merely overwrought imagination, brought on by the tension of being in the enemy's headquarters and being confronted by these strange events and this strange, freakish woman. "Now," he said when he was settled, "you said you'd tell me all about this place."

"Well, no," she answered, "I said I'd tell you about being lost and going in circles." She shifted, leaning to one side; her dress slipped back to reveal most of one thigh.

"Tell me, then."

"You're not from the Citadel, are you? No, I can see you aren't. You came here from one of the other villages, probably one well outside Dawes' little protectorate. You wanted to find out what was going on here—so you walked into this building, which is conveniently left open and unguarded, and then wandered about until I found you. Am I right?"

“Yes,” John admitted.

“Well, it's not surprising. But there isn't anything of any importance on this level, you know. You need to know which door leads up or down, to where everything important is.”

“What *is* on this floor, then?” He sipped his drink.

“Oh, a lot of storage rooms and meeting rooms and machinery, I suppose. Mostly it's just corridors for people like you to get lost in, and a lot of hidden machines watching.”

“Then what are *you* doing here? And all this?” He gestured at the room around them.

“Oh, I had this whipped up for my amusement. I don't really belong here, you know—I just came to see if there was anything entertaining on this world of yours. Dawes would have preferred to keep me out, but I'm a stockholder—she can't.”

John wondered what sort of a “stockholder” she might be; this woman did not look as if she had ever handled sheep or cattle. Another question came first, though. “Who's Dawes? That's the second time you've mentioned that name.” Dawes was not a real name, any more than Tuesday was, but he guessed it to be a nickname of some sort.

“Don't you even know that? Ricky Dawes—America Dawes, that is—is the executive officer of the entire operation on Godsworld.”

“What does that mean?” He ignored the weird name for the moment; it was obviously pagan, but that was hardly surprising under the circumstances.

“She's in charge—she controls the People of Heaven.”

“She does? *She*?” John, without really intending to, made his true question very clear with his emphasis on the feminine pronoun. He regretted it immediately; some women, he knew, were discontented with Godsworld's recognition of the natural superiority of the male.

“Yes, *she* does.” Tuesday seemed more amused than angry, but John decided not to pursue that; arguing with women about the proper roles of the sexes was likely to get nowhere and provoke animosity that he would do better without. He drank the rest of his fruit punch as he groped for another question.

“You know,” Tuesday said, “I'd rather talk about you—if we have to talk at all.”

John shrugged.

“Have you had many women?”

Shocked at the bluntness of the question, even from a whore, John replied, “I don't talk about that.”

“You don't?” She smiled.

John was beginning to dislike her smiles. “No,” he said.

“Do you *do* anything about it?”

He said nothing, simply sat and frowned at his empty glass. He refused to say anything in reply to such direct obscenity.

“No?” She grinned, openly mocking now. “Are you a virgin, then? Or do you prefer men?”



This was the second woman to question his manhood within the past few days; he had dealt calmly with the first, but that was before the strains of his scouting expedition. He forced himself to put his empty glass down gently, then stood up. "I did not come here so that you might insult me."

Her grin broadened. "Oh? Where *do* you go to be insulted, then?" She stood up in turn, and reached up to the single shoulder of her gown.

"I'll go now," he said. He turned, but the door was closed.

She twisted something, and the dress fell away completely, leaving her naked. "I guess there's no harm in this," she said, still smiling, "since you don't know what to do with a woman."

He turned back to face her, rage mounting within him. He tried to remind himself that anger and lust were mortal sins, but the woman stood mocking him with her stance, hips thrust forward, her hands out in a displaying gesture. He growled wordlessly.

"Take it or leave it," she said.

He lunged at her; she fell back onto the cushions, laughing, and her hands groped for his belt, unbuttoned his pants. He no longer cared whether she was cooperating or not; he intended to prove his mastery over her. As he pushed himself between her legs she wrapped her arms around him, one hand on his back and the other on his neck; he felt a sharp prick where fingers brushed his neck, but ignored it.

Only when he was finished did the possibility of poison occur to him. He pushed himself up and rolled off her, then felt at the back of his neck.

There was a small stinging as he touched one spot; he drew back his hand and found a small smear of blood on his fingers.

"What did you do to me?" he bellowed.

"What?"

"My neck—what did you do to my neck?"

"Oh, stop shouting, it's just a little prick."

"It's not poisoned?" He calmed somewhat, and his voice dropped.

"No, it's not poisoned; why would I want to poison you?"

"I don't know; why did you prick me? What did you do it with?" He was genuinely puzzled.

She held up one hand languidly and showed him the tip of her index finger; a thin metal wire, the tip sharpened like a needle, projected from it at a peculiar angle. He could not see what held it in place.

"What's that?"

Her satisfied smile broadened. "It's called an empathy spike. It's wired into my nervous system—into my brain. When I used it to hook into *your* nervous system, I felt everything that you felt."

"You read my mind?"

"No, stupid—it only picks up your physical sensations. I felt what your *body* felt, not your mind."

“Oh!” Once again, John was shocked—horrified, in fact. The concept was strange, but once he grasped it he loathed it immediately. It was the most obscene thing he had ever heard of. This woman had violated his privacy in a way he had never imagined, *could* never have imagined. It was bad enough that he had copulated so thoughtlessly with a freak, but it was infinitely worse, somehow, that she had felt his own sensations as it happened. He pulled away from her, instinctively curling himself into a semi-foetal position. “That’s disgusting!” he spat.

“Oh, it’s fun!” She giggled, then rolled over onto one elbow. “It’s so much more fun with the spike!”

“It’s disgusting!” he repeated.

“You think so?” She grinned. “I’ll have to introduce you to Isao some time—if he lives long enough.”

“Who is this Esau?” That was a name he could understand.

“Not Esau, Isao—it’s Japanese, I think. He’s painwired. He has his pain nerves hooked into the pleasure center of his brain; he feels every injury as pure pleasure. One of these days he’ll get carried away and kill himself; he’s already had to replace all his fingers and toes—and a few other things.”

“Oh, Jesus!” John was suddenly unable to accept his situation. This was not possible; God could not permit such things to exist. This impossibly luxurious room, this woman who spoke so casually of the unspeakable, this entire building and all the People of Heaven, were abominations. It all had to be a nightmare. He fought down nausea and willed himself to wake up somewhere else.

“Hey, don’t take it so badly!” Tuesday said. “I just thought it would be interesting to try it with a Godsworlder, someone different—and don’t feel badly that you did it, because I put aphrodisiac in your drink; you couldn’t help yourself.” Her almost apologetic tone suddenly gave way to another giggle. “You were pretty good, too—awfully quick, but you put your heart into it, you know what I mean? And with the spike I don’t mind if it’s quick.”

John said nothing; he lay there, unable to awaken and convinced that it was all real after all, trying to gather up the shattered fragments of his thoughts.

“Hey, are you all right?”

He did not answer.

She said something totally alien; John was not even sure it was words. He closed his eyes, straining to think.

“The computer says that you’re okay, just upset. I can’t wait around all day, Joel; that wouldn’t be any fun at all. I think you can find your way out if you try; I’ll leave the door open.” He heard her moving about, heard the rustle of clothing.

“Wait,” he said.

“Why?” she asked.

“Where are you from?”

“Me? Ho Chi Minh City. Why?”

“No, I mean, where are the People of Heaven from?” He opened his eyes and saw her ankles; a skirt hung above them, cut like the one she had worn before, but this one was a different color, a deep rich

brown.

“Earth, mostly; they're a wholly-owned subsidiary of the New Bechtel-Rand Corporation. It was fun, Joel.” She walked away; her ankles vanished from his field of vision.

He lay there for a few seconds more, then uncurled and got slowly to his feet. As she had promised, the door to the corridor stood open. He walked unsteadily out into the passageway, chose a direction at random, and began looking for the exit.

From Earth? As far as John was concerned, such monsters of decadence could only be from Hell, and he had every intention of destroying them before they could harm Godsworld any further.

And the woman who had seduced him and used that infernal spike on him—if that whore was merely a “stockholder”, which he guessed to be something like the Satanic equivalent of a deacon, then this America Dawes could be no less than the Great Whore of Babylon herself.

Could the spike have been poisoned after all? He felt weaker than mere emotional distress would seem to account for. But then, he had just ... raped? Attacked? He had just had a woman, and he had been drugged; the unknown aphrodisiac might have side-effects.

If he had been poisoned he would fight it off. He drew strength from his fury. His uncertain walk became his usual firm stride, and ten minutes later, after a few false turns, he found the lobby he had entered through. He left the building and marched toward the inn.

## Chapter Nine

*“Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge?”—Job 38:2*

\* \* \* \*

Lazarus Speaker-of-Gospel cocked his head sideways and stared at his nephew in annoyance.

“You're sure of all this?” he demanded.

“Yes, Elder,” John replied, “I am. You've heard Matt's testimony as well; I'm sorry that the heretic Miriam Humble-Before-God won't speak, and that we couldn't find any of the other surviving scouts, but you have the sworn word of two good men, good Christians, and good soldiers. Isn't that enough?”

“I'm not sure; by your own admission you were drugged by this woman, and Matthew never heard anyone claim to be from Earth, nor saw any of the shameful perversions you insist took place.”

Hiding his own annoyance, John said, “He saw the guns, though, and rode this airship of theirs, and can swear that these people are strangers to Godsworld who live in sinful luxury and decadence. Three years ago the Citadel of Heaven was just another heretic community, up in the hills—now it's the home base of this growing protectorate that uses Earthly weapons and preaches against evangelism. Even if these strangers aren't Satan's minions sent from Earth—and I believe that that's exactly what they are—they are an evil force we've got to destroy.” Beside him, Matthew nodded agreement.

Lazarus sighed.

At the end of the council table Jacob Blessed-Among-Men barked impatiently, “Enough of this! These people are obviously a threat, and we have to destroy them; John's right about that. So what are we going to do about it?”

“Can't it wait until after we've fought the Chosen?” Simon Called-to-the-Truth whined.

“Their power is growing steadily,” John said. “Marshside was on the verge of joining their protectorate when we captured it; if we'd been a month later, we might've faced not just one machine gun, but a dozen.”

“And that's something that troubles me,” old Isaac Fisher-of-Men said, shaking his head unsteadily. “What could you and your men—fine as they are—*do* against the weapons you say these people have? John, you lost what—thirty men against that one machine gun?”

“Thirty-one,” John admitted. “And two more who died later. But Elder, we were taken by surprise; we were charging down an open hillside, making ourselves perfect targets. We wouldn't be doing that against the People of Heaven; we know what we're facing this time.”

“Do we? John, you may be a good soldier, but you don't know everything; there were weapons back on Earth that make machine guns look like children's slings. What if these people have them?”

“Why should they? They didn't come here to fight a war; they came to subvert us, lead us into the temptations of material wealth and sensual pleasure. If they have other, mightier weapons, why have they kept them secret? Why not let it be known, so that we would be more frightened than ever? Maybe Earth has lost some of its wonders, just as we have; maybe they couldn't bring that much with them. *I* don't know their reasons, but I don't believe they have any of these miracle weapons.”

“Still,” Lazarus pointed out, “you'd be leading men with swords up against machine guns.”

“I would be leading men with swords and rifles and bombs and whatever shields we can devise up against machine guns—men armed with steel and with steel in their backbones, the steel of the one true faith, against guns manned by soft and decadent weaklings!”

“We don't need speeches,” someone muttered; John did not see who had spoken.

“The men of Marshside fought well,” Lazarus said. “They weren't weaklings.”

“They weren't the People of Heaven, either—they hadn't even joined the protectorate yet.”

“So you want to take all our guns and ammunition and men, all the explosives in New Nazareth, and attack the Citadel of Heaven with them, sneaking them in where the roads are so bad travellers ride this ungodly airship,” Simon said derisively. “Fine—what are we supposed to do if the Chosen attack while you're leading your men up through these hills?”

“I hope to have the armies of the Chosen with me,” John replied.

“What's he talking about?” Simon demanded, looking back and forth at his fellow Elders.

Lazarus sighed again. “I hadn't told them about that part yet, John,” he said. “I figured we'd best start with the easy part.”

“Elders, I want to make a truce with the Chosen of the Holy Ghost. After all, they're as threatened by the People of Heaven as we are; I think we should put aside our differences until this greater threat has been destroyed. You've pointed out yourselves that our army, fine as it is, might not be enough against these diabolical weapons the Heavens use—but if we had the Chosen marching beside us, our numbers doubled, nothing on Godsworld could stand against us.”

“I don't like this,” Simon said, “I don't like it at all. They're heretics.”

“They're still Christians, though,” John insisted. “The People of Heaven aren't.”

Old Adam Bearing-the-Cross, who had sat quietly beside Jacob Blessed-Among-Men throughout the entire session until now, spoke up. "Our ancestors put aside their doctrinal differences in order to come to Godsworld in the first place," he said. "They hoped for a miracle that would show them how to resolve those differences permanently, and that miracle never came—but can we do any less to preserve Godsworld than they did to create it? I don't say that I believe every word John has said about these people—it's hard to imagine offworlders sleeping a hundred years to come here and make trouble—but John obviously believes it, and he's a good man, an intelligent man. If he tells us these people are a real threat, and that stopping them is more important than showing the Chosen the error of their heathenish ways, then he's probably right. I say we make the treaty."

"I agree," Jacob said. "After all, we can always take care of the Chosen later; this way we'll know more about how they fight."

"And they'll know more about the way *we* fight," Isaac pointed out.

"We know enough about how they fight now," Simon said. "Can't we deal with them first, and *then* attack the Heaveners?"

"We need their strength," John said.

"Vote!" Paul Bound-for-Glory called.

"All right," Lazarus said, "All those who favor treating with the so-called Chosen of the Holy Ghost to form an alliance to attack the so-called People of Heaven, vote 'aye'. Paul?"

"Aye."

"Thaddeus?"

"Aye."

"Simon?"

"No."

"Isaac?"

"I'll abstain."

"Tom?"

"Aye."

"Jake?"

Simon objected, "You're not taking them in order."

"I don't have to," Lazarus replied. "Jake?"

"Aye."

"Adam?"

"Aye."

"And reluctant as I am, I vote 'aye', too," Lazarus said. "That makes six for, and with an abstention that's

a majority. God's will be done, amen. If you others want to go on record you can, but that's all we need. Anyone?"

No one spoke up; after a brief pause, Lazarus continued, "All right, then—someone get John a white flag and a cross, and he can head out for Spiritus Sancti right now."

"Thank you, Uncle Lazarus," John replied.

The party that had ridden full-speed from Marshside had been made up of John, Habakkuk, Matthew, and Miriam—John had brought Matthew and Miriam to support his testimony, and Habakkuk to report on the current state of the army at Marshside, reaffirming the soldiers' faith in their leaders and their readiness to fight any foe. The party that gathered for the journey to Spiritus Sancti, an hour after the meeting of the Elders, included John, as spokesman; Habakkuk, as second; a civilian by the name of Peter Light-of-the-World to speak for the Elders; two soldiers as honor guard; and Miriam, because nobody had any better idea of what to do with her. Matthew was to return to Marshside with Lieutenant David Saved-By-Grace, who would be taking charge of the army there until John's return—John and Habakkuk had left a mere under-lieutenant running things, and the Elders deemed that unsuitable.

It was the third of May when the party reached Spiritus Sancti under heavy guard and was led into the presence of the Anointed.

When Peter had run through the required formalities and made introductions, John came directly to the point. "We have come here in hopes that we can convince your people to forget, temporarily, their differences with the People of the True Word and Flesh, and join with us against a common foe."

The Anointed sat back on his cathedra; the chair creaked beneath his weight. "And who would this common foe be?" he asked.

"The so-called People of Heaven, and their infernal pagan protectorate."

"I don't know a thing about them; they're on the other side of the New Jordan, and I don't concern myself with anything over there."

"Well, sir, whether you know it or not, they're a growing threat to all of Godsworld, on both sides of the New Jordan, from Asher all the way to Simeon."

"Oh?" the Anointed said politely.

"Yes, they are! They're from Earth, agents of Satan come to destroy us."

"Oh?" the Anointed said again. "What makes you think so?"

"I've visited their capital, and they told me as much. They have the lost arts—they have an airship, they have machine guns, and they're fabulously wealthy. They're expanding rapidly; it won't be more than two years before they start nibbling away at your own southeastern territories. They've already taken Little St. Peter, and St. Peter itself is a part of your domain, isn't it?"

"It is—but if I were concerned with *Little St. Peter* we'd have taken that, too. Still ... agents of Satan, you say?"

"Their women are wantons, their men cowards; their leader is a woman. The towns they 'protect' become soft and decadent. They have no faith—they insist their client towns accept any sort of heresy."

The Anointed nodded. "And your people intend to put a stop to these abominations?"

“With your help, yes.”

“You propose to put an end to your plans for a war against my people?”

“We propose an alliance until the last of the People of Heaven is destroyed; I can't promise any more than that.”

“And if I accept such an alliance, whose command would our armies fight under?”

John glanced at Peter and Habakkuk, then turned back to the Anointed. “That remains to be negotiated.”

“I see.” He nodded again. “Is that everything?”

The True Worders looked at one another. “I think so,” John said.

“All right, then. You folks can wait in the yard; I need to pray and talk to my advisors. I'll let you know my decision before supper. God be with you.” He pushed his swollen body up out of the chair and plodded heavily from the room.

The Chosen guards herded the True Worders unceremoniously out before they could protest, out to the yard in front of the Anointed's house where rows of benches were available for petitioners.

After a moment of rebelliousness, John shrugged and sat down. He was in the enemy camp; he had no say here. He could not even use the standard diplomatic threat of war to demand better treatment, since what he wanted most of all was to avoid a war against the Chosen.

Miriam sat beside him, pressing up close; startled, John turned and looked at her, even as Habakkuk and the others, noticing her actions, discreetly took benches well away from the pair. She smiled winningly.

“What do you think you're doing?” he asked quietly.

“Oh, I'm just enjoying myself,” she replied in a near-whisper.

“You are?”

“Sure—I knew you were a coward and a hypocrite all along, and it's nice to have proof.”

John felt his face going red, and glanced at Habakkuk. Habakkuk politely looked the other way; he had seen the red and assumed that his captain was blushing at something the girl had suggested.

“A coward?”

“Yes, a coward. You claim that you command an army of the Lord's own men, the only followers of the true religion on all Godsworld, but before you go up against the Heaveners—men you called decadent weaklings—you want to make sure you've got the help of the biggest bunch of heretics around. The big brave warrior!”

“They have machine guns,” he reminded her.

“A lot of good that did Marshside!”

Annoyed, he pushed her away and sat brooding silently.

The sun was well down the western sky when a messenger summoned them back into the Anointed's presence.

"I've decided," the Anointed said without preliminaries, "that I can't afford to risk my people by getting them into a war that's none of our business. You may be right about the threat these heathens present, but we'll just have to trust in the Lord to protect us. We won't join your alliance." He paused, watching the True Worders' faces for reactions, then went on, "However, since these 'People of Heaven' may be a real threat someday, we *will* swear to remain neutral in any war you poor heretics may wage against them; we won't harm any of you so long as you fight the Heavens." He shifted in his seat and leaned forward. "In fact, we'd be glad to arrange a truce, whether you fight the Heavens or not, so that our two peoples won't be weakened by fighting each other, such that the Heavens could wipe us both out later."

John said, "I hope you'll reconsider..."

The Anointed interrupted him. "Boy, when I speak from this cathedra, it's final—I don't reconsider. You got that?"

John opened his mouth, then closed it again and nodded.

"Good. We've got a couple of rooms for you down the street; you stay there tonight, but be out of the city by noon tomorrow. Got that?"

John nodded again.

"Good. Thanks for coming; tell your Elders to send me a message if they want that truce, and I'll lay off you as long as you fight the Heavens, truce or not. Now, get out of here, and God be with you." He waved, then sat back and watched as the True Worders departed.

The rooms were in a boarding house, but the matron refused to serve heretics, so that supper consisted of cold trail provisions. After everything was eaten and the food had had time to settle John, Habakkuk, Peter, and Miriam gathered in one room to talk—or rather, the three men were to talk; Miriam was just there.

"I don't like it," Habakkuk said.

"Which part?" Peter asked.

"Any of it."

"The truce offer isn't bad."

"It's interesting, certainly," John agreed.

"It's a trick of some kind," Habakkuk insisted.

"I don't think so," John said. "The Chosen have been careful about treaties; they don't break them without provocation. I think that the Anointed means what he says."

"Why? A few months ago the Chosen were practically *begging* for a war, blocking our trade routes, taking hostages ... why would they want peace now?"

"There's only one reason anyone *ever* wants to avoid a war, Hab; they think they'll lose. A few months ago the Chosen didn't know anything about our army; I would guess that they've learned a little since then. They may have spies, or maybe someone from Marshside talked to them. Or maybe it's something here in Spiritus; maybe there's been trouble in *their* army. Anyway, they think they'll lose if there's a war, that's plain."



“You're right, John—that's got to be it. And that's why they want us to fight the Heaveners—so they can take on the survivor while he's still weak.”

John nodded. “I'd say so.”

“But in that case, we need to attack the Chosen *first*; after we're done with them we can worry about the Heaveners. The Chosen are a lot closer to home, John, and truce or not, they've been our enemies for years, while the Heaveners don't even know yet that we exist. If we take the Chosen now, then take a year to rebuild, we should still be able to take on the Heaveners; but if we take the Heaveners now, as soon as they're defeated the Chosen will take us from behind, before we can get our men back across the New Jordan.”

John shook his head. “I think you're right about most of that, Hab—but I'm not sure that we *will* be able to take on the Heaveners after a year's rebuilding. If we don't get them now we may never have the strength.”

“You don't have the strength now!” Miriam spat.

The three men looked at her.

“You'll never take the Heaveners on; none of you have the guts. They'd blow you all to bits, squash you like bugs.”

“Oh, shut up,” Peter said.

“Why? Will you hit me if I don't? You're all so brave against a woman, but when it comes to facing those machine guns you'd probably all turn and run! Where's the strength of your faith now? I thought God was on your side!”

“God *is* on our side,” Habakkuk said calmly, “but God helps those who help themselves. We mustn't *depend* on miracles; that would be the sin of pride. We can only accept them when they come.”

“And if they don't come, you'll just let these Heaveners walk all over you? You won't defend Godsworld against the heathen unless you're sure you can win? Oh, I am just overwhelmed by your integrity!”

“Shut up, woman,” Peter said again.

“Some defenders of the truth! You're afraid of the truth when you hear it! Godsworld is going to be taken over by the Heaveners because *you* haven't got the guts to fight them—and when they do run everything, and they don't have to play nice any more, I'll watch them skin you alive and I'll laugh!”

“Why would they skin us if we *don't* fight them?” Habakkuk asked placatingly.

“For your effrontery in claiming to have the true faith, when you won't fight for it!”

Peter slapped her; to his astonishment she responded by punching him in the belly with her closed fist. He doubled over as John and Habakkuk grabbed her.

When order was restored and Miriam securely bound to one of the beds, John said quietly, “She's right, you know.”

“About what?”

“We have got to fight the Heaveners. They're the real threat to God's way, and we all know that. Even if we don't have a chance, how can we call ourselves Christians if we don't fight for what we believe? We

know the Chosen aren't a real danger now, but the Heaveners are. We have to fight them. God will see to it that the Chosen don't stab us in the back—or that if they do, we'll triumph in the end all the same."

Habakkuk shook his head. "I don't like it, John."

"It's what's right, whether you like it or not. And besides, if we wipe out the Heaveners we may capture some of those weapons they have—if we do that we can handle the Chosen even if we've lost half our army. I'll send messengers out, see if we can recruit some allies other than the Chosen, but even if we can't, by September I intend to be the lord and master of the Citadel."

## Chapter Ten

*"Then said he unto them, Nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom."*—**St. Luke 21:10**

\* \* \* \*

It was amazing, John thought, how readily the small tribes signed up when they were promised booty and did not need to choose sides between empires. Faith did not come into it, really, although his messages had made an appeal to defend Christianity. Ordinarily, when recruiting allies, the other side would also be recruiting, so that the small tribes would not join for fear of later reprisals against the losing side; the Heaveners, however, seemed totally ignorant of the preparations being made against them. Furthermore, they had a reputation for incredible wealth—which meant good looting—and no reputation at all for fighting. The True Worders had been a long-standing threat for most of the small tribes; the Heaveners were newcomers no one had learned to fear. With the Chosen swearing neutrality, John had had no trouble in picking up dozens of volunteer companies.

Of course, he had made a point of the decadence and evil of the Heaveners, while downplaying their armament.

His own armament had increased significantly; bombs that would probably have been of little use wasted in open battle against the Chosen would be quite effective against the hillside defenses of the Heaveners, so John had appropriated the entire True Worder stockpile.

The final result of his preparations was the largest, most heavily-armed army Godsworld had ever seen, all prepared in incredible haste under his command. By the third of August John was finally satisfied; on the morning of the fourth of August, after the necessary invocation and brief dedicatory service, he led his troops out of the immense camp one day's march east of Marshside, and on toward the Citadel.

In the hectic days of gathering and equipping his forces he had had no time for lesser concerns; as a result, Miriam rode beside him. He had never decided what to do with her; for some reason he could not define he was reluctant to send her to New Nazareth as an ordinary captive, to work and be taught the true faith. He told himself that she could be useful, and simply brought her along wherever he went, even though in fact, she had as yet been of no use whatsoever.

He called a halt at noon, for lunch and a rest, and watched with pride as the vast company neatly settled to the ground. Glass-tipped spears flashed redly in the sun; harness jingled and blades rattled. A murmur of voices began.

Satisfied, he swung down from his own mount and was reaching for his provisions when he heard the sound, low and harsh, but growing quickly louder. It was a little like the whirl of a spinning wheel at first, but by the time he looked up to find its source it was already rising into a screaming roar.

Motion caught his eye; he turned just in time to glimpse something huge and glittering. Before he could focus on it it howled directly overhead, the sound plummeting from an ear-piercing shriek to a dull

rumble. He whirled, trying to follow it, but it was gone over the horizon before he could make out anything but a shining blur.

The murmur of voices died, then was reborn as a babble that quickly mounted into shouting chaos. The one question that he could hear clearly, over and over, was, "What was that thing?"

John felt a cold uneasiness in his belly as he remembered Isaac Fisher's words: "There were weapons back on Earth that make machine guns look like children's slings."

Then the thing reappeared on the horizon and swept toward him again; the sound followed a moment later. John began a loud prayer. "Oh, Lord, we are gathered here to fight in your name..."

He paused; something was happening. A small piece of the thing was splitting off, dropping down toward him. He forgot his prayer and started to call a warning, but his voice was drowned out by the roar of the thing passing overhead.

The smaller part did not pass overhead in a flash; instead it slowed and dropped nearer, until it was hovering over the army's vanguard. It was almost flat, roughly triangular, and black and silver in color—silver around the edges, black at the center. John could not be certain of its dimensions against the empty sky, with nothing to give it scale, but judged it to be four or five feet across.

"People of Godsworld!" The voice boomed out suddenly, coming from the hovering device; John started, as did almost everyone.

"People of Godsworld!" the voice repeated. "You are marching against the People of Heaven, thinking to destroy the Citadel and loot the protectorate. This is your only warning; we have the means to defend ourselves. We have weapons that could shatter Godsworld like a hen's egg hit by a sledgehammer. Turn back now, return to your homes, and no ill will befall you; continue on and you will be destroyed. This is your only warning. We do not wish to harm anyone, but any further advance in our direction will be met with force." John noted that the voice had only a slight Heavener accent. The device hung silently for a moment longer, then swooped away with only a faint buzz.

"It's a Devil's trick!" John bellowed as the thing shrank into the distance. "Forward, march! In the Name of the Lord!"

With some scattered hesitation, his men got to their feet; with more hesitation they formed lines. John saw, with some distress, that a few were falling out, stepping aside, even turning to run. He drew his sword and waved it over his head. "In the Name of the Lord, we march on!" he shouted as he spurred his mount forward.

The horse took a few steps, then stopped and shied as the larger flying craft came roaring up at them again from behind the eastern hills. This time it was lower in the sky than before, and seemed to John to be diving directly at him; without thinking, he slid sideways off his horse to the ground, rolling as he hit.

Something flashed, and men screamed behind him. He struggled to his feet, sword still in his hand, and looked around for an enemy he could strike—or for something he could use against his flying foe.

The enemy was gone again, but this time its passing had not been harmless; supply wagons were ablaze, and John could see men lying sprawled at the roadside, blood running freely. Screams and shouts battered at him.

Then the wedge-shaped thing was back, and the voice announced, "This land is under the protection of the People of Heaven; you have fifteen minutes before further action will be taken against intruders."

John shook his fist at it, sword flashing. “Darn you! *Damn* you!” There was no way he could strike at it. He had never thought before about the difference flying machines could make in a battle.

Habakkuk was shouting something at him; without bothering to listen, John shouted back, “We march on, those of us who dare to fight for the Lord!” He remounted his horse. “We have fifteen minutes to find cover! Those of you who are too cowardly to face the Devil's minions, turn back now; the rest of us will pray for your souls when we've triumphed!”

He spurred his mount forward again; when he had gone a few yards he glanced back and saw that his army was ripping itself in half. Some men were following him, pressing forward, while others had turned back. There was no pattern or order to it, simply two mobs sorting themselves out from one another.

He kept his horse walking forward; Habakkuk was, as usual, at his right hand, and to his surprise he saw Miriam following close on his heels.

“What are you doing?” he called.

“I want to see what they do to you,” she called back. “I've been waiting for this for months!”

He had calmed considerably, as he always did when the actual instant of crisis was past, but her reply irritated him anew; he turned away and ignored her. Instead of worrying any further about Miriam, he called to Habakkuk, “Go back with them—see if you can turn them around when they're over their initial fright.” He pointed at the retreating half of his army.

“Yes, Captain,” Habakkuk said; he saluted, then turned his horse and spurred it to a gallop, back toward Marshside.

By the time the fifteen minutes were past the two groups had separated completely, a widening gap forming between them, and Habakkuk was in the midst of the retreating group; he was not yet trying to turn them, but merely riding along until the moment seemed right. At the head of his own half John was trying to pick up the pace, as his reduced force was still far from any decent shelter, anything that might shield them from whatever mysterious power had sliced up a dozen men and set three score wagons ablaze.

The triangular thing had hovered overhead the entire time, occasionally changing position; now, as it hung close above the center of John's loyal troops, the voice suddenly called, “Cover your eyes! Cover your eyes!”

John glanced up and then, without thinking, covered his eyes with his arm.

Even so, he saw the flash; the light seemed to burn into his eyes, pouring around his forearm and even through it, so that for an instant he could see the shadow of his own bones.

Then the shockwave hit him, and everything vanished.

He awoke slowly and painfully, blinking unsteadily up at the uncomfortably bright, greenish-yellow glow of the ceiling.

That glow answered the first question that anyone asks when waking up somewhere different from where he or she went to sleep; John knew where he was, he was inside the Heavener stronghold.

That left a myriad of other questions, however.

How had he come here? What had happened to his men? It seemed obvious that his army had been

soundly defeated; where did that leave his people? What had that flash been? Why had the flying thing shouted a warning to the attacking troops to cover their eyes? What was he doing here? And just where in the Heavener fortress was he, and how could he get out?

He turned his head; his neck was stiff, but he ignored the sharp twinge of pain.

He was lying naked in a bed, covered by a soft white sheet and surrounded by more of the familiar and hated golden plastic walls that seemed to be in everything the Heaveners built. A small table stood nearby, and the walls were dotted with various mysterious panels and protrusions. The bed was not flat; it seemed to be fitted to his body in a wholly unnatural way. It was extremely comfortable, which immediately made him suspicious. Life was not meant to be comfortable; the pleasures of the flesh were snares and delusions. They weakened a man's will.

"Please do not attempt to get out of bed," a pleasant voice said from an unidentifiable source; it had only a trace of the Heavener accent, and John was unsure if the speaker was a man or a woman. He turned his head back the other way, looking for whoever had spoken, but the tiny room was empty save for himself, the bed, and the table. There were two doors, one opposite the foot of the bed and one to his left; to his right the center of the wall contained a large panel that might have been a shuttered window.

"Who said that?" he asked; his voice was a faint croaking. He swallowed, coughed, swallowed, and asked again, "Who said that?" This second attempt was better, but still thin and hoarse.

"Who said what?" the pleasant voice asked.

"Who are you? Who am I speaking to?"

"I'm Cuddles; I run things around here."

Another of the absurd Earther names, John thought. "Where are you?" he demanded feebly.

There was a pause before the voice replied, "I'm right here."

"Let me see you! Show yourself!" John's breath gave out after making this demand; he coughed feebly, then lay back to recover. He was still not at all sure what had happened, but he had apparently been injured somehow. This place was the Heavener infirmary, he was sure.

A panel on the wall beyond the foot of the bed glowed oddly, then seemed to vanish, leaving an opening into another room. A bland face smiled down at him. "Here I am," Cuddles said.

John still could not be certain of the speaker's sex; the face was beardless, the black hair worn at a moderate length, the features fairly delicate but not clearly feminine. The skin was oddly dark, as if heavily tanned.

"Come in here!" John demanded.

"I can't do that," Cuddles replied. "But someone will be there very soon. Here he is now."

The door to the left slid silently open, and John turned in time to glimpse the corridor beyond as a young man wearing a short white gown and white pants entered.

"*Hlo*," he said, "I'm Liao Hasan." The name was utterly incomprehensible to John, merely noise, even less meaningful than the other Earther names he had encountered. "I'm glad to see you awake." The man had the thickest Heavener accent John had heard yet, and also had the same odd skin hue and eye formation as the woman who called herself Tuesday. That startled him; could Tuesday have been, not a

freak, but a member of an unfamiliar race? John was familiar with the half-dozen varieties of dog on Godsworld, and had heard that on Earth there had similarly been three separate races of people, white, black, and brown, descended from Noah's three sons, but he had never before encountered any kind but his own; none of the original colonists had been Hamitic or Shemitic, though John had never heard any explanation of why the Japethitic race should be the only one to accept the true faith.

This attendant and Tuesday were surely not black, and even calling them brown would be a gross exaggeration, but perhaps they were another human variant that Godsworlders had forgotten.

"Who are you?" John demanded. "What am I doing here?" His voice cracked on the final word.

"I'm Liao Hasan; I'm a medical assistant here. You were brought here badly burned after your army was nuked three weeks ago; we've regrown your skin and repaired what other damage we found."

John ignored the claims of miraculous healing. "Nuked?" he asked.

"Yes, nuked; your army was destroyed with a clean fusion bomb. Intense heat in a very small area, but only a small shockwave, and virtually no fallout or secondary radiation at all—there's no fission, it's just an overload of a fusion power plant, not really a bomb at all."

John did not pretend to understand any of this explanation. "What happened to the others?" he asked.

Hesitantly, the man said something that John could not make out.

"It is not polite to speak in a language the patient does not understand, sir," the neutral voice replied.

"Ah ... all right, Cuddles, have it your way. Answer my question; am I authorized to tell him that?" John noticed that the 'medical assistant' did not look at the window when he spoke, but simply addressed the air over John's head.

"Yes, sir," Cuddles replied calmly. "There are no additional restrictions on information for this patient."

"Well, we aren't sure how many people you had there to begin with; the central part of the advancing group was vaporized. There were even a few burns in the retreating group—that was a serious miscalculation. Out of the advancing group, we saved one hundred forty-seven men and one woman. Oh, and two horses. We aren't as good with horses—there aren't any back home."

"One hundred forty-seven men?"

"That's right."

"I had ... well, after the split, I reckon I had six thousand men."

"I'm sorry."

John struggled to grasp the scope of the disaster. "The others are *all* dead?"

"It's possible a few fled before our rescue team arrived; I can't say for sure. The only reason you survived was that you were well ahead of the main body. The woman and about half a dozen men were up front; the rest were at the back. We were trying to avoid the retreating group."

"So I'm in your infirmary now?"

"We call it a hospital, but yes."

“And you're a doctor?”

“No, I'm a medical assistant—a nurse.”

John stared for a moment, then dismissed the incongruity of a man claiming to be a nurse.

“Who's Cuddles? A doctor?”

“Oh, no, of course not! It's a *comsim*.” The final word was not any part of the Godsworlder version of English; the ‘medical assistant’ pronounced it even more strangely than he pronounced more familiar words.

“A what? Say it slowly.”

“A *comsim*,” the young man repeated carefully.

John dug back in his memory, picking through the faint memories of childhood lessons about Earth and man's history there.

“Comsymp?” he asked, “Communist sympathizer?”

“No, no, *comsim*; computer simulation. It's not real, it's just an image the machines use to talk to you.”

“Oh!” John had heard stories about machines that talked, machines that thought, or flew, or swam, or whatever, but he had not always believed them completely. He looked at the window; Cuddles smiled and nodded.

“Yes, I am a computer simulation,” Cuddles said. The image suddenly distorted and then reshaped itself, and John abruptly realized that what he had taken for a window was a screen of some kind on which the image of a face was projected.

“Cuddles, do you need me here?” Liao Hasan asked.

“No, I do not think I do,” Cuddles replied. “If the patient has no objection, you may continue your rounds.”

“Do you mind if I go? Cuddles will take better care of you than I could, anyway, Mister ... I didn't get your name.”

With his army destroyed, John saw no need to dissemble—and he did not seriously doubt that his army was defeated, though perhaps not as thoroughly obliterated as the Heaveners claimed. “John Mercy-of-Christ, Armed Guardian of the True Word and Flesh,” he replied.

“Mister Mercy-of-Christ. Glad to have met you.” He turned to go.

“Wait!” John croaked.

The medical assistant turned back.

“What happened to my people?”

“I told you...”

“No, not the army; I mean my tribe.”

“The True Worders? Oh, they've joined our protectorate as a client state; the treaty was signed four days

ago. Cuddles can show you the tapes, if you like."

John looked back at the screen; the computer's bland artificial face gazed mildly back as Liao Hasan departed. "Would you like to see the tape of the treaty signing?" it asked.

"Yes," John said, unsure of the proper way to address a machine.

"Do you have a preferred format?"

"Ah ... no."

"Very well." The face vanished from the screen, and John found himself looking at a gathering of people at a peculiar angle, as if peering up through a basement window. He was shocked to recognize all the Elders, and Habakkuk, on one side; on the other were various strangers in peculiar brightly-colored clothing.

The sounds of formal conversation swelled to fill the room, and John watched in horror as each of the Elders in turn first signed a paper, then pressed his hand to a metal plate. Finally, Habakkuk's turn came, and the ceremony hit a snag.

"This says 'Armed Guardian of the True Word and Flesh'; that's not right," said Habakkuk's familiar voice. "We don't know for certain John's dead, and you haven't deposed him. I'm just Acting Guardian."

"Just sign it and add 'Acting' after your name, then," Lazarus replied.

"Let's get it over with," Jacob called.

Uncertain, Habakkuk glanced about.

"Listen, even if John turns up alive, do you think we'll keep him around after what happened?" Paul Baptised-in-Fire demanded. "You're the Armed Guardian now, Habakkuk, like it or not. Sign the treaty; they want a military authority, and you're the best one we've got."

"All right," Habakkuk said, as John struggled to rise to a sitting position. He accepted the pen and signed.

"Stop!" John called.

The scene vanished instantly, leaving the blank wall panel.

"You said that was four days ago?"

"Yes."

"Oh." John sank back. A thought occurred to him. "You said a hundred and forty-seven men survived; what happened to them all?"

"One hundred and six were treated and released, and I have no information on their subsequent actions. Thirty-eight, including yourself, are now conscious but still hospitalized; all are due to be released shortly. Three are still comatose; one of those three may not survive, or at any rate may have suffered irreversible brain damage. Of the total, sixty-two ignored the warning to cover their eyes and may still be suffering impaired vision."

"What about the woman?"



“Miriam Humble-Before-God has been conscious and fit for release for over a day now, but refuses to leave until you do, Mr. Mercy-of-Christ. She left a message for you, to be delivered at your request.”

“What's the message?”

The reply was not Cuddles' voice, but Miriam's shriller one. “I told you I'd see you all fry, you bastard! You lived through this one, but I'll see you die yet—you aren't rid of me!”

“Oh, Jesus,” John muttered, fighting back tears of rage and frustration, “how did it come to this? What have I done wrong?”

## Chapter Eleven

*“Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings hast thou ordained strength because of thine enemies, that thou mightest still the enemy and the avenger.”—Psalms 8:2*

\* \* \* \*

The clothes they had given him upon his release were strange, and so comfortable that John felt as if he weren't wearing anything, which he found disconcerting as he made his way up the street. Miriam followed close behind, but he ignored her. He was a warlord no longer, and therefore could have no prisoners, and was not ready to deal with Miriam on any other basis. She still hated him, yet she followed him without taking any openly hostile action against him. He had serious doubts about her sanity; in his opinion, a sane person would go on about her life—or rather, since her old life had been wiped out, would go about building a new life. The Citadel, with its insistence on treating strangers as equals, was probably the best place on Godsworld for doing that. Miriam's clinging to her pointless enmity, the last vestige of her old world, struck him as senseless. The People of the True Word and Flesh had been defeated, had become just another client of the People of Heaven; what more did she want?

*His* enemy, on the other hand, was triumphant, and John was determined to reverse that. An open attack had failed, and obviously had had no chance to begin with against the Satanic weaponry the Heaveners used—little wonder they were willing to sell machine guns when their own armament was so much more powerful! There were other methods besides open attack, though. After much careful thought and study, and some indirect questioning of the machine that called itself Cuddles, John had come to the conclusion that there were no more than five hundred of the Earth-born Heaveners on Godsworld; they controlled thousands of Godsworlders, true, but the Earthmen and Earthwomen were, relatively, only a handful. If he could bring their followers to see them in their true light, as agents of Hell come to destroy Godsworld, John was certain that he could bring even the corrupted and decadent population of the Citadel to rebel. After all, just a few years before the Citadel of Heaven had been an independent city-state; some vestige of pride and Christianity must linger.

It puzzled him that the Earthers had made so little effort to conceal their actual origins. Surely they knew that the people of Godsworld were aware of Earth's evil nature!

Against a popular uprising their weapons would not be enough; they could not bomb their own homes, after all. Even if they were able to hold out indefinitely in their fortress—their Corporate Headquarters, Cuddles had called it—they would have no further influence on Godsworld, and that would be enough to satisfy John.

All he had to do was stir up a rebellion.

He turned and entered the Righteous House inn, Miriam close behind.

The Heaveners had given him money—reparations, they called it, a word he had never heard before. He was able to book a comfortable room and order himself an ale without worrying about the cost. With the

cold mug in hand—chilled by a Heavener machine called a “*frizh*”, instead of with honest ice stored from last winter—he settled at a large table, annoyed by the softness of his chair's upholstery and the gentle feel of his own clothes.

Miriam, after buying herself wine with her own reparations money, sat down two seats to his left.

John knew exactly what he wanted to do, but he was not quite sure of how to go about it. He was not a preacher. He had had some experience in speaking, in telling his troops what he wanted and firing them up for battle, but that was not the same thing as trying to convince someone of something. The men had been a captive audience, already proud and eager, and had respected him and known him; now he would be speaking to strangers, individuals or small groups at most, most of whom would be reluctant to believe him, and all without the madness of crowds to help him.

He sipped his ale and tried to prepare himself, planning out what he would say.

Twenty minutes after he sat down, as he had known would happen as the inn filled up with the lunchtime crowds, a young man sat down on his right. “Excuse me, sir,” the fellow said, “I hope you don't mind if I sit here.”

“Go right ahead,” John said. “Glad of the company. Joel Meek-Before-Christ is my name.” He put out a hand.

The other reached across to shake it. “*J'sevyu*, Mr. Meek,” he said. “Aaron Blessed-of-Heaven.”

“Really? I knew a family by that name, back in North Dan. Kin of yours?”

“I can't say; my folks are from Naphthali, but we aren't traced. Don't know anyone in Dan, north or south, but they might be kin somehow.”

“Naphthali? What brings you to the Citadel, then?”

“Oh, *I'm* not from Naphthali; when I was a baby my folks' village was burned in a border war, but they slipped out and headed this way. We've got a place in the hills a few miles east of here; I'm in town for some supplies.” The man's initial formality had faded away.

“What do you think of this place?” John asked.

“The inn?”

“The whole town.”

Aaron shrugged. “It's a town. It's nice enough, since the New Heavers arrived, but too crowded for me.”

“New Heavers?”

“The tall ones who talk funny. The folks around here have always called themselves the People of Heaven, ever since I was a baby, anyway, but they were just plain folks until the new people showed up a few years back and started trading.”

“Where'd these new people come from?”

Aaron shrugged again. “Couldn't say. I've heard rumors, but you can't trust those.”

John looked down at his mug for a moment, then back at Aaron. “I'll tell you, Mr. Blessed, it happens I

know where they're from—I was in their headquarters for something, and I found out. Wasn't any chance I misheard or misunderstood, either; they're from Earth." He watched closely to see how Aaron took this.

"Well," Aaron said, lifting his mug, "that's the rumor I'd heard. I don't know what they're doing here, then—what we've got here that would be worth the trip."

"I think that's plain enough, Mr. Blessed—it's us they're after. They're not Christians, you know—when our people left Earth they were the last true Christians around, though there were still some heretics claimed the name. The people of Earth all sold their souls to the Devil centuries ago, and now they've come here to collect ours, too." John kept his voice low, but a certain intensity crept into it.

Aaron glanced at him, surprised by that intensity, then took a healthy swig of ale before answering.

"Mr. Meek, I can't say you're wrong—but does it matter? Seems to me that we've done a pretty fair job of consigning our own souls to perdition right here on Godsworld. Jesus said to love our neighbors, but I'm here now, instead of down in Naphthali, because some of those loving neighbors didn't like the way my grandpa said his prayers and burned him out. They hanged him, as a matter of fact—him and sixteen other men—and raped my grandmother and all the other women they could catch. That's not any sort of neighborly love I know. Now, these Earthers, if that's what they really are, have come here and paid us all good prices for what we could trade, sold us what we wanted at fair prices, and they haven't burned any villages or hanged or raped anybody, so far as I've heard. That's no sort of evil I ever heard of; it's more my idea of a good neighbor. If they aren't good Christians, and that's as may be, I figure that's their own concern, so long as they don't try and stop me and mine from being what we are."

"They killed six thousand men last month—fried them, out on the plain, and took over their homeland."

"The True Worders?" Aaron frowned. "I heard about that—a bad business, no doubt about that. But those men were coming here to attack us; they were offered a chance to turn back, and a lot of them took it—and those who did weren't hurt. Seems to me that when someone's attacked he has a right to defend himself. And the Heaveners didn't take away the True Worder homeland; all they did was sign a treaty to defend it against the Chosen of the Holy Ghost, or any of the other troublemakers up that way." He paused, drank more of his ale, then looked at John. "You said North Dan," he said. "Were some of your folks in that army? Most of North Dan's True Worder land now."

"I was in that army," John admitted. "I was wounded."

"And they brought you here to patch you up? Now, you see what I mean? That was just plain neighborly—good Samaritans, these New Heaveners. The Samaritans hated the Jews, you know, but in the parable a Samaritan helped a Jew—you can't judge everyone just by where they come from. Did you ever think that maybe the New Heaveners were outcasts from Earth, same as our ancestors were? Maybe they came to Godsworld looking for the true path, hoping we could show it to them. Fine welcome your people gave them! I don't know if that's the truth, but it could be. I'll judge them by what they do, not by what our ancestors told us about Earth."

The possibility that the Heaveners did not represent Earth as a whole had not occurred to John, but he refused to be thrown off by it. "Look at what they're doing, though," he said. "They've turned this town into a fleshpot. Look at these cushions, these colors! It's disgraceful—decadent!"

Aaron waved that away. "Horsehold," he said. "What's so decadent about a few cushions? You know, life is hard here on Godsworld, because God didn't intend people to live here—He meant for Man to live forever in the Garden, back on Earth. The Bible says so. Man was thrown out of the Garden, and eventually he came here, and we've done the best we can with a hard lot—but the way we live now, our

ancestors who first came here would call hard poverty, Mr. Meek. I've seen old pictures, from right after the Crossing—the Reverend Fuller, who became Adam Full-of-Grace, kept what they called an album, and there's a fellow out our way still has it. Back then, before there were so many people and before the ship fittings got so spread out or lost, folks lived better than the people here in the Citadel, the ones you call decadent, live now—and a hundred times better than most of the poor villagers out there."

John was becoming confused, frustrated, and angry by this young man's easy countering of his every point. "They were still weak then!" he almost shouted. "They had just come from Earth, and the stink of decadence was still on them! God made life here hard to purify men, to work that softness out of them, and that's what it's done; and you want to let these Earthers let it all back in, make us weak again!" He was leaning toward Aaron, frowning ferociously.

"Mr. Meek," Aaron said, "I don't want to argue with you; you take it how you will. I'm just saying that I don't have any quarrel with the Heaveners."

"And I'm saying that as a good Christian, you should! We need to defend ourselves!"

"I don't feel, Mr. Meek, that I need any defending against the Heaveners. If they do me wrong, or if I see them do wrong to another, then I reckon I'll reconsider, but I don't see that they've harmed anybody that didn't attack them without reason. Nobody's forced me to trade with them. And as for comfort making them weak—how weak can they be if they wiped out an army in fifteen minutes?"

"They did that with hellfire!"

"No, sir, they did it with a weapon that was designed and built by men—just men, not demons."

"Men too weak to fight for themselves, though—they need machines to do it."

Aaron finished his ale. "Mr. Meek-Before-Christ, I enjoyed meeting you," he said as he stood up, "but I think I had best move along now. Have a good day, sir, and God bless you." He nodded politely and walked away.

John watched him go, seething with suppressed anger. His first attempt at recruiting had been a dismal failure; the boy had had a smart answer for everything. Still, he was just one man; the Citadel was filled with others, and John was sure that he would find plenty who would rally to his cause. He glanced around the room.

Most of those present had heard a little of the argument, and were now steadily ignoring him, while two seats away Miriam was grinning at him in triumph. She leaned over and whispered, "All you're going to do is get them mad enough to hang you—so you just keep it up, Captain John!"

She sat back, smirking.

## Chapter Twelve

*"Put not your trust in princes, nor in the son of man, in whom there is no help."*—**Psalms 146:3**

\* \* \* \*

Even after a week and a half of intensive efforts John could see no sign at all that he had angered the Heavener authorities with his harangues. Unfortunately, there was also no sign at all that he had won a single convert, or even planted any seeds of doubt that might later bloom. The people of the Citadel, either native or visitor, simply refused to worry about any dire purpose that might lie behind the generosity and good will of the New Heaveners. The only actual result that John could detect was that after a week or so a few people were beginning to refer to them openly as "the Earthers".

He knew when to cut his losses; besides, just because he saw no evidence, that didn't mean the Earthers weren't mad at him. On the eleventh day, the fifteenth of September, he bought a ticket on the airship and headed for Little St. Peter.

He had not given up, however. The people of the Citadel had been too thoroughly corrupted to be saved, true, but the rest of the protectorate might not be so far gone; he admitted to himself that most of the client populations were probably as deluded as the people he had spoken to in the Citadel, but there were probably still some men who held to the true ways, and at the very least he could hope to organize some sort of resistance *somewhere*, even if only mercenaries from outlying areas. Open warfare was not possible, but quick raids and harassment could be effective. If he made life sufficiently difficult for the protectorate's client states, no more would join and some might drop out. The spread of the Heavener contamination would be stopped and the evil contained, even if not destroyed. The Heavers could not expand peacefully if no one was willing to sign up, and if they switched tactics and tried to expand by force their evil intent would be out in the open, and John could exploit that, perhaps even foment the popular rebellion he had expected initially.

With that all thought out he boarded the airship in a mood of guarded optimism, ignoring Miriam, who was still following him.

She was not willing to be ignored, however, and shortly after the airship took off she demanded, "Fleeing for your life, Captain?" She spoke loudly enough that two of the five other passengers glanced in her direction.

"No," John replied calmly. "Just looking for more promising ground to seed."

"I hope you find some, Mr. Meek/Mercy—I'm still looking forward to seeing the Heavers finish you off."

"If you want me dead so much, Ms. Humble, why don't you kill me yourself? You tried once, but since then you've passed up a dozen opportunities. Try it again and let's get it over with—I'm tired of seeing you following me around."

"Oh, no; I want no blood on my hands. When I tried to stab you I was still mad with grief—and besides, I thought I was defending myself, I thought you planned to rape me; I didn't know you were queer. Vengeance is the Lord's, and He'll take vengeance upon you when He's ready—but I want the pleasure of seeing it happen, as a comfort for my own suffering."

"You don't seem to remember the fifth chapter of Matthew's gospel," John said. "Taking joy in another's suffering is not Christian. I have no further quarrel with you; leave me alone and I'll trouble you no more. Let what is past be past."

"And what of yourself, then, if you're so concerned with good Christian behavior? Aren't you seeking your own vengeance? Haven't you killed people, and aren't you planning to kill more?"

"I am fighting to save God's truth from its enemies, woman; the things of this world, even the lives of men, aren't as important as the life of the soul."

"You're so certain that the Heavers are evil?"

John looked at her closely. "I thought you wanted me to fight them, so that I would be killed."

"Oh, I do, and I think that you'd fight them regardless of whether you thought they were evil or not. They're your enemies; they killed your men, destroyed your stinking little empire. You'll fight them

anyway; you're not one for loving forgiveness."

"Matthew Five, Forty-Four—I do believe that, and I would forgive them and welcome them with all my heart if I didn't know them to be agents of Satan. They did destroy the People of the True Word and Flesh, the last bastion of the one purely true way of God—what more evil do you need?"

"Your people destroyed themselves, by attacking a more powerful foe—you destroyed them, by attacking the Heaveners. There's no evil in defending oneself. It may not be the Christian way—one could turn the other cheek—but it's not evil."

"If it's not Christian it *is* evil."

"I don't believe that."

"I do. Christ said, 'He that is not with me is against me.'—Matthew, Chapter Twelve, Verse Thirty."

"Well, we don't know for sure whether they're Christians or not—Matthew, Chapter Twenty-Four, Verse Fourteen, the gospel shall be preached to *all* nations. What evil have the Heaveners done? Why attack them so foolishly in the first place?"

"You need to ask? They wallow in the sins of the flesh; their homes are full of sinful luxuries, and they take their pleasures without thought. When I visited their headquarters a woman who gave an obviously false name, that she wouldn't be held to account, forced herself upon me, seeking a moment's relief from her lust—not even an honest whore, as she took no money, but simply humiliated me for her own amusement. These are the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, come again."

"And you're no Sodomite, yourself?"

"No."

"I almost believe you," she said, staring at him. "This woman..." She trailed off.

John waited for her to finish her question, but when she did not he simply let it drop and turned away. He had had enough of the conversation in any case.

At Little St. Peter John left the airship and hired a ride into town; as the wagon crawled up the slope he looked around for Miriam, but saw no sign of her in the darkness. He wondered if he had finally managed to lose her.

He quickly dismissed her from his thoughts as unimportant, however, and concentrated on his plans to organize a guerilla resistance against the Heaveners.

He remembered James Redeemed-from-Sin at St. Peter's Inn, who had spoken so strongly on the Heaveners' behalf; that, he decided, would be a very bad place to start. Accordingly, when the wagon dropped him in the market square, he asked a few questions and found himself a room at a small boarding house, owned and run by the widow Worthy-of-Heaven.

In four days he found only one man who was willing to fight the Heaveners. Jonas Dust-to-Dust was perhaps not the most desirable recruit he had ever seen—fifty years old, but as bent and wrinkled as a man of eighty, not very bright and apparently ready to hate just about anybody, particularly if there were money or food to be had by doing so.

He was, however, a start, and he did happen to make one very useful remark.

“Seems to me,” he said when John had explained the situation, “that if you want to put together an army you should go where there's already some soldiers. All we got here in Little Pete is those fool guards on the walls, that work those big guns, and they ain't really soldiers at all.”

John accepted the truth of this immediately. While it was true that he would have preferred to turn the people of the protectorate against their masters, it would be far faster and easier to find soldiers elsewhere. He had had no trouble recruiting allies for his disastrous first attack; surely he would be able to find ready allies for a guerilla war. The Chosen had seen what happened to their hated enemies; they might now be frightened enough to help. With Jonas in tow, he spent most of his remaining reparation money on three horses and set out for Spiritus Sancti.

No one in the protectorate paid much attention to them, but within an hour of crossing the border into the territory of the Chosen of the Holy Ghost they were surrounded by armed men, taken prisoner, and herded onward toward Spiritus Sancti.

John did not resist this treatment; he simply announced, over and over, that he carried an important message for the Anointed.

Jonas was less cooperative; despite John's example he put up a fight, knocking two men to the ground before someone broke his jaw with a rifle butt. He was bound and flung across his horse's back. John was permitted to ride upright, though the soldiers did confiscate the long knife he had bought in Little St. Peter, as a replacement for his own sword, which had somehow never been returned to him after his hospitalization.

To John's disappointment, they were not taken directly to the capital; instead, they turned off the main road and found themselves in a military outpost. Here, after delays that John struggled to take calmly, he was dragged before a harried-looking captain, leaving Jonas to wait his turn.

“Name?” the captain asked wearily, without looking up from his desk.

“John Mercy-of-Christ, former captain in the army of the People of the True Word and Flesh,” John replied. “I have a message for the Anointed.”

The captain looked up. He stared at John for a moment, then commented, “You're not in uniform.”

“I said *former* captain, sir; I was relieved of my command.”

The captain sat back, folding his hands behind his head. “Mr. Mercy, I sure hope you know what you're doing. It's traditional to use ‘retired’ or ‘discharged’ officers as spies; you could be hanged for espionage if you're not careful.”

“I'm not a spy, sir; I have a message for the Anointed. I came into your territory openly, I haven't done or said anything out of line; what else am I supposed to do? I *was* relieved of my command, for leading my men into a massacre; should I lie about it, or wear a uniform I'm not entitled to? Besides, I haven't *got* a uniform; it was burned. They took my sword, too.”

The captain leaned forward again. Even if he had not recognized John's name, he had certainly heard of the massacre the True Worders walked into.

“What's this message?” he asked. “Who's it from?”

“It's for the Anointed, from a group who want to keep the protectorate run by the People of Heaven from getting any bigger than it already is; I can't tell you the details, but we're hoping for some help.”

"You didn't do very well with your first try—that is, if you were really in command of that attack."

"I was, sir—and that's why I won't try a frontal assault again. There are other ways, though."

The captain stared at him. "How many of you are there? The True Worders are too scared to fight; you must be an independent operation, right?"

"Well, sir, we aren't connected with the traitors in the True Worder government who sold out to the Heaveners, that's true. As for how many of us there are, even if I told you, would you believe what I said?"

"Probably not," the captain admitted. He thought for a moment, still staring at John.

"All right," he said at length, "if your buddy bears out your story, I'll send you to Spiritus Sancti with a recommendation that you be given a chance to talk to the Anointed. And if you are what you say you are, Mr. Mercy-of-Christ, I hope you get what you're after and wipe those bastards off Godsworld." He motioned, and the two guards led John away.

Jonas apparently managed not to ruin John's story; the following morning the pair was on the road again, this time accompanied by four heavily-armed Chosen soldiers.

The Anointed heard John out politely.

"I take it," he said after a thoughtful pause, "that you're the military commander of your little group."

John nodded.

"Your record against the Heaveners isn't very inspiring."

"That was the first time any army I led was ever defeated in battle—I didn't think they'd have any weapons that powerful. Now I know better."

"Even so, you'll understand that I'm not about to name you as my commander-in-chief and give you free rein. What I *will* do is offer my men a chance to volunteer. And I think we can sell you guns and bullets cheap—maybe even make it a loan. I don't think I like these Heaveners either, you know. And with the True Worders gone, I don't need my whole army here, sitting around eating and getting fat and lazy. Ah ... answer me truthfully, now; how many men have you got so far? I know it isn't many, or I'd have heard about it."

"I can't say, exactly," John said. "They come and go—men volunteer, others decide they made a mistake and go home. Not many, though, I'll admit that."

"Fewer than a dozen?"

Reluctantly, John said, "Yes."

"I thought so." The Anointed leaned back with a contented smile on his face. "That's all right, though; you know the enemy better than we do. I'll call for volunteers and send them along. You'll have to wait just across the border—can't have any hostile acts on Chosen land. The Heaveners might be watching, with those airships of theirs."

"I suppose they might," John agreed calmly. He forced himself to smile back.

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### Chapter Thirteen



*“Have not I commanded thee? Be strong and of a good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed: for the Lord thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest.”—Joshua 1:9*

\* \* \* \*

The Heaveners had, in a way, been very obliging in settling in the high hills; John and his men had no trouble finding places to hide amid the rocks and valleys surrounding the Citadel. Had the city stood on an open plain, or gently rolling countryside like that around New Nazareth, they would have had to find concealment within the walls, and confined themselves to sabotage and assassination instead of raiding.

John's company was a good-sized one. Eighty-five of the Chosen had volunteered, including three officers, and every one brought a rifle and five rounds; John guessed that that must have virtually emptied the Anointed's arsenal. As soon as he and the Chosen had their home camp set up and a basic organization established, John headed for the nearest town, intent on more recruiting; he did not like being one of only two non-Chosen in his own army.

He quickly discovered that the handful of survivors of his own destroyed True Worder army were still scattered about the Citadel and a few of the surrounding towns; the Heaveners had simply turned them loose when they were sufficiently recovered, just as they had with John himself. He had assumed previously that, as commander, he was given special treatment, but such was not the case. Of these men, fourteen were successfully recruited; the other survivors either refused to join or were never found. John considered this a disappointingly small response; he had hoped for greater loyalty from his own men.

As word of their presence spread, though, a handful of other recruits turned up. Eight volunteers drifted in from True Worder lands, three of them soldiers in Habakkuk's army who felt guilty about turning back before the massacre, the other five civilians who had disagreed with the decision to surrender and join the protectorate, army or no army. Four other men and two women also wandered in from various places.

John was surprised that Miriam never came looking for him, to wait for a chance to watch him die, but there was no sign of her.

With over a hundred men John felt ready to begin his campaign. He had hoped for more, perhaps enough to split into several bands, but he would take what he had and use it as best he could.

The Anointed had provided tents, but John had refused to set up such ideal targets, and had used the oilcloth to roof over a washed-out gully instead, scattering dirt and various red plants across the top for camouflage. The result was a cool, dim interior, long and narrow, with steep sides and a rough, slanting, uneven floor. John made his headquarters at the upper end; below that was the kitchen area, and the remainder was divided up between sleeping areas wherever the ground was relatively flat and dry, and open commons wherever it was not. One walled-off corner of the lower end served as a latrine, the other as a stable.

It was rather pleasant throughout most of September, but late in the afternoon of the final day of the month, the twenty-third, as John sat cross-legged on a rock planning the last few details of the opening raid on the Corporate Headquarters building, scheduled for that night, the fall rains arrived, drumming heavily on the fabric roof and dripping down through the seams.

Men who had been outside for one reason or another came rushing in, hands on their heads; of the dozen who had been gathering fungus for the kitchen supplies only one kept hold of his load, the rest dropping the pasty red lumps wherever they were, so as to run better. The clouds had been building for days, but had not been expected to break quite yet.

The trickle of water down the center of the gully widened perceptibly as John watched. He sighed and put down his pen and parchment. The rain would be good cover for the raid, but he was sure the men

wouldn't see it that way. They would only notice that they were cold and wet.

"All right," he called over the general hubbub, "those men going on tonight's raid, let's get moving; this weather is going to slow us down. If we want to get there and get back before dawn we'd better get started."

"But Captain," someone called, "we can't go in the rain!"

"Why not?" John demanded.

"Won't it ruin the guns?"

"Not if you're careful. Come on, then." He clapped his own helmet on his head, slid the waxed-wool rust-protector over it, then picked up his bundled supplies; his new sword, bought a week before in the protectorate village of Christ's Corner, was already on his belt, and his heavy leather jacket on his back. He had no rifle; he had never liked them.

Reluctantly, the others he had selected gathered about him: eight of the Chosen, two of his loyal True Worder soldiers, and a blacksmith from Truechurch who had resented the Heaveners' trade in plastic. All ten soldiers carried rifles, with two rounds in each; the smith carried an assortment of explosives and a good sword, but like John himself, no firearms.

A few months earlier John would have considered twenty bullets an incredible extravagance for a single raid, but since the Heaveners had turned up with their apparently infinite supply of powder—if it was actually gunpowder they used, and not something else, as John had heard suggested—bullets were suddenly more plentiful, and had the advantage of being useful at long range. Guerillas could not afford to get in close enough to a fortress to use blades.

Besides, the Chosen were supplying the ammunition; it cost John nothing, and the Chosen officers had assured him more would be forthcoming if he needed it.

He had no grandiose ambitions for this initial raid; it was simply to get the men doing something, rather than sitting around letting the weather deteriorate. A raid would stir things up, would encourage the men, and might even attract more recruits. John had a dozen of his most reliable and intelligent men scattered about the local markets and taverns, looking for likely candidates as well as trying to pick up useful information about Heavener activities or organization.

The men he had chosen for the raid were his second-best dozen; he looked them over as he spoke a brief invocation, carefully kept non-denominational out of respect for the doctrinal differences between True Worder, Chosen, and Truechurcher. They seemed sound enough, reassuring him of his earlier selection. He did not care to increase the risk of failure by using men who might panic and freeze or flee, and he was confident these men would not. Although they grumbled, when he announced, "In the Name of the Lord, amen!", they echoed him promptly and followed him readily enough as he led the way out into the driving rain and up the hillside toward the Citadel.

Visibility was poor; the sun was still above the horizon when John broke out the rolls of string he had brought to link the men together and prevent them from getting lost in the dark. As long as each was tied to his string, the twelve of them would stay together; if any of them got lost, they all would. He had originally chosen string because a lantern would have been too easy for the Heaveners to spot, but he blessed his choice now because he doubted a lantern would have been enough in the downpour.

They struggled on, some of them complaining loudly, the others persevering in silence that could be either determination or simply resignation, and an hour or so after sunset they spotted the lights of the Citadel

ahead of them.

They were approaching from the rear, with the intention of doing what damage they could to the fortress without involving any native Godsworlders. This side was not guarded, so far as anyone knew; the cliff below the fortress was presumably thought to be guardian enough. That was a major reason John had chosen it, instead of the "airport", for the first attack.

The cliff, however, was not really that bad at all; he had investigated it himself a few days earlier. It was steep, true, far too steep for horses or vehicles, but by no means sheer, with plenty of handholds and ledges, not a very difficult climb for a healthy man.

Of course, John had not climbed it in the dark, in pouring rain. His companions balked at first when they reached its base.

"Come on!" he said. "It's easy!" He snatched a rifle from its owner. "I'll show you myself!" He began marching up the slope, using one hand to steady himself, the rifle clutched in the other.

When he was twenty feet up he heard the scrape of boots on stone and knew that his men were following him. He kept moving, and only when he was almost halfway up the hundred and fifty foot climb did he glance back to be sure they were all there.

They were. "Safe-in-God's-Hands, come get your rifle," he called.

The Chosen soldier scurried up to where John was waiting and accepted the return of his weapon. The rest of the climb was made in silence.

The slope levelled off as they climbed, and they soon found themselves standing on a gently-rising hilltop below the fortress wall.

The fortress loomed above them, its windows glowing golden through the gloom; the lowest were a few feet above John's head.

"All right, Safe," he said. "Let's see what you can do with that gun of yours." He gestured at the windows.

Silas Safe-in-God's-Hands lifted his rifle, selected his target—they had hoped to find a Heavener to snipe at, but he saw no sign of anyone in the windows—took careful aim, and fired.

Instead of the sound of breaking glass, however, his shot was followed by the whine of a ricochet. Embarrassed, he lowered his weapon. "I must've missed, sir," he called. "But I don't see how. Must've been the rain."

John had been watching the window, and thought he had seen it shiver as if something had hit it. "You were close, anyway. Here, move right up next to one and try again."

The range had already been short, but Silas obediently took a few steps forward and aimed at one of the lowest tier. He was so close that he was thrusting the rifle up more than forward. It was absolutely not possible for him to miss at this distance; he squeezed the trigger.

Again, the bullet whimpered away as a ricochet, and the window remained intact. John stared up at it for a moment, then stepped up as close as he could and studied it intently.

There was a narrow scratch on the glass, dead center. He motioned for the men to move in.

“Here,” he said, “someone lift me up and let me take a look at this.”

Two men crossed arms to form a seat, and John was lifted up until his eyes were level with the bottom of the window. The scratch was definitely there. Peering in, he could see that the room was full of machinery quietly whirring about its business; he saw no sign of any human inhabitants.

He reached up and tapped the pane with one finger, then closed his fist and rapped on it with his knuckles.

“Damn!” he said. “It’s not glass!”

“What is it, then?” someone called.

“I don’t know—but whatever it is, it’s bulletproof. Let me down.”

He was lowered to the ground, where he stood staring resentfully up at the warm glow of the window.

“What do we do now?” someone whispered.

“Well,” John said, “maybe we can’t shoot out the windows the way we planned, or pick anyone off, but we’ve still got ourselves enough explosives to blow a hole in their wall, I’d say.” He looked around for the Truechurcher blacksmith.

The smith’s name was Thomas Across-the-Jordan. “Jordan,” John called, “let’s see what you can do with that stuff.”

“All right, Captain, but I’m not too sure about the fuses in this rain.”

“Do your best.”

The smith set to work. While he unpacked his knapsack, John announced, “If any of you have any ideas or suggestions, I’d be glad to hear them; I was figuring half of us would be inside by now, not still out here in the rain.”

After a moment of uneasy silence, someone suggested, “We could work our way around the walls and go in the front, couldn’t we?”

“We’d have to go over the old town wall,” someone else answered.

“We could head out to the airship port,” a third voice said.

“Could we?” John asked. He turned to look at the building’s corner and consider the possibilities.

“Sure! If we stay right under the walls, no one will see us coming; we can slip right in and wreck the place, maybe cut the Citadel off.”

John nodded. “I wasn’t planning to do that tonight,” he said, “and I’m not sure we can get past the guards without a fight, but it’s as good an idea as we’re going to get. Soon as Tom here blows out that wall, we’ll make a run for it; the mess here should keep the Heaveners too busy to stop us.” He glanced back at Across-the-Jordan, then at the corner. “In fact, why wait? Tom, you can handle this by yourself, can’t you?”

Across-the-Jordan looked up. “I reckon I can, Captain,” he said.

“Well, I’ll leave two men here just in case you need them, and the rest of us will head for the airport.

Silas, you've used up your bullets; you stay here and help out if you can. Simon," he said, indicating another man, "you stay here as their lookout. Soon as that wall blows, the three of you come along after us; we shouldn't be too hard to find."

The three men selected all nodded acknowledgement, and John led the others around the corner and onward toward the airport.

They had just reached the juncture of the Corporate Headquarters and the old town wall when the explosion roared out behind them.

"Sooner than I expected," someone remarked.

John said nothing, but he was suddenly worried. The explosion had, indeed, come sooner than expected, much sooner; he hoped nothing had gone wrong. He heard nothing after the initial blast, no sound of settling rubble; that was bad.

Then the sky lit up, greenish-gold, turning the rain into a shower of glowing sparks. John looked up.

The light was coming from an airship hovering over the headquarters building; it was roughly triangular, barbed and evil-looking, and a dozen sections around its edges were ablaze with light. John estimated it to be thirty or forty feet long.

"What's that?" one of his men hissed. John shushed him. "I think we better get out of here," he said.

"Back the way we came?"

"No," John said, looking appraisingly about him. "That's where the airship will be looking for us. Down the slope right here and head for home."

"What about Silas? And Simon and that Jordan?"

"Hope for the best," John said. "I think the explosion got them; it came too soon. We can't afford to wait and see if I'm wrong." He headed straight out away from the town wall, moving at a fast walk, half-crouched.

"Hey!" An unfamiliar voice shouted; John glanced back and saw someone standing on the wall, holding a gun.

"Run!" he called, suiting his own actions to his command.

Five of the others obeyed; one had frozen, one was running back toward the site of the explosion instead, and the last raised his rifle.

The man on the wall fired first, with the rattle of a machine gun; the man with the raised rifle fell.

A guerrilla commander could not leave wounded on the battlefield; John knew that. "Get that sentry!" he called, as he turned and ran back for the injured man.

Three men raised their rifles; two of them fired, the third went down in a spray of bullets. Another went down after squeezing off a shot; the third fired his second shot, then turned and ran for cover.

Someone had scored; the man on the wall also fell, and did not reappear. John thanked God for that small favor as he scooped up the man who had been first to fall.

He was unconscious, with red oozing from his scalp and running from his side. John dragged him down

toward the cliff.

Beside him, the man who had managed to fire both bullets was on his feet again, struggling to lift another wounded man. The man who had frozen by the wall joined them; the other two men had already fled out of sight.

“Head for home!” John called. He lifted his burden up across his shoulders and broke into a stumbling run.

The other two unhurt guerrillas followed him closely, each with a wounded man. One was able to hobble along with minimal support; the other was dragged like a sack. John hung back and looked at the dragged man; he did not like what he saw. When they were out of sight of the wall, all panting heavily, John checked the man out.

As he had feared, the man was dead, had probably been dead when he first hit the ground, with half a dozen bullet holes in a line across his chest. The man John had carried was still breathing, though badly injured; the other had taken a bullet through the meaty part of the thigh, but was otherwise unhurt, and could hobble along, using his rifle for a cane as needed.

Leaving the corpse, they struggled onward, down the slope and heading for home, alone in the darkness and rain.

Somehow they made it eventually, all five of them, reaching the roofed-over gully late in the afternoon. The man John had carried remained unconscious for the entire journey, and the three uninjured men took turns carrying him.

The two who had disappeared into the night, ignoring John's order to turn and shoot, never turned up; John never saw either of them again, nor any of the four who had been at the back of the building. That made one dead, two wounded, six missing, out of a party of twelve men; John guessed that of the six, three were killed by the explosion, one captured, and two deserted.

It was a very bad beginning, but in the following month the situation only got worse.

## Chapter Fourteen

*“If the spirit of the ruler rise up against thee, leave not thy place; for yielding pacifieth great offences.”—Ecclesiastes 10:4*

\* \* \* \*

After that first debacle John had expected it, but it still hurt to admit it—his biggest problem was desertion. Late in the afternoon of All Saints' Day he looked down the slope at the mostly empty interior of his base and admitted to himself that the pitiful handful of men who had stayed with him, loyal as they were, would not be enough to accomplish anything during the winter. He could not expect to recruit more men while the cold lasted—it would be hard enough feeding those he had, and keeping them warm. The cloth-covered gully did not hold heat well.

It held odors, though; John himself hardly noticed the stink any more, but the men still always complained of it whenever they returned from any trip outside. Ever since the first rain the smells of the stable and the latrine had simply accumulated, instead of blowing away. That would improve once the cold arrived—but little else would.

And would he be able to keep the horses healthy without solid walls?

He shook his head. Wintering here would not work. It would do no good; they would be unable to

harass the Heaveners and then slip away once the snows came, as they would leave clear footprints—even assuming they dared to make the journey across country in the first place. With just twenty-three men and the two women—women who had both shown far more determination than John had expected—left in the camp, staying here was pointless. What would they do if they were stricken with some sickness? Trapped beneath a blizzard? Washed out by spring flooding? What could they accomplish?

Nothing, that was what they could accomplish. It was time to retreat and regroup. He and his handful of loyal supporters would go underground in the surrounding towns, then return in the spring.

They had at least done a little during their stay; half a dozen raids had been made on nearby villages, though they had, as yet, not managed to do any damage at all to the Citadel itself in their four attempts. Not only was the Corporate Headquarters bulletproof and bombproof, so was every other Earther-built structure or craft; the heaviest slugs he had been able to find had simply rattled off the black-painted sides of the airship like hail—and that had been when they had finally managed to get close enough to shoot at it, which had been a major effort.

Even the Earthers themselves were partially bulletproof—John had seen one shot in the chest, at close range, who came away with only a slight bruise. He could not imagine how the thin shirts the Earthers wore could stop bullets, yet they did.

When shot in the face, of course, an Earther went down as quickly and died as messily as anybody else; John had seen that, too, when a sightseer was jumped in the village of Withered Fig that very morning. That was the first confirmed killing of an Earther, ever, anywhere on Godsworld.

One of them, out of a few hundred—and John had lost at least eleven, probably eighteen, men, not counting those known to have deserted or been captured, not counting the six thousand who died in the fusion blast, not counting those cut down by the machine gun at Marshside. Scattering his men through the towns for the winter might actually be a better idea all around—perhaps they could become assassins, picking off Earthers whenever possible, until the survivors retreated into the Citadel and stopped interfering with Godsworld. Even if the assassins were captured or killed, a one-for-one exchange would be far better than he had been doing so far.

Of course, convincing men to become assassins could be difficult; of his remaining troops he estimated that only four or five were fanatical enough for such a role.

Still, whether any assassinations were carried out or not, dispersing for the winter was undoubtedly the best thing to do.

Despite all the logic that led to the same conclusion, he hesitated. If he once broke up the little band, would he ever be able to get it back together again?

He wasn't sure.

He kicked the question about for the remainder of the evening, sitting quietly throughout a subdued supper. He had no one left that he trusted enough to confide in; Habakkuk was back in New Nazareth, Jonas had deserted weeks ago, and none of the others had spoken to him much about anything but military matters. He had to think it through himself and make the decision.

He would sleep on it, he told himself, and decide in the morning. He said his evening prayer for the little congregation, congratulated again the man who had shot the Earther, then went quietly to bed.

He woke up suddenly, unsure what had disturbed him. He listened.

Someone was moving about nearby—several someones. A bright light flashed in his face; he blinked.

“You John Mercy-of-Christ?” someone asked.

This was obviously not the belated arrival of more volunteers; the man spoke with a thick Heavener accent. John did not answer.

“It's got to be him,” another voice said.

“All right, whoever you are, get up; you're coming with us.” Hands reached down and grabbed his arms; reluctantly, he allowed them to pull him to his feet, wishing he had kept his sword within reach.

The light shone in his face again.

“That's him—right, Sparky?”

“Correct,” an oddly neuter voice said. Remembering Cuddles, John guessed it to be a machine of some sort.

“Let's go, then.”

He was dragged up out the upper end of the camp and hustled into an open doorway in a gleaming dark blue wall, a wall that had never been there before; still not fully alert, it took him a moment to recognize it as an airship, probably the one that had hovered over the Corporate Headquarters the night of the first unsuccessful attack on the Citadel.

Corporate Headquarters—his sleep-fuddled mind wondered idly why it was called “corporate”. Was there a Spirit Headquarters somewhere? And the Heaveners called themselves a corporation—was that like a congregation? Did they worship the body? Their lives were luxurious enough to make such an idea possible.

It didn't matter. They strapped him into a seat aboard the airship, seated themselves all around, and ignored him for the few moments it took to fly back to the Citadel and set down on the fortress roof, chatting amongst themselves in a strange tongue.

Once the airship was down again he was dragged out of the craft and across a dozen feet of open roof, through a sliding door into a small room, where his guards simply stood, as if waiting for something. A moment later he felt a sudden odd lightening and realized that the room was sinking down into the building somehow.

When the door slid open again he faced a richly-upholstered chamber, only slightly larger than the movable one he was in, with a single door in its far wall. “This is as far as we go,” one of his captors announced. He was unceremoniously shoved forward into the chamber; the doors of the moving room slid shut behind him, and he was alone.

He paused to straighten his rumpled clothing, wishing that he had been allowed to put on his hat and boots and maybe his jacket; with the increasing cold he had kept on his shirt and trousers, so he was not completely unsuited to seeing people, but he would have preferred something more than woolen socks on his feet. He looked about.

The chamber was carpeted in very dark red; the walls were dusky orange, and padded, the padding covered by an unfamiliar fabric. There was no furniture whatsoever. The ceiling glowed, like most of the ceilings he had seen in the Earthers' headquarters.



The inner door—which was dark red, a shade lighter than the carpet—slid open, and he faced another chamber, far larger. The floor was covered in the same carpeting, but the walls were an odd shade of light blue, and a row of windows made blocks of darkness along one side. This room was furnished, though he could not identify everything he saw; hanging just to one side of the room's center, for example, was a cloud of tiny glowing sparkles, arranged in a swirling helical pattern. He had no idea what they were or what they were for, or what supported them in mid-air. Cushions, in a dozen shades of red and dark blue, were scattered about. A single straightbacked chair, obviously made here on Godsworld, stood beside the sparkles, and facing it was a broad, gleaming reddish thing that he recognized only with effort as a desk.

The desk would have dominated the room, save for the woman sitting behind it; it was she who dominated. She was tall, even seated—and even for an Earther. Her hair was black and long, but pulled back over the top of her head in a way John had never seen before that seemed to thrust her face forward. Her eyes, too, looked black, but did not have the odd shape that so many of the Earthers' eyes had. Her nose was small and straight; her jaw set firmly. She was wearing a yellow garment that covered her decently, but was cut tight, far too tight by Godsworlder standards, particularly over her breasts.

“Come in, Captain Mercy-of-Christ,” she said, her voice surprisingly smooth and pleasant, and revealing only a faint trace of accent. “I'm America Dawes.”

Hesitantly, John took a few steps forward into the larger room. The door slid shut behind him. “I've heard of you,” he said. “Pardon me if I don't shake hands, but I reckon we're enemies. I won't make my hand a liar.”

“That's fine,” she said. “I'm not fond of needless ceremony myself.”

“Well, that's good, then.”

“Sit down; we need to talk to each other.” She gestured at the Godsworlder chair. “I had that sent up, in case you don't like our unfamiliar furnishings.”

Reluctantly, John seated himself.

“There are going to be two parts to this little talk, Captain. First I'm going to explain the situation and tell you what I want, and you're going to just listen; after that, I'll answer any questions you care to ask, and ask you a few in return, and maybe we can settle a few things and get to know each other a little better. Is that all right with you?”

“I reckon it is,” John replied cautiously.

“All right. Now, I'm the chief executive officer of the People of Heaven, a wholly-owned subsidiary of the New Bechtel-Rand Corporation; that's a company, a business, but one so big that no one person or group of partners could own it all or run it all. The New Bechtel-Rand Corporation has been given permission by the government back on Earth to trade with Godsworld and to maybe develop it a little—that is, to see if we can improve things here so as to make trade even more profitable for both sides. I know you're a soldier, not a merchant, but it's obvious that it's more profitable to sell to a rich man than a poor one, so Bechtel-Rand is trying to make Godsworld a little bit richer, so that Bechtel-Rand can be a little bit richer. You understand that?”

“No,” John said truthfully.

She frowned. “All right, it doesn't matter. My point is that we aren't trying to hurt Godsworld. We won't interfere with your beliefs; we aren't going to conquer anyone. We won't take anything we haven't paid

for. We aren't criminals or invaders, we're just businesspeople. All we want is to trade with you people; you have things here on Godsworld that are precious back on Earth, and we have things that are precious here. *All* we want is trade."

She paused; John said nothing, simply looked at her.

"Look, if anyone from Earth wanted to conquer Godsworld, do you think you could stop them? You've seen our weapons. But we aren't *allowed* to conquer Godsworld, or anywhere else; Earth has laws and can enforce them, and anybody from Earth who broke those laws here on Godsworld would be punished severely. We can't do anything illegal—we don't dare. We can defend ourselves, as we did when you attacked us, but if we aren't attacked, we can't harm a single Godsworlder, or interfere with your religion, your customs, your rights in any way, or the authorities back on Earth would revoke our trade licenses and we'd be out of business. We'd have to leave Godsworld entirely, and let a competing corporation have a try at doing better. So you see, we aren't going to harm you, any of you."

John sat, looking at her.

"Now, you and your little band of marauders have been causing us trouble. You're interfering with business. You've attacked us. It's cost us money. However, we didn't want to stir things up too much—if we fought back it might cause bad feeling among the people we came to trade with. They might see it as a big strong bunch of bullies fighting dirty, turning Earthly weapons against your brave little company. With that in mind, we preferred to just wait and see if you and your compatriots might not get tired and give up. I think in time you would have—or else your fellow Godsworlders would have taken care of you, since after all, your more successful attacks have been against them, not us."

She paused again.

"That is, until today. This morning you killed one of our stockholders, one of the people who owns a part of Bechtel-Rand. The laws back on Earth say that we have to let anyone who owns more than one percent of one percent of our company come here and roam freely—it's supposed to help keep us honest. We're required to let these people come in, at our expense, and do as they please, and we're required to protect them. We try to protect them, but we can't be everywhere they might wander, so we don't always succeed. One of your men blew the face off a stockholder this morning, down in Withered Fig, and that could mean that we're in very big trouble. I think we'll come out of it all right—this is a barbaric planet, so they'll make allowances when they investigate—but we can't let it happen again. Ever. That means that your little band of guerrillas is going to be gone by noon tomorrow, one way or another. Do you understand?"

"I'm not sure," John answered.

"I mean that at noon tomorrow, if anyone is still in that camp of yours, we're going to vaporize the entire place. We don't want to do that—particularly because we know perfectly well that you could easily put together a new group, that you have agents scattered all through the protectorate. We would much rather settle this all peacefully. Is that clear enough?"

After a long silence, John admitted, "It's clear—but how do you figure on settling it peacefully?"

"By giving you what you want, so that you don't have to fight for it—if we can. What is it that you and your men want?"

John stared at her for a long moment, wondering if she could really need to ask. "We want Godsworld back the way it was, with no trace of you people left to pollute it," he answered finally.

“Well, we can't do that. I think I've finished my explanation; it's time for some questions and answers. *Why* do you want us off Godsworld?”

“Because you're destroying it.”

“We aren't destroying anything! I told you, we aren't allowed to.”

“But you *are* destroying it! I don't mean the people or the houses—I don't care about those. You're destroying our way of life! You've brought in weapons that make wars too dangerous to fight, and all these cushions and colors everywhere make life too soft to live!” He got to his feet, unable to contain himself, and leaned forward across the desk. “You're decadent and corrupt yourselves, like all of Earth, and you're making Godsworld decadent and corrupt, too.”

“Decadent? Soft? Because we've introduced a few little improvements?” She rose, too, and John was startled to realize that she was taller than he was. “The most luxurious life ever lived on Godsworld would be abject poverty to your ancestors back on Earth! Decadence isn't a physical thing—a few pillows and hangings aren't going to turn people decadent. It's a way of thinking—a spiritual thing, in your terms. If Godsworlders are decadent now, then they always were—they just didn't have a chance to show it before. We're not forcing these things on anybody, we're *selling* them; if they're evil, as you say, then the righteous should resist the temptation. I've read the Bible, too, you know—in my own language, not your King James version, but it can't be that different. I've also read Mark Twain, which you haven't—an ancient American philosopher who proved that it's easy, and therefore meaningless, to resist temptation when there isn't any.”

“Oh, you can say anything you please—the Devil can quote scripture, they say—but you people are foul and decadent, and we don't want you on Godsworld.”

“Why are you so certain that we're foul and decadent?”

“Because I've seen it!” John shouted. “That slut who called herself Tuesday!”

“Tuesday?” Dawes' eyes widened. “Tuesday Ikeya? You ran into her?”

Taken aback by the Earther's startlement, John said, “I met a pervert who called herself Tuesday, who abused me, yes.”

“That idiot! She's just a stockholder, Captain; she doesn't work for us. What did she do? Rape you, and use the empathy spike? That's her usual routine.”

Bothered by hearing it said aloud, and by a woman, John had trouble answering. He nodded, once.

“No wonder you think we're decadent! Captain, she isn't one of us—she's not one of the People of Heaven. I should have kept a closer eye on her—I'll check the tapes tomorrow and see if she's done anything else harmful. We're required to let her do what she wants here, but she isn't one of ours, she's a spoiled rotten rich nuisance. She sees the universe and everyone in it as toys to be played with. If you took her for a representative of our people, I can understand that you would be upset, but I promise you she's not.”

“Oh?” John was sufficiently recovered from his shocked embarrassment to put his bitterness into words.

“Are you trying to tell me she's unique, that other Earthers aren't like that?”

“Not all of us...”

“What about her friend Esau, who had himself painwired?” John demanded. “And who gave her that

spike thing in the first place?"

"I didn't say she was unique; she's not. Plenty of Earthers are hedonistic monsters. But not *all* of us—not the people who work for *me*. I won't have it. I don't hire rewires or rebuilt or variants, and I insist on specifications on anyone artificial—and I wouldn't use any of them on a planet like Godsworld even if I had them. I *respect* your culture here, and I don't want to interfere with it—after all, if Godsworld were just like Earth, what sort of a trade could I do?"

John had no idea what the woman was talking about. He simply stared at her across the desktop.

"You don't trust me," she said. "I suppose there's no reason you should. Still, I mean what I say; Tuesday isn't one of the People of Heaven. I wouldn't allow her kind here if I had any choice."

"And I wouldn't allow any of you here at all," John replied.

"Ah, but you don't have a choice, any more than I do! We're here to stay; if you drive us away, another group will move in. Once a colony is rediscovered, it's never allowed to slip away again."

"We're not a colony! We've been independent for three hundred years!"

"Is it *that* long by your calendar? I hadn't checked; for us it's two hundred and something. All right, not a colony, then, but a human settlement. Captain, once Earth finds a market, we never let it go."

"And I'm supposed to just accept that?"

"You *have* to accept it. It's the simple fact." She took a breath, then continued, "We aren't getting anywhere yelling at each other like this. I'm ready to make you a good offer for giving up your fight, grant any terms that won't cut seriously into my profits, but I don't know what it is you *want*. I can't put Godsworld back the way it was, and I wouldn't if I could. I don't think most of your people would want it back. Short of that, what can I offer you? Money? I can give you almost unlimited credit, make you the richest man on Godsworld. Power? I can put you in charge of the entire True Worder territory, if that's what you want. You've told me you think physical comforts are decadent—sinful, I suppose—but I can provide them, if you'd like, more than you've ever imagined." She looked at him, not pleading, as her words might have led him to expect, but measuring him carefully.

"And what would I do, with this money and power? My life has been dedicated to bringing the true faith to the heathen and the heretic, with fire and sword—do you expect me to sit back and spend the rest of my days in indolence? I have a calling in this world, and I mean to pursue it!"

"Do you? I have no objection if you want to preach your gospel."

"I'm no preacher, woman, I'm a warrior!"

"War," she said, "is bad for business. It uses up money and kills off our customers. I don't think there will be many more wars on Godsworld—certainly nobody is going to fight any against the protectorate. No one will live long if they try."

"You see? You've destroyed the one true way, cut it down, stopped it from spreading the truth by destroying our army!"

"You think that the People of the True Word and Flesh had the one true religion, and all the others were false?"

"Heretical—the others had part of the truth, but had corrupted it."

"You're so very certain that yours was the true way? Then why did God allow your army to be wiped out so easily?"

That very question had troubled him greatly in the past few weeks. "The Lord moves in mysterious ways," he said feebly.

"Captain, I've studied your religions here on Godsworld, and the records back on Earth about the expedition that brought your ancestors here—what records there were, anyway. There are two hundred faiths on Godsworld, at least, spread among two hundred tribes, and out of those two hundred *not one* is actually the same faith those original settlers brought! *No one* follows the Founders' religion—not you, not the Chosen, not the Old Churchers, none of you!"

"You're lying," John said, but without conviction.

"No, I'm not. I know I can't prove it to you—you'd accuse me of faking the records—but it's true. Your religion has changed to fit the situation here, just as religions always do."

"You're lying," John repeated. "You're an agent of Satan, trying to weaken me."

"Oh, d ... No, I didn't mean to make you think that. Wait a minute." She leaned back, then slowly settled back into her red-upholstered, oddly shapeless chair. "Sit down."

John hesitated, but then sat down.

"Captain, I don't think that your faith is what's really important to you—and hear me out before you argue!" John subsided, his protest half-formed. "I think that what really interests you is power—not *having* it, but *getting* it and *using* it. It's not religious fervor that drives you into battle, it's the need to prove yourself, the challenge, the chance to face and defeat a worthy foe. You need to win, to conquer. You want to fight for something. So far you've fought for the True Word, as you call it, and you've fought with guns and swords, but I don't think that's what's really important; I think you'd be just as happy fighting for New Bechtel-Rand, using credits and trade goods as your weapons. I can't afford to let you fight against us; I want you to fight *for* us. That's what I'd like to give you in exchange for peace."

"What?"

"Captain, I'm offering you a job."

He stared at her for a long, silent moment, wondering if she might be mad. "A job?" he asked at last.

"Yes. You're determined, a good leader—oh, you haven't done very well against *us*, but no Godsworlder could. You don't have the technology. You probably thought we knew where to find your army because of hidden lookouts, or that we found your guerrilla camp by questioning your deserters, but that's not true; we used satellites in orbit around Godsworld that were able to see everything you ever did. You thought that our most advanced weapons were machine guns, because that's what you saw, but that was because we consider those so primitive that we don't mind selling them to people we think of—forgive me—as little more than savages; how could you know we had limited fusion weapons? You put up a good fight, but you never had a chance. Join us, and we'll send you back to Earth for retraining, and next time you'll have that technology fighting *for* you, not against you. We have a dozen development projects planned for Godsworld that could use a man like you in charge."

"No," he said, without thinking.

"Are you sure? You can take some time to think about it..."

“No,” he repeated.

“Well, then, perhaps somewhere else? New Bechtel-Rand is developing fourteen rediscovered colonies at present, and any number of other projects. We can find any work you like, anywhere in human-inhabited space.”

“Working for you?”

“Not me, personally—I’m only in charge of Godsworld. But for the corporation, yes.” Before John could reply, she added, “If it bothers you, working for a woman—well, I hope you’ll get over that, because that’s one of the worst things about Godsworld, this whole sexist set-up you have here, but even if you don’t, at the moment a man’s running Bechtel-Rand, and I’m sure we could find a position where none of your direct superiors would be female.”

A few steps behind, John asked, “You said you would ship me back to Earth?”

“Yes.”

“How could you do that? It’s a century each way; by the time I got back here you’d be long dead—probably all Godsworld would be dead, with the sustaining faith destroyed.”

“Oh, Lord, Captain, you don’t think we spent a century coming out here, do you? If we were still limited by that we’d have left Godsworld alone. It’s been over a hundred years since faster-than-light travel was developed. That was what brought down the United Nation and started Earth moving again! We don’t really travel through space at all, we sort of ... I can’t explain it in your language, but it’s only a couple of hundred *hours* of subjective time to Earth, not a hundred *years*. Earth hours, at that, which are a little shorter than yours.”

“Oh.”

“Captain, I can see that this has all been a great deal to absorb. I’m going to have my people fly you back to your camp now, and at noon tomorrow we’re going to wipe it off the planet, whether you and your people are in it or not. You can go on fighting us, but it won’t do you any good, and if any more of our people die, either employees or stockholders, we’re going to start removing *your* people, one way or another. I would much rather you joined us; we aren’t the monsters you think us. Very few of us are like Tuesday; I’m sure that you have your own degenerates here on Godsworld, but we don’t judge you by them, and we ask that you not judge us by ours. At least think it over, and if you decide to join us, come see me—announce your name in the entrance hall and the machines will bring you here. Just think it over, Captain—that’s all.” She rose; John stood in response.

A section of the wall behind her slid aside, revealing gleaming golden walls; before John could see any details, she stepped through and the wall closed again. As she vanished, she called, “Remember, be out by noon!”

## Chapter Fifteen

*“When the wicked are multiplied, transgression increaseth: but the righteous shall see their fall.”*  
—**Proverbs 29:16**

\* \* \* \*

For a moment he was alone in the room; he turned to look it over.

The door he had entered by had opened again, and the two men who had brought him were standing in the room beyond. “Whenever you’re ready, Mr. Mercy-of-Christ,” one of them called. “The airship’s

waiting on the roof."

John took a final glance around, decided that there was no point in lingering, and marched out. His escorts fell in on either side as he stepped into the open door of the moving room.

The conversation with America Dawes was roiling in his head, with first one fact or question bubbling up, then another. As he felt the floor rising beneath him he glanced up automatically, and noticed the glowing ceiling.

"Why are your lights all that awful color, and so bright?" he asked. "Can't you make them any color you like?"

"Of course we can," one of the guards replied. "That's the color of sunlight back on Earth. Earth has a yellow sun, you know, not a red one like yours. Godsworld seems pretty dim to us."

John noticed how much more respectfully he was handled now than he had been in being brought here, and guessed at the reason—before he had only been an enemy, whereas now he was a prospective member of the People of Heaven. These two were treating him with mild deference—if he accepted the offer of a job he would presumably be their superior, and that deference would be appropriate. He had no intention of working with the People of Heaven, though; if he did accept the offer of a job, it would be to attack them from within. He realized now that his enemy was not Dawes herself, but the people back on Earth who had sent her. He was still not sure exactly what a corporation was, whether a tribe, congregation, or as Dawes had said, merely an overgrown business, but he was sure that it was the New Bechtel-Rand Corporation that was destroying Godsworld, not any individual Earther.

And was Tuesday really not a part of the corporation? He still did not understand what a "stockholder" was, but whatever they were, if Dawes had not lied they were outsiders with special privileges. *Had* he been unfair in his assessment of the People of Heaven? That would bear some thought; they might not be the degenerates he had thought them. Oh, they were still his bitter enemies, there could be no doubt of that—they had destroyed Godsworld's traditional way of life, reduced the People of the True Word and Flesh to chattels and robbed them of their approaching triumph.

He needed to know more, to understand just exactly what Bechtel-Rand was. Would he have to go to Earth to destroy the corporation, or to drive it permanently off Godsworld? If so, he would probably need to accept the job offer—there was no power on Godsworld that could transport him off the planet other than Bechtel-Rand itself.

He certainly could not stay and fight as he had been fighting. He had no doubt that Dawes meant exactly what she said about destroying the camp, and he had been almost resigned to abandoning it for the winter in any case. Going underground in the towns would be difficult, all the more so now that he was being watched, and he was not sure he cared to attempt it. He had been offered a choice of death or surrender, and as he had always told himself he would, he chose surrender.

He was not, however, willing to give up completely. He would abandon his little band of guerrillas, but not the fight against the corrupting influence of the Earthers. He remembered how he had thought men who refused to acknowledge defeat to be fools, but thrust the thought aside; he had lost a battle, but not the war. He could still fight—if he knew what he was fighting, and how to attack it.

Right now, he had no idea how to find out what he had to know, other than accepting the job. He hesitated at that thought; the prospect of actually going to Earth was simultaneously exciting and terrifying. Earth, hotbed of sin and corruption, heart of temporal evil—but the birthplace of mankind, the world where Jesus had walked! A world where the false god Progress had not been denied, where machines usurped the rights of men—and a world where a thousand green plants grew, instead of the handful on

Godsworld.

Only green plants, no red ones—what did they use for nearwood? Was that why the Heaveners paid so much for it?

His two escorts seemed willing to talk; he asked, "What's Earth like?"

The guards smiled at each other. "How am I supposed to answer that?" said the one who had explained about the light. "It's an entire world! And a much more complicated one than yours, I'd say. There are nine billion people, cities, starports, mountains, oceans—what can I say?"

John skipped over the absurd population given as ordinary exaggeration. "I just meant generally—is the sky blue? The soil gray?"

"The sky is blue, but lighter than yours, and the soil comes in different colors. It's a brighter world than yours—more color, as well as the brighter sun. The air is thicker, and there's much more wind; the gravity is a little stronger, so everything's heavier. There are trees—big plants, taller than people."

"I know what trees are—they're in the Bible!"

The guard shrugged. "I've spoken to Godsworlders who didn't know, despite what your holy book says. I don't understand why Godsworld hasn't got any trees, myself. Your ancestors should have brought some."

"They tried, the legends say, but they wouldn't grow here."

"Oh." The guard nodded. "Could be."

They stepped out on the roof and boarded the airship. When they were seated, John asked, "The people you work for, the corporation—what are they like?"

The talkative guard shrugged again. "Oh, like any other big corporation, I guess—good people and bad ones. I do my job and they pay me."

There were other corporations, then. "Is the New Bechtel-Rand Corporation one of the big ones?"

He nodded. "It sure is."

"The biggest?"

"Oh, I don't think so—not even the biggest developer. ITD's bigger, I think."

"Ahtadi?"

"ITD—stands for Interstellar Trade and Development Corporation."

"Oh." He thought for a moment. "How big *is* Bechtel-Rand?"

"Last I heard, they had about a million and a half employees and were earning half a trillion credits a year."

John balked at the numbers. "A million? Do you mean a thousand, ten times a hundred?"

"No, a million—a thousand times a thousand. A one and six zeroes."

"And a trillion?"



"A one and twelve zeroes—a million million."

Resentfully, John said, "If you don't want to tell me, just say so; you don't need to make stupid jokes."

"I'm not joking!" the guard insisted, obviously offended.

"A million and a half people? There aren't that many people on all of Godsworld!"

"Oh, I'm not sure of that; Cheng, what was our census count?"

"I don't remember," the other guard replied, "Ask Sparky."

"Sparky? What's the population of Godsworld?" the guard said, addressing the ceiling.

"No exact count is available, sir, but the current estimate is four million, one hundred thousand," said the neuter voice of a machine.

"There, you see?" The guard was triumphant.

John subsided without further protest and sat silently for the rest of the brief flight. He had trouble imagining any reason for the Earthers to lie about such details; they could not have known in advance that he would ask the questions he had asked. Therefore, he had to assume that the numbers were reasonably accurate. That meant that if he roused the entire population of Godsworld, including every man, woman and child, he would have the healthy, heavily-armed adults of the complete Bechtel-Rand outnumbered by less than three to one, and would not have enough people to even think of challenging Earth itself. The five hundred Earthers on Godsworld were nothing, merely a figurehead. In any battle, as he was well aware, knowing the enemy's reserves and countering them was as important as defeating the front line troops.

He needed allies; he had to turn the Earthers against each other. He had done it often enough as Armed Guardian, in dealing with small tribes—tempt one into attacking another, then move in and pick up the pieces without any real resistance. The Chosen had probably intended to do the same with the war between the Heaveners and the True Worders, but had never had a chance, since the massacre had been so fast and so complete. Godsworld would never be able to destroy Earth, but, John thought, the corporations might be kept so busy fighting one another that they would have no chance to do Godsworld further damage.

Why had only one corporation come to Godsworld in the first place?

There was still too much he didn't know, and the airship was settling to the ground at the head of the gully. The first dim red light was on the eastern hills, he noticed as he emerged from the craft, and he had to get his men and as much material as possible out of the camp before noon; long-term plans would have to wait.

Before the door of the airship had closed behind him he was running down into camp, shouting the alert, rousing his men.

## Chapter Sixteen

*"A good name is better than precious ointment; and the day of death than the day of one's birth."*  
—**Ecclesiastes 7:1**

\* \* \* \*

Once they were all out of the gully there was no reason to hurry; John slowed his horse to a walk and turned for a final look at the camouflaged oilcloth. A minor pang ran through him; he was going to miss

the place, miserable as most of his stay there had been. It had been *his*, the first place that ever truly was. Always before, when he was in charge of a place, he had been working for someone else—his father, his uncle, the Elders—someone. They had all betrayed the truth and surrendered to the enemy, though.

He had not; he would carry on fighting even now. He glanced up at the sky, wondering whether the same airship that had picked him up would be the one to destroy the camp. He doubted that the Heaveners had more than a handful of airships. He had wanted to pack up and carry as much as possible, so that it was now just about noon, and the attack was due.

He never even saw what it was that did hit the camp; he glimpsed a quick flicker in the air, gone before he could turn to look at it, and a moment later the gully erupted in flame.

The fire did not last long; within ten minutes it had died down to isolated patches of flame, leaving most of the gully adrift with white ash.

John shook his head. Nothing on Godsworld could fight that kind of weapon; they needed outside help.

He had no illusions about what sort of help he was likely to find; whatever other corporation he could bring in, if he could do it at all, would probably be just as unChristian, just as evil as Bechtel-Rand. He no longer cared. The old Godsworld, where the righteous stood alone and took their strength from the truth, was gone. He knew he could never eradicate the changes the Earthers had brought. Even if they were driven off Godsworld forever, all of them, things had been changed. The protectorate might survive without them; the People of the True Word and Flesh, however, would not. All the relative strengths and military balances that John had known for years had already been thrown off irretrievably. And the trade goods—dyes, fabrics, guns, ammunition—would be around for years, maybe centuries. Beliefs would change; the Apocalypsists could no longer maintain that Earth had been destroyed, and that the starships had been the new arks. Simply the knowledge that Earth was still out there, that people could travel between worlds, would change how people thought. Attempts might well be made to recover the lost arts of Earther technology, even to build new starships.

But that was all conjecture; in fact, the Earthers were not going to abandon Godsworld. All he could hope to do would be to slow, perhaps halt, their spreading contagion. If he drove away or destroyed Bechtel-Rand, another corporation would come—that was one thing Dawes had told him that he did not doubt at all.

Even a delay would be welcome, though. It would give the Godsworlders time to adjust to the changes, time to do what they could to maintain their way of life in the face of Earther encroachments. John also thought that he would prefer that Bechtel-Rand not be the group to profit from the ruin of Godsworld. If someone must, it need not be his personal enemies.

He turned away from the smoldering ashes in the gully and urged his mount to a trot; the way to the Citadel by horse was long and winding.

Beside him rode three of his last handful of men and one of the two women; in these last days the camp had only kept five horses. The rest of the band, left on foot, had scattered in all directions, with arrangements made for meetings and contacts throughout the central part of the Heavener protectorate. The resistance against the Earthers' encroachment was not done yet.

“What *was* that?” one of his companions asked.

“What was what?” John replied, startled out of his thoughts.

“That flash that burned the whole camp like that!” The speaker was Thaddeus Blood-of-the-Lamb, one

of John's original True Worder soldiers—one who had joined the retreating half and thereby survived the massacre.

"I don't know; it doesn't matter. It's just another Heavener weapon. It's not the steel of the weapons that matters, Thaddeus, it's the steel in the man who uses them."

"That wasn't steel, Captain, that was hellfire," said David Beloved-of-Jesus, one of the Chosen, on his other side.

"Just steel—a machine, that's all. The Earthers are just men and women, not demons."

"They're both," David insisted, and John thought better of answering. Just machines, he told himself, designed and built by people. He wondered if his ancestors had made the right decision, abandoning most of Earth's technology.

The image of an ordinary religious war fought with Earther weapons came to him, and he decided quickly that the ancients had chosen wisely.

There were to be no more ordinary religious wars, though; the Heaveners didn't like them. The next war, John hoped, was to be between corporations. He couldn't expect that all the fighting in this new kind of war would be back on Earth; to make it worthwhile for Bechtel-Rand's opponent they would have to be invited to share in the trade on Godsworld. He hoped that if nukes and other such incredible weapons were used that the targets would be chosen very, very carefully.

For a moment his determination to destroy the New Bechtel-Rand Corporation faltered; would it be worth risking the lives of the Godsworlders who would inevitably be caught in the crossfire?

Yes, he answered himself, because only their bodies would die. Saving souls was worth any risk.

The route they followed was a long and winding one; they passed through two small villages and made camp in the wilderness, and only in the early afternoon of the following day did they reach the gates of the Citadel. By the time they arrived John had evolved a plan.

He would not immediately accept the offered job; instead, he would ask that it be held open while he explored possibilities and thought it over at length. He would then try and find another way of contacting another corporation back on Earth, rather than going himself. Corporations did not appear to be all that different from tribes, and as he well knew, any large tribe is likely to harbor spies and traitors, or simply weak-willed individuals whose loyalty and aid could be bought. If he could find those weaklings, spies, or traitors among Bechtel-Rand's people on Godsworld he would be able to contact his proposed ally indirectly.

He would talk to the Earthers, to any and all Earthers he could find, under the guise of considering the job offer—it would be only natural to find out more about his prospective employer, after all. The right questions, carefully asked, should find him what he was looking for. That corporation the guard had mentioned, ITD—that sounded very promising. If he could find no genuine spies, he would just try to hire someone to put him in touch with ITD's leaders. If ITD was bigger than Bechtel-Rand, then it should be able to destroy his enemy.

They were in the market square now. "Where are we going?" Thaddeus asked.

John glanced at him. "I am going to find a room at an inn; you're welcome to accompany me, but you're free to find your own place."

"I have a brother nearby," said Eleazar Freed-by-the-Truth, "We'll stay with him." His sister Esther

nodded agreement.

“Abihu didn't come with us because he has a wife and two babies to look after,” she said, “but he'll keep us safe.”

“That's good, then; stay with him. If you want to find us, check the market around midafternoon; I'll have someone here whenever I can, to keep us all in touch. David?”

“I'll come with you.”

“Thaddeus?”

“I will, too.”

“Fine. Eleazar, Esther, God be with you; we'll see you again.” He watched as the pair rode away down a side street.

When they were out of sight he prodded his own horse forward again, and his two remaining companions followed. After a moment's indecision they headed for the inn where John had stayed before, the Righteous House.

They reached it without difficulty; John dismounted at the front door, intending to ask what rooms were available before leaving the horses in the stable. When he turned to enter, though, a woman was standing in the doorway. He stared.

“Ms. Humble?” he asked.

“Captain John!” Miriam answered, staring back.

She wore a new dress, John noticed—dark green, of an unfamiliar fabric. She appeared confused and uncertain. Otherwise, she looked much as she had when last he saw her.

He studied her expression and could see no trace of malice. “A pleasure to see you again, Ms. Humble,” he said, forcing a smile. “Allow me to present my companions, Thaddeus Blood-of-the-Lamb and David Beloved-of-Jesus.”

She nodded polite acknowledgement. “I thought you were living out on the hills somewhere,” she said.

“We were, but circumstances have changed. If you don't mind, Ms. Humble, we're here to find rooms for ourselves.”

“Oh,” she said. She stepped aside; John and Thaddeus entered the inn, leaving David to watch the horses. When John and Thaddeus had passed Miriam turned hesitantly to follow them.

She waited and watched silently as they took two rooms and assured the care of the horses; then, as they turned back toward the door, she said, “I want to talk to you, Captain.”

He glanced at her, then back at Thaddeus. “Go on out, Thad, and help David with the horses; I'll meet you at the rooms later.”

Thaddeus nodded, looking at Miriam curiously, and obeyed. When he had gone John led the way to a quiet corner table, seated them both, and asked, “What is it? Are you still trying to get me killed?”

“No—at least, I don't think so.”

"Don't you know?"

"No, I don't—not any more."

"I reckon maybe you don't, at that; I pretty much expected you to find our camp and come out there to bother me, but you never did. When I found out that the Earthers knew where we were I thought you might have told them, but it wasn't you at all, it was one of their 'sat-alights'. I thought I'd seen the last of you."

"Well, I didn't expect to see you again, either! I thought you were so stubborn that you'd stay out there all alone after your men all deserted you, and freeze to death by Christmas!"

"I may be that stubborn, but I'm not that stupid. Suicide's a sin—besides, he who fights and runs away lives to fight another day, as the saying goes."

She stared at him, momentarily at a loss for words.

"What was it you wanted to talk to me about?" he demanded.

"Oh. I don't know how to explain, exactly. I wanted to tell you ... no, ask ... no, *tell* you something. About how I feel about you."

"Tell me, then." He sat back, expecting her to spout either gleeful anticipation of his impending death at the hands of the Heaveners, or a tearful forgiveness.

"I hated you, so very much—you took my home, killed my father, a dozen of your men raped me. I wanted to see you die, slowly." She paused, looking up at him across the table.

John was uneasy. This was not the raving he had anticipated. He had rarely heard anyone speak so openly and directly. He tried to answer soothingly without lying or distorting the truth. "That's natural enough," he said. "The Lord said to love your enemies and forgive the wrongs done you, but it's hard—about the hardest thing there is, I guess. I'm sorry about what my men did to you—it's the custom, in war, but that's hard, too. It was a just war, to bring people to Jesus, but I can't fault you for hating it."

"I hated *you*, though," she said. "I blamed it all on you. You had led the invaders; I heard an officer say that it was your idea to use Marshside for a base instead of attacking the Chosen directly and I knew you'd given your men permission to pillage the town."

"It wasn't really my idea—one of the Elders..."

"That doesn't matter," she interrupted. "Let me finish. I hated you, I thought you were an inhuman monster. When you took that splinter away from me so easily I was sure of it, and when you refused to rape me because the Bible says a man should be chaste I thought it was because you weren't human enough to rape a woman. I thought you were a demon. Maybe not really, actually a demon, but not really a *man*. You were the Enemy. And my enemy's enemy is my friend, so I believed that the Heaveners were honest and good, come to help Godsworld. You understand?"

John nodded, cautiously.

"Then you told me about that woman, Tuesday—you had a reason to hate the Heaveners, after all. And you'd lost your army; you weren't unbeatable, you'd suffered. I was confused by all that, Captain. I wanted to see how much of what you said was true. So I came back here, and got a job at the inn here—I told them I was the widow of one of your men. And I went to the fortress and talked to people there, and I saw some of the records they have, and what you told me about Tuesday was true; I saw the

tape of you and her together."

"What?!" John's outburst was involuntary, the result of astonishment and outrage. "What tape?"

"Oh, they tape everything there, pictures and sound—it's almost like watching through a window. Any time anyone moves, anywhere in the Corporate Headquarters, it's carefully recorded and filed away. The machines do it all. I got to know some of the Earthers pretty well in the past few weeks, and one of them let me watch the tapes of you. I watched it all half a dozen times, from different angles. You were raped, just the way I was—and you took it the same way I did, you wanted revenge. You're just human, like me; you're not a monster."

He stared at her for a long moment, unable to reply.

"I just wanted you to know that I know that now. You're just human, and you've been raped and your family killed—the army was your family, wasn't it?—and your home was destroyed, just the way it happened to me. We're even now; I can forgive you, at least partly. I still won't weep if you get killed, Captain, but I don't need to see it. I wanted to tell you that." She pushed back her chair and stood up. "That's all."

"Wait a minute!"

"Yes?"

"It was all recorded?"

"Well, not all—you can be glad of one thing." A vicious smile suddenly lit her face. "Did you know they can even record what comes over an empathy spike? Tuesday didn't do that, though—what you felt is gone forever. Thank God for the small favors, Captain!" She walked away, her hips swinging in saucy derision.

## Chapter Seventeen

*"And thou, even thyself, shalt discontinue from thine heritage that I gave thee; and I will cause thee to serve thine enemies in the land which thou knowest not: for ye have kindled a fire in mine anger, which shall burn forever."*—**Jeremiah 17:4**

\* \* \* \*

After sending a message to Dawes that he needed time to consider her offer, John spent most of the next two days resting and thinking, while his few remaining followers were out in the streets and markets trying unsuccessfully to recruit new men, and making contact with their fellows, now no longer spies for an army but merely a band of saboteurs. It was the morning of the third day when John was certain of his decision; he tracked down Miriam. She worked days as a chambermaid and evenings as a waitress, rarely leaving the inn, so finding her was not difficult.

After a few stiff formalities, John said, "You told me that you knew some of the Earthers pretty well."

She looked at him warily before replying, "Mostly just one, really."

"The one who showed you those tapes."

"Yes."

"What sort of a man is he?"

"How do you mean that?"

"Well, showing you the tapes—that wasn't something he was expected to do, was it? Did his superiors approve?"

"I don't know; I didn't think about it. Why? What does it matter?"

"I want to talk to an Earther, that's all—a reasonable one, who won't turn down a proposition before he hears it."

"You want to hire a spy?"

"No, not really—just someone who will do one or two things for me, nothing dangerous."

"Kwamé might do something like that, I don't know."

"Kwamé?"

"That's his name."

"I don't like these pagan Earther names; they don't *mean* anything. It makes them hard to remember."

"His name is Kwamé Montez; he says he's from a place called Australia, back on Earth."

"I never heard of it."

"Neither did I," Miriam admitted. "This proposition you want to make—you're still trying to drive away the Earthers, aren't you?"

"I might be," John said.

"Are you?"

"Yes," he admitted.

"That's what I thought—you don't give up easily. I don't know if Kwamé will help you—he's not really dishonest, he's just ... well, playful. He is a Heavener, a real Heavener, not a stockholder like Tuesday; he wants them to stay on Godsworld."

"I just want him to listen to my offer. I'm not trying to hurt anybody. I won't ask him to damage anything."

She looked at him carefully. They were in one of the unoccupied rooms, where she had been replacing the bedsheets. "What are you up to?"

"Nothing that will hurt you. Just introduce me to this Kwamé, that's all. I can do you a favor in exchange, or pay you a little, if you like."

"Are you going to ask him to get you something? Steal something?"

John shook his head. "Don't ask me a lot of questions." She was uncomfortably close to what he had in mind. He had not expected her to figure anything out, or even to try. He hadn't thought her capable of thinking like that.

"Are you planning to buy Earther weapons and meet the Heaveners on even terms?"

That was not exactly what he had had in mind, but he could understand how Miriam might have come up with such an idea. For his own part, he had dismissed the idea a few weeks earlier; open warfare with Earth weapons on both sides would be far too destructive. Half of Godsworld might perish in the

crossfire.

“No,” he said. “I don't want to fight the Heaveners openly any more; they can do too much damage.”

After another moment's hesitation, Miriam gave in. “All right,” she said, “I'll take you to see Kwamé.”

“Good,” John replied. “Where and when can I meet this mysterious person?”

“I'll take you there, right now.”

“Now?” John was startled and made no attempt to hide it.

“Yes, now; tell your friends you'll be back later.”

“I don't...” he began.

“Come now or forget it, Captain!” she interrupted.

He gave in. “I'm coming,” he said.

After a detour to the market to tell David and Thaddeus, who were currently stationed there, that an urgent errand had come up, John followed as Miriam led the way at a brisk pace directly toward the Corporate Headquarters. She marched in through the open door without hesitation, turned left, and proceeded along one of the door-lined corridors. A right into another corridor, then a left, and she began counting doors. At the fifth she turned and tapped on a panel in the wall beside it.

The door slid aside; she stepped inside, John entering close on her heels.

He froze the moment he was inside. Despite minor rearrangement, he recognized the room; he had been here before.

The door had closed behind him. He was trapped. He reached for Miriam's arm, but before he could grab it an unfamiliar voice called, “Oh, it's you, Miriam! What are you doing here? Who's that with you?”

He turned, as Miriam said, “Hello, Kwamé; this is John Mercy-of-Christ. He wants to talk to you.”

John could not locate the voice's origin.

“I'll be right down,” Kwamé said.

Miriam gestured at the cushions heaped on all sides. “We might as well be comfortable.” She sat down, the cushions rising to meet her in an unsettling, almost lascivious manner.

John remained standing. “I know this room,” he said. “This is where Tuesday...”

“Oh, I know that! But Tuesday left weeks ago; she's not even on Godsworld any more. Kwamé says she went on to a planet called Hellenbeck Five; I don't know much about it, but I guess it's a little like Godsworld, with Earthers just recently moving in. There are a lot of worlds out there, not just Earth and Godsworld.”

“I know that,” John said, still uneasy.

“Stop worrying! Kwamé will be here in a minute. We picked this room as a meeting place because nobody uses it much—probably nobody uses it at all since the stockholders left. When your men killed that one over in Withered Fig there were three or four stockholders around, but they all left on the next



ship—you scared them."

"Well, it's nice to know we accomplished something," John said sarcastically. "If nobody uses this room, how did Kwamé know we were here?"

"Because," Miriam said patiently, "the machines keep track of everything, everywhere, and we told the machines that whenever anyone came in here they should tell Kwamé."

"Oh." Before he could say anything else the door slid open, and Kwamé Montez stepped into the room.

"So you're John Mercy-of-Christ," he said. "I'm pleased to meet you." He held out a hand.

John took it as briefly as he politely could.

Kwamé Montez was small for an Earther, about average by Godsworlder standards, a few inches shorter than John's five foot ten and a good many pounds lighter. His hair was black and curly, his skin dusky, and his smile broad and gleaming with big white teeth. "What brings you here?" he asked.

"Miriam told me a few things about you, and I wanted to talk with you about the corporation. Did you know they offered me a job?"

Kwamé nodded politely. "I had heard something about that," he said.

Miriam did not take John's news so calmly. Although she managed not to interrupt, she was plainly thunderstruck.

"They did. I told them I needed time to think about it. I'd like to talk to you, if you aren't busy."

"Oh, I set my own hours; what did you want to ask?"

"Well—could we go somewhere else? They record everything that happens here, don't they?"

"Yes, of course they do; you'll have to get used to that if you're going to work for us."

"I suppose I will, but right now I'm not used to it. Could we go somewhere else, where I can talk freely?"

"All right; lead the way. Hiring isn't exactly my regular job, but I'm here." He waved, and the door to the corridor slid open.

John breathed more easily when they were out of the cushioned room, and by the time they had reached his room at the now-familiar inn he was feeling relaxed and sure of himself. "Mr. Mawn-Tess," he said, "thank you for coming. Sit down." He indicated the bed; the room had no chairs.

Kwamé sat down.

"Ms. Humble, you don't need to stay," John added.

Miriam, standing by the door, did not move. After a moment John shrugged. "Suit yourself. Mr. Mawn-Tess, how did the New Bechtel-Rand Corporation wind up here on Godsworld in the first place?"

"We came in starships, like the one next to the headquarters..."

"No, no, that's not what I mean. I mean how is it that Bechtel-Rand came to Godsworld and nobody else? What about the Earth government? Or other corporations? Or religions seeking converts?"

"Oh, I see what you're asking. Bechtel-Rand won the development contract when Godsworld was rediscovered. I'm not sure if the Godsworld job was a bid, a lottery, or rotation, but when they let the contract we got it."

"When *who* let *what* contract?"

"When the Colonial Redevelopment Authority gave out the right to develop Godsworld."

"How does that work?"

"Well, the CRA is in charge of everything concerning the old sleepership colonies, both vol and shangman..."

"What?"

"The CRA—the Colonial Redevelopment Authority—controls everything about the colonies founded by the United Nation, back before FTL was developed..."

"Effial?"

"Faster-than-light."

"Go on."

"Right. There are a lot of colonies—the United Nation got rid of anyone who made trouble by shipping them off quick-frozen. Some were founded by volunteers, like Godsworld—people who wanted a world of their own—and others were founded by prisoners or just people off the streets who happened to get caught, who didn't want to go. The volunteers are called 'vol', and the others are called 'shangman'—I'm not sure where the word came from. Anyway, it doesn't matter which they are, the CRA controls them all."

"All right, I understand that—but then, why is Bechtel-Rand here, instead of the CRA?"

"The CRA doesn't develop planets itself; that's not their job. They're just a branch of the Interstellar Confederacy overgovernment in charge of making sure that everyone plays by the rules. One of those rules is that lost colonies need to be handled carefully and treated with respect; nobody wants to start an interstellar war. So when a colony is found, the way Godsworld was, the CRA assesses the situation and chooses one developer who is allowed to move in slowly and establish contact between the colony and Earth. They're supposed to pick the developer best suited to handle each particular situation, but sometimes nobody can decide which company that is, so they hold a lottery, or if there are one or two companies that would do equally well, whichever one didn't get the job last time gets a turn. I don't know how they decided about Godsworld, but they gave it to Bechtel-Rand."

"Why only one?"

"Because if there were two, they would compete with each other, and that could be dangerous for the colonists. Keeping one corporation in line isn't that hard, but when there are two competing in the same market it's almost impossible, and the CRA doesn't want to try. Besides, why confuse the colonists with two developers, or three? On some worlds the developers are practically gods—and if a tribe thinks one developing corporation is the gods, then the other one must be demons. You can get some nasty little wars that way."

John nodded. The explanation made good sense, and was in line with some of his own guesswork.

“Does that one corporation keep the contract forever?”

“Oh, no, of course not! Eventually the colony reaches the point where it can handle modern civilization, and allow in other corporations, or even build corporations of its own. There are a dozen colonies that were never handled by a single developer, and a few others that outgrew it. After all, FTL was invented by one of the colonies in the first place—Achernar IV, the home of the Interstellar Confederacy. *They* weren't going to stand for giving one company from Earth a monopoly!”

John did not entirely follow this, but did not let that distract him; he latched onto the point that concerned him. “How do they know when a planet is ready to let other corporations in?”

“Oh, that's easy—when the people of the planet invite other corporations, they're free to come. The CRA only chooses the company that can land without an invitation. The colonists own their own planets, though, so they have the final word about who comes and goes. I suppose they could even refuse to let the CRA's developer land at all—but that's never happened, so far as I know.”

“You mean that if another corporation received an invitation from someone on Godsworld, they could move in tomorrow?”

“Worried about someone competing with you if you work for Bechtel-Rand, huh? Well, it's not quite that simple. First off, it would take more than a day for a message to reach Earth and a ship to come here. Second, the invitation has to come from someone who has the authority to issue it—the ship has to have a place to land. An innkeeper can't just invite in another company because he wants a better price on his liquor; you can't land a starship in a stableyard.”

“I suppose not.” John looked at Kwamé thoughtfully. “How big an area *do* you need to land a starship?”

“Oh, a dozen hectares or so.”

“What's a hectare?”

Kwamé snorted. “I think Godsworld must be the only planet in the entire galaxy where people don't use the metric system! Why your ancestors decided to use the ancient American system I will never understand!”

“They were Americans,” John said stiffly. Insulting the Founders was not something he could take lightly.

“Yes, I know, but even then America had been using metrics for a century or so!”

John had not been aware of that, but refused to be distracted. “What's a hectare?” he repeated.

“It's ... it's ... I don't know your units well enough. You could land a starship in a square about a thousand feet on a side, I think.”

“A thousand-foot square? That would be twenty or thirty acres. That's not that much.”

“It's enough.”

“If I had a hundred acres of land somewhere, then, I could invite another Earth corporation to land there and trade with me and the rest of Godsworld?”

“Well, yes, I suppose you could—if you had some way of getting a message to them.”

“Ah! That, Mr. Mawn-Tess, is why I wanted to talk to you where the machines couldn't hear us. Ms. Humble tells me you don't mind bending rules a little—would you consider delivering a message to the

ITD Corporation for me?"

"What?"

"You heard me."

"Are you crazy? I'd lose my job! Why would you want to do that?"

"Mr. Mawn-Tess, I don't like the New Bechtel-Rand Corporation; I don't like the way they do business. I don't think they deserve to be the only corporation on Godsworld, and I want to invite in another one to take part of the planet away from them. If you won't help me, I can find someone else who will—and if you *do* help me, I would think that the ITD Corporation might be grateful enough to give you a job if you lose your position with Bechtel-Rand."

"They might, at that." Kwamé looked at him thoughtfully. "They just might—and there could be a nice bonus in it, too."

"You see?"

"I'd need your word that you'd demand they hire me and keep me hired—after all, you'd be issuing the invitation, so you'd be the one with some say."

"I'd be glad to do that, Mr. Mawn-Tess."

"You'll need that landing site—thirty hekus, or whatever you said, of flat, clear ground."

"Acres—thirty acres. That won't be a problem."

"In that case, Captain Mercy-of-Christ, you've got a deal." He stuck out his hand. This time John's shake was more enthusiastic.

## Chapter Eighteen

*"Where the word of a king is, there is power: and who may say unto him, What doest thou?"—  
Ecclesiastes 8:4*

\* \* \* \*

It had been easy to say that finding thirty acres he could use for a landing site would be no problem—easy to say, but not necessarily true. Certainly Godsworld had no shortage of empty land, but John did not happen to hold title to any of it, nor did he have any clear idea of how to remedy that lack. He did not have any significant amount of money; what had come in in donations to his guerrilla army had gone out to buy supplies of food and ammunition. He had never bothered to save his own money when he had been Armed Guardian of the True Word and Flesh; he had assumed that if he lived long enough to need it he would either be granted a pension or made an Elder. His family lands had gone to his uncle Lazarus, at John's own request—he had never wanted to be a farmer.

Furthermore, Kwamé pointed out that it would be better if the invitation came from a government of some sort rather than an individual. That made sense, John had to admit, but he no longer represented a government. The Anointed had, after supplying his initial wants, not bothered to stay in contact; still, he was the closest thing to an ally that John had. The Chosen had plenty of land—more of it than anyone else on Godsworld except the Heavener protectorate, now that the True Worders were out of the running. An invitation from the Chosen to ITD would be ideal.

For one thing, if the Chosen issued the invitation and events then devolved into open warfare, the brunt of it would fall on the Heaveners and the Chosen, and John still did not find himself in sympathy with either

group. The Anointed had helped him, but only out of the basest of motives, and never as openly or effectively as John might have liked.

All he had to do was convince the Chosen to issue the invitation. For something this important John decided not to rely on messengers, but to go himself.

As escort—as commander, he could scarcely go alone—he chose David Beloved-of-Jesus, himself one of the Anointed's men, and Thaddeus Blood-of-the-Lamb. The pair had been decent companions, and having one of the Chosen and one of his own men seemed like a good distribution. He expected Miriam to insist on tagging along, but she surprised him by announcing her intention to stay at the inn. Kwamé, of course, could not leave his job in the fortress without raising suspicion.

That settled, the threesome set out at dawn on the tenth of November, on horseback—John had become quite familiar with the roads and countryside in the area during his time there, and although taking an airship to one of the outlying towns to the northwest would have saved a considerable amount of time, John thought it would also be far more likely to attract the attention of people at Bechtel-Rand whose attention he preferred to avoid.

The first day was quiet and uneventful. The second was marred by a long, loud theological argument between David and Thaddeus; David maintained that all men were damned unless they served the Lord's Anointed, while Thaddeus insisted that, quite aside from any spurious claims to divine authority made by mere mortals, God was sufficiently merciful to allow a second chance for any who lived out their lives without ever hearing the Word of God—such would be reborn to live new lives, again and again, until they got it right.

Neither side sounded exactly right to John; Thaddeus' version was not quite in accord with his own understanding of True Worder doctrine. He declined to intervene, however; since the defeat of the People of the True Word and Flesh John was no longer certain that he considered their doctrines to be absolute truth, and furthermore, for a commander to take sides in such a dispute between two of his men would be extremely foolish. He ignored the entire discussion and simply refused to hear questions or demands for intercession directed at him.

Other arguments sprang up, but none developed into anything worse than a moment's shouting, and the three men reached Spiritus Sancti without coming to blows, either amongst themselves or with the four soldiers who formed their escort for the last leg of the journey.

Once in the Chosen capital, however, events did not proceed as smoothly as John had hoped. Unlike his previous visits, he was kept waiting in the courtyard for virtually an entire afternoon; his men were not permitted to accompany him. Finally, only a few minutes before sundown, the great nearwood doors swung open and four men surrounded him.

He had the distinct impression that had he not stepped eagerly forward he would have been dragged, willing or not, into the audience chamber. One of the men kept a spear levelled at him the entire time he was in the chamber, and another had a hand on his sword-hilt; this was obviously no ceremonial honor guard.

He walked up the center aisle, as before, but upon seeing the Anointed's expression of extreme displeasure he stopped a few paces further back than he had previously.

Before he could decide what to say, the Anointed himself spoke.

“So, John Mercy-of-Christ, you're back—what do you want *this* time?”

John decided against any preliminary rigmarole. “J<sup>sevyu</sup>, sir; I have only a small favor to ask,” he said, “requiring simply the use of your name on an invitation and a few acres of barren land...”

“Oh? No more men to be killed or to desert their loyalties?”

“No, Reverend Sir...”

“Has it occurred to you that your schemes have not been very successful, Mercy-of-Christ? You've lost two entire armies now, one in the field and one of guerrillas.”

“No, sir, I have not; I did not lose my guerrillas! They're in hiding in the protectorate!”

“Oh? Of the eighty-five men I gave you, ten are known dead and twenty-eight have returned here after leaving your service.”

“I admit I've lost men—that happens in any war! And desertions have been a problem because we're facing a powerful enemy, and with little support!”

The Anointed glared at him for a few seconds of tense silence, then calmed somewhat, waved a hand in dismissal, and said, “All right, then, what's this new idea of yours?”

John spoke slowly, trying to choose his words carefully. “I have discovered that the People of Heaven are more powerful than I had thought. I don't think that any army on Godsworld can succeed against them—I don't think all of Godsworld put together could defeat them. However, that doesn't mean that they can't be stopped. I propose to invite one of their enemies to come in and oppose them, with our help. They're known back on Earth as a ‘corporation’, the New Bechtel-Rand Corporation—it's something like a tribe or congregation. Theirs is the second largest, second most powerful of all the corporations that ‘develop’ worlds like Godsworld. I want to invite the largest, ITD Corporation, to come to Godsworld and compete against them, destroy them if possible.”

There was absolute silence for a long moment. Finally, the Anointed asked, “Are you crazy?”

John did not answer.

“Isn't one of these what-do-you-call-its bad enough? You want to invite *another* one?”

“That's right; the two of them should slow each other down, maybe destroy each other.”

“That's crazy!” The Anointed stared at him for several seconds; John stared back.

At last, the Anointed sighed. “All right, then, why do you need us? If you have some way of inviting in this other ‘corporation’, why don't you just do it?”

“I can't,” John said. “These people are bound by a sort of covenant—only one is permitted onto each world unless others are invited. The invitation has to come from someone in a position of authority, who controls a piece of land big enough for their ships to land on—my informant said that thirty acres of reasonably flat country would be about right. I need your name on the invitation, and the use of thirty acres for the landing field.”

“I see. And if I agree to this, what happens next?”

“Well, in a few weeks their first ship would arrive, and they would negotiate a trade agreement, just as the Bechtel-Rand people did with the old People of Heaven. They would sell you weapons, I assume, and set up a base here, and whenever the People of Heaven or any of their client states gave you any

trouble after that you could ask for help."

"Why shouldn't I just join the protectorate, then, if I'm to give up my freedom?"

"You wouldn't be giving up your freedom! ITD would be here at your invitation; you would have complete say over what they do here on Godsworld!"

"Oh? Why would they do that? What's to stop them from simply taking over the entire Realm of the Chosen?"

"They have laws..."

"Laws! What good are laws, when these people aren't even true Christians? What can bind men who don't honor the word of God? Do you know what happened to Stephen Christ-is-Risen, the Shepherd of the People of Heaven, when the Earthers arrived in the Citadel?"

"Uh..."

"It was one of your own men that told me, Mercy-of-Christ—one who deserted your camp to return home to his wife and children. He heard it from one of your spies in the Citadel, who never told you because you never bothered to ask about what happened to the rightful rulers of the place!"

It was true that John had never troubled himself with learning the details of the Earther takeover of the People of Heaven; he had simply accepted it as an accomplished fact. It had not even occurred to him that there might have been resistance, and he had never before heard either the name or title of Stephen Christ-is-Risen, Shepherd of the People of Heaven.

"Well?" the Anointed demanded.

"I don't know," John admitted, imagining assorted horrors—involuntary painwiring, perhaps, or some other even more perverse punishment.

"He agreed to let them trade, allowed them to build their headquarters and their airport—and then disappeared! He went into their headquarters one day and never came out, and all the Earthers would tell anybody was that he'd gone off somewhere! By then the Heaveners were too far gone to care, though—they never argued, just took orders from the Earthers as if their Shepherd had told them to. They didn't *care*!"

John was startled by the Anointed's vehemence.

"Do you think that I'm going to let some ship land here and entice my people to sin, so that when these invaders get tired of me *I* could simply vanish without anyone even paying any attention?"

John suddenly understood. The Anointed had not brought up Stephen Christ-is-Risen as another example of the untrustworthiness or evil of the Earthers, but because he feared the same fate—whatever it was—himself. He was jealous of his own power and prestige.

"Oh," John said. "No, I reckon you won't." Further argument was obviously not going to accomplish much.

The rest of the audience was trivial; the Anointed asked for an accounting of the men and supplies he had provided, which John did his best to supply. It was agreed that any of the Chosen John could contact were to be ordered home to Spiritus Sancti; John refrained from voicing his suspicion that many of them would not obey such an order. There were no supplies left to return, as John told it; he had no intention

of giving up the few remaining arms he had salvaged from the destruction of his camp. Throughout the remaining conversation the Anointed was visibly tired and irritable, while John was simply impatient to be done and leave. He was quite certain that, barring the overthrow of the Anointed, he would not be getting any further help from the Chosen of the Holy Ghost; that meant that any more time spent in Spiritus Sancti would simply be wasted. He was eager to move on and find a tribe that would issue the invitation to ITD; surely, among the dozens of smaller tribes in the hills of Isachar and Gad, there would be one or more eager for a chance to become a rich and powerful nation, even at the cost of independence.

As he talked about missing men and squandered ammunition he ran through the possibilities in his head. He would need a tribe where the government was not as jealous of its power as the Anointed of the Chosen.

That limited the field considerably. He thought over what he knew of the politics of the region, and was surprised to realize that most of the tribes he was familiar with were out-and-out dictatorships of one sort or another, ruled by prophets, military men, or hereditary monarchs. That was hardly in keeping with his own beliefs—hadn't Christ taught that all men are worthy? The ancient Americans had had a republic, and the original plan among the Godsworlders was for a democracy, with all laws set by referendum, but little seemed to remain of that; each group that had split off from the founding colony at New Jerusalem had followed its own leaders and set its own precedents, and New Jerusalem itself had elected the first Lion of Judah as its absolute ruler within a century of the Crossing—not that it mattered, since the city had been sacked by the Children of the New Israel long ago, and never rebuilt.

The People of the True Word and Flesh were not a dictatorship, of course—or at least they weren't before joining the protectorate—but they hadn't been a democracy, either. They were ruled by the Elders, who served for life, with death-created vacancies filled by vote of the eleven survivors. Such a council, made up of those who guarded the true faith, might be jealous of its prerogatives, too. John tried to imagine what the Elders would have said if he had asked them to issue the invitation, but could not decide.

That didn't matter, he told himself; his own people were part of the protectorate now, and therefore in no position to invite ITD.

He would surely be able to find a tribe somewhere that would do, he told himself. After all, even if he could only find dictatorships and oligarchies, he would not point out Stephen Christ-is-Risen's disappearance, and he might well turn up a dictator whose greed outweighed his caution.

When the Anointed finally dismissed him it was full dark; he returned to the room he had been provided, impatient for morning, when he could begin his search. He ate his dinner without tasting it, and slept hardly at all as he ran through everything he knew of the tribes not yet committed to either protectorate or Chosen. He hardly noticed when an officer came and escorted David Beloved-of-Jesus to the barracks to return him to regular service.

He was up at dawn, saddling his horse before the sun cleared the horizon, ready to ride for Isachar. He had three tribes in mind already. Thaddeus was barely able to keep up, but, unwilling to be left alone in a strange and hostile city, he did his best. It was not until they stopped for lunch that he was able to ask John where they were going.

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## Chapter Nineteen

*“And if a stranger sojourn with thee in your land, ye shall not vex him.”—Leviticus 19:33*

\* \* \* \*

The Followers of God had listened politely to the proposal, debated it for a day and a night, then



declared John an agent of the Antichrist; he fled before they could lay their hands on him.

The People of Christ's Blood had listened only after much argument, and dismissed the entire matter the moment John mentioned trade; they felt ordinary business and commerce unworthy of their attention, and tossed John and Thaddeus on a dungheap.

Despite their disdain of material possessions they kept the horses, so that the two men had to walk over the hill to the village of Savior's Grace, whose people had no established name for themselves. They came across no streams, and at Thaddeus' insistence did not take time to rest, so that they limped into the village stinking and filthy and exhausted.

There was no inn, but the minister, Seth Bound-for-Glory by name, brought them to the rectory, where his children took over; the three daughters washed the soiled clothes while the two sons heated and hauled water for long, luxurious baths; they also provided a few small cakes to ease growling stomachs. The minister's wife saw to preparing a suitable dinner a little later in the evening.

It was only after dinner, feeling greatly refreshed and relieved, that John and Thaddeus explained their mission.

"Have you heard about the People of Heaven?" John asked, to begin the conversation.

"Is that the protectorate that's been developing of late?" the minister asked.

"Yes, it is," John said.

"A man of theirs came by a few weeks ago, with samples of their goods and a smooth line of talk; we've been considering the offer, but haven't decided as yet. They set no deadline, so we're not in any hurry. It sounds good, but fair speeches aren't always the truth."

John nodded. "I might as well admit, right up front," he said, "that I'm an enemy of the protectorate. They destroyed my own tribe's army."

"You're a True Worder? That fellow boasted about defeating those folks."

John nodded again. "We're both True Worders."

"Ah!"

John had hoped for a more informative response; he glanced at Thaddeus, who shrugged slightly.

"We came looking for someone who would like to stop the spread of the People of Heaven." He held his hand up quickly to forestall any protests. "Not by open warfare—I'm not looking for allies for another war. I want to defeat the Heaveners at their own game—trade and negotiation. I don't have the means to do it myself, but I know how it can be done, and make the doer rich in the process; all I need is the cooperation of a government with thirty acres of empty land to spare, and a willingness to work with strangers."

He tensed, watching the minister's reaction.

"That sounds right interesting," Bound-for-Glory said. "Tell me more."

John smiled his relief and explained.

When he had finished there was a long moment of silence; finally, Bound-for-Glory said, "We'll need to talk it over."

“We?”

“The folks here; I’m not the boss, just the spokesman. Everybody has a say in what we do.”

John smiled again. That was exactly the situation he was hoping for.

“I’ll say right now, though,” Bound-for-Glory added, “that we’ll probably do it. I’d reckon that sooner or later somebody’s going to, and that someone’s going to get rich off it. Might as well be us, then—I figure I’d like being rich.” He smiled back.

John and Thaddeus were lodged in a spare room in a neighbor’s house, while the villagers jammed into the minister’s house for the discussion. Assuming the debate would last a few days, John quickly settled in to sleep, intending to rest after his recent efforts and be ready to start back toward the Citadel as soon as the decision came. He was startled by his awakening after what seemed like mere minutes; a glance at the window assured him that it was still dark out. He looked up at the unfamiliar form looming over him, the features hidden by shadow, as the room’s only lamp was on a bracket beside the door, behind whoever it was.

“Mr. Mercy,” the figure said, “we’ve decided. I won’t keep you in suspense; we’ll make the invitation.”

“Oh,” John said, “Good. What time is it?”

“Around midnight; we figured we’d let you know now, so you wouldn’t have a chance to slip away in the morning before we could talk to you.”

“Why would I want to do that?”

“Oh, I don’t know—we’ve had a swindler or two come through here. And Mr. Mercy, if you’re one of them, if you’ve lied or deceived us about this, I just want you to know that around here we skin our enemies alive.” Before John could reply, the figure retreated back through the doorway and out of sight.

John stared after him. He had thought that the people of Savior’s Grace were some of the calmest, friendliest, most sensible folk he had yet encountered, but this midnight visitation disproved that. Some of them, at any rate, were just as unpleasant as people anywhere else, and their behavior just as unpredictable. He hoped that nothing would be done that might disrupt his plans.

He worried for perhaps five minutes before falling asleep again.

In the morning, when he had arisen, washed, and dressed, he met with a deputation of the townsfolk, who confirmed what his midnight visitor had said, even providing a written document to that effect. That done, Seth Bound-for-Glory apologized for the nocturnal intrusion.

“Don’t pay old Hezekiah any mind,” he said. “He’s impatient and mistrustful, that’s all. You just go tell your corporation that the Free People of Savior’s Grace want them to come here and talk to us, and that they can use that flat piece of pasture land at the foot of the hill here for their ships.”

John nodded. “Thank you; I’ll get moving just as soon as I can. If anyone could lend me a horse, or better still two, for me and my comrade here, we’d make better time...” He stopped upon seeing the expressions of the half dozen men facing him go hard.

“Mr. Mercy, it’s not that we don’t trust you,” Bound-for-Glory said, “but all we have is your word, and you haven’t shown us a dime. This *could* all be just a ways of talking us out of two horses, you see. I don’t reckon we can spare any.”

John looked around, then nodded. "I understand. God be with you, then—I'll be back as soon as I can." His meager supplies were already packed; he slung the sack on his shoulder and marched out of the village without further conversation, Thaddeus close behind. He had no money for horses or airship fare; even when they reached the protectorate they would still have to walk the entire way, unless someone took pity on them. John knew that was unlikely.

They were perhaps halfway to the Citadel when the first snows began, and the going got steadily rougher; John began to wonder whether he would make it before Anno Domini 2593 gave way to Anno Domini 2594, but on December 20th he looked up at an unfamiliar sound and saw a gleaming metal something rising straight up into the sky. After a moment's astonishment he recognized it as one of the ships that came and went from the field beside the Corporate Headquarters of the People of Heaven, and that meant that he was almost to the Citadel.

He had never seen one of the starships flying in daylight before; they had always taken off and landed under cover of darkness, showing no lights.

It flashed in the sun's ruddy glow, dwindled, and vanished; John stood for a moment staring after it. It was a beautiful thing, he admitted that readily, despite his hatred of what it represented.

They reached the Citadel in the midst of a blizzard on the twenty-third, and after making their way through the empty streets found Miriam waiting at the Righteous House. She hurried them to a table, wrapped blankets about their shoulders, and supplied them with hot beef stew and herbal brew.

When he had recovered sufficiently to speak, Thaddeus announced, "Captain, I've had all I can take. I wish you luck, but I'm not going back to Savior's Grace with you; I'm going home as soon as I can raise the fare for an airship ride to New Nazareth."

John nodded. "I don't blame you," he said. "Go with my blessing."

They sat for a moment in silence, warming their bones.

Miriam sat down at the table and said, "Kwamé told me you were coming; he's been watching you when he could."

John looked at her. "Watching us how?"

"By satellite, mostly."

"Those things again." He shook his head, then looked up at her. "Do you mean that the Heaveners have known where we were every step of the way?"

"Oh, I don't think so—Kwamé was keeping track of you, but I don't think anyone else was. The rumor seemed to be that you'd gone underground again, and no one was very concerned about it."

"They weren't?"

"I don't think so; I'm not really sure."

"They should have been. We found what we wanted." He sipped his brew.

"Kwamé thought you had; he's been thinking about going out in one of the airships to get you, but he decided not to risk it—at least, until this blizzard hit. If you hadn't made it when you did he'd have come after you."

John did not find that reassuring, somehow; he suspected that Kwamé might well have waited just a little too long, thereby keeping a clear conscience while ridding himself of potential trouble—and of course, potential profit as well. Before he could think of anything appropriate to say, the door of the inn slammed open, caught by the wind, and Kwamé himself stepped in, wrapped in a dull gray cloak.

John noted that somehow, none of the wet, driven snow had stuck to the garment; Kwamé was able to take it off and fold it up without shaking it out. Not only was there no snow adhering to it, it looked dry. Another bit of Earther technology, John thought with resignation. Even miracles could lose their savor when they came too often, and the Earthers seemed to produce one minor miracle after another, without let-up.

“You made it,” Kwamé said as he sank into the table's only remaining vacant chair.

John nodded. “So we did,” he said.

The Earther seemed uncertain of what to say next, so John went on, “We got the invitation, from a village called Savior's Grace up in Isachar—they call themselves the Free People, but so do a lot of independent villages. There's a big meadow at the foot of the hillside they're on that should be just about large enough for the landing site.” He pulled out the document Bound-for-Glory had given him.

Kwamé accepted it, unrolled it and began reading. John interrupted to ask, “What happened to Stephen Christ-is-Risen?”

Kwamé looked up. “Who?”

“Stephen Christ-is-Risen, Shepherd of the People of Heaven.”

“Oh, you mean the preacher here? He's out on Fomalhaut II, I think—wanted to preach the word to the heathen, I suppose.”

“He's alive?”

Kwamé lowered the document. “Of course he's alive! Why wouldn't he be?”

“The rumor in Spiritus Sancti is that you people murdered him when he got in your way.”

“Oh, no! We couldn't get away with that. He just felt useless after we started running everything; his last few meetings didn't get more than a dozen people. When he complained, Ricky Dawes offered him free transportation anywhere in the Confederacy, and he took it.”

“He did?”

“Sure, why not? What is there here on Godsworld for him?”

“It's his home.”

“So what? He's a preacher—he wanted people to preach to, and the people here weren't interested any more. They have plenty of preachers. Out on Fomalhaut II organized religion was outlawed for a couple of centuries, so the miners are eager for interesting preachers.”

“Oh.” John found it impossible to answer intelligently. Kwamé and the other Earthers knew so much more than he did, about the universe and everything in it, that he often found himself feeling like a stupid child when talking with them. Changing the subject, he tapped the document. “How do you like your Christmas present?”

“Christmas?” He looked down at the paper, then up at John. “Oh, Christmas! I see. I like it fine!”

“Don't they still celebrate Christmas back on Earth? I know true Christianity is dead, but I thought the trappings still lingered.”

“Oh, we do! But we call it Exmas, and Earth's on a different calendar from Godsworld; it's only October to me. I haven't adjusted to the change yet.”

“Oh; here, tomorrow is Christmas Eve, the day after that is Christmas, and the day after that is New Year's Day, the start of Anno Domini Two Thousand Five Hundred and Ninety-Four—that means ‘the year of the Lord.’”

“I know that, I'd just forgotten for a moment. On Earth it's October, Twenty-Five Forty-Three, Standard Reckoning.”

John nodded. “What do they reckon from?”

“The same thing you do, except that your years are shorter. That's not important. John, this invitation doesn't mention *you* anywhere.”

“Oh?”

“Don't you want to have some say in what happens? *I* want you to—you promised me a job with ITD, but this Seth Bound-for-Glory never did.”

John shrugged. “I'd like to help run things, but I won't insist. If you're worried about your own job, just demand they hire you before you give them the invitation—or at least before you tell them where Savior's Grace is. You just get them to come here, and I'll take care of myself.”

“All right,” Kwamé said. “There's a ship going out tomorrow morning; I'll see if I can get on that. I'm due for some vacation time.”

That reminded John of something. “Why are they flying their starships by daylight now?” he asked.

“Oh, that's your doing! You made such a big point of telling everyone that we're from Earth that there didn't seem to be any reason to hide it any more; they've been flying in daylight since four days after you left.” He rolled up the invitation and stood. “I should get going; I'll be lucky to get on this flight as it is.” He paused. “I'm not sure whether I should thank you or not.”

“Don't worry about it,” John said. “We'll see how things turn out.”

“Right. I'll probably be coming back on an ITD ship and landing directly at Savior's Grace, I guess.”

“I'll be there waiting for you,” John said; he reached out and shook Kwamé's hand in farewell.

The Earther flung his cloak about his shoulders and marched out into the snow.

## Chapter Twenty

*“Withdraw thy foot from thy neighbor's house; lest he be weary of thee, and so hate thee.”—*  
**Proverbs 25:17**

\* \* \* \*

Despite his attempts to earn his keep by shoveling snow, carving nearwood, and breaking up ice for drinking water, it was obvious to John that he was wearing out his welcome in Savior's Grace. Although

few said so openly, he doubted that more than a handful of the villagers still believed an ITD ship was coming.

John was not entirely sure he believed it himself. He had hurried back to Isachar, unsure whether the ship might come before he could reach Savior's Grace, but his haste turned out to be completely unnecessary. January and February passed without any sign of a ship, and with the first week of March and the spring thaw he began to wonder if something had gone wrong. Had Bechtel-Rand discovered what Kwamé had in mind, and somehow stopped him? Had ITD refused to cooperate for some reason? Had they thought it was a trick, or dismissed Godsworld as not worth fighting over? Had Bechtel-Rand shot down the ITD ship?

Late in the afternoon of the eighth of March he was working in a nearwood field, carving away the soft red pulp from an unusually large, fine mass, when he glanced at the sky for the thousandth time and saw a distant glittering.

He froze, the machete half-raised, and stared.

The glittering grew brighter; something shiny was falling out of the sky.

He dropped the machete and ran for the meadow, shouting, "The ship! The ship's coming! Clear the field!"

Around him his fellow workers stopped and stared. "Get back here!" the nearwood field's owner called; John ignored him and kept running.

By the time he was past the stone fence he could make out the ship's general contours; it was roughly cylindrical, with several odd lumps and bulges. It was descending rapidly; John had no way of judging its size, but it was obviously enormous.

He charged full-tilt down the hillside toward the meadow chosen for the landing, just barely managing to slow down in time to avoid colliding with the wire surrounding it. The ship, too, slowed as it neared the meadow; its shadow spread across the field.

Others had seen the immense vessel's approach now, and were trickling down toward the fence in twos and threes. Following John's example, none stepped over into the meadow.

The ship was now dropping so slowly that it scarcely seemed to be moving at all, and that, combined with the utter silence of its descent, gave the scene an air of unreality. John wondered for a moment if its arrival were all just a wish-fulfilling dream. He stared up at the ship, now only a few hundred feet from the ground as best he could estimate.

He tried to guess its size, comparing its shadow to the length of the meadow and the villagers who were now crowding the uphill side of the fence, and came up with a diameter of two hundred feet. That seemed unreasonably large—it was certainly far bigger than the ships he had seen in the Citadel of Heaven—but within the bounds of possibility.

The ship seemed to suddenly accelerate, as if it were simply falling the last few yards, and there was a sudden roar of wind accompanying it, followed by an earth-shaking boom as it struck the ground.

That was followed by a long moment of silence as the thing settled into the soil. No one in the watching crowd spoke; all just stared in silent amazement.

Now that the thing was down, John revised his earlier estimate. It was over a hundred feet in diameter, but well short of two hundred. It stood upright on one flat end, and he judged the height at roughly five or

six hundred feet. Not the monster he had first thought it, but quite big enough. The sides were gleaming silvery metal, for the most part, with red and white patterning; in addition to the bulges he had seen during the descent he could now make out odd bits of piping, hatchways, and printed messages. The only one large enough for him to read at this distance was also the only one that was neither red nor white; halfway up the side facing him were three immense blue letters, with narrow horizontal yellow stripes across them.

The letters were ITD, removing any possible doubt about the ship's origin.

He glanced away from it at the villagers; it appeared that the entire population of Savior's Grace was lined up along the fence, staring at the cylinder. This was the ideal opportunity to impress them, to convince them once and for all that he was a man due their respect, not just a swindler. He climbed up on the stone baseline and lifted one leg over the wire.

Before he could put his foot down on the other side and swing himself completely over there was a sudden change in the crowd's silence, as if everyone had caught his or her breath at the same instant. John looked over the line of faces, but saw no explanation there; he turned, still straddling the wire, and looked up at the ship.

A hatchway had opened, some fifty feet off the ground, effectively stealing his thunder. Hurriedly he finished crossing the fence and stepped down into the meadow, a hundred yards from the towering vessel's side.

A man was standing in the open hatchway. John looked up and waved.

The man leaned forward, and called, "*Hlo*, John, is that you? We made it!"

John smiled, and shouted back, "*J'sevyu*, Kwamé! Welcome to Savior's Grace!" His importance had been neatly established, right at the start.

"I'll be right down!" Kwamé answered. He stepped back inside, and the hatch closed again.

The silence around the field was broken, and a babble of voices poured from the line of villagers. John stood, arms folded, waiting for Kwamé to reappear.

A moment later another hatchway opened, this one only about eight feet above the ground; a ladder appeared from the side of the ship, though John was not quite sure exactly where it emerged. Kwamé stepped out and carefully descended the ladder. When he was safely on the ground he turned and waved.

John walked slowly toward him, hand upraised in formal greeting. Kwamé picked up his cue, and began walking toward John, hand up. When they reached the midpoint they shook hands.

"I was beginning to wonder what was keeping you," John said.

"Oh, you know bureaucracy; the executives spent a couple of weeks arguing. I don't think there was ever any real doubt they'd accept the invitation, but they had to make it look good. Besides, it takes awhile to put together a big expedition, even for a company like ITD. Sorry if you were worried."

John shrugged it off. "It doesn't matter now that they're here." He paused. "Now what?" he asked.

"Now ITD's chief negotiator talks to the village elders, or whoever's in charge here."

John looked around at the spectators. "Savior's Grace is pretty loosely run; that invitation came from a vote of the entire adult population. I reckon the minister, Seth Bound-for-Glory, would do as a

spokesman.” He pointed. “That’s him yonder, in the brown jacket and black hat.”

Kwamé nodded. “I take it you’re not in a position of authority yourself.”

“Me?” John snorted. “I was lucky they didn’t chase me away weeks ago! If they hadn’t had a good crop of nearwood to cut they would have.”

“As bad as that?”

“Just about.” He did not offer any details, preferring not to admit that he had been found, by the villagers and by himself, to be amazingly inept at ordinary labor. He had the necessary strength, dexterity, and intelligence, but had simply never acquired any of the skills.

Kwamé shook his head. “Then it’s just as well I anticipated that. I’ve got a job lined up for you if you want it, as an on-site consultant.”

“A what?” Anything that required no heavy physical work would sound good.

“A consultant—an advisor. You’d be at the side of the planetary administrator—that’s the person in charge of the operation, the way Ricky Dawes is at the Citadel. Different companies, different names, but the same work. Your job would be to answer questions about how the people of Godsworld think or anything else about the world that the administrator might want to know, and to make suggestions and comment on any plans. It pays well, and it’s good work—productive, but it won’t kill you. There’s room for advancement, too; you’ll be learning how the company works at the same time you’ll be teaching the company about Godsworld, and if the planetary administrator gets promoted off-planet you’ll have a good shot at replacing him.” He coughed. “I think it’s a good job, anyway; they’ve budgeted two on-site consultants for this post, and I’m the other one.”

“I’ll need to think it over,” John replied. “Right now there are other matters to settle.”

“Yes, I suppose there are. I came out first so that you’d see a familiar face, and so the people here could see us talking like old friends, but I don’t really have any authority yet—my job’s contingent on setting up a post here. It’s the P.A.—the planetary administrator—who’ll have to do the actual negotiating. It’s his show; he says he wants to do his own talking, doesn’t trust anyone else to do it. I’ll go get him down here if you’ll go get this Bound-for-Glory person—have I ever mentioned how much I like your family names here on Godsworld?”

“Not that I recall; have I ever mentioned how much I *dislike* all the pagan, meaningless, apocryphal names you Earthers use?”

“Not in my hearing. You may like our P.A., then—his name is Gamaliel Blessing. I think that may be what got him this job; it certainly wasn’t his looks.”

“What do you mean by that?” John asked, suddenly worried.

“Oh, you’ll see. I’ll go get him; you get the minister.”

Kwamé turned and strode back toward the ship, while John turned and headed for the spot along the fence where he had seen Seth Bound-for-Glory. He wondered what Kwamé’s remark about the administrator’s looks could mean; he had distinctly called this person “him”, so John was sure that it was not a woman, as he might otherwise have feared.

The minister saw him coming, and clambered awkwardly up over the wire. “You want me, John?” he called.



“Yes, Reverend, I do; can you act as spokesman for your people here? The Earther commander wants to do some negotiating.”

Bound-for-Glory was visibly nervous. “Seems to me you're doing fine,” he said.

“Oh, no, Reverend,” John replied, suppressing a grin. “You've got it all wrong. I'm not one of the Free People at all, now, am I? You folks have made that plain these past months. I work for *them*, not for you!” He waved a hand at the towering starship, gleaming golden-red in the sun. He had not actually decided whether to accept the job he had been offered—he had strong reservations, not entirely clear even to himself, about working for *any* offworlder—but he saw no point in admitting that to the minister.

“Oh,” Bound-for-Glory replied. “Well, then, I can just talk to you, can't I?”

“Well, now, the commander wanted to speak for himself. Come on, now; he's just a man.” He glanced back at the ship and waved toward the hatch.

A figure was emerging—not Kwamé, but someone much larger.

“There he is now,” John said, turning around for a good look at the administrator.

As he stepped out of the shadowy hatchway the explanation of Kwamé's remark was suddenly obvious.

Gamaliel Blessing stood more than seven feet tall, John was sure, certainly taller than any other Earther John had ever seen, let alone any Godsworlders. He was heavily built, too, not the tall and slender sort. He wore tight black trousers—not jeans—gleaming black boots, a loose, open yellow vest, and a great deal of metal apparatus; no shirt, no jacket, no hat, despite the lingering winter chill. His skin was a deep brown, almost black; his hair was black and curly, and his eyes glowed—literally glowed—a peculiar milky white. His metal trappings were not mere ornaments hung on his limbs, but were set into his flesh; some sparkled and flickered with unnatural lights and colors. A silvery band ran around his head, with several oddly-shaped protrusions; metal blocks jutted from his chest; wires were woven through his arms.

Perhaps worst of all, three more irregular metal blocks hung in the air behind him, following along just above his shoulders.

John heard Bound-for-Glory whisper “Oh, my good Lord in heaven! What is it?” He said nothing himself, but his feelings were similar.

The hideous apparition turned and climbed down the ladder; Kwamé emerged right behind him and also descended, again moving very cautiously down the metal rungs. At the bottom of the ladder the brown-skinned man-thing turned and looked over the villagers who still lined the fence. The three metal things drifting in the air suddenly fanned out across the meadow, spacing themselves along a line parallel to the fence, but a hundred feet in, and hanging about eight feet off the ground. Several villagers started back in alarm.

“*Hlo!*” boomed a voice, coming simultaneously from the three flying contraptions and the huge Earther. “I'm Gamaliel Blessing, representing the Interstellar Trade and Development Corporation!” It spoke with a thick Earther accent.

Kwamé tugged at Blessing's arm, and led him to meet John and the minister.

John stepped forward readily to shake the monster's hand, trying hard to hide his dismay at Blessing's appearance and to resist the temptation to stare rudely at the opalescent artificial eyes. Kwamé introduced him. “Mr. Blessing, this is Captain John Mercy-of-Christ, formerly the Armed Guardian of the

True Word and Flesh, currently under consideration to be your on-site consultant. John, Gameliel Blessing, planetary administrator for ITD."

"Captain Mercy-of-Christ, a pleasure to meet you."

John winced at the incorrect form of address. He wanted the Earther to come across well, and silly little mistakes in form would not help at all. "*J'sevyu*, Mr. Blessing; this here is the Reverend Seth Bound-for-Glory, spokesman for the Free People of Savior's Grace and pastor of the Savior's Grace Church of Christ."

Blessing stuck out a hand; Bound-for-Glory took it reluctantly, apparently surprised to find it felt like any other man's hand. "Reverend," Blessing said, "I hope we can do business together. I understand Godsworld is short of plastics; would ITD be able to lease this meadow with plastics, or is there something else you'd prefer? I don't suppose that you have much use for Terran credit out here."

"Plastic?" The minister's face lit up. "I think we can make a deal, Mr. Blessing."

From that point on it was easy. The villagers quickly forgot Blessing's mechanized body and dark skin when other crewmembers, almost all of them completely human in appearance despite a wide range of skin colors, began bringing out crates of guns, ammunition, plastic sheeting, and other trade goods.

John followed the negotiations with interest, and found himself, without really meaning to, giving both sides advice on how to deal with the other, correcting misunderstandings, explaining obscure references, and interpreting phrases that one or the other did not understand. By noon the next day he had formally accepted Kwamé's offer and signed on as an ITD employee.

## Chapter Twenty-One

*"For what hath man of all his labour, and of the vexation of his heart, wherein he hath laboured under the sun?"—Ecclesiastes 2:22*

\* \* \* \*

John glanced impatiently at the cabin door. "I don't understand how ITD could be so stupid," he said. "How could they send a rebuilt black man to run their operation on an all-white world where cyborgs are traditionally considered the work of the Devil?"

"John," Kwamé said patiently, "ITD is an equal-opportunity employer. They hire the most qualified people without worrying about their skin color or how many gadgets have been built into them. Hell, at least he's human! They could have sent an arty or a sport model or something. Black skin isn't so bad when you consider the other possibilities."

"What other possibilities?"

"Green and scaly, say."

"You mean they've found intelligent beings out there besides humans?"

"No, they built them. Maybe they've found some, too—there were rumors when we left."

"Oh." John shook his head. "It still seems wrong, somehow, messing around with God's image."

"God's image?"

"Man was created in God's image—the Bible says so."

“Which man? Is God white?”

John looked down at the table for a moment, then looked up again. “I don't know,” he said. “A year ago I probably would have said yes, but now I don't know. I do know He isn't green and scaly.”

Kwamé shrugged. “That's more than *I* know about Him; I'm not even sure He exists!”

“Well, you're not a Godsworlder—and Gamaliel Blessing isn't even close. Couldn't they have found someone who would be more ... who would fit in better?”

“John, they didn't even try. I don't think you really understand the situation. You invited ITD to come here; that's supposed to mean that you're ready to deal with the people of the Interstellar Confederacy, that you and these other Godsworlders are reasonably sane and civilized now. To anyone out there in the Confederacy, that means you're supposed to be able to accept people as people, however they may vary; that's just about the most basic rule our civilization has. Gamaliel Blessing is a person, even if he has had half his nervous system rewired and any number of things added; Godsworld is going to have to accept that if they're going to deal with civilized people. Now, you know and I know that ITD was invited in here because you feel Bechtel-Rand wronged you, not because Godsworld is actually ready for open trade; you know and I know that Savior's Grace issued the invitation and ITD accepted it because they both smelled a profit; but ITD can't *admit* that, because the CRA wouldn't allow them to trade here if they did. They have to behave as if Godsworld really were civilized.”

“It *is* civilized! More civilized than Earth!”

“Oh, come on, you know better than that!”

“We have the perfect way of life here, following the word of God! How can anything be more civilized than that?”

“The perfect way of life? Living on the edge of starvation, fighting petty little wars over whether to use wine or grape juice to simulate human blood?”

“That war was over centuries ago! The prohibitionist heretics were wiped out!”

“That's civilized?”

“Yes!”

“I think we may have a problem in translation here; you may have noticed that those pop up, where words have changed their meanings over time. Godsworlder English isn't *exactly* like the evolved Old American that the machines taught us before we came here. Just what do *you* mean by ‘civilized’?”

John opened his mouth, then closed it again. “I don't know,” he admitted.

“That's what I thought.”

“It seems to me, though, that a guest should respect a host's customs, and we don't allow mixing men and machines here.”

Kwamé shrugged. “Get used to it,” he said.

“We also try and keep our appointments; when is this strategy session going to start?”

“When Blessing gets here. That idiot minister of yours is probably arguing about some stupid detail.”

"He's not *my* minister. And I still think picking a black *and* a cyborg was ... inconsiderate."

"Oh, I don't know," Blessing said from the doorway. "I think they wanted someone *impressive*. And you must admit, Captain, that to your little pale people here, I *am impressive*."

"I didn't hear you come in," Kwamé said.

"I didn't want you to," Blessing replied.

Impatiently, John said, "Forget that. Sit down, Mr. Blessing, and let's talk."

"Gladly." He sank into one of the cushions; it billowed up around him, supporting his weight and pillowing him on all sides. "The robots have started digging our headquarters. I hope, Captain, that Godsworld has no taboos about building underground? There is no sacred earth here, no burial ground? Mr. Bound-for-Glory made no objection, but he might have been constrained from speaking by some custom of which I am unaware. He did not appear happy, however."

John stared at him. "You can't build underground on Godsworld; the soil's only a few feet deep. You'd need to blast out rock. We don't have any laws against it—I don't know what you mean by 'taboo'—because we never needed any."

"Oh, we can go through rock; that's no problem. It explains our host's misgivings, though. ITD learned its trade on planets where the atmosphere was not breathable, Captain; we always build underground unless local custom forbids it. It would be a shame to disturb the fields here, wouldn't it?"

John accepted another amazing accomplishment of Earther technology without further argument. "Oh," he said. "Well, there's no graveyard here; if there were there would be headstones."

"Ah. Good. That makes it easy." He nodded. "Then the robots should have the basic rooms ready in a few hundred hours. Already we have arranged to purchase a few tons of this fungoid you call 'nearwood' from the village here, in exchange for firearms, in addition to leasing our headquarters site for a few tons of cheap styrene."

"Firearms? You mean guns?"

"Yes, guns. Your people seem very fond of them."

"These aren't my people; I'm a True Worder, not from Savior's Grace."

"All Godsworlders, Captain; I meant no offense. At any rate, they seem pleased to have us here. We should be able to make quick progress."

"Do you expect the People of Heaven to try and stop you? Are you putting your headquarters underground for defensive reasons?" John asked.

"No, no, Captain; I told you why we build underground. The People of Heaven certainly know we're here, and will undoubtedly try to prevent us from establishing ourselves on Godsworld; I expect them to cut their prices and aggressively expand their trading."

"Cut prices?" John sat stunned for a moment as vague misgivings that had been mounting since the ship landed suddenly crystallized. Blessing and Kwamé did not notice; Blessing was inquiring what Bechtel-Rand's former employee thought would be the best-selling products on Godsworld.

John was realizing clearly for the first time that ITD and Bechtel-Rand were not immediately going to start

shooting at each other. America Dawes and Gamaliel Blessing were merchants, not warriors.

They would not kill each other off.

He had made a mistake, a disastrous and irreversible mistake. ITD and Bechtel-Rand were not going to drive each other off Godsworld. They would split the planet between them.

He might still be able to salvage something from the situation, he told himself. The two were competitors. If he could keep them nibbling away at each other they might yet leave the rest of Godsworld alone.

And at the very least, Godsworlders would now have the choice of *two* Satanic organizations to surrender to, instead of only one. Somehow, John did not find that thought comforting.

He returned his attention to the meeting, and found that one of Blessing's remote floaters was projecting an incredibly detailed topographic map of Godsworld on a nearby cream-colored bulkhead.

"We're here," Blessing said, pointing to a spot in the northeast of Isachar. "And Bechtel-Rand's base of operations is here, in the Hills of Judah, far more centrally located. Of course, with the opening contract and development license, they were able to pick any spot on the planet. Now, where would you two suggest we send our first batch of envoys?"

Kwamé shrugged. "That's not my field," he said.

John looked at the map carefully, trying to match it up with the distorted and crudely-drawn maps he was familiar with. "Would this be the Little New Jordan River, here?" He pointed.

"Yes," Blessing said after an instant's hesitation, "That's what the ship's records call it."

"Then this must be the marshes; there's a village there that I don't see on here."

"Oh, we can't show every single village on that map! If you like we can have it enlarged until the village does show. Why? What did you have in mind?"

"Oh, I'm just trying to get oriented. I was thinking you might try Little St. Peter. I have three men there loyal to me who might be able to sabotage the defenses."

"Captain, we aren't trying to capture towns from Bechtel-Rand's net quite yet; first we need to establish ourselves. We'll be cutting into their markets soon enough, but for now we need to turn a profit quickly to convince the home office it's worth investing further, and to do that we want previously-untapped markets, where we can set our own prices. Once we have more funds available we can start picking at the edges of Bechtel-Rand's little empire."

"Oh." That was just good military sense, of course; build a base first, exploit that to support your attack...

But there wouldn't be any attack. ITD was not interested in killing or converting the people of Godsworld, but only in buying and selling. Odd, John thought, how very similar the strategies might be.

"What about the other villages in these hills around us—Isachar, they're called?" Blessing asked.

"Yes, Isachar. Probably not worth bothering with, actually," John said without thinking. "Too many of them, too small, all independent of each other. It would take years to pick them all up piecemeal. That's why nobody ever conquered them—too much time and trouble for little gain."

"Ah. Small markets, then. We'll send out a few people to see what they have to offer, but I'd prefer

something larger for our major campaign. What about this city-state here—doesn't it have something of an empire of its own? And trade, as well?" He pointed to a dot that John realized must represent Spiritus Sancti.

"That's the Realm of the Chosen of the Holy Ghost," John said. "They're big and rich, all right, with a good location—protected on two sides but open to the western plain—but I don't think you'll be able to trade with them."

"Why not?"

"Because it's ruled by a man called the Anointed of God who doesn't trust Earthers. I tried to get him to invite you here, but he threw me out, and I wound up in Savior's Grace instead."

"Oh." Blessing looked at the map. "It's too good to pass up, though. We'll have to offer this Anointed of God a deal he can't refuse. Either that, or depose him somehow." He gazed thoughtfully at the map.

John, too, stared at it. Depose the Anointed? These Earthers might be merchants, not killers, but they had possibilities after all. Blessing was a pervert, by Godsworld standards, corrupting his own flesh with steel, but he had drive and intelligence; he was not wholly decadent, not a simple thrill-seeker like Tuesday Ikeya.

John wondered for a moment whether his rewiring included an empathy spike, but thrust the question aside as irrelevant.

This campaign, he thought, was going to be interesting. "How would you do that?" he asked.

"Oh, there are ways—but let's hope it doesn't come to that. Why doesn't this Anointed person like Terrans? I mean, Earthers?"

John described his last meeting with the Anointed, and told the story of Stephen Christ-is-Risen as he understood it.

Blessing frowned as he listened; when John had finished he thought silently for a moment. "This Stephen Christ-is-Risen," he asked finally, "do you think Bechtel-Rand really sent him off-planet?"

John floundered for a moment, then looked at Kwamé.

"I think they did," Kwamé said.

"Then I don't think we need to worry about protests to the CRA if we depose the Anointed," Blessing said, "though I still hope it won't come to that. We can make anything *we* do to the Anointed look like what *they* did to Christ-is-Risen. I like that." He paused. "It shouldn't be necessary, though. John, you've talked with this person, so I'll be sending you along, but you won't be speaking on our behalf—if anyone asks you're just along as a guide. I know just the person to send to talk to this Anointed." He smiled, and one of his three floaters did a slow roll in mid-air.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

*"And the maiden pleased him, and she obtained kindness of him ... "*—**Esther 2:9**

\* \* \* \*

The woman let out another little startled yip, and again John glanced sideways at her in disbelief. Even riding astride at a slow walk she was obviously having trouble staying in the saddle. John knew perfectly well that horses were extinct back on Earth—or nearly so, anyway—but he had not realized anyone, even a woman who had never seen a horse before, could have quite so much trouble riding one.

This woman, however, was doing just that. Three times now the entire expedition—John, the woman, and an escort of four of the Free People and two ITD employees—had come to a halt while John adjusted her saddle and boosted her up until she was reasonably steady once more. The stirrups had been shortened almost as far as they would go, the cinch-strap pulled so tight the horse was visibly uncomfortable; fortunately, the beast found for her was so placid it made no protest, but merely walked all the more slowly and gingerly.

John had great difficulty in believing that this tiny, frail, clumsy woman was Premosila Kim, the incredible salesperson that Gamaliel Blessing had been so proud of. She was less than five feet tall—a meter and a half, she said—by far the shortest Earther John had yet encountered, with black curling hair and big dark eyes, but flat-chested and scrawny. She did, he had to admit, have a delightful smile—she had used it on him when they were introduced—but it would take more than a smile to win over the Anointed.

She gasped suddenly as she slipped sideways; she caught herself with both hands grabbing the pommel, but her riding skirt fell away.

After spending as much time as he had among Earthers John was no longer shocked or intrigued by the sight of a woman's legs, particularly legs as thin as these; he simply reined in his mount, slid to the ground, and walked back to recover the skirt. It would not do to let her be seen bare-legged by any of the Chosen.

Two of the men from Savior's Grace were staring, while the other two averted their eyes; John shook his head in disgust. Their reactions would be different a year from now, he told himself, when the Earthers had been around their village for awhile. The other two ITD people were not staring, but simply watching calmly and casually—but then, one of them was a woman herself. The other claimed to be from someplace called Groombridgiana, which he insisted was not on Earth at all, and for all John knew the women in Groombridgiana ran around stark naked.

He threw the skirt across the horse's back behind her, and stood by as she tugged it into place again.

“Thank you,” she said, smiling at him for the second time.

He smiled back without meaning to, then remounted and spurred his horse forward again. A pretty smile would not be enough to win over the Anointed—but it might help.

That was the last time she slipped; somehow she seemed to suddenly get the hang of riding after that, and by the time they reached the border of the Chosen Empire the party was moving at a decent pace and able to converse with one another.

John knew that long before they reached Spiritus Sancti, word of their coming would reach the army and an escort would meet them; that meant that this was his last opportunity to talk with Kim where there was no chance of being overheard by unfriendly ears. He had held his peace through all the long ride through the hills and while they wandered along the Upper New Jordan searching for a ford, but he could resist no longer.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” he asked her at a moment when they happened to be out of easy earshot of the others.

“Do what?” She looked honestly puzzled.

“Talk to the Anointed. He hates Earthers; it's entirely possible he'll have you imprisoned or even killed.”

“Oh, I don't think he'll do that.”

"I'll do the talking, if you like."

"No, no; it's my job."

"But it's dangerous!"

"Captain, it's my *job*. I don't think you understand."

John was getting tired of being told that he didn't understand things, but he knew that it had usually been true when one of the Earthers had said that. "Oh?" he replied.

"Be honest, now; you've negotiated with this person three times so far. Have you ever gotten what you wanted?"

John had to admit that he had not gotten the alliance he had asked for, nor permission to land the ITD ship on the Anointed's land, but he insisted, "I got my guerrillas!"

"Yes, given grudgingly and undersupplied, and taken back again later!"

John had no answer to that.

"Besides, how can you speak for ITD, when he knows you as a True Worder? He won't really accept what you say. *I* know you work for ITD and hold a responsible position, but *he* won't believe it. He thinks of you as a Godsworlder and ITD as Earther, and if he's as rigid in his thinking as you've led me to believe he won't accept any crossovers."

"Not me, then, but you need a strong negotiator, someone he'll respect..."

"No, you don't. You're thinking in military terms again, Captain, where the object is to scare your enemy. We're not an army. We want to look just as harmless and weak as we can, don't you see that? We want him to believe that he has nothing to fear from us, that he can allow us the free run of his whole empire without worrying about his own security. And if he's like other primitives—forgive me, Captain, but that's what Godsworlders seem to us—then he'll equate physical size with power. If he sees me as the representative of ITD—as their spokesman and as their symbol both—then he'll think he's safe, that we're weak and harmless. He'll agree to terms that he would not risk granting to a big strong male like yourself."

"Oh." John saw the logic to what she said, although it still went against his accustomed beliefs. After a moment of silence, he asked, "But aren't you really just as weak as he sees you to be? You don't have your ship here, or any of your machines..."

Kim sighed. "Take my word for it, Captain, I can handle it."

"But..."

She urged her horse forward before he could finish his question, putting an end to the conversation, and twenty minutes later their escort appeared.

In Spiritus Sancti they were met by two of the Anointed's advisors, both small, delicate men, who interrogated them politely in a small office; John noticed for the first time, now that Kim had brought it to his attention, that none of the government officials among the Chosen, and none of the higher-ranking officers, were really very large. John guessed that the Anointed did, indeed, equate physical strength with ambition and power, and allowed no big strong men into positions of power lest they one day overthrow him. That seemed odd, since the Anointed himself was so grotesquely fat that the effort of hauling his own



weight around left him with little strength for anything else.

Or perhaps it was not so odd, at that. John thought of the Anointed as a man of great power, certainly, since he commanded an empire, but perhaps *he* saw himself as a weakling. His fear of being subverted by the Earthers certainly said little for his self-confidence.

At Kim's insistence John did not speak to the advisors during the questioning, but stood silently with the four men from Savior's Grace as the three offworlders were interviewed. He made no protest when the advisors recognized him and demanded to know why he was there, and were told that he had been hired simply as a guide. He understood that admitting a connection between himself and ITD might harm the negotiating; he also knew that with their mysteriously perfect maps—he was still unclear on what a 'satellite' was, though he had learned to spell and pronounce the word—the Earthers had no need of guides in the usual sense.

Kim did virtually all the talking for the Earthers, despite the attempts of the advisors to draw her male companion into the conversation. The Groombridgian was adept at finding various ways of saying, "That's not my field; you'll have to ask my superior, Ms. Kim."

Something about Kim seemed to make the two Chosen uneasy, although John could not see what it would be; she was being the very picture of deference, smiling, nodding, apologizing, and speaking in simple, sometimes broken sentences, as if she were not fluent in English—or rather, Godsworlder English, as the Earthers called it. Apparently it differed greatly from the dead language known as English back on Earth.

It was only as the conversation was nearing its end that John realized the Chosen were having trouble dealing with her because she was a woman. He had been associating so much with Earthers that he had forgotten how thoroughly the Chosen despised women, the heirs of sinful Eve. The People of the True Word and Flesh had relegated women to secondary roles, as did every Godsworld society, but the Chosen carried it to an extreme—while the Earthers at times seemed totally oblivious of any difference between the sexes. Perhaps that was another reason that the Anointed had wanted nothing to do with them.

And not only was Kim female, but John realized when they all stood again that she had managed to loosen the collar of her blouse, as if by accident. Throughout the interrogation the Anointed's advisors had been staring down her neckline, too polite to mention her apparent disarray; a Godsworlder woman would have noticed their stares and fixed the collar.

*She* certainly knew the difference between the sexes, and was willing to exploit it. That was nothing new on either planet, John was sure.

It was decided that Kim, the man from Groombridgiana, and the senior of the men from Savior's Grace would be permitted to discuss the possibility of trade with the Anointed the following morning. The entire party was escorted to rooms up the street, which John remembered well.

When they were gathered in their two rooms, John remarked quietly to Kim, "I'm impressed, I think—you probably convinced those advisors you're a harlot, and not a very bright one at that."

"Do you think so?"

"Yes."

"Oh, good! I was hoping that was their impression, but I wasn't sure how far to go to convince them without being blatant."

“Oh? You planned on being taken for a whore?”

“Certainly! Is there anyone more despised and harmless in your culture? They probably think I'm Blessing's woman of the moment, and the fact that he sent me on a delicate mission should convince them he's either an idiot, drastically short-handed, or both. How much of a threat can his organization be, then? You see? *You* couldn't have done that—no man could.”

John shook his head in admiration. “You Earthers may not all be Satanists—I haven't decided that one yet—but you're tricky enough.”

Kim shrugged. “Just psychology.”

“I still don't think he'll let you open a trading post here, though.”

At that, Kim just smiled.

John had underestimated the Earther salespeople and the Anointed's greed; Kim returned from her first audience with a signed agreement allowing ITD traders freedom to cross the borders at will until further notice. She was also bubbling with suppressed laughter at the Anointed's ludicrous attempts to seduce her.

Within a fortnight the Chosen of the Holy Ghost had not merely agreed to the establishment of a trading mission, but had joined the Free Trade Federation, ITD's puppet organization intended to counter the Protectorate of Heaven, outright, signing exclusive contracts stating that ITD was to supply all new weapons for their army.

Once the Anointed had signed the contract and joined the Federation the two corporate powers shared a border—the border between the Chosen and the True Worders, the site of conflict for as far back as John could recall. Upon his return to Savior's Grace John spent an hour or so pondering this on the incredible maps ITD's ship generated upon request, and brought up the subject at the next strategy session.

“You know, if the Chosen were to march south across the Little New Jordan, then swing west, they could cut the True Worders off from the rest of the Protectorate and probably march right into New Nazareth unopposed. The True Worders don't have much of an army; they lost it fighting the Heaveners.”

Kwamé stared at him. “They lost it under your command.”

“I'm well aware of that!” John snapped.

“Are you suggesting, Captain,” Blessing said, casually flicking at a wire that protruded, at the moment, from one of his fingertips, “That we arm the Chosen and prod them into conquering your own native land?”

“Not conquering; recapturing!”

“It looks very much like conquest to me,” Blessing replied. He folded the wire down; it vanished into his finger. “Weren't you leading an army against the Chosen a year ago?”

“Yes, I was.”

“It seems you've changed sides.”

“No, I haven't—everyone else has! My people surrendered to the Heaveners, and the Chosen

surrendered to us."

"There would be a bloodbath, you know; we've armed the Chosen with light machine guns and armor-piercing bullets, and I'm sure Bechtel-Rand has equipped the True Worders with equally formidable weapons. Casualties would be enormous. Even if the True Worder army was destroyed, surely they have some sort of militia, and you yourself told us that they joined the protectorate in order to acquire the means to defend themselves. And furthermore, Captain, as its name implies, wouldn't the protectorate be obligated to come to their aid? True, the Chosen could cut them off on the ground, but Bechtel-Rand has enough aircraft to keep True Worder resistance well-supplied for months, even if they don't decide to use their starships, as they well might."

John stared at the map. Blessing was right, he knew. He had still been thinking in the terms of old Godsworld, where wars could be fought without interference, and where trained men, horses, and steel blades decided battles. He had not considered either the heightened firepower or the presence of aircraft.

"Besides," Kwamé said, "what's the point in killing potential customers?"

Reluctantly, John pulled his eyes away from the map and nodded.

"However," Blessing said, "I think you may be right in choosing our next target. The agreement that your former people signed upon joining the protectorate—was it an exclusive contract?"

"I don't know," John admitted, "I never thought about it."

"Well, Captain, if you're to go on working for ITD you need to think of such things. Just because Bechtel-Rand has trading rights in New Nazareth and holds the contract to defend the tribe, doesn't mean that we can't trade with them *as well*."

John stared at him.

"In fact, Captain, I think that tomorrow morning you'll be leaving for New Nazareth, to see if you can't open trade there."

### Chapter Twenty-Three

*"Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him; but I will maintain my own ways before him."*—**Job 13:15**

\* \* \* \*

The airship dropped him and his party at the border; he and Blessing had decided that it would be unwise to fly directly into New Nazareth until they had a better idea how matters stood there. John had a small metal device that was supposed to signal the airship to come and get him, wherever he might be at the time, when he was ready to leave and return to Savior's Grace.

He had wanted Kwamé along on this expedition, but the Australian had refused; in fact, John noticed that he no longer left the ITD headquarters except to go aboard the ship for one reason or another. He had obviously lost interest in Godsworld.

Besides, as Blessing pointed out, it was reckless and wasteful to send both of his local experts—only Kwamé used the official term, "on-site consultants"—on a single expedition.

Premosila Kim, however, was available; once the opening rounds of negotiation were out of the way Blessing had replaced her in Spiritus Sancti with a man, someone that the Chosen could deal with more comfortably.

John found himself thinking the worse of the Chosen for their prejudice against women, even while he realized that he, himself, had not been much better for most of his life. He was still not ready to concede women full equality with men, as the Earthers did, but he certainly respected some of the Earther women far more than he ever had any Godsworlder women.

For one, he respected Kim, despite her occasional awkwardness with the details of everyday life on Godsworld; he accepted her inclusion gladly.

He also took along a deacon from Savior's Grace, to lend the group some official status by Godsworlder tribal standards, and a young male Earther in case the True Worders refused to deal with Kim.

The four of them walked from the border as far as the outskirts of New Nazareth, a journey lasting about a day and a half, before anyone stopped them or asked their business. Finally, only a hundred yards from the city's open gates, a patrol marched out to meet them, apparently alerted by a lookout somewhere.

John introduced himself by name only, since his titles had been revoked, and explained that he had come to speak to the Elders on behalf of himself and his companions. He did not offer any explanation of who his companions were.

Two of the six men in the patrol obviously recognized him immediately; he was unsure of the others, and did not himself recognize any of them well enough to call by name.

"Captain John," the patrol leader said, "we thought you were dead."

He felt an unreasonable warmth at simply being addressed by his old familiar title, rather than just "Captain", as the Earthers called him, or by a civilian name, as the Chosen did now that he no longer had an army.

"No," he said, "I came close once or twice, but God's not ready for me yet."

"Either that, or the Devil thinks you're more use here than there!" The patrol leader smiled, but John did not laugh at the jibe; he was too uncertain of his reception among his own people.

"I need to talk to the Elders," he said. "Can that be arranged?"

"I reckon we might get a couple of them to see you," the soldier answered. "Old Captain Habakkuk's an Elder now, and I'm sure he'll be eager to see you again, sir!"

John smiled. "I hope so."

"He's up at the garrison, sir; would it be all right if I brought you and these others there?"

John nodded. "It'd be fine with me—you know what your orders are better than I do, now. Don't break them just because it's me."

"Oh, they don't get very specific about it, sir; we're to use our own judgement, so I'll take you to Captain-Elder Habakkuk."

"Good," John answered. "We'd like that."

In practice, however, they were not taken directly to Habakkuk, but rather to one of his aides, in a small, cluttered office at one end of the garrison barracks. There they were kept waiting at swordpoint—John noticed that all six soldiers carried revolvers on their belts, but two swords were the only weapons drawn to guard the foursome—while the aide went to consult with his commander.

They sat on the floor for almost an hour before the aide finally returned.

"Mr. Mercy," he said, "the Captain-Elder will see you now."

The civilian address struck John as a bad sign as he got to his feet. He said nothing, but followed the aide up a flight of stairs to Habakkuk's office—an office which had once been his own.

It had changed very little, he saw when the door swung open. Habakkuk, too, had changed very little—except he did not stand up when John entered the room. That was a mark of respect to a superior officer; whatever form of address the patrol leader might have used, Habakkuk obviously no longer saw John as his commander. He sat behind his desk, his heavy body squeezed into the familiar chair, his square face expressionless, and said nothing. The initial warmth John felt at the sight of his old comrade quickly faded before that lack of response.

They stared at each other for a long moment.

"*J'sevyu*, Captain-Elder," John said at last.

"*J'sevyu*, John," Habakkuk replied. "I never expected to see you again."

John nodded and was about to say something when Habakkuk added, "I never *wanted* to see you again."

John's mouth, opening in preparation for speech, continued to open, but no sound came out for the first few seconds. "What?" he managed at last.

"You heard me."

"Yes, I heard you, but I don't understand you. I thought we were friends."

"Maybe we were once, but we aren't now. You betrayed your own people; how can I be friend to a traitor?"

"I'm no traitor!"

"No? You prevented our people from conquering the Chosen when we had the chance; you led our army into a trap and saw it destroyed instead. When we had found an ally in the People of Heaven to protect us from the Chosen, you waged a guerrilla war against them. Now you've come here openly as an agent of the Chosen. What did they pay you for all this, John? Was it worth it?" John could hear the bitterness in Habakkuk's voice.

"Nobody paid me!" he replied. "And I'm not here as an agent of the Chosen!"

"You aren't under the Anointed's protection?"

"No!"

"I didn't think you'd be stupid enough to come back here any other way. If you're not here as a foreign agent, then you're still a True Worder, and a traitor. Will you insist on a trial, or can we just get right on with the hanging?"

"Damn it, I'm not a traitor!"

"Oh, come on, John!"

"I'm not! I made mistakes—bad mistakes—but I'm not a traitor!"

The two men stared at one another for a long moment; then Habakkuk demanded, "Well, if you aren't here as an envoy for the Chosen, why *are* you here? Were you just coming home?"

"No," John admitted. "I *am* an envoy, but not for the Chosen."

"Who, then?"

"The Free Trade Federation."

Habakkuk looked utterly blank. "Who?"

"The Free Trade Federation," John insisted. "It's ... well, an alliance. Intended to counter the Heavener protectorate. Our base is in Savior's Grace, up in Isachar."

"I never heard of it."

"We're still pretty new—but we've signed up the Chosen..."

"I knew it!"

"Wait..."

"I *knew* you were working for the Chosen!"

"Darn it, I am *not*!" John was infuriated. Habakkuk had always had a tendency to hang onto ideas that had outlived their usefulness; John had tolerated it before, but never before had one of those ideas been directed against him. "I'm working for ITD!"

Habakkuk stared at him for a moment. "Get your story straight, John," he said at last. "Who's Ahtedeh? And you said you worked for this federation."

"I said I was here on their behalf, not that I worked for them."

"Not much of a difference from where I sit."

"There is, though. I work for the Interstellar Trade and Development Corporation; it's an organization that competes with the People of Heaven back on Earth. I brought some of them to Godsworld to give the Heaveners a little of their own medicine. The corporation is called ITD for short, and ITD runs the Free Trade Federation, which is based in Savior's Grace, and which has signed up the Chosen as a client state, just the way the Heaveners signed up you folks."

"You work for Earthers?"

"Yes—Earthers, but not the Heaveners."

"Earthers are Earthers, John; I thought you hated them all for the pagans they are."

"I hate the Heaveners for coming in here and destroying what we had on Godsworld, corrupting the people and usurping power and destroying my homeland. If I have to work with Earthers to fight them, I will."

"How long have you been working for the Earthers? Were they the ones who paid you to attack the Heaveners instead of the Chosen?"

"*Nobody* paid me to do that, Hab! It was a mistake!"

Habakkuk stared at him.

"Look, I've been working for ITD for about a month now—that's all."

Habakkuk stared for a moment longer, leaning back in his chair. Then, abruptly, he leaned forward across the desk.

"You swear you weren't paid to betray us?"

"I swear it, by God and Jesus."

"All right, then, I believe you—I think. What did you come here for?"

"To trade—the Free Trade Federation wants to trade with you."

"We're part of the Heavener protectorate, you know."

"Yes, of course I know that, but you can still *trade* with us, can't you? Anything the Heaveners can sell you, we can sell you—and probably at a better price."

"I'm no trader."

"I know that—but you're an Elder."

"True enough. All right, keep talking."

"Let me get my assistant up here; she's the expert."

"*She*? You mean that woman isn't just baggage?"

"That's Premosila Kim, our top salesperson," John said proudly.

Habakkuk sat back and stared in astonishment.

It took four days of haggling to arrange for a caravan's reception; John stayed quietly in the background while his companions handled the details.

After the initial explanations were made, Habakkuk, too, stayed in the background, letting the other Elders handle things; his specialty was the military, and he left other matters to other people. Once, on the second day, he came and sat beside John throughout a long debate, but did not speak; the coldness between the two men had not been completely dispelled.

On the third day he did speak, remarking casually, "That woman's quite a talker; when you brought her here I thought you'd gone mad, putting so much faith in a woman."

John nodded. "She's smart, all right."

"She says you're second in command of ITD's entire force on Godsworld," Habakkuk continued.

"I thought I was third," John replied truthfully, "but I reckon I might be wrong." He had never inquired as to how he stood relative to Kwamé.

Habakkuk nodded silently, accepting the information. After a long pause he said, "Then I don't guess you plan to come back here again."

John thought long and hard before finally replying, "No, I guess I don't."

He had never thought about that, never planned that far ahead. He had only been concerned with opposing the Heaveners, never worrying about what he, personally, would do when he no longer had a part to play in that opposition. Now that he did think about it, though, he knew he would never be happy returning to the People of the True Word and Flesh. They would never again wage war upon their neighbors, he was certain; the spirit had been destroyed, the steel stripped from their souls, by their crushing defeat at the hands of the People of Heaven. Their empire had been swallowed up by the protectorate, and John could not believe that it would ever again be the proud and independent power it had once been.

That was no place for a man like himself.

"Reckon it's just as well," Habakkuk said. "You aren't real popular around here, traitor or not."

John nodded. That, too, was true.

When the negotiations were finished he signaled the airship, eager to return home—home to the ITD headquarters in Savior's Grace.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

*"My lips shall not speak wickedness, nor my tongue utter deceit."*—**Job 27:4**

\* \* \* \*

After the Chosen and the True Worders, John spent several weeks visiting various old allies, accompanied by ITD salespeople, stopping back at Savior's Grace every so often for more supplies and to report back to Blessing. Several tribes had agreed to open trade with ITD, which was, for once, all John was asking for—no military commitments or exclusive contracts.

He had made a good trip through eastern Reuben and was just off the airship, bound for Blessing's office, when someone called to him from across the landing field.

He stopped and looked; a woman was waving at him from beyond the fence.

"John! Over here!" she called.

Puzzled, John turned aside, motioning to the two sales representatives who had left the airship with him to go on without him. He strode quickly to the fence.

The voice and figure had been familiar; the woman was Miriam Humble-Before-God.

"What are *you* doing here?" he asked.

"I came to see you," she answered. "And maybe Kwamé."

"Why?" John could guess why; she was probably renewing her drive for vengeance against him, and hoping to revive her friendship—if that was what it had been—with Kwamé.

"Ms. Dawes sent me."

He had not expected that. "Oh?" he said.

"Yes. Can we go somewhere else, somewhere more comfortable?"

"I have an office in the headquarters here."



“No, somewhere we can't be watched.”

He glanced at her curiously. He had never asked Blessing whether his office was monitored, but in all probability it was; that was standard for all rooms in Earther buildings, even the lavatories. He had become accustomed to the idea—just as he had become accustomed to Earther lavatories and the incredible amounts of water they used. Kwamé had assured him that all the water was purified and re-used, not simply wasted, but it had still taken him weeks to adjust to the idea of intentionally polluting water with his own wastes.

He had adjusted, though, and now he was bothered by the smell whenever he had to use Godsworlder facilities, and annoyed by the inconvenience of carrying a communicator with him when outside headquarters, rather than being able to talk to anyone he chose simply by addressing the ceiling.

Miriam said she was working for Dawes, and wanted complete privacy; it was easy to guess that whatever was to be said to him was something Bechtel-Rand did not want ITD to hear. That might be interesting; it might well be something he could use against Bechtel-Rand.

“All right,” he said, “I know a hollow over in the rocks.” He pointed with one hand and slipped the other into his pocket, checking the settings on his communicator and trying to decide whether or not to use it to record the conversation.

Miriam nodded, and he led the way up to where a rocky shelf jugged out from the hillside. A piece had broken off and slid down the slope a few yards, leaving a gap where they would be sheltered on three sides.

When they reached the spot, John turned expectantly to Miriam.

“What is it?” he asked.

“What's in your pocket?” she demanded.

“What?”

“You shouldn't wear your jeans tight, like the Earthers, if you want to hide things in the pockets—I can see you've got something there. What is it?”

Reluctantly, he pulled out the communicator. She snatched it away and tossed it down the hillside.

“You can fetch it back later, if you want,” she told him.

“All right, then,” he said. “You've got your privacy, Ms. Humble; what is it you wanted to tell me?”

“The People of Heaven hired me to come and talk with you because they were pretty sure you'd talk to me, where you might not talk to one of their own people. I'm not saying I like what they're doing, but they're paying me enough to buy my *own* inn, if I want, so here I am.”

“What is it?”

“I just want you to understand I'm not here on my own—I'd given up my revenge. I think you deserve this, but it's not my doing.”

“*What* isn't your doing? Darn it, woman, will you get to the point?”

“They don't want you working for ITD any more; they want you to break up this Free Trade Federation if you can, but whether you do that or not, they want you to go away from here. They don't like having a

native Godsworlder running things for ITD here—it's making ITD look good and the Heavens look bad, especially when it's you, the man who fought the Earthers for so long. It makes it look like ITD belongs on Godsworld more than the Heavens do."

"Maybe it does."

"I don't know, maybe it does—but that's not the point. Ms. Dawes wants you to stop working for ITD. She doesn't care what you do after that—her job offer is still open, she says, or you can just go home, or whatever, just stay away from ITD."

"Why should I? I don't owe her any favors!"

"She'll pay you."

"ITD is paying me, and they can match anything she can offer."

"All right, then; I was hoping it wouldn't go this far. Do you know what a videodrome is?"

"Of course—Mr. Blessing is thinking of building one here."

"Ms. Dawes *has* built one in the Citadel, and she's going to open it to the public tomorrow, free of charge. And if you're still in Savior's Grace, the first tape she'll have shown is the one of you and Tuesday Ikeya; she's had copies made, and one will go to every town in the protectorate. You'll be a laughingstock."

John stared at her silently for a long moment. "You think so?" he said at last.

"Of course! The great warrior, humbled by a mere woman!"

"I don't think that's how it'll look, Miriam. I think that if you hadn't seen that tape while you still hated me you'd know that."

Suddenly uncertain, Miriam asked, "What do you mean?"

"Think about it. The Earthers are planning to show Godsworlders an obscene tape—first off, how many do you think will actually watch it? How many of them will dare admit they watched it? Most places on Godsworld strong men still blanch when one of our saleswomen adjusts her collar; do you think they'll watch a tape of a perverted rape? And you think that if they do, after watching me and this naked slut of an Earthwoman, they'll think the worse of *me* but not of her?"

"No, but Tuesday isn't here any more; she doesn't matter."

"Doesn't she? Do you think that your ordinary Godsworlder will think that? He'll see an Earthwoman wallowing in decadent lust. Do you think he'll say, 'oh, that's just this one pervert'? No, he'll say, 'I knew those Earthers were bad!'"

"But John, they'll see you naked!"

"No, they won't; she didn't get my clothes off."

"No, I mean they'll see ... see *you*!"

"They'll see a lot more of her, as I remember it."

She stared at him. "What kind of a man are you? You can stop the tape from being shown, and you

won't? You don't *care* if half the population of the world watches you rutting like an animal?"

"No, actually—I *don't* care. I suppose I should, but it hardly even seems as if I'm the same person I was then. I was naive and ignorant, like most Godsworlders; I'm not any more."

"You're still a Godsworlder."

"Am I? I haven't attended services in months; the minister here doesn't like me, and I don't like him. I'm not a member of any tribe; the True Worders have disowned me. I live here in the Earther headquarters, like an Earther myself—I eat their foods and I use their furniture."

"You're still a Christian, with morals..."

"Am I? I'm not sure about that. Look, I followed the rules in my tribe for all of my life; I thought we had the one true path, God's intended way, and that anyone who lived differently was wrong, evil, lost—and that all those people would have to be miserable, suffering for their sins, that the only joy was to be found in Christ. Isn't that what you were taught?"

"Yes, of course!"

"Well, it's not true. The Earthers live just as they please, and they don't suffer for it. God doesn't punish them. They don't know Christ, but they're happy, happier than anyone I ever knew before they came. They're comfortable—not just physically, either, they're comfortable with each other and with themselves, most of them. They don't worry about sin. Maybe they'll all burn in hell, I don't know, but in *this* life they're better off than Godsworlders, and a lot of it is because they don't worry about things like sin and righteousness. I'm not going to worry about strangers watching that tape—if I ever had any reputation for chastity or dignity it doesn't matter any more. I *am* going to worry about going on with my work. I don't like Bechtel-Rand, and I don't like America Dawes. Let her show the tape; if things get too rough for me here on Godsworld I'll leave."

"What?"

"You heard me; if Bechtel-Rand makes me unwelcome on Godsworld there are plenty of other worlds out there."

"You mean leave Godsworld? But you *can't*! This is your *home*!"

"Is it? I don't think I have a home any more. Stephen Christ-is-Risen went somewhere else when the Heavens ruined his home; I can do the same. Listen, Miriam—you tell America Dawes that she can run that tape if she wants, but I'm not leaving ITD, and it'll hurt her business more than it'll hurt mine. She must know that." To himself, he added silently that Dawes must be desperate to make such a foolish attempt at blackmail.

Miriam stared at him. "They've corrupted you. I thought you were the great fighter who would never give in!"

John shrugged. "I'm still fighting—but for money, not for God."

"That's disgusting!"

"Is it? Look at it this way, Miriam; I haven't killed anybody since I left the Citadel, haven't ordered anyone to his death. No one from ITD ever raped anybody—except financially. Our conquests don't leave widows and orphans and burned villages; they leave a more comfortable life."

“A year ago you heard those same arguments and denounced them.”

John shrugged. “I was wrong,” he said.

When Miriam had gone he sat in the rocky hollow for a moment staring at the sky and thinking.

Miriam was quite right; a year earlier he had been determined to wipe every trace of the Earthers off Godsworld, and now he was working with them, doing the best he could to expand ITD's influence, yet he wasn't aware of any great change in his thinking.

A year ago he had thought Tuesday Ikeya's empathy spike an unspeakable abomination; now he was working for a man equipped with an identical one, and other rewirings as well, and was not troubled by it.

Of course, Blessing never raped anyone, so far as he knew, but still, his attitude had changed.

The change, he decided, had been a gradual thing, the result of working, first as a common laborer in Savior's Grace, then as ITD's local expert. He had never done common labor before that; his family had always been wealthy, by Godsworld standards, and he had entered the army as a boy of fourteen. That had been dangerous, but always exciting. He had never really seen the grinding boredom and exhaustion most people lived with. His stay in Savior's Grace had destroyed any ideas he had still held about the nobility of ordinary life on the old Godsworld. That old life was simple misery for most people, unending drudgery just to stay alive. His ancestors had been fools to give up Earther technology—even the less sophisticated technology of their time.

And working for ITD he had found the excitement of the military back in a new guise. Dawes had told him, when she spoke to him in her office those months ago, that he was not really interested in beliefs, but in using and expanding power, and she had been, he had to admit, quite right. He had hated the Heaveners for ruining his old life, destroying his position of power and privilege—but Earth had provided a replacement. He had refused the first one offered, by the Heaveners themselves, like a petulant child refusing a new puppy and demanding a dead one be brought back somehow—but he had brought ITD to Godsworld to punish Bechtel-Rand, and, worn down by his “puppyless” stay in Savior's Grace, he had taken what was offered.

He did not regret it at all.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

*“So I was great, and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem: also my wisdom remained with me.”—Ecclesiastes 2:9*

\* \* \* \*

By the local calendar it was Christmas Day, Anno Domini 2596, when the ship bearing news of Gamaliel Blessing's promotion set down at Savior's Grace. John watched the landing through his office window; he had been the first to lay claim to a window when the above-ground addition to ITD's headquarters was built, and had made sure he had a good view of the spaceport.

He already knew about the promotion; the ship had transmitted the news from orbit. What had not yet been mentioned was the name of the new planetary administrator. There were three possibilities, as he saw it; either himself, currently the director of planning for all Godsworld; Premosila Kim, director of sales; or someone aboard the ship, sent from Earth to take over.

He wanted the job badly. Premosila was very good at what she did, certainly, and had perhaps the best intuitive grasp of practical psychology he had ever seen, but he had doubts about her ability to handle the

job's other aspects. And a stranger from Earth would not know Godsworld the way he did. He had done a good job, he knew, helping ITD fit into Godsworld better than Bechtel-Rand ever did—the old protectorate had added no clients for two years now, while the Free Trade Federation was everywhere on the planet. He deserved recognition for his work.

Besides, it was the only promotion open to him, and he had always wanted to be at the top of his profession.

He watched the freighter settling onto the concrete pavement—the old-line folks in Savior's Grace had put up a fuss about that pavement, but it allowed larger ships to land safely, and when it was explained that that meant lower prices, the old-line folks had been decisively outvoted.

He could stand the suspense no longer. "Get me a line to the ship," he told the wall.

"ITD Vessel *Clydesdale*," a woman's voice answered.

"This is John Mercy; can you tell me whether Mr. Blessing's replacement is aboard?"

There was a moment's hesitation before the woman answered, "Mr. Mercy, I'm just the pilot; they don't tell me what's going on, they just tell me where to put the ship. We have a company executive aboard, but I have no idea whether he's anybody's replacement."

"Oh."

"He'll be debarking in a minute; why don't you come ask him in person?"

"Thanks, I'll do that."

His duties did not ordinarily include meeting new arrivals, but this was a special case; he stood, slapped his belt to be sure his communicator was working, and headed for the field.

By the time he stepped out onto the concrete crates were unloading themselves, sliding out through the upper hatchways and neatly stacking themselves on the waiting cargo platform. Most of the goods would have to be transferred to other containers before sale—Godsworlders were still uncomfortable around machinery that needed no human direction, and besides, the crate's brains were worth reusing.

The lower passenger hatchway was open, and three people had emerged. Two of them were ordinary ship's personnel, come aground on their own business; the third was a silver-haired man in a bizarre dark gray jacket and matching pants of a cut John had never seen before.

"*Hlo* and *j'sevyu*," John said, extending a hand, "Welcome to Godsworld."

"*Hlo*," the stranger replied. "I'm Colin Szebenyi."

"John Mercy, director of planning."

"Ah! Good, good—glad to meet you."

"Mr. Seven-Ye..."

"Szebenyi."

"Szebenyi, yes. Mr. Szebenyi, I won't waste any time; why are you here? Are you Mr. Blessing's replacement?"

“Direct, aren't you? Is that the local custom, or is it just you?”

“A little of both.” John noticed that Szebenyi had not answered the question.

“Ah. Well, yes. I'm here to evaluate the situation; the development committee has given me free rein. If I think it's necessary, I have the authority to take over here and run things myself, but I don't plan to—and I don't want to, either. Does that ease your mind?”

John smiled. “Yes, it does. What can I do for you?”

“Take me to Blessing, first off.”

Three hours later, as Christmas Day was fading with the setting of the sun into New Year's Eve, John, Blessing, Szebenyi, Premosila, and Kwamé were gathered around the table in Blessing's office.

“It looks good,” Szebenyi said.

“Thank you, sir,” Blessing replied.

“You've got an outlet within ten kilometers of every village on the planet that's not exclusive to Bechtel-Rand, is that right?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You've got regular air freight running?”

“Yes.”

“Stable currency?”

“Yes.”

“You're buying foodstuffs, leather, this weird nearwood fungus, and plenty of handicrafts—anything else?”

“Not really, sir—Godsworld has no fossil fuels at all, since it's never had dense enough carboniferous life and has been geologically stable since before life really even got established. It's extremely poor in heavy metals and even some of the lighter ones. There's no established industry at all—the original colonists were mildly BTN, and with so little to work with...”

John interrupted, “What's BTN? I never heard that term.”

“‘Back-to-Nature’,” Kwamé explained. “Anti-technology. It's a recurring problem on colony planets.”

“Aren't any of the other native life-forms useful?”

“Not that we know of; there *are* no native fauna, only the fungoids—red plants, the locals call them. They aren't really fungus at all, they're a whole new category—but not a very useful one, except for nearwood. They're not biologically interactive with any terrestrial life, though in an emergency they can be eaten without ill effect. The nutritional value of the best of them is low, and the taste is like eating dirt.”

John did not consider fungusmeat to be as bad as that, but said nothing.

“We'll want to put a biochemical research team on that all the same,” Szebenyi said. “Let's see ... any chance of tourism?”

"I don't think so, sir—the native culture is pretty drab." Blessing glanced at John, who made no objection. "About the only thing they ever did with real style was fight wars, and of course we put an end to that. They do have some very complex theology, which has produced interesting rituals—but interesting to anthropologists, not tourists. And really, sir, it's a pretty ugly planet. No trees, no real mountains, no beaches worth mentioning. We've had a few stockholders come around to look the place over, and every one of them got bored and left on the next ship out, so I don't think the place has any overwhelming attraction."

"All right," Szebenyi said. "That's what I'd heard from the computers. Blessing, we've got a new post for you—ITD just got the contract to open Harwood's World, and you've been named as supervisor—assuming you want the job."

Blessing nodded, smiling.

"For the rest of you, after looking things over here, I've decided to cut back operations on Godsworld. This place is a backwater—it's always going to *be* a backwater. We'll keep up what we've got, but any expansion would be a waste of money; we're already at the point of diminishing return on our investment, because there just isn't anything here." He glanced at John, the only native Godsworlder in the room, but John simply stared back silently. He had long suspected that the profits to be made on Godsworld were limited. Even ITD couldn't make money from nothing.

"Mercy, you'll be taking over for Blessing for now; Kim, you'll be coming back to Earth as soon as you can get your operation here set up to run without you. Montez, you'll be taking over as second-in-command—use whatever title you like, we'll pay you the same in any case." He stood up. "Any objections?"

No one spoke.

"Good. Mercy, I want to talk to you alone for a moment about what you'll be doing." He motioned for John to follow.

John obeyed, and the two men left the room; they strode side by side down the upholstered hallway, neither one speaking.

Szebenyi led the way to John's office; by unspoken agreement neither man sat behind the desk, but instead each took one of the crude Godsworlder chairs John kept handy for visiting locals.

When both were settled, Szebenyi said, "Mercy, you've done good work here, despite your background."

John nodded. "Thank you," he said.

"Of course, it's your home planet, and that gives you an advantage."

John nodded again.

"Have you ever considered moving on?"

John leaned back thoughtfully. "Can't say," he said.

He had thought about leaving Godsworld, of course—particularly in those uncertain weeks when he still thought America Dawes might carry out her threat to show the tapes of Tuesday and himself publicly—but never very seriously. ITD had hired him for his knowledge of this one particular planet, after all—why would they move him elsewhere?

“Well, I’ll tell you, the reason I wanted to talk to you alone is to let you consider something without having to listen to what anyone else thinks, because we want it to be entirely your own choice. We’re putting you in charge of the operation here on Godsworld, and we’re perfectly willing to leave you here running it for the rest of your life, if that’s what you want. You can have the entire planet, if you want it—we have inside information that Bechtel-Rand has been losing money here and will be pulling out soon, so we’ll have the whole place to ourselves. You’re a native, so you can get away with a lot—you could pretty much set yourself up as a dictator and I don’t think the CRA would care—I know ITD wouldn’t. So that’s one choice.”

He paused.

“The other possibility—if you want, we could use a good administrator in our development department. We could give you some training back on Earth, and probably find you a job as planetary administrator on a new world somewhere, maybe even as supervisor on an opening. There’s no guarantee of how that will turn out, of course; development of rediscovered planets is a tricky business. They won’t be like Godsworld, most of them. And you won’t have a shot at a dictatorship; that’s only possible here because you’re a native, which makes you acceptable to the CRA, and because the market here on Godsworld isn’t going to be expanding any further. We don’t set up static situations on planets where there are still untapped profits. If you move on, you’ll have one of the most challenging jobs in the galaxy; if you stay here you’ll have the whole planet. It’s your choice.”

“If I go,” John asked, “who’ll take over here?”

“Montez,” Szebenyi replied, “Kwamé Montez.” He stood up. “You’d have to stay long enough to train him and get everything squared away here—five or six months, Terran calendar.”

John stood as well.

“You don’t need to decide immediately,” Szebenyi said. “Just let me know before I leave, or send a message on the next ship. If you wait any longer than that I can’t promise the offer will still be open.”

“I’ll let you know,” John assured him, as he saw him out of the office.

When Szebenyi had gone he settled behind his desk and turned his chair to stare out at the landing field.

Two small fliers were cruising overhead, their polished steel sides gleaming bright in the last rays of the setting sun; he remembered how his sword had flashed in much the same way when he led his cavalry charge into Marshside. He remembered the madness of the battle and the mess afterward.

After all this time, so far from the machine gun that Little St. Peter had sold the elders of Marshside, Bechtel-Rand was giving up, defeated by ITD’s competition; he had finally won his long battle, and without ever killing a single Bechtel-Rand employee, yet the fight and eventual victory were none the less satisfying for that.

Now, if he chose, he could sit back and enjoy the fruits of his victory. He had just been offered Godsworld, the entire planet, as his reward—but he didn’t want it. Kwamé could have it. The fun, the excitement, the challenge lay in the taking, not the having! Much as he hated to admit it, America Dawes had been right, right from the first; she had understood him before he understood himself. He would not, could not rest on his laurels. He looked up to where the stars were coming out above the *Clydesdale*.

Whether by sword or starship, he was a conqueror, and the entire galaxy awaited his steel.

—END—

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