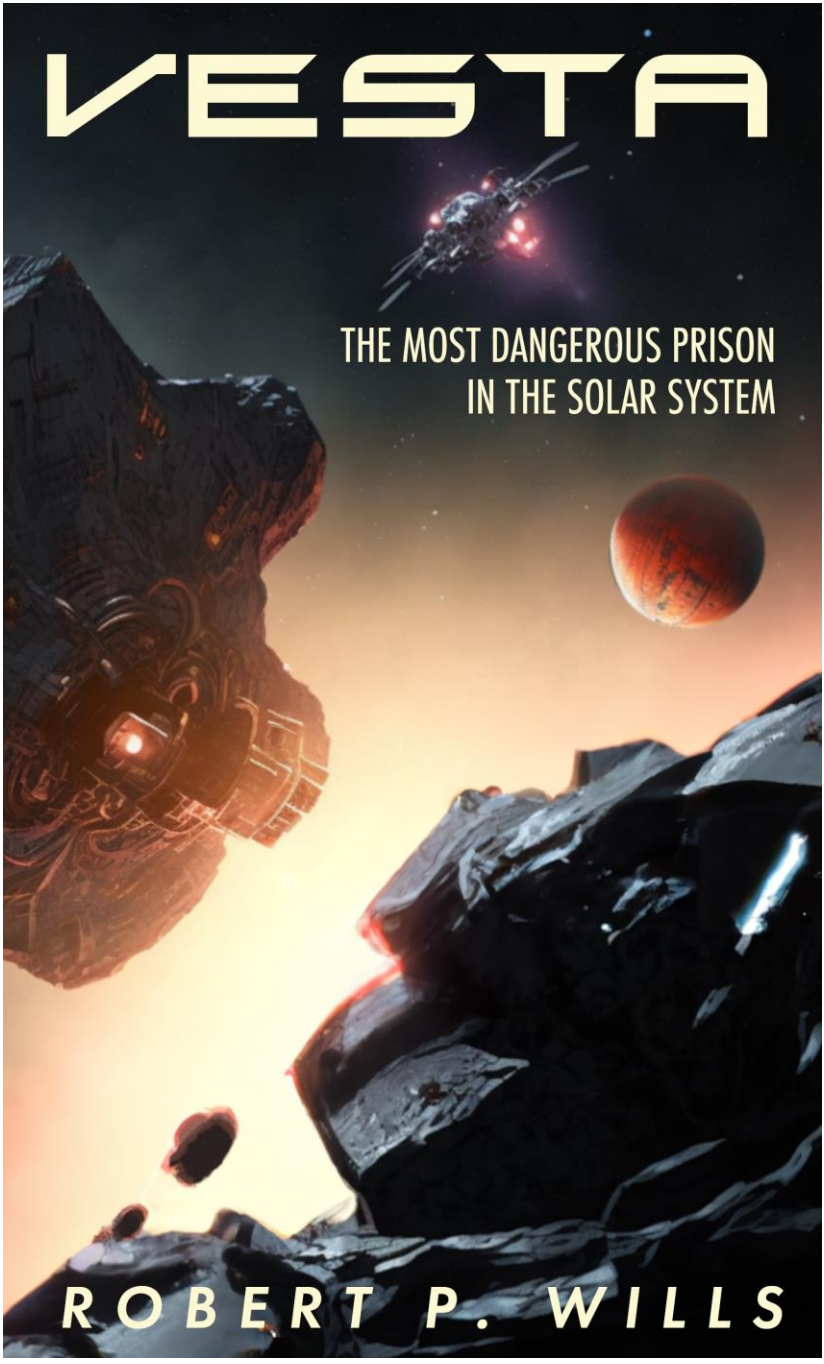

VESTA
THE MOST DANGEROUS PRISON
IN THE SOLAR SYSTEM
ROBERT P. WILLS

Vesta

The Most Feared Prison in the Solar System

A novella within *The Prodigals* universe

by

Robert P. Wills

Cover illustration and design by

N. T. Narbutovskih on Fiverr.com as "ntnarbutovskih". Find his excellent science fiction series *The Reckoning Cycle* on Amazon.

Any similarities between the characters in this book and persons living or dead are purely coincidental.

No animals were harmed in the writing of this book. A new addition to the family – "Bucky" did interfere with writing due to very important Jeep rides and walkies.

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For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

-Romans 6:23

1

Ephraim leapt from the second story window into the darkness. As he cleared the narrow ledge below it, his military training took over; he pressed his feet and knees together, keeping his legs slightly flexed. He also brought his hands up to the top of his head, protecting his face with his forearms.

As his feet hit a dumpster, his knees buckled lessening the impact. He rolled off it onto the ground another six feet down, landing on his back still in a curled up position. As his back hit, he rolled to the side, denim sleeves protecting his face as he did. He tucked his legs under himself as he rolled and popped to his feet.

Ephraim looked left and right- the dingy alley was empty. He looked up at the window. It was empty as well. "Come on now, no one was looking? That was impressive!"

"Stand still or I'll have you shot!" A man shouted as he filled the no longer empty window. "Don't do it, *pastor*!" Every time he said that word, it came out as an insult. What made it worse was that it was inaccurate; Ephraim was the rabbi of a Messianic Jewish congregation. An illegal Messianic Jewish congregation. He pointed at Ephraim. "I'm warning you!"

Ephraim pointed back. "Did you see that? Tell me you saw that!"

The man refused to give him the pleasure - even though he had indeed seen the impressive maneuver. "No!"

"Well crud." Ephraim smiled up at the police detective. "Your loss. In any case I am truly sorry I can't stay to finish our chat." His hand went up to his eye- it was starting to swell shut where the detective had hit him. "Perhaps at some as yet undetermined date in the far, far future!"

"Stop or else!" The man pointed at him. "I'm warning you!"

Ephraim gave a sloppy salute. "If it helps any Detective Lancaster, I forgive you!" He turned and ran down the alley. *Thank you Lord for the safe landing,* he prayed as he went.

Ephraim moved down the alley quickly to try and put some space between him and the police precinct. As he ran, he reached into his satchel and pulled out a ventilator. Thanks to several wars as well as terrorist actions, the air was mostly filled with particulates, many of which were toxic. The fact that Seattle tended to remain overcast and rainy did not help the situation one bit. Often, while traveling in the Midwest, he would encounter days where the sun would be visible for one, sometimes two hours. Nearer his home city, that never happened. He slipped the ventilator over his face before the acidic air made him cough and slow his pace. He skidded to a stop as he exited the alley onto a wide sidewalk. He sidestepped a pile of trash as he looked left and right down the street.

It was ironic that the city was dirty; with less population, Seattle -and the Earth in general- should have been cleaner since there were less people to dirty it up. Thanks to all the conflicts and skyrocketing crime, the population of the Earth was down to around two million people- a number not seen on the planet in fifty thousand years. Unfortunately, the sad fact of the matter was that it actually didn't take a lot of people to leave a mess and the limited population made it difficult to employ enough street cleaners and sanitation workers to keep ahead of the trash. So it tended to pile up alongside buildings and up and over dumpsters. Ephraim looked up, hoping to see a street sign to get his bearings.

There wasn't one.

Public Works was also experiencing difficulties hiring people thanks to generous welfare programs, so street signs as well as traffic lights tended to be missing or broken. Fortunately these two facts did not impact life very much: auto-driving vehicles followed the rules of the road better than their human counterparts and since they couldn't be programmed to be in a hurry, yielding the right of way was an easy computation. Also, everyone carried a Digital-Uplink so hardly anyone even looked at street signs anymore; they each carried their own personal map of wherever they were.

Holy Spirit, please guide my steps away from this place if it is Your will. He looked left and right. He felt as if the way left was the better choice even though there was no reason for it, so he ran that way down the mostly empty sidewalk. Until he knew where he was, he couldn't afford to slow to a walk.

Unlike the vast majority of the population, Ephraim did not carry a Data Uplink, even though it would have given him access to a detailed, real-time map of the city of Seattle. If he had, he would have known his location to within a half meter which was as accurate as a civilian D-U was allowed to be; military or law enforcement D-Us were accurate to twenty centimeters- just under eight inches. Which coincidentally was the accuracy required for a

precision micro-munition to be legally dropped onto a public street from a drone.

It was not common knowledge that D-Us processed information *both* ways and the police would have been able to locate Ephraim to within that very-lethal-for-an-escapee twenty centimeters in a matter of moments. Thanks to his military service, he was well aware of the two-way communication involved with D-Us. If he had used one, he would either meet a precision micro-munition, or a dozen police officers.

Ephraim stopped at the intersection and once again looked up hoping to see a sign. He was relieved to see one; Spring Street and Boren Avenue were faded but still visible on it. *Thank you Lord.* He prayed as he took several calming breaths. He continued to the next corner and crossed Madison Street toward an apartment that was owned by one of the parishioners of the local church. While he wasn't sure who that person actually was, he had heard the place discussed in one of his church meetings. And that it was only to be used for dire emergencies. Which after two weeks of running, Ephraim was sure he was experiencing one. As he got his bearings, he realized it was well over twenty blocks away. If he got into a cab, he could have easily paid with a D-U and been there in minutes. Since he didn't have one, he would have to pay electronically either with facial recognition or with a fingerprint. Both of which would raise red flags at the very same police station that he had abruptly exited before his interrogation had really gotten underway. To make matters worse, even though he was carrying an untraceable digital wallet, he had no more money on it because he had been on the run for the better part of two weeks- since Detective Lancaster had raided the underground synagogue he had been leading.

Not wanting to walk directly to the apartment, he turned left once he crossed the street at the next intersection. He planned to go toward the apartment on a parallel street a two blocks away just in case he was being followed. Twenty blocks was plenty of time to see if that was the case especially since the streets were even more deserted late at night. Ephraim pulled his hood up to keep the stinging rain (that always seemed to be falling in Seattle) off his face, but left it loose enough that he could hear the sounds of sirens. Or worse- the clanking of metal feet. Once he got to the next intersection, he turned right and took up a quick -but not suspiciously quick- pace toward the apartment. Thanks to twenty years of service in the military and routine T-Cell baths, he was a very fit fifty-three year old and could have easily run to the apartment at a very respectable pace. He knew however that no matter how fast he ran, that when his running invariably drew the attention of the police department's computer algorithms that were monitoring CCTV feeds throughout the city, he would hear the clanking of

feet. And he could never run fast enough to get away from them. So an unsuspiciously quick pace was in his best interest. He also started walking on his toes so if the algorithms happened to check him, he would appear eight feet ten inches instead of the eight feet seven the police knew Ephraim Simpson was, and move to the next figure walking the streets. So he walked briskly on his toes as he used the time to pray for guidance from the Holy Spirit.

As he walked his vision began to blur. The city street before him transformed from a dark empty street to one blocked with rubble. It was also day time. Ephraim looked up at the sun- the sky was fairly clear but the sun itself was dim with dark streaks running through it. As he walked, he stepped right through the debris that littered the sidewalk; he had discovered when he first started having his visions that while he could see what was around him, he could not actually interact with the things he saw. He did not know exactly when the time was, but he felt that it was fairly soon. Like the other times he had had the vision, the streets he walked were full of destruction but not people. *Where is everyone, Lord? What am I supposed to do?* He prayed as he walked through a large piece of a building that had fallen onto the sidewalk. *I don't understand what I'm supposed to do about this. Am I able to stop it from happening?* With a relegated sigh, he continued to walk the destroyed street of Seattle toward the apartment. After a few blocks, the street darkened and returned to its deserted albeit not destroyed appearance.

2

Detective Lancaster stormed out of the interrogation room. He never expected the man to jump out of a second-story window. While he found it impressive that he had not only done just that and had also made what was a very graceful landing before running off, he still planned on killing him for being the subversive that he was.

"Stinking zealots." He said as he stepped into the large open area of the police station where the detectives all had desks- 'The Pit' as it was called. Only the two Detective Inspectors and the Chief had offices to themselves. "Jennigan!" He bellowed. Each detective had two beat-cops assigned to them. Joe Lancaster knew that Cayman Morgan was off so he was down to Officer Jennigan. Between the two, Morgan was the more hard-nosed, but Amy Jennigan was better with technology. "Jennigan!" He shouted again.

Officer Jennigan stepped up to Detective Lancaster. "You know that you can just call me on your D-U and I'd hear you anywhere on the continent… the planet even, right?" She smirked. "Hell, even if I were on the Moon, I'd get your message after a fifteen minute delay."

"It's not nearly as satisfying."

"What if I were downstairs? Or in the bathroom?" She smirked again. "Indisposed."

"I'd have shouted louder."

Jennigan laughed. "Okay then. What do you need Detective?"

Detective Lancaster closed the distance between them as he looked left and right. "He's escaped." He whispered.

"Oh!" Jennigan moved to her toes to look over her superior's shoulder. "Oh man. How are we going to get him out of there?" She looked around. "Maybe when graveyard comes on? The Pit's pretty empty then."

"What?"

"Escaped." Jennigan winked at him. "Got it. How about you lower him out the window and I get a rolling unit so we can dump him somewhere? Take him out to Shanty Town, or the pier."

Detective Lancaster shoved Jennigan backward. "I didn't kill him you dolt; he *really* escaped."

"Come on now."

"He jumped out the window." He hissed at her.

"Joe." She said in her own conspiratorial whisper. Although he was her superior she tended to use his first name when scolding him or poking fun at him- which was fairly often. She knew if she weren't so good at her job, he would never have let her get away with calling him by his first name.

"Amy!" Detective Lancaster hissed back in the same tone. He put up with her calling him by his first name because she never did it around other officers so it wasn't disrespectful. And usually he deserved it. Plus she was a really good cop.

The two stared at each other for a long moment.

Amy spoke first: "What? How?" Her eyes got large. "That shouldn't even be possible, right?"

"They have those stupid new one-way electrostatic screens installed so we can open the windows to save on cooling costs. So it was wide open." Detective Lancaster scowled as he gestured around the room. "I said they were a bad idea in a *police station*. But would they listen to me? No!" True enough; several large windows were open allowing heat to escape without letting in any acid rain. "Stinking penny pinchers."

Jennigan smiled wide. "So he's already down on the street? That's saves us some work. Want me to call a meat wagon to pick him up? We'll have him loaded and the paperwork done in an hour." She slapped him on the shoulder. "First drink'll be on me."

Detective Lancaster grabbed Officer Jennigan by her collar and pulled her out of the large area into one of the many alcoves used for interrogations. Even with the clamoring of a dozen conversations going on, when all was said and done it was a room full of detectives. And if any of them heard what he was saying, he would end up in the Chief's office for a round of questioning that he definitely did not want to endure. When he was safely out of earshot, he let go of her. "*No*; he jumped out the window, performed a textbook Parachute Landing Fall off a dumpster then ran off."

Officer Jennigan's smile disappeared. "Wait. You're serious? You *didn't* kill him?"

"Not yet I haven't. But I'm sure going to." He scowled. "Oh, I'm going to enjoy killing that annoying man."

Officer Jennigan looked toward the interrogation room. "Oh man. I signed him out. What are we going to do about that, Joe? Oh man I'm in for it." She looked toward the Chief's office. "This is not good, Joe. I'm going to get paperwork on this. And not the good kind!"

The regular line officers who were assigned to detectives were picked because they were seen as potential detective material. If after two or three years of 'apprenticeship' the detective felt they were ready, the officers would test to become detectives themselves.

"I'll take care of that, Amy."

"How?" Officer Jennigan looked toward the Chief's office. "We should just tell the Chief right now. If we wait and she finds out later, heads are going to roll. I'm supposed to test in two months, remember?"

"You'll still test." Detective Lancaster assured her. "I'll tell Officer Barker that we're taking the prisoner out to point out safe houses and we'll bring him back in seventy-two hours. That's pretty standard."

"Seventy-two hours? And what if we haven't found him by then?"

"Then we'll deal with that problem then." Detective Lancaster put his hand on Jennigan's shoulder. While he felt the woman would make an excellent detective and did not want to ruin her opportunity, if it came down to it he would leave the young police officer to hang to protect his own career. After all, he was up for Detective *Inspector* next year; there were always plenty of prospective detectives in The Pit. He shrugged. "If we need to, we can always say he got away from us then. Yeah?"

"Yeah." Jennigan said, not sounding convinced. "So you know where he's going?"

"He's got family in town. We'll start with them. I'll go talk things over with Barker; you go down to supply and pull a PAT."

The Police Apprehension and Transportation drones, or 'PAT' were the smaller cousins of the military's Multipurpose Sentry-Cordon-Quarantine Automated Turret Soldiers or EM-SQUAT which held eighty thousand rounds and enough battery reserves to remain on duty for six months. Instead of traditional arms, they had four articulated barrels that could shoot independently in all directions. A series of sensors on its stubby head

provided imaging through the entire spectrum of light – seen and unseen. While the PATs still had claw legs suitable for running and climbing across most any terrain, instead of four rifle barrels they were equipped with two grappling arms that could be used to hold a suspect in place, or carry them around while transporting them. They were not as autonomous as EM-SQUATs however they did have access to the entire police database as well as city cameras and businesses' facial recognition and fingerprint payment systems. And while they were equipped with a weapon, it was merely a modified police pistol- that had five hundred rounds.

"A PAT? *That's* going to draw attention."

"Not really." Detective Lancaster shook his head. "Either we take a rolling unit or we take a PAT. I'll tell you Amy, I'm not carrying that idiot all the way back here. And it'll be more efficient to take the trains around town so we don't have to backtrack to a vehicle over and over again. Besides, we'll be going down to Shanty Town. If we left a vehicle there, it would be stripped clean by the time we got back unless we left a PAT to guard it."

"Then both them might be stripped when we get back." Jennigan said with a smirk. "Yeah, okay. I'll meet you out front."

With a nod, Detective Lancaster went to tell his good friend, Officer Baker (who had failed his detective test three times relegating him to being a career officer who augmented his income with bribes and kickbacks) exactly what had happened just in case he needed help setting up Officer Jennigan to take the fall later on.

3

Ephraim looked left and right casually as he looked at the large stone apartment building across the street. He knew the safe house was on the fifth floor and also knew the codes to open both the front door and the apartment door. He appraised the building as he decided his next move.

The building had been built two hundred years ago- on the foundations of an old government building. The old building had been razed when the government sold it as part of a reorganization plan; when the continents of North and South America -and everything in between- became the United States of the Americas. Government assets were combined with redundant resources either demolished or sold off. The Aslou Apartments had started out in what used to be a very a nice part of town. Since then, Seattle had undergone several rebirths throughout the centuries with the last 'renaissance' after a fifty-foot tsunami washed away nearly a quarter of the city thanks to a nuclear bomb set off a couple of miles off shore by One Generation terrorists. One-Gen had discovered that several tech companies in Seattle had started making computer chips for the military's colonization efforts.

It was common knowledge that the Earth had about fifty years before it was completely unlivable. There were limits to what food reproduction and recycling could do and the damage to the Earth's ecosystems was past the point of recovery. Because of that, the various governments had been working together to locate planets for colonies in other solar systems. Several faster-than-light Linear Accelerator powered probes had been sent to distant solar systems to find just such a planet. But as of yet, no planets had been found that would sustain all of humanity. The plan now was to colonize several planets that were fairly close to each other that could support a portion of the Earth's population. Humanity would survive; it would just be spread across fifty light years. And while there were already over a dozen colonies scattered throughout the Solar System, they were for all intents and purposes 'full'. And even if a few hundred more colonists could be squeezed into each of them, it would be insignificant against the two million people still living on Earth. What was needed was one large habitable planet with several other planets in its system that could support colonists. To date, neither had been found.

One-Gen felt that Humans had had their chance on Earth and done so badly on it, that they did not deserve a chance to pollute another planet.

Their mission statement was 'Humanity must die for Earth to live' and they were prepared to kill to make that happen. They knew they just needed to keep any colonization efforts from being successful for fifty years, then the Earth's damaging population of Humans would become extinct and the planet could heal on its own.

So One Gen had set off a five-megaton warhead two miles off and five hundred feet below the coast of Seattle in order to put the burgeoning tech companies out of business. Considering not only their profits from their government contracts, but also their own personal survival, the owners of the tech companies moved their operations to easier-protected bunkers in Nevada. And the newly created waterfront experienced an economic boom as dozens of new state-of-the-art buildings were built. The building Ephraim was standing in front of had remained undamaged because when the tsunami had rampaged up Puget Sound, an attentive maintenance worker had heard the warning about the approaching tsunami on his D-U and had hit the manual override to close all of the shutters. Unlike the newer surrounding buildings, it was constructed of large blocks of granite and because it was an older building that hadn't been renovated, instead of electronic tinting window shutters, it had actual rolling steel shutters that could be lowered into place to block light, street noises, as well as potential thieves. Both the waters rushing in and rushing out did not enter the building. As such, it had remained un-renovated. And because the simple, numbers-worn-off-the-keys entry pad continued to diligently allow people into the building, the not-connected-to-the-city-network entry pad had remained in place.

Lord, give me the wisdom to follow your will. Ephraim prayed as he stood looking at the building. He took several deep breaths through his ventilator as he decided whether to just go in through the front door or try to enter through the fire escape in the rear of the building.

Then he remembered an incident a year ago in San Francisco when he had lost a dear friend and fellow believer. Thanks to pheromones, of all things.

Ephraim moved to one of the overflowing garbage cans. He stopped to appraise the can. He had never actually seen one newly emptied but he also never saw the small receptacles completely overflowing. Perhaps they reached a certain level of 'fullness' then pedestrians used other cans. But he could never remember passing a trashcan that was actually empty. Or ever seeing a trash collector emptying a can. Even so, he knew the cans invariably had a sack in them to start with. So after carefully looking around to make sure he didn't seem suspicious- or as suspicious as someone who was going to do what he was planning to do would look- he dumped the can over, emptying

the contents onto the sidewalk. After offering a quick prayer for forgiveness from the illusive Seattle trash collectors, he then took the plastic sack out of the can, shook it then turned it inside out putting what was ostensibly the cleaner side on the inside.

Ephraim started walking again, again looking around to see if anyone was paying attention to his antics. Fairly certain no one was, he walked to the end of the block then crossed the street. When he got there, he wrapped the end of the trash bag over the exit hole of his ventilator. He walked back down the block furiously trying to not make eye contact with anyone he passed as he slowly inflated the garbage bag with his exhalations. When he got across from the apartment, he took several deep breaths then held his breath. He quickly removed the bag and tied it shut. He started across the street and once again offering a prayer for forgiveness, he let go of the inflated bag in the middle of the street then moved to a jog to get to the apartment door before he had to take a breath- it was going to be close.

He entered the code and quickly slipped into the building as he gasped for air. Confident he had prevented any pheromone-sniffing robots from following his trail into the building, he went to the elevators. Just in case however he took a deep breath before the elevator opened on the fifth floor, pressed the sixth through fifteenth floors then exited it quickly. He moved down the hallways quickly to the apartment, punched in another code and took a gasping breath just before the door closed.

Ephraim leaned against the door as he took several breaths. *Thank you, Lord, for getting me safely here.* With one more deep breath, he removed his ventilator and went in search of a change of clothes and a fresh ventilator filter while he decided his next move for getting out of the city. He had decided to find his nephew Jeffrey for help. Not only was Jeffrey a fellow believer, he was a pilot so he could hopefully help him get off the continent. Or even the planet- he knew of a fairly large underground church on the Moon if he could find a way there. What he definitely did not want to do was get any of his local family involved in his escape.

He found a packet of ventilator filters in the bedroom nightstand. Then to his relief, he spotted several pieces of clothing in his size in the closet. Suddenly exhausted from a very long week of being on the run, he lay down on the bed to gather his thoughts and plan his escape from Seattle. Within a minute, he was sound asleep.

4

"Where is he?" Detective Lancaster asked angrily. He had tried questioning the male and had come up with nothing. He hoped the woman would provide information. If not, he would have the PAT go back to holding the male off the ground by his wrists. The PAT had a month-long power capability and if need be, the detective could just sit down during the questioning. "I can do this all day long!"

"I don't know where he is!" The woman said softly as she choked back tears from the pain. "I haven't seen Ephraim in over a year," she lied.

"Detective Lancaster," Officer Jennigan said as she tapped his elbow. "Can I have a word?"

The detective looked at her. "What?"

"In private." Jennigan added. She gestured with her head out of the room.

Detective Lancaster looked back at the woman. The PAT was holding her several feet off the ground by her wrists. "Don't go anywhere; we're not done." He looked at the robot. "Decrease holding pressure by fifty percent," He ordered- returning the pressure to where it was when the robot had initially picked up the woman.

"Complying," the PAT said without looking at him. It was keeping an eye on the male in case he tried to escape; it had been ordered to keep both suspects in the apartment with lethal force authorized. So that was what it was going to do.

"Detective," Jessica said as the pair stepped into the dining area, "we're on thin ice in here; we don't have authorization for the questioning of suspects. Chief doesn't know. We have no warrant, no nothing. We're way off the reservation here. I'm worried about this."

"Well I'm not."

"What?" Officer Jennigan looked back into the other room. "Why not?"

"Because no one knows what we're doing." Detective Lancaster pointed out. "It's not like we can put in for a warrant to help search for our missing prisoner because we haven't mentioned that particular fact to anyone."

"What if they file a complaint?" She looked at the woman. "I really don't think they know where he is."

"There's one way to find out, isn't there." Detective Lancaster said. "And to deal with those pesky complaints. Which do you want?"

Officer Jennigan nodded. "Let me question the woman."

Detective Lancaster turned to the PAT. "Release the woman. If either tries to leave the residence, terminate them."

"Roger, Detective Joe Lancaster." The PAT said as it let go of the woman.

The woman crumpled to the ground. She rubbed her bruised wrists as she pushed herself toward her husband. He reached out and pushed her hair out of her face.

"Come with me." Detective Lancaster said to the man flatly. "Into the bedroom." He pointed. "Move it. And if you make a run for it, our mechanical friend here will have caught you before you even get off this floor, much less out of the building."

With a grunt of pain, the man pushed himself to his feet. He looked down at his wife and smiled. "Revelation fourteen thirteen."

"See you soon, my love." The woman answered with a smile of her own.

"I knew it!" Roared Detective Lancaster. "Get in there! You stinking *zealots*!"

The man limped to the other room as the PAT moved down the hall to the front door, blocking any chance for escape. Since the apartment was on the seventy-fifth floor, it was the only way out.

Officer Jennigan smiled at the woman as she moved to her. "Listen…" She let her voice trail off expectedly.

The woman chuckled. "My name doesn't matter to you."

"It would be easier to know what to call you." Jennigan squatted down in front of her. "Really it would."

"Easier for whom?" The woman asked. "For you, a blind follower of The Beast? What do you care what my name is?" She sat up and her voice strengthened. "You can call me whatever you want, Officer. You know what; I call myself *follower of Christ.* Call me that. I *dare* you."

Officer Jennigan narrowed her eyes. "Have it your way." She said, refusing to use that name. "Tell me where Ephraim Simpson is. He is an escaped prisoner so harboring him or not providing information about his whereabouts is a crime."

"Oh, in that case." The woman said, her tone softening. "He's on the path."

"What path?" Jennigan stood. "Where?"

"The path of *righteousness*." The woman pointed at the ceiling. "You can be on that path too if you change your ways and repent." She smiled. "I hope I have pointed you in the right direction because…" The woman's voice took up a sing-song timber, "…the wicked draw the sword and bend the bow to bring down the poor and needy, to slay those that are upright…"

"Shut up!"

"…but their swords will pierce their own hearts and their bows will be broken. Better is…"

Officer Jennigan smoothly drew her piston and shot the woman in the head.

"Jennigan!" Detective Lancaster called from the other room.

"I'm good."

Another shot rang out from the other room then Officer Lancaster stepped into the living room. "Anything?"

"Apparently we should be using swords and bows."

"These people." Detective Lancaster holstered his pistol. "Let's get out of here."

Officer Jennigan stepped back from the pool of blood that was forming. "Where to next, boss?"

"He has another brother across town."

"That it?"

"There's a nephew in Saint Louis but he's probably a dead end."

"Oh? Why is that?" Officer Jennigan asked.

"He's Army; a pilot."

"Yeah, definitely." Officer Jennigan nodded. "Then let's go find this local brother."

Detective Lancaster smiled as he pointed at her weapon. "You going to keep that out the whole way? You'll scare the locals."

"What?" She looked down at her pistol. *The wicked draw the sword and bend the bow to bring down the poor and needy, to slay those that are upright*. "No, of course not."

"Then put it away before you accidentally shoot me." Detective Lancaster said.

Officer Jennigan pushed it back into her holster, a small tab switching on the safety. *Their swords will pierce their own hearts.* "Okay. Okay… Let's go." She looked back at the dead woman, and frowned.

"Don't let them spook you, Amy." Detective Lancaster said seriously. "You're a good cop and you'll make a good detective. Just remember what side you're on."

"Apparently the wicked." Officer Jennigan said with a smirk. "But only after a few drinks, that is."

"We can test that theory out later today." He gestured at the door. "Let's go." Detective Lancaster said as he started down the hallway. "PAT, erase present law enforcement officers' entries in this building for the past two hours."

"Complying," the PAT said as it accessed the buildings network and deleted any record of either Lancaster or Jennigan from it."

5

Ephraim startled awake to the smell of something cooking. For a moment he didn't remember where he was. When he did, his fear did not subside- he was trapped in an apartment that wasn't his and someone was cooking in the kitchen between him and the front door.

Lord, you've watched over me all these years, if I could trouble you for your undivided attention for a few minutes longer, I would appreciate it. With a relegated sigh, he stepped out of the bedroom into the back of the kitchen/living area. There was a man cooking something on a skillet, his back was to Ephraim.

Ephraim watched the man cook for almost a minute. Since he didn't know who he was he didn't want to get too close to him, so to gain the man's attention he cleared his throat.

The man looked over his shoulder. "There's cold water in the fridge if your throat is dry. Dinner is almost ready." With that, he went back to frying.

"Oh, well thank you." Ephraim said hesitantly. While the man obviously didn't seem to consider Ephraim a threat, the feeling wasn't mutual. "Do you… want me to set the table, Mister…"

"Skees. Theron Skees." The man said with a smile. "And you are?"

"Raimi," Ephraim said, opting for a childhood nickname instead of his actual one.

"That's some shiner you have there, Raimi." Theron said. He gestured at the skillet. "This is almost ready. The glasses are to the left of the refrigerator. I've already got the plates."

"That smells pretty good." Ephraim admitted as he moved to the cabinet. He removed two glasses. "Water?"

"Please." Theron said as he scooped what looked like scrambled eggs onto two plates. "Sorry there's nothing better to drink. Use the bottom pitcher. I run the water from top to bottom."

"Oh, water is fine by me." Ephraim opened the refrigerator. There was a water container on each of the three shelves. "Three times. Nice."

"It's actually four." Theron answered, referring to the number of times the water was filtered. "I took one of the pitchers to a friend's house yesterday. Seattle's water isn't what it used to be."

"Earth's water isn't what it used to be." Ephraim pointed out.

"Touché." Theron chuckled as he moved to the table. "Hungry?"

"I truly am." Ephraim put the water glasses on the table as he sat. He looked at his watch. "Wow, four hours?"

"Yeah, you were out cold when I came in. So I figured you needed some shut eye." Theron smiled. "So I kept quiet as long as I could. My belly overruled your lack of sleep." He put a plate in front of Ephraim and then sat with his own.

For a moment the two men just stared at each other.

Finally Theron smiled. "Since you are a guest in my home, I will break the ice." He bowed his head. "Lord, thank you for this food and for watching over and guiding me today. Bless my newfound houseguest and help him be successful in his endeavors if they glorify You." He raised his head and looked at Ephraim.

"Amen."

"Amen," repeated Theron.

"They do, by the way." Ephraim said as he picked up his fork.

"They do what?"

"Glorify our Lord."

"That is indeed a glorious shiner you have there, I must say." Theron scooped some food into his mouth.

"Yes, well… my previous host wasn't as gracious as my current one." Ephraim said. He was still unsure of who the man was and didn't want to mention that he had been in police custody. "By a long shot. By the way, these eggs are what are glorious. How did you get them?"

"Dangerous times we live in." Theron said. "So was it street thugs or more the more official variety of thugs?"

"It's hard to tell them apart." Ephraim realized the man had not answered his question about the eggs- a very hard to get and expensive item- much less the five or six he had cooked. And on top of that, there were diced

peppers and onions mixed in with them- fresh vegetables were also something only the rich could afford.

"The official ones usually have robots with them." Theon said with a smile. "But enough about that." He smiled again. "Is there anything I can help you with?"

Ephraim took another mouthful of food to buy some time. "And the eggs?"

"Listen Raimi, obviously you are a believer because we are sitting here eating this meal instead of me being on the floor right after I finished my prayer. And you had the code for the doors."

Ephraim opened his mouth to speak.

"And it is known among believers that this is a place of last resort, for emergencies. So if you're here, there is a pressing need."

Ephraim put down his fork. "I need to get out of the city. The police want to arrest me. Or technically it's re-arrest."

"They want to arrest all of us."

"Well, one in particular has decided it is his personal responsibility to take me in." Ephraim put his hand to his eye. "Especially since we parted ways so abruptly."

"An escapee?" Theron smiled again. "Nice. How?"

"I jumped out the window of an interrogation room."

Theron laughed out loud. "Wow, I'd have loved to see that officer's face when you did that. You weren't manacled to the table yet?"

"He had them in his hand when I made a break for it."

"Nice." Theron said again. "Very nicely done, Sir." He toasted Ephraim with is glass then took a drink. "Wait, they had an interrogation room on the *first floor*? With a window open even?"

"It was the second floor." Ephraim said. "Truth be told."

Theron laughed again. "Oh, I imagine we'd have been great friends if you stayed in Seattle. What a pity."

"There is a lot of work to be done in Seattle but my face is just too well known. It would be terrible if I got anyone else arrested just for being caught with me. Now about these eggs."

Theron shrugged. “I have chickens of course.”

“Chickens? Where in the world do you keep chickens in the city; on the roof?”

“When they built the new airport ten years ago, I bought a couple of hangars in the city auction.”

“And you keep chickens in hangars?”

“I keep chickens and goats in one of the hangars and I grow corn, tomatoes, beans and other stuff around them. The other hangar is straight vegetables.”

Ephraim raised an eyebrow at the man. “And the government doesn’t have an issue with that?”

“I don’t sell any of it.” Theron took another bite of eggs. “Strictly for personal and staff use.” He smiled. “And the police officer who checks up on me, of course.” He toasted Ephraim with a forkful of eggs.

“And yet you live in this little apartment?”

“Kind of.” Theron picked up some more eggs. “So out of the city then. Do you have any plans?” He smiled. “Besides just walking eastward?”

“I was hoping I could or hitch a ride. I’m trying to get to Saint Louis.”

Theron whistled. “That’s a good distance. Can you ride a motorcycle?”

“No, I can’t.”

“Well nuts. I know a guy who has a bike you could have borrowed on a long-term basis.”

“I don’t have a lot of money on me.” Ephraim admitted. “To buy a car or a bike, even if I could ride it.”

“Borrowed.” Theron said. “This guy isn’t going to be using it for a while. He’s in a reeducation camp at the moment. Six-month stint.”

“Six months isn’t bad. If he stays true, they won’t get anything to stick. Still six months…” His voice trailed off.

Theron smiled again. “Said like a man who has had experience with the system.”

“What?” Ephraim nodded as he scooped up more of the food. “Yeah; more than once, unfortunately. If they catch me again, I’ll probably be conveniently shot trying to escape, or I’ll end up on Vesta.”

"Between the two, I suggest actually trying to escape." Theron said.

"Yes." Ephraim said even though he felt in his heart that he would one day end up on that asteroid. "I suppose." He chuckled. "Six months."

"What's wrong with six months?"

Ephraim inwardly cringed- he was not comfortable discussing the subject. "Oh, it's nothing really."

"What's wrong with six months?" Theron asked again.

Ephraim put down his fork then let out a long breath. "I don't think he… we… have six months."

"For what?"

"For anything." Ephraim said. "I've had…" He hesitated; even among believers what he was going to say was something that was often not accepted. "Visions." He finished. "And dreams."

"There are lots of instances of prophesy," Theron said. "And they didn't just happen during Bible times. I believe that prophesy is one of the gifts of the Spirit."

"And I do as well. It's just…"

"When you get a feeling in your gut." Theron put down his fork and smiled. "When you're praying for guidance on where to run to, for instance. When your gut tells you to go left instead of right. That's no accident."

"I agree." Ephraim said since that had actually happened to him earlier in the day.

"So you have the gift of prophesy." Theron said. "What happens in six months?"

"It's bad."

Theron held his arms out wide. "I don't need to tell you it's bad right now. Earth's a mess."

"At least it's still Earth." Ephraim said.

"Wait a minute." Theron let his arms drop. "What are you saying, exactly?"

"I have had these dreams about the Earth. The entire solar system even. It all gets destroyed. Smoldering ruins. No one is left. The sun is dim in the

sky." Ephraim picked up his fork. "That's why I've been trying to talk to as many people as possible. Time is short. I can feel it. I know it."

"That's…" Theron's voice trailed off. "Huh."

"Yeah. It sure is." Ephraim picked up his fork and scooped up some eggs. "So that's where I am at the moment; frantically trying to talk to as many people as I can before time runs out."

"Huh." Theron said again as he too picked up his fork and returned to eating.

"So what am I supposed to do about it?"

Theron took a moment to chew his food. "Nothing. God has given you a vision and you just need to accept it and continue to do what you are doing, obviously."

Ephraim chuckled again. "Obviously."

"I mean it." Theron said. "You just need to stick to what you're doing; telling others about Christ until you can't anymore." He held his hands out. "That's all any of us can do, really. No one is guaranteed tomorrow, you know. James said that you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.' So that's what you need to do."

"Just do this or that."

Theron smiled wide. "But maybe with a little more urgency."

"Yeah, I suppose so." Ephraim responded.

The two finished their meal in silence.

"Do you need a place for the night?" Theron said as he gathered the two plates.

"Like I said earlier, I'd hate to put anyone in danger. Detective Lancaster is pretty upset with me right now."

"Well, I think I can help you out with a place to stay and allay your worry."

"Oh?"

Theron nodded. "I have a safe house inside a safe house." He put the plates in the sink.

"How does that even work?"

Theron pointed to the far wall. "Let me show you." He moved to a large painting on the wall. "Over here."

Ephraim drank the last of his water then put his glass in the sink. "Okay, as long as it's secure."

Theron pointed at a painting of the Seattle skyline from almost fifty years ago- the Space Needle was still intact as well as most of the buildings in the downtown area. "When I bought this apartment, I bought the one next to it is as well. This one is a three two, the other one a four two. I closed off the back bedroom and added a door to it from here." He pressed the red light painted on the top of the Space Needle. The painting popped away from the wall slightly as a magnetic lock deactivated.

"Come on now." Ephraim said. "You're kidding me."

Theron pulled the painting back as it hinged out into the room. "From this apartment a PAT will just see a room on the other side of the wall and think it belongs to the other apartment. If a PAT is in the other apartment, it looks like the room is part of *this* apartment. If it sees people inside it, it just looks like people in another apartment so it filters them out as background noise. Even if they search both apartments one after another with the same PAT, unless a human asks them how many rooms each apartment has, they'll never realize what's been done."

"That's ingenious." Ephraim said. He peeked into the room. "It would make me feel better knowing you aren't in any danger if someone tracks me here."

Theron's eyes got large. "Someone could track you here?"

Ephraim shook his head. "No, I don't see how." He shrugged. "I put a plastic bag over my ventilator to hide my pheromone trail when I got here and now that it's four hours later, that's completely gone."

"You carry a plastic bag with you?"

Ephraim shrugged again. "It was a garbage sack."

"I wondered about the vandalized can out front." Theron chuckled. "That's just absurd. But effective I suppose." He gestured into the room. "There's a toilet, sink and shower combination in the corner and I'll grab you some clothes; we're about the same size."

Ephraim smiled. "I appreciate your hospitality."

"Well, once we get to those mansions that John talked about, you can return the favor."

"Deal." Ephraim said. He started to shake Theron's hand but hugged him instead. "I pray God watches over you, brother."

"Oh, He does." Theron said. "There's no way I'd get away with my antics all by myself." He hugged Ephraim back. "Let me get you some clothes. Be right back, Raimi."

Ephraim sighed. "Since you're praying for me, you should know my real name is Ephraim. Ephraim Simpson."

Theron smiled. "God would have known who I was praying for, but I appreciate it, Ephraim. Let me get those clothes." With that he turned and walked to the master bedroom.

Ephraim stepped through the painting into the room. It was well apportioned with a bed, a small table with two chairs and what was ostensibly the bathroom suite in the corner behind a curved curtain for privacy. He sat on the bed and bounced on it. "Thank you again Lord for all that you do for me. I am undeserving of your blessings." He fell back on the bed and stared at the ceiling.

"Hey now, don't fall asleep on me just yet." Theron said as he stepped through the painting.

"I'm awake still." Ephraim sat up and smiled. "Temporarily anyway. I'm going to take advantage of that shower first."

Theron nodded. "Good. So I got you a couple of shirts and a pair of pants. Some toiletries in case you didn't have any." He put them on the table. "So, Saint Louis. Finding anyone in particular?"

"My nephew."

Theron nodded. "Well, you can take Ninety to Deer Lodge then Fifteen south to Seventy and that will run straight into Saint Louis."

"Sounds easy when you say it like that." Ephraim said. He smirked. "You're up on your highways, Theron."

"I guess I am. There's a Semi Corral a few blocks south of there in Judkins Park. You can hop a four or five trailer Auto-Semi there at the start of Highway Ninety." He said, referring to the autonomous four or five trailer semis that ran on the highways much like freight trains did on the rails.

"Said like a man who has ridden the Semis before."

"I prefer the rails; a lot quieter," Theron admitted. "But as the owner of Eastern Freight, I've hitched a few rides on an Auto-Semi as well. But up in

the cab. Which reminds me." He pulled a black FOB from his pocket. "This will get you into the cab of any E-F semi." He tossed it to Ephraim.

"Owner?" Ephraim caught it. "But if I'm caught with this, you'll be implicated."

"Nope," Theron said. "It's a hacked clone so their suspect pool will be three dozen mechanics and computer techs. And none of them will know a thing about it."

"Nice." Ephraim looked at the FOB.

"So, your nephew huh? You two close?"

Ephraim shrugged. "Sure, sure. Well, we haven't spoken in months, but sure."

"You haven't spoken in months and you're close?" Theron smiled. "How does that work?"

"It's that whole 'I don't ever want to implicate anyone' deal. He's a Lieutenant in the Americas Marine Defense Forces. A pilot."

"Oh, I see." Theron said. "And he'll help you?"

"He's a believer. I'm hoping he can get me off the continent. Or even to the Moon."

"Then I'll be praying for a safe journey to Saint Louis." Theron said. "And beyond. And about your visions; that you get more clarity."

"I appreciate it." Ephraim said. A thought occurred to him. He looked out of the room. "Uhm, Theron, how do I get out of here to start that safe journey you are going to pray for?"

Theron laughed. "It's really a shame you're leaving. We'd have gotten along great." He pointed at the window. "Fire escape. It's a magnetic lock so when you close it, it will automatically lock behind you." He winked. "So make sure you get it closed on your way out so I don't have any unwanted squatters. And make sure you're really ready to leave before you close it."

"That I will, Sir." Ephraim said. "And I'll be praying for you and your antics as well."

"That's the best we can do." Theron said. "Okay, need anything else before I go home?"

"You don't live here?"

Theron smiled. "The owner of Eastern Freight living in this little three-bedroom apartment? You must be joking. I'm going to my mansion in D-B-S."

"You live in Denny-Blaine-Seacrest?" Ephraim's eyes got large. It was an extremely wealthy part of the city with huge mansions, all with their own guarded compounds. "Really?"

"Sure, sure. I only come slumming when someone sets off one of the proximity alarms." Theron stepped back through the painting. "I own the entire floor, you know." He smiled again. "Good night, brother. God bless you."

Ephraim shook his head. "And you."

Theron closed the painting. Even from the inside, the opening was not noticeable.

"Lord, you truly work in mysterious ways." Ephraim looked at the FOB. "But I wholeheartedly approve of them."

6

Detective Lancaster sat at his desk, brooding. Not only had he not found his escaped prisoner, he had also been yelled at by Chief Stevens about it. Since she had caught him unawares when he came into the precinct, he didn't have any time to talk to Officer Barker to put the blame on Jennigan. Luckily it was one of her verbal reprimands instead of anything in writing that could affect his chance at Detective Inspector. Even so, he did not appreciate it.

"Hey Joe, what's cooking?" Officer Jennigan said as she stepped up to his desk. She put a coffee on it. "Any leads?"

He looked up at her. "No. And not only that, I got a great talking to from the Chief about it."

"Oh man, sorry about that."

"Yeah, well, it let her blow off some steam. And it will be okay when I finally catch that lunatic and he's behind bars. Or in an incinerator."

Jennigan sat at one of the chairs at his desk- there was one per side for each of his officers. "So what's the plan?"

"We go talk to that brother he's got here in town."

"And protocol?"

"Oh, we'll do it the right way. So if that turd even *starts* a prayer I'll be able to pitch him in a cell for the rest of his life."

"Nice." Officer Jennigan nodded. "Sounds like a good plan."

"Hey you two!" Officer Morgan said as he flopped into the other chair. "How are you two doing this fine morning?"

Officer Jennigan smiled at the man. "Chipper are we? Meet a new gal, Cayman?"

Officer Morgan shook his head. "No, no; same old gal. It's a lot easier that way, you know."

"So you date the same girl for two weeks and she becomes an old gal?" Jennigan laughed. "I suppose that is a long term relationship for you."

"Is that word even in your vocabulary?" Morgan said back. "Amy 'Fun Time' Jennigan?"

"You wouldn't know fun if it came up and bit you."

"You don't know my girlfriend."

"Listen you two; I'm really not in the mood for your banter today. We've got an escapee to catch."

Officer Morgan nodded. "Okay, sure." He stood. "Let's go pick him up." He pointed at the double doors at the far end of the large room as he stood. "Ready?"

Detective Lancaster looked up at him. "You know where he is? You have breakfast with him or something?"

"Something." Morgan smirked. "Come on Amy. I'll let you cuff him. It's your turn, I think."

"That's right, it is." Officer Jennigan stood as well and picked up her coffee. "Let's go." She looked down at Detective Lancaster. "You coming, Joe? We've got some enforcement of the law to dole out."

Detective Lancaster stood. "So how do you know where he is?"

Officer Morgan shrugged as the trio headed toward the double doors. "Got an informant at a semi corral." He tilted his head. "Actually I've got informants at pretty much all of them, now that I think about it. It's a good way to keep track of folks trying to move around under the radar. So you see…"

Detective Lancaster held open the door. "Stay on track, Cayman. The semi corral…" he coaxed.

"Yeah, yeah. A guy I've got at the I-90 semi corral said he saw someone matching that Simpsons' description sneaking around out there. He let him get into a cab then called me." He smiled. "It's an Eastern Freight quad-rig. Number Seven Twenty-Three." He paused for a moment. "A cab-over Volvo. Red, he said."

"You riding with us or taking your bike?" Detective Lancaster asked Officer Jennigan.

"My bike. I'm not riding in the back seat with that nut." Officer Jennigan said.

“Yeah, that’s a good idea, Amy.” Detective Lancaster said. “And nicely done, Officer Morgan; good use of your informant network.” He added as he stepped through the door behind his two officers. “Man, I can’t wait to see his smug face when we have that thing pulled over and he’s trapped in it.”

7

Ephraim reclined the seat of the semi even though the windows were electronically tinted so dark he could barely see out of them. The tinting helped keep the electronics cool but could be turned down in case the truck needed to be driven manually for servicing or to fix a computer problem. He leaned back even more when one of the foremen walked to the semi for the third time. There wasn't any reason a foreman would have to enter the cab of the autonomous truck, but even so, Ephraim unhooked his seat belt, planning on making a run for it if he did. He also didn't like that the foreman was speaking into his D-U.

Finally, the foreman walked away and the semi's turbines whined up to speed. To Ephraim's relief, the climate control turned on as the truck came to life. Since the truck was completely autonomous, the dashboard remained dark since there was no one physically there to monitor any instruments. It was disconcerting when the truck went into gear without the gearshift moving and it started out of the huge parking area without the steering wheel turning. Since everything was electronic, there was no reason to have the steering wheel turn when the wheels did; it was only when the truck was in manual mode that the steering wheel, pedals, and gearshift actually did anything.

A feeling of dread came over Ephraim as the truck headed toward the exit. He sat up straight and looked back through the side mirror. There was no one following the truck- except two other trucks. He looked around the yard- even the foreman seemed to be gone now. Even so, as the truck turned toward the exit, Ephraim hopped out of it and quickly ran to toward a truck that was also idling- waiting for its turn to leave. It was also an Eastern Freight so he pushed the FOB to unlock the door as he clambered up onto the side of it. The door dutifully clicked open and he got in behind the driver's seat and once again slouched down.

Knowing that most all of the trucks were invariably going somewhere eastward, he knew that once he was out of the city, he could switch to another if this particular one seemed to be going more south than he wanted. As Ephraim closed the driver's door behind him the truck lurched forward, easing behind the train of trucks that had the one he had just been in as the leader. "Different directions would be nice, Lord." Ephraim said out loud as he clambered over to the passenger seat, not wanting to inadvertently touch

any buttons that would alert the dispatch center that someone was inside the truck.

As Ephraim watched, his truck fell in line behind the other three, then they all moved to Highway 90 and began their journey east at 80 miles an hour with barely three feet in between them to maximize their aerodynamics.

The droning of the wheels soon had him asleep.

8

"Where are they?" Detective Lancaster said as he moved to the center lane- he had been traveling at over 100 miles an hour to catch up with the semis.

Officer Morgan picked up the radio mike. "Amy, where are you? Do you have them in sight?"

Officer Jennigan had moved ahead of the patrol car easily- the top speed for her hybrid motorcycle was close to a hundred sixty miles an hour while the loaded with gear patrol car only managed barely over a hundred. And it took far longer to reach that speed than the motorcycle.

"I'm running beside the rig now. Can't see anyone in it." She said. "Coming up on the four-oh-five interchange."

"We're three miles behind you Amy. So just stay with them and…."

"Wait, wait." Officer Jennigan cut off Morgan. "First three trucks are taking the interchange north. The last two are continuing on Interstate Ninety."

"He's heading toward Canada." Detective Lancaster said. "As if that would do him any good."

"Maybe he knows someone up there. Family we aren't tracking?"

Detective Lancaster nodded. "Yeah, that's probably it. Tell her to…"

"I'm going to keep on the two trucks heading east in case he's swapped on us." Officer Jennigan interrupted again. "You take the northern train. I'll meet you back in the station this afternoon."

Officer Morgan looked at his superior. "What say you?"

Detective Lancaster shrugged. "It never hurts to cover all the bases. He might've swapped on us. Tell her she's good."

Officer Morgan nodded. "Sounds good, Amy." He said into the mike. "See you back at the precinct later today. After we catch him."

"We'll see about that." Officer Jennigan replied.

"Stay safe out there." Officer Morgan said. "Seriously. Keep an eye out, okay?"

"Copy that." Officer Jennigan said as she turned off her radio. "So let's see if you're still being sneaky." She said to herself. She braked hard to get behind the trailing Semi. "And I get myself a collar instead of the boys."

Officer Jennigan pulled behind the Semi. With the windows tinted completely she couldn't see in them so she needed them to stop for her to search them. She knew that there was another large interchange in a mile and a half- a perfect spot to get the two Semis to pull over. She glanced at an icon on the heads-up display in her helmet, turning on her D-U. "Display number for Eastern Freight dispatch center, Seattle." She said.

Dutifully within only a couple of seconds, several numbers scrolled slowly by on the bottom corner of her visor.

"Call dispatch center official number."

After several rings, a tired sounding woman's voice spoke: "Eastern Freight Dispatch Center Five. How can I help you?"

"This is Officer Amy Jennigan, Precinct Twelve Seattle. Confirm please."

"Yeah, that's who you are. Are you having some sort of identity crisis, officer? We handle freight not existential problems."

Amy frowned. "I am following two of your trucks out of Seattle on Interstate Ninety. The rear truck is…" She hesitated because she couldn't see what sort of Semi was pulling the trailer.

"Blocking your view of the countryside?" The dispatcher offered. "Not getting out of your way in the right lane?"

Amy frowned again. "No. The trailer is number three, triple five, one."

The woman didn't respond.

"Hello?" Amy said.

"I'm not looking at every truck everywhere, Officer Jennigan." The dispatcher said. "Yes, I see that that trailer is indeed heading east on ninety. Thanks for letting me know it's doing exactly what it's supposed to be doing. Is there anything else?"

Amy tightened her grip on the handlebars. "No, I..."

"Fine then." The dispatcher ended the call.

"Oh, I hate you so much right now!" Amy shouted. "Call dispatch center official number!"

After only two rings, the woman answered in the same tone as before: "Eastern Freight Dispatch Center Five. How can I help you?"

Before Officer Jennigan could answer, she –and the Semis- passed the interchange. "Damn it all." She cursed.

"Officer Jennigan, are you having a bad day or something?" The dispatcher said. "Maybe you need to talk to someone at your precinct, or something. I'm not a crisis center."

"No, that's not it. We just passed the interchange."

There was another pause then: "Yes, I see that. The two-train is moving along nicely on schedule. Thanks for the update. Is there anything else?"

"Yes!" Detective Jennigan shouted. "Yes there is; do *not* hang up on me!"

"Calm down, Officer. What do you need?"

"I need to get into these two semis."

"They're carrying clothes, not contraband. I can assure you of that, officer."

Amy shook her head. "No, no. There might be a fugitive in one of them."

"Might? Do you have a warrant, Officer Jennigan?"

Amy scowled. "No. No I don't. But we are in active pursuit of a fugitive so a warrant isn't necessary in cases such…"

"Did you see this fugitive get into one of those two Semis?"

Amy let out a long breath. "No, I believe the suspect may have swapped trucks."

"So now it's just a suspect?"

"Listen, obviously you have some experience with law enforcement. Yes?"

"My brother is a Sergeant in Redmond. Twelve years."

"Great, I…"

"He's been on the force for twelve years, not a Sergeant for twelve years."

"GREAT!" Amy said louder than she wanted to. "But what I need is to catch this…" A thought occurred to her. "Fugitive. He in fact escaped from our precinct yesterday so he is indeed a fugitive of the law."

"And you know he's in one of our trucks?"

"Well, no. We think he's in one of the trucks going north on the four-oh-five; I'm just making sure he didn't swap on us." She took a calming breath. "So all I want to do is have you stop the truck for a minute for me to look inside the back. If he's in there, I'll call you back to let you know. It's just a minute."

"We run on a real tight schedule. That two-train is supposed to join a five-train in Issaquah later today and run to Buffalo."

"New York? I thought that place was still uninhabitable."

"Montana."

"Oh. Well, I just need it to stop for a minute. That's all."

"But you see Officer Jennigan; it's not really a minute. They are going to have to slow down, exit the interstate, pull into a safe location, stop there, and have you look inside them, then drive back to the interstate and get back up to speed. What you're asking for is about a thirty minute delay. Which affects those other five Semis, and the ones they are going to meet later on today, which will affect the whole the week."

"I see but…"

"So your one minute delay," continued the dispatcher, "has multiple orders of effect that will cause issues for the rest of the week." She paused. "Is this man wanted for a capital crime? Murder?"

Amy cringed. "No…. he's an undesirable."

"Aren't we all?"

"Ma'am, I understand the trouble this causes but my boss, Inspector Joe Lancaster…"

"Don't know him."

"Inspector Lancaster has been pursuing this individual for the better part of two months." She exaggerated. "If I can catch him, it would really mean a lot to my career."

The woman didn't respond.

"Hello?" Amy tried.

"Seems your inspector is making the same request of that tri-train heading up Interstate Four Hundred Five."

"Are you letting him in?"

"Me? No. He's talking to a different dispatcher. There are five of us here, you know. Seems my coworker's making your inspector get a warrant."

Amy's heart sank. "Oh man."

"But, here's what I can do for you, Officer Jennigan."

Amy brightened up. "Oh?"

"I'll get that two-train to pull over at the next interchange. Two rigs can maneuver around and get back up to speed pretty quick. I'll give you thirty seconds on each one. The cab is easy, the trailer you'll just have to make quick work of it."

"Trailer?"

"Is this undesirable in the cab or the trailer?"

"Oh, I'm not sure." Amy admitted. "How could he get from the cab to the trailer? They aren't connected."

"There's an emergency exit in the back of the cab. Required by law. And both of those trailers also have emergency exits at the front of them as well."

"Oh, I didn't know. So I need to search them as well, I suppose."

"And now your minute stop is up to three or four minutes per Semi, isn't it. Now they're even further behind schedule."

"I suppose they are." Amy said, dejected.

"So here's what I can do, Officer Jennigan trying to impress her boss. I'll stop those trucks for five minutes *total*. You get thirty seconds to peek into the cab; it's quick and easy because it's a small space with nowhere to hide. Then you get two minutes to search the trailer. It's boxes of clothes so they'll all be neatly stacked and secured in place. That's five minutes total. If I don't hear otherwise from you, they're going back on their route."

"Deal!" Amy interrupted.

"But…" The dispatcher said. "I need an authorization to run at ninety for a couple of hours to make up the time so they can rendezvous on time."

"Deal, deal!" Amy said, even though she didn't have the authority to do that.

"Officer Jennigan," The dispatcher said. "I know for a fact you don't have the authority to do say that."

Amy took several breaths. "Okay, that's true. But I can provide an escort for two hours so they don't get stopped for speeding."

"You're going to run ahead of them for two hours down Interstate Ninety?"

"Sure?"

"Sure, doesn't sound very convincing Officer Jennigan." The dispatcher said. "If you could provide an affirmative answer to this call that is being recorded for quality assurance and training purposes, I would appreciate it."

Amy cringed again. "Fine, fine. This is Officer Jennigan and I will provide an escort for two hours to these two trucks that I will be delaying so they can get back on schedule." She paused. "How's that?"

"Sounds good to me. I'll be pulling them over at the upcoming interchange in Eastgate, then into a shopping center lot right off the interstate. Your five minutes starts when they both go into park. If you're not done, you get to just watch the doors close and they drive off. And you get a warrant to stop them again."

"Damn." Officer Jennigan said.

"What was that?"

"Deal. I said deal."

"Fine. I'm updating their route now. Have a fine day, Officer Jennigan."

"Yeah, you too." Amy answered, not looking forward to a four-hour ride on top of the hour she was already away from the precinct. She eyed her radio icon. "Morgan, this is Jennigan."

After a moment Officer Morgan answered: "What's up?"

"I'm getting these two semis to pull over so I can search them."

"Nice." said Officer Morgan.

"But then I'll have to provide an escort to get them back on schedule. So I won't be in the office until tomorrow morning."

"Tomorrow?" Detective Lancaster said. "Doing some sightseeing?"

"Not at all. I'm going to have to escort these two things for two hours to get them back on schedule. That means once I'm done with that I'll be three hours away from the precinct. Understand?"

"Yeah, that makes sense." Detective Lancaster said. "We're going to follow these until the warrant comes through."

"Right, right. Otherwise I'll just see you in the morning. Okay?"

"Let us know if you get him so we don't waste time on our warrant. But I'm pretty sure we've got him to rights in this semi and you're on a wild goose chase."

"Copy that. Better to cover all the bases, you know?" Amy said as she switched off her radio. She leaned back on her motorcycle, stretching her arms over her head as she rode along at eighty miles an hour. "Keep thinking that Joe; I'm sure he's swapped trucks on you. Sure of it." She put her hands back on the handlebars as the trucks began to slow. "This will be great."

9

Ephraim stood in front of his seat to look out the driver's window. He could hear a motorcycle beside the truck but didn't see it pass. When he sat up higher to look down for it, he saw that it was a police motorcycle. "Oh man." After a few moments, the motorcycle broke hard and disappeared from sight. "Oh man!" He said again. He looked around the cabin. There was a small hatch in the back with 'emergency exit only' printed above it. "That's what I'm having right now."

He moved to the door and pushed it open. Cold air blew in from outside. He looked around the cab. Besides his backpack, there wasn't anything in useful that he saw- because the truck mostly operated without a human driver. As he crawled out of the small door, he noticed a flashlight clipped in above it. He took it before exiting completely to stand on a small platform at the back of the rig. He looked left and right- the roadway whizzed by at eighty miles an hour- far too fast to jump off. "Oh man." He said again. Then he noticed that the trailer had a corresponding hatch in it. "In or out?" He looked to the right and left- there was open landscape on both sides of the highway for almost a quarter of a mile, then random houses and businesses. It would be much too far to try and run for cover. Especially when he would be chased by a motorcycle. Ephraim took a moment to calm himself. *Lord, is this the end of the line for me? I sure can't make a run for it out here. In. I'm going to hide in the trailer. That's my best option, right?* With a relegated sigh, he pulled open the trailer's escape hatch. As he maneuvered himself into it, he pushed the cab's hatch shut.

Switching the flashlight on, he panned it around the large trailer. There were boxes neatly stacked to the ceiling from the front to the back of it. They were all strapped down to keep them from moving. The boxes were stacked along the edge of the walls of the trailer leaving a pathway down the middle- he could see from the front of the truck all the way to the back. "Oh man."

Ephraim lost his footing as the truck started to decelerate. "Uh oh." He said to no one in particular. "Time to hide, Ephraim. And be quick about it." He panned the flashlight around- the boxes went all the way to the rear of the trailer, packed tightly against one another the entire way. A thought occurred to him. He put the flashlight in his mouth to have both hands free as he removed the ratchet straps from the stacks of boxes right against the front of the trailer. As the truck continued to slow, he pulled the tall stack of boxes

toward him and into the pathway. Once he had one stack done, he did the same with the other stack. From the rear of the truck it would now look like the boxes were stacked neatly against the sides of the trailer then at the very front stacked two deep across it.

Without anything else to do but wait, he sat down and turned off the flashlight. The truck slowed even more then made a series of turns. Finally, the truck stopped with a loud hiss of its brakes. While waiting for the doors to open, Ephraim prayed.

10

Officer Jennigan swung her bike around past the rear of the trailer as the two Semis pulled into the large parking lot, parking it in a spot off to the side. "Five minutes." She dismounted the motorcycle and put her helmet on the handlebars. "Five minutes starting…" She looked down at her watch and switched it to chronograph as the two semis creeped forward. Finally when they came to a stop nose to tail, the passenger doors of the Semis swung open and the rear clamshells of the trailers began opening upwards. "Now!" She said. She ran to the front of the first Semi, clambered up and looked inside. Not seeing anyone, she ran forward to the other cab and did the same thing. "Huh." She looked at the opening trailers. "You hiding back there?" She said as she hopped off the running board of the cab. As she walked to the back of the truck, she looked at her watch. She was surprised that a minute had already passed.

Officer Jennigan climbed up into the trailer- it was almost seventy feet long. There were boxes stacked neatly along the sides of the trailer with small gaps in between them. She could see to the very front of the trailer but the way the boxes were stacked made small hiding spots on either side the entire way. She unholstered her gun and cautiously started down the pathway. When she reached the end of the trailer, she was alarmed to see she had spent just over three minutes moving slowing down it.

"Two minutes left!" She said as she sprinted to the rear of the trailer and jumped down. Continuing her sprint, she ran the hundred feet to where the other trailer's rear had opened. For a moment she hesitated, torn between running to her bike to get her helmet to radio for more time, or just entering the trailer. She looked down at her watch- just over a minute and a half remained. She climbed into the trailer and started down the long passageway much quicker than she would have liked. When she reached the end of it, she had a mere twenty seconds left. She put her hand on the box at the end of the passageway as she holstered her pistol, a double -beep- sound indicating the safety was now on. "Where are you?" Realization hit her. She pushed on the boxes blocking the pathway that should have run to the front of the truck. They teetered as she did. "Hey!" She pushed harder on the stack of boxes and they tilted precariously toward the front of the trailer. "Come out of there now!" She said.

As she reached for her pistol, the boxes pushed back towards her. "Hey!" She exclaimed as they toppled over on top of her.

Ephraim continued to push the boxes as they fell on the officer. He stepped over one of them as the officer got her pistol out of her holster. It hummed to life. He picked up a box- it was light since it was only filled with clothes and threw it at her face.

The officer brought up her free hand to keep the box from hitting her as she brought the pistol around to shoot her assailant while still on her back.

Ephraim grabbed the pistol and wrenched it out of her hand. Thanks to biometrics he knew he couldn't fire it himself, but what he really wanted was for the officer to not to be able to fire it.

The light in the trailer started to dim.

Ephraim looked toward the back of the trailer. The clamshell was closing.

"Sorry, Officer," Ephraim said. "Got to run." As he stepped past her, she grabbed his ankle, tripping him.

As Ephraim fell to the deck of the trailer he put his hands out to break his fall, losing his grip on the pistol. It clattered ahead of him as the clamshell continued to close. He tried to get to his feet but the officer had a tight grip on his ankle.

Ephraim stretched out to grab the gun as the clamshell closed completely, putting the trailer in total darkness. He kicked a foot backward, connecting with the officer but she still kept a tight grip on his ankle.

"Freeze!" The officer shouted.

11

Detective Lancaster exhaled loudly. "This is absurd. How long does it take to get a lousy warrant to stop a truck for a couple of minutes?"

Officer Morgan smirked. "Apparently there are ripple effects of stopping a truck that go on for a week." He said, repeating what the dispatcher had said.

"Yeah? And one of those ripple effects is that it pisses me off!" Detective Lancaster snapped. He had tried pulling in front of the lead semi-truck to slow down the trio. But they either switched lanes to get around him or when the programming determined that it wasn't feasible, the lead truck had bumped his patrol car. Forcefully. "I think these shipping companies have way too much power on the roads."

"Well, fifty tons is fifty tons." Officer Morgan said. "Just give it a few more minutes."

"Anything from Jennigan?"

Morgan shook his head. "She's switched off her radio. That woman." He laughed. "Probably upset she's on a self-imposed five hour road trip. That was a stupid move."

Detective Lancaster shook his head. "Don't laugh. She's a good officer and will make a good detective. She's got good instincts. It didn't occur to me that that nut could have hopped to another rig."

"How do you even know he did?"

"Oh, I don't." Detective Lancaster said. "But having her following along with us wouldn't have helped in any way. We can handle one guy. But by thinking outside the box and covering all contingencies she's improved our chances of catching this guy." He looked at the officer. "Would you have liked to be the one to have to tell the Chief that we followed three empty semis instead of splitting up and following the one that ended up having that guy in it? *That* my friend would have been an unpleasant conversation."

"Eeesh, I suppose so."

"And if he happens to not be in one of these three, she's got him cold. So we're still a successful team. There are things you can learn from Officer Jennigan, Cayman. I suggest you listen more and disparage less. Remember; the success of one of the team is success for *all* the team. I don't care who collars this guy; whichever of you do it, I'll look good to the Chief."

"Got it." Officer Morgan said, even though he didn't think highly of Amy Jennigan, or any female officers for that matter.

"Echo mike one two six," The radio said.

Officer Morgan keyed the microphone. "E-M Twelve six here. What's the word?"

"The word is go. Warrant is signed." The officer on the other end said. "Good hunting, Echo Mike."

"Roger that!" Officer Morgan replied. He picked up his D-U and called the dispatcher again. "Oh man, I can't wait to tell this guy off."

"Don't annoy people you might need later on." Detective Lancaster warned. "You want me to make the call?"

Morgan shook his head. "No, I got it." He waited until the call connected. It was a woman this time.

"Eastern Freight Dispatch Center Five. How can I help you?" She said.

"This is Officer Cayman Morgan from Precinct Twelve out of Seattle."

"Not much must be happening in Seattle if you're all out on road trips," The woman said. "Am I right or am I right?"

Morgan glanced at Detective Lancaster.

Detective Lancaster shook his head and waggled a finger.

"Yes. Yes we are in fact, Ma'am." Morgan continued in a pleasant voice. "We have a warrant to stop and search the semi-trucks we are currently following."

"Please be aware that this conversation is being recorded for quality assurance and training purposes. You are saying that there is a warrant that was signed before right now in this conversation? Fifteen hundred hours, Pacific Standard Time?"

"Yes ma'am." Officer Morgan said. "It was signed ten minutes ago by a Judge Lawrence Harper." He smirked at his superior and winked. "You can trust me; I work in law enforcement."

Detective Lancaster nodded approvingly.

"Of course, Officer," the woman said, "everyone knows there're no rollers out there working in the grey areas of the law."

"Rollers?" Detective Lancaster said with a chuckle. He leaned over toward the microphone. "Hey lady, are you single and thirty-ish? I think you'd do Officer Morgan some good."

"Who is that?" The woman asked.

"That's my boss; Detective Lancaster. Just ignore him." Officer Morgan said. "Are you going to stop those trucks for us now?"

"Not on the highway I'm not, Officer Morgan. There's an exit at Mount Vernon in about fifteen miles. I'll route the trucks off there and into a parking lot."

"Another fifteen miles?"

"It's not like he can get out of there until those trucks stop." The woman said. "Just be patient and follow them at the exit before they get into town. I'll put them in a large parking area off to the right, side by side."

"Fine. That sounds fine." Officer Morgan said.

"And if you could please let me know the moment you're done so I can get those rigs back on the road, I would appreciate it. Stopping those trucks causes scheduling issues down the road."

"Got it." Officer Morgan said. "As soon as we've cleared all three, I'll give you folks a call." He looked at Detective Lancaster who nodded at him. "I appreciate your help with this." He said before keying off the microphone. "Man that was tough."

"Being nice to people who can help you later is tough? You might be in the wrong line of work." Detective Lancaster shook his head. "I talk to people all the time that I'd rather just punch in the face but I talk all nice and polite to them because I'm trying to get one of the big three from them; information, cooperation, or access."

Officer Morgan nodded. "Got it." He let out a long breath. "I got it."

"Good." Detective Lancaster moved behind the last Semi in the train, tailgating it. "We'll get that guy and be home in time for dinner." He smirked. "And you can tell Amy all about it tomorrow morning."

"Sounds good, boss."

The pair rode in silence the ten minutes it took to get to the exit. As promised, the trucks all slowed, exited then turned into the large parking lot of a vacant mall. As they pulled one beside the other, crawling to a stop, Detective Lancaster stopped his cruiser twenty yards away from them. "Nice, now all we need…"

The trucks stopped in unison then the passenger doors popped open and the clamshells on the rear of the trailers started to open.

"That stupid woman! We're gonna have a runner!" Officer Morgan said as he hopped out of the car. "I'll take the right one!" He shouted as he sprinted toward the front of the truck.

Detective Lancaster pushed his door open and drew his pistol as he stepped out. He could see the passenger door of the left truck and was prepared to just shoot Ephraim Simpson numerous times if he tried to run. In fact, he stood back hoping for the opportunity. When no one came out he shouted to Morgan, "Check the cabs of the other two trucks I have the rears covered!"

After a few moments, after ostensibly checking the middle truck, Officer Morgan jogged into view and clambered up into the far left truck, disappearing from site. He hopped out a couple of seconds later and raised his hands. "Clear!" He shouted. "How can that be?"

"Then it's the trailers!" Detective Lancaster shouted back. He gestured for the officer. "Come check them out while I cover you!"

Dutifully Officer Morgan jogged to the now open trailers. He put his hands on his hips. "That's a lot of running all of a sudden."

"Well now you get to walk nice and slow and clear those trailers." Detective Lancaster said he stepped beside him. "Right to left?"

"Works for me." Officer Morgan said as he took two leaping bounds and jumped into the back of the trailer. "And you're going to cover me from out here?"

Detective Lancaster shrugged. "Cover might not be the right word. If he gets past you I'm going to put a bunch of holes in him." He smirked. "Unless you do first because…"

Officer Morgan smiled back. "It doesn't matter who collars him; it all looks good for the team."

"Right. Although I would lose a bit of personal satisfaction if I wasn't the one to shoot him."

"You can have the next annoying perp, Boss." Morgan drew his pistol as he turned and started into the trailer.

Detective Lancaster took several steps back to give him more room to shoot at a moving target.

12

Ephraim resisted turning on the flashlight as he groped for the gun- it skittered at his fingertips. As he tried to move forward, Officer Jennigan grabbed him by the calf and pulled herself up onto him.

Ephraim thought the officer was trying to climb over him to get to the gun until she grabbed his right wrist. As someone who had been arrested several times, he knew her next act would be to snap a handcuff onto his wrist. And at that point, even if he got away, he would still have a case-hardened steel handcuff attached to his wrist for all to see.

To get her off, he pushed off the floor and rolled hard toward the boxes on the far side of the trailer. As their two bodies hit the flimsy boxes, the bottom one crushed in and the next one up pushed down on Officer Jennigan- the five above it did the same thing.

Ephraim rolled away from the toppling boxes and scrambled to the gun before Officer Jennigan got up.

As Officer Jennigan got to her feet, Ephraim turned on his flashlight, shining it into her eyes. "Just stop right there." He ordered.

"You going to shoot me?" She asked.

"We both know this thing won't fire, but me pointing it at you and pulling the trigger will get me an attempted murder charge none the less."

"You already have an assault charge."

"I don't think rolling around counts as assault." Ephraim said. "Please sit down." The trailer shifted as the truck changed lanes passing a slower vehicle. "It's at least safer."

"For who?"

"Both of us. We don't need any misunderstandings. I'll start, to show my good faith." Ephraim sat then twisted the end of the flashlight broadening the beam so it was practically a lantern. It clacked to the floor of the trailer thanks to its magnetic base.

"And my gun?"

Ephraim pulled the slide back slightly then flipped a small lever. As he let the slide move forward, it slipped completely off the bottom half of the pistol. He tossed the handgrip- magazine and all- over his shoulder.

"Hey now!"

"If that got you upset," Ephraim said as he shook the barrel out of the slide, "check this out." He used the tip of the barrel to press out the pin that held the firing pin in place, then he shook it out as well.

"Hey, stop that!"

With a smile, he slipped the barrel back into the slide then tossed it into the darkness at the front of the trailer.

The main components of the pistol- the lower receiver, slide, and barrel all had serial numbers to track them. Firing pins did not because they would wear out and as such were considered 'expendable items'. He put the firing pin in his back pocket. "Okay? Now will you relax?"

With a scowl, Officer Jennigan sat.

"Ephraim Simpson." He nodded. "But you probably already know that."

"Officer Jennigan." She said sourly.

"Pleasure to meet you." Ephraim smirked. "Well, not really. Now toss me your cuffs."

"What?"

"Toss me your cuffs, Officer Jennigan. I'd hate to doze off and find myself shackled to the inside of this trailer. Cuffs."

"Yeah, that would be terrible." Officer Jennigan said as she tossed the cuffs to him. Fully expecting them to join the top half of her pistol somewhere at the front of her truck.

"Great. Now take off your jacket."

"What?"

"Are you going to make me repeat everything? That's going to get annoying."

"Yeah? Well, you trying to get my clothes off is annoying. And it'll get bloody. Real bloody."

"What? No, no. This trailer is going to get pretty hot. And I don't want to have to deal with you wanting to take off your jacket later on. But if you want to keep that armored leather bike jacket on, that's fine by me. But you're getting cuffed either way. And once they're on, they're on for good."

Officer Jennigan stared at Ephraim for a long moment, and then took off her jacket- it was already causing her to sweat.

"Great. Now lay on your belly with your arms out in front of you." Before she could say anything, he continued: "Because if we get into a wrestling match again, you might get hurt. And I don't want that. I would also like you to promise you're not going to try anything."

"Promise?" Officer Jennigan laughed. "That's funny. Promise."

"Yeah, promise. Otherwise I can just handcuff your left hand to your right ankle *behind your back*. Or if you agree to be reasonable," he continued with a smile, "you can sit comfortably with your hands cuffed in front of you until we stop. Again, the choice is yours."

After another long moment, Officer Jennigan nodded. "Fine, I won't try anything."

"Fine then." Ephraim repeated.

With a scowl, Officer Jennigan rolled onto her belly and extended her hands.

After only a moment, Ephraim had the cuffs on her.

"You're pretty handy with a pistol." Officer Jennigan said once she was sitting upright.

"I used to be in the Army. Finance clerk."

Officer Jennigan chuckled. "Glamourous."

"It was if your pay wasn't right. Then I was everyone's best friend." He smiled. "Why are you so angry?"

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe because I've been kidnapped, handcuffed with my own cuffs, had my gun taken apart, and forced to sit with a nosy fugitive."

"No see, that's not right; that should make you frustrated or embarrassed. Not angry. When was the last time you had a joyful fun time?"

Officer Jennigan thought for a moment. Nothing came to mind.

"Do you find joy in your work? When you get home, do you think 'this was a good day'?"

"No."

"How about when you're off duty. With friends. How about then?"

"I keep to myself mostly." Officer Jennigan said. She thought about the men that she dated- usually only as a one-night-stand.

"Family?"

"Don't have any."

Ephraim rubbed his chin. "Come on now. There has to be something that makes you happy. Do you have a dog? I really think you need a dog in your life."

"I don't need a dog in my life."

"Well you need something to make you happy."

"I'm happy." Snapped Officer Jennigan. "You've never seen anyone as happy as me."

"I…" Ephraim smiled. "Okay. What's the last thing that made you happy? Tell me."

"You first," she said instead as she stared at him.

"Oh that's easy. We were on our way home from a picnic at Olympic National Park." Ephraim hesitated, and then smiled as he thought back. "Me and my wife. We spent the day on the shore under the dome. No respirators, just white sand and cool water."

"When was this?"

"Two years ago." His smile faded. "Then on the way home, we got caught in the middle of a high-speed chase. One of Seattle's finest sideswiped us going by and we rolled down an embankment." Now he stared at Officer Jennigan. "They killed my wife and our baby that was due in a couple of weeks."

Officer Jennigan looked at the floor. "Oh. I…"

"I know it wasn't you that did it." Ephraim said. "But what it all boils down to is that someone like you did it."

"Now wait a minute."

"You get your eyes on a target and anyone and everyone in the way better just look out."

"That's not fair. We have a job…"

"You all live in the here and now," Ephraim said as if she hadn't interrupted him. "Never farther than a little bubble right around you. There's an infinite universe out there and an eternity ahead of you."

"Here we go." Officer Jennigan rolled her eyes.

"And a creator of it all," Ephraim pressed on, "that you choose to ignore."

Office Jennigan laid back on the floor. "I'm not listening to you anymore."

"No, actually you shouldn't be *listening* to me."

Officer Jennigan picked up her head and looked at him.

"You're supposed to be *telling* me. About the last time you felt joy. The last time you were happy."

She put her head back down. "Riding my bike is nice." She finally said.

"Well, that's something. But that's just something that's nice. I'm talking real happiness inside of you. Joy."

"Nope."

"Never? Even as a kid?" Ephraim shook his head. "Wow."

"Yeah, yeah; wow. There's not that much to be happy about right now, okay? I've got bands of thugs trying to set up their own little kingdoms and killing each other to prove they should be in charge. I've got One-Gen idiots blowing up buildings. I've got stupid escapees kidnapping me."

"Well, I mean, you're still on the clock, right? So you're getting paid right now."

Officer Jennigan picked up her head to look at him again. "Can't you just shut up?"

"Do you know why I didn't go on a state-wide cop killing spree?"

"Be serious."

"Oh, I am being serious. That was my first option. And I'm sure you've seen it that when people are backed into a corner, they'll do all sorts of things they normally wouldn't ever dream of doing."

Officer Jennigan shook her head. "Still. Killing cops?"

"You guys do get killed. You're not invulnerable." Ephraim said.

"Yeah, it happens." She looked down at the floor. "More and more often, it seems."

"So, after you people killed my wife and son, the only people important to me in the whole world. Why didn't I go on a killing spree?" When Officer Jennigan didn't answer, he continued: "Because I found it in my heart to forgive them."

"For the record, I'd have gone on that killing spree."

"That's a terrible thing to say."

"But your wife and kid are gone."

"Temporarily. I will see them both when I get to heaven."

"You're crazy."

"They're waiting for me there. I know that in my heart, with my whole being. But some days…"

Amy

"… some days Amy, I just want to walk into a police station and punch some cop in the face so his pals fill me full of holes and be done with this entire messed up planet."

Officer Jennigan picked up her head again. She was sure she hadn't told the man her first name.

"But then I think about the people like you; joyless, stumbling through life toward an eternal end. And my heart breaks. I want to scream from the rooftops 'You're doing life wrong!'." Ephraim scooted to the wall and leaned back against it. "Because the fact of the matter is that I have felt joy a hundred times. A thousand even since my family died. Every time I get someone to understand, I know I have saved them from an eternity of suffering." He smiled as his eyes got wet. "That's what keeps me running from the likes of you."

Officer Jennigan sat up. "So what if you're wrong?"

Ephraim pointed at her. "Exactly!"

"What?"

"So what if I *am* wrong? Let's say that for argument's sake, I am. *So what?* That means I lived my life helping others, looking forward to something better. I've tried to bring joy to other people. How does that hurt anyone? How does that make me hard to govern? Jesus said 'Give unto Caesar what is Caesar's'. And the Bible also says 'let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.'."

"That's not true. He was a rabble rouser and a trouble maker."

"Oh, Amy." Ephraim said. "So you do believe He is a real person. That's a start."

"That's not what I said at all." Officer Jennigan said defensively. "And stop calling me Amy!"

"It's your name."

"Well, I didn't tell it to you!"

"Yes you did; just a moment ago."

"I certainly did not." Officer Jennigan started to cross her arms but the cuffs wouldn't let her.

"No, I'm sure you did. Otherwise how would I know that?" Ephraim smiled. "Well, that's odd isn't it."

Amy frowned as she went over the conversation in her head. She was sure she didn't give her first name.

"You can call me Ephraim if it helps."

"No, it does not."

"Well, Officer Jennigan, Let me ask you why we believers are being hunted down and killed?"

"You're not being killed. Don't be absurd."

"Amy…"

"So we're back to that?" Officer Jennigan interrupted.

"What's the Colorado SuperMax do with all those people that are sent there? Havana Penitentiary? Vesta Penal Colony. Do people ever leave there? Alive?"

Officer Jennigan looked at the floor. It was common knowledge that prisoners' live spans in those facilities were measured in months. Single digit months. "There's nothing I can do about it."

"Another admission. Nice. If you know the organization you work for is doing evil, why do you work for it?"

"What else can I do?" Officer Jennigan asked. "I didn't make the world the screwed up place it is. I'm just trying to get by in it."

"That's the problem, Amy; you're just trying to get by. Just keep your head above water. Instead you should be striving for more. More for yourself. More for Earth. Because when you die, and life has a one hundred percent mortality rate, you're going to stand in front of the Almighty. And he's going to ask you what you did for His people, His kingdom. 'I kept my head above water' isn't going to cut it. And it will be too late to do anything about it by then. There isn't a lot of time left for just treading water."

Officer Jennigan snorted derisively. "I've done some good things."

"No; you have to be all in. In fact, God has more respect for evil doers than he does half-hearted followers. He actually said 'I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other. So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to vomit you out of My mouth."

"That's a pleasant image." Officer Jennigan held her hands out as wide as the cuffs would allow. "But the entire world? I'm supposed to go opposite the entire world?"

"There's more of us than you think. Lots more. And the battle lines have already been drawn. And the cold hard truth is that you're on the losing side." Ephraim leaned toward her. "I'll give you a spoiler on the Bible; God wins in the end."

"Thanks; that saves me reading it. Which by the way would get me arrested."

"See? Right there. Your side can't even have a discussion about a *book* without being violent. Okay, how about I ask you a different question?"

"I don't think I have a choice."

Ephraim said a prayer asking for the right words to use against the officer's hardened heart.

"Is this a verbal question?" Officer Jennigan asked. "Because I'm not feeling too psychic today."

"Yes. Yes it is." Ephraim leaned forward. "So, while you're dealing with some suspect, talking to him or her." Ephraim smirked. "You do still talk to people, right? Or do you just bash them on the head?"

"Was that the question? If so, the answer is yes and sometimes."

"When you are questioning someone. Having a conversation with them, when do they become violent? Honestly."

Officer Jennigan was caught off guard by the different line of questioning. She thought back to the hundreds of arrests she had done when talking to someone and she confronted them on something they had done or were doing that they knew was wrong, they invariably either attacked her or tried to run away.

"Well?" Ephraim coaxed.

"It always happens when I catch them in a lie. When they know they are wrong so they try to use force to get their way, or they try to get away." As soon as she said it, she was sorry she did.

Ephraim nodded. "Exposing them to the truth makes them lash out." He put his finger to his chin. "That really sounds familiar."

"It's totally different."

"Why?"

"Because it's the government."

Ephraim laughed long and loud. "Oh well, in that case it's the old adage 'might makes right'. Let me ask you this: are you *proud* of your job? Be honest; it's just you and me."

Officer Jennigan frowned. "No. Not really."

"That's God tugging on your conscience."

"Said the man who wants to be released."

Ephraim pointed to the handcuffs. "Oh, I'm not the one in shackles. Actual or metaphorical. When this truck stops, I'm getting off. You may

catch me later on, and that's fine. Because I declare this to you here and now: I forgive you Amy Kepley Jennigan. As of right now."

Officer Jennigan's eyes got large. While she may have slipped and given her first name, or perhaps he had heard someone else use it, she was *positive* she had not given her middle. Not even her coworkers knew that. It was her grandmother's name- someone she had been very close to. Until she was arrested for attending a religious service. Amy never saw her again. "How do you…"

"Wouldn't it be great to be reunited with her?"

"No, that's not possible."

"Not while you keep your heart hard."

"That's not what I meant."

Ephraim continued as if knowing her grandmother's name was something everyone knew. "In the trinity there is God the father, Jesus the son, and Holy Spirit. If you open your heart and listen. Really listen, the Holy Spirit will speak to you."

"I don't believe in ghosts."

"Spirit." Corrected Ephraim.

"Same thing." But now Officer Jennigan wasn't as sure.

"Well, it's something you need to do, no one can do it for you. You have to accept and believe. But I'll tell you this, Officer Jennigan; if you open yourself, truly open yourself to the Lord, He will show you He exists with irrefutable proof. And I'm telling you, you really need to make a decision on this; there isn't time for indecision, believe me."

"I don't believe. It's absurd."

"That's something you need to figure out, because most people don't know when they're going to die. And when it happens, it will be too late."

"That sounds like a threat. So God threatens people to believe?"

"It's not a threat; it's a consequence for a decision. The offer has been made and paid in full in advance. It's up to you to either accept it or not. And you need to accept it soon, Amy because I…" Ephraim hesitated, then decided to not also subject the woman to the gift of prophesy as well. "I feel that there isn't a lot of time left for you, or anyone for that matter. There's

going to be a catastrophe and when it happens it will be too late. So you really need to be thinking about what your decision will be. "

"It's a lot to ask." Officer Jennigan said.

"It's a pittance, really. A mere drop in the bucket. A little faith and trust for an eternity of joy."

Officer Jennigan chuckled. "Well then it's a deal, huh?"

"It's no laughing matter, Amy. And I would love for you to believe."

"So I'll let you go."

"Amy, believe this; I'd march into the shuttle heading to Vesta Penal Colony gladly and joyfully if it made you believe. A few months of discomfort for me on Vesta for your *immortal soul*? Hah! There's nothing to even consider about that trade. I'd give my *life* for your soul."

The words hit Officer Jennigan like a ton of bricks. Not since her grandmother had anyone professed unconditional love for her like that. Now someone she didn't know and was actually trying to arrest had professed that very same love. And she knew that he meant every word. She sat silent, staring at the floor thinking about her life and her choices.

"We're going to be parting ways soon Amy, and I am going to take a leap of faith. Put my trust in you."

"You sure that's a good idea? I'm part of that system that's out to get you."

"I have faith. In you." Ephraim said.

"Wow." Officer Jennigan said sarcastically.

"If you have other questions, it will be hard to get answers without knowing how to find someone to talk to."

Officer Jennigan sat up. She realized Ephraim was going to tell her -a police officer- how to identify believers. It was a deadly proposition. "Yes?"

"One of the words we use is 'sandstone'. Usually along with road or path."

"A sandstone road?"

Ephraim nodded. "In ancient times, Romans built roads all over their empire. Wide smooth sandstone roads for their troops to march on so they could get places quickly. And it also allowed regular people and merchants a

great way to get around. Now, in the Bible there is a powerful book called Romans. It's a letter to them. It talks about salvation. The verses that directly spell out that salvation is called 'the Roman road'."

"Which were made of sandstone. Clever." Officer Jennigan said. "But what if that accidentally comes up in conversation?"

"How many sandstone roads have you been on lately?"

"Huh. Okay then." Officer Jennigan said, still shocked he had given her a secret password. It was definitely lethal information that he had just given her. On faith, no less.

Worried he had pushed her too hard, Ephraim moved farther back and leaned against a stack of boxes.

The pair rode in silence for several hours, both dozing off here and there. While awake, Ephraim prayed and Officer Jennigan replayed her conversations with her grandmother. They all now seemed to be thinly veiled discussions about God's love. Many times she had even said 'the Spirit guides me' and as a young girl, she had assumed her grandmother meant her own personal ideals. Now she knew what she really meant.

A loud noise and a shudder brought them both fully alert.

"What was that?" Officer Jennigan said.

"We blew a tire."

"You ride the trailers often enough to know what that sounds like?" She smirked. "You Hobo."

Ephraim shook his head. "I see big chunks of tires along the highways all the time. To save money, these companies re-groove their tires over and over until they finally blow out."

"Oh, right."

"They know they'll have huge chunks of speeding tires flying around the road, putting regular folks, families in danger. But all they see is the bottom line. And the truck never even stops so the company never gets charged. When the authorities arrive, they are long gone."

As a traffic cop, Officer Jennigan had been to several accidents with fatalities due to 'road gators' as the strips of tire were called. "Yeah, I've worked a few of those." She said as she thought back to what Ephraim had said; 'most people don't know when they are going to die. And when it

happens, it will be too late.' "I hope no one was hurt. Stupid greedy trucking companies."

"And now we have something we agree on, Officer Jennigan." Ephraim stood. "I'm glad we got a chance to talk." He moved to the rear of the trailer as the semi made another turn. It was moving much slower- ostensibly going to a parking lot for the tire to be changed.

"This is where I get off." Ephraim said. "I'm going to take off these cuffs okay? You don't need to be in some random truck stop or parking lot and handcuffed in the middle of the night." He moved to her, key in his hand. "Think about what I said."

"I don't know." Amy stared at Ephraim while he undid her cuffs. She rubbed her wrists. "It's a lot to take in. But…"

"I'm glad you said 'but'." Ephraim said as he stepped back and pressed the FOB causing the rear of the trailer to open.

"Where'd you get that?"

"You'd be amazed what someone can get on the black market." Ephraim answered noncommittally.

"They're going to catch you, you know."

"Don't forget your pistol." Ephraim kicked the bottom half of it towards her. "Oh, and Amy?" He said as he hopped off the back of the truck.

"What?"

"Thanks for saying 'they' instead of 'we'. That's very promising."

Amy started to reply but Ephraim turned and ran into the darkness. She actually didn't realize she had even said 'they' instead of 'we' herself. But now it seemed appropriate because she really did not want to be the one to apprehend Ephraim.

With a relegated sigh, she hopped to her feet and went to retrieve the top half of her pistol. As she picked it up, the clamshell started to close.

"No, no no!" Officer Jennigan said as she sprinted for the rapidly closing back. She dropped to her butt and slid out just in time feet first. She landed in a heap on asphalt, then spread her arms and legs out and stared at the sky. As the air began to sting her face, she pulled her respirator on. "Blue skies and streets of gold," her grandmother had said once. She continued to stare upward when a voice brought her out of her retrospection.

“Hey you! You a stowaway?” A large man grabbed her by her shoulders and yanked her to her feet roughly.

13

As the man picked Officer Jennigan completely off the ground, he noticed her uniform. "Officer! I'm sorry. Are you okay?" He gently lowered her until her feet touched the ground. He let go of her and stepped back. "Are you okay? What happened?"

Amy held up her hands. She was still holding both halves of her gun and her cuffs. "I'm fine."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I thought you were Hobo'ing it in the back of this rig."

"No. I was ambushed in back near Seattle while I was searching this truck for a suspect and we both got trapped inside. When it blew a tire, it pulled in here."

The man shook his head. "Well crud, there goes the schedule."

"What?"

"A body is going to put this rig out of commission for at least the rest of the day."

"He's not dead." Officer Jennigan said. "He got away when the back opened."

"He got away?"

"He had a FOB or something. A remote to open the back up. Where do you get one of those?" She asked as she deftly put her gun together and put it in its holster. It made a flat triple- tone indicating that the systems check had found something wrong with the pistol making it inoperable.

"Oh, you'd be surprised what you can get on the black market." The man said matter-of-factly.

"Yeah, I've heard." Officer Jennigan answered sourly. She looked around. "Where am I?"

"Ritzville."

"You're making that up."

"No, this is a real place." He pointed over his shoulder. "We're just sixty miles from Spokane."

"Well, being that close to Spokane has to make this place real." Officer Jennigan shook her head. "Ritzville. Great." She looked toward the dingy diner beyond the rows of trucks. "Well, thanks."

"For what?"

"I don't know." Officer Jennigan said with a smile. "Helping me up?"

"Hah! Right. I'm glad you're okay. Well, you take care, officer." He said. "Look out for those guys."

Officer Jennigan turned to look. A robotic jack and tire replacement robot were moving quickly in their direction.

"They'll just run you over if you're not paying attention." The man smiled and gave a sloppy salute. "I hope you catch that guy."

"Yeah." Officer Jennigan said, now not sure at all if she wanted to any more. "Sure." She added as she started toward the diner- giving the two robots a wide birth as they barreled toward the disabled trailer.

Officer Jennigan entered the diner. There were a handful of patrons sitting at the tables and at the bar. They looked as dingy as the building itself.

While most long-haul trucks were automated, the smaller ones and local trucking companies used drivers still.

Officer Jennigan went to the bar and sat. After only a moment, an old man in a stained apron approached her. "Morning Officer. What can I get you?"

"Coffee for starters."

"Coming right up." The man turned around and retrieved a coffee cup and a carafe. "Sugar? Milk?"

"Is there real milk out here in the booming metropolis of Ritzville?"

"I don't even think the sugar is real."

"Black then."

The man filled her cup and placed a square reader on the counter. "Coffees on the house for law enforcement. You eating?"

Officer Jennigan looked at the reader. It was designed to work with D-Us to take payments. "Oh, I got separated from my gear. Bio?" She said, referring to a biometric scan of her retina, face or fingerprints to charge her account.

"It's down."

"Eye, face, or prints?"

"All of them. Damned One-Gen nut blew up the relay station last week."

"Why?"

"Because they're a bunch of nuts. Wackadoodles. Short circuits."

"So they did that last week? And it's still down?"

The man looked at her patch. "This ain't Seattle, sweetheart."

"Don't I know it." Officer Jennigan scowled. "Coffee's fine." She said hoping the man would offer her something.

"Okay." He said simply as he turned and headed down the counter filling cups as he went.

"Man. That's rough." Officer Jennigan said as she took a sip of the coffee. Her scowl turned into a grimace. "Man," she said again.

"It'll stain leather so keep it off your boots." A disheveled truck driver said as he slid his plate and coffee over two stools to get beside her. "And a word of warning," he said with a wink.

"Something wrong with your eye?"

The man smiled wide. "No, no Officer. Not at all." He opened his eyes wide. They were bloodshot. "See?"

"Yeah, I see. You need more sleep and less drugs, I think."

"Nah; I'm clean. I just drove seventeen hours."

"Seventeen?"

"You have to if you don't want replaced by a remote."

"I see." Officer Jennigan took another sip of her acrid coffee. "So what's the warning about?"

"Don't order the chipped beef."

"That's a standing order for me."

"But they do have actual eggs. Boiled."

"Real eggs? In this place?"

"Owner's got a chicken farm. This place is famous for its eggs."

"Well, that figures."

"What's that?"

"I end up in the capital city of the land of po-dunk where the restaurant has real eggs and I don't have my D-U. And One Gen has blown up the bio scanner controller building or whatever it is." She took another sip of her coffee. "And there's miles of asphalt between me and my nice comfy bed back in Seattle."

"Miles of asphalt, huh? You walking?"

"My bike is back in a suburb called Eastgate, an hour or so east of Seattle." She took another sip. "This is the worst coffee I've ever had, and as a cop that's saying something." She smacked her lips. "I think it's killing my taste buds."

"Then it won't taste so bad, huh?" The man smiled wide. He looked left and right conspiratorially then leaned in close. "Listen," he whispered.

Amy moved her hand to her pistol- even though it wouldn't fire, it would still be a deterrent. "Sir, all I want to do is finish this mop bucket coffee and catch a bus home. If I arrest you, I'll be stuck here all day." A strange thought occurred to her. "And I just want to get back on that sandstone highway."

The man pulled back from her. "What?"

"Nothing. It's nothing. What were you saying?"

The man once again looked left and right even though no one was sitting next to them or even seemed to be paying attention, and then he leaned in again. "I can spot you the money for a couple of eggs if you promise to pay me back."

Amy laughed out loud. "Wait, that's your secret? That you'll…"

"Shush!" The man hissed. "If these leeches heard that, they'd never leave me alone." He raised his voice an octave, "Hey Riley, buy me an egg." He deepened his voice. "Hey Riley, can you get my breakfast? I'm a little

short today." His voice returned to normal albeit still at a whisper. "Once word got out, these moochers would never leave me alone."

Amy nodded. "Yeah, sorry. I can see that." She smiled then whispered. "Yes, I'd love a couple of eggs and I will pay you back as soon as I'm home."

Riley nodded, and as he leaned in closer, he took Officer Jennigan's hand and pulled it over toward his lap.

"Riley…" She warned.

He put her hand on his D-U which was on his lap. "Just act like it was in a pocket you didn't notice."

Officer Jennigan fought to keep a smile from her face as she brought the D-U up onto the counter. "Excuse me," she said.

The waiter walked over. "Refill?"

"Please, and a couple of boiled eggs." She gestured at the D-U. "I didn't realize it was in a side pocket." She patted her police vest. It did in fact have a dozen pockets.

"Hot or cold?"

Officer Jennigan thought for a moment. "What's the difference? Price?"

The man shrugged. "One just hasn't cooled down yet. I can't charge extra for Newton's third law of thermodynamics."

Officer Jennigan gave the man a double-take.

"I graduated from Po-Dunk Polytech," the man said flatly.

"Oh, well… sorry about that. Two warm eggs would be great please." She looked at her coffee. "And some sugar, I suppose."

The man stepped away and returned with two eggs rolling around on a saucer. He put them in front of her then retrieved salt and pepper shakers from under the counter. "It won't help, but here you go." He added as he put a sugar container on the counter as well.

"Knowing you have a problem is the first step in solving it."

The man cocked his head to the side. "You think this coffee is my biggest problem?" He touched his reader to the D-U. It made a double beep to show the payment went through. He glanced at Riley. "Riley? Isn't that your…"

"I'm good, Preston. Thanks." Riley interrupted. "Thanks very much."

"Uh huh." Preston said as eyed the both of them. He topped off both of their coffees then walked off.

Officer Jennigan started to peel her egg- it was almost too hot to touch. "I can't remember the last time I had an actual egg."

"It's the only reason I stop here." Riley scooped the rest of his scrambled eggs into his mouth.

"Hey, Riley can I make a quick call?"

Riley winked at her. "It's your D-U, right?"

Officer Jennigan smiled. "Hah, I suppose so." She picked it up and keyed in Detective Lancaster's number.

After several rings a tired voice answered. "Who the hell is this?"

"Joe, it's me."

"Amy. What's going on? Tell me you're still chasing that man, or better yet, you've finally caught him." He said as his voice got stronger. "Is he dead?"

"Not exactly."

"Not exactly dead? Wounded?"

"No. Not exactly caught. I was with him earlier."

"With him? That's nice. Did you have dinner, catch a show?"

"We got trapped in that trailer I was following. He got my gun, handcuffed me and… and…" She wasn't sure what else from their conversation she wanted to relay to her boss.

"And? And! Oh, I'm going to kill that stinking lousy piece of trash for touching you. Oh I'm going to *kill* him!"

"Wait what? No, no. Nothing like that. He was actually a gentleman."

"I find that hard to believe."

"We sat and talked, Joe. Well, he talked… on and on. I sat there handcuffed. When the truck stopped he un-cuffed me and ran off."

"He un-cuffed you?"

"Yeah. He said I didn't need to be handcuffed in a truck stop in the middle of the night."

"Well, that's a gentleman for you. But I'm still going to kill him." Detective Lancaster said. "Wait? He got your gun? That's great! Now we can ping it and go right to him."

It wasn't common knowledge that law enforcement weapons had a tracker on them so if they were ever stolen, they could be traced to within inches.

"No, he gave it back. Minus the firing pin."

"I really hate that guy."

"Yeah, well," Officer Jennigan started. "Anyway, I'm at a Jordan's Truck Stop on Interstate Ninety. My D-U is in my pack so if you can send a unit there a-s-a-p, to get my bike and pack, if it's even still there. "I'm going to grab a bus back home."

"I'll have dispatch look up its last location and send a unit there."

"There's probably just a thank you note."

"I'll get a local unit to sit on it until we get someone to pick it up. Maybe it's still there."

"Thanks, Joe."

"Right, right. I'll call that in right now. See you in the morning."

"Joe, it *is* the morning. Three A.M. And I'm still five hours away, once I find a ride back to Seattle. I'll see you *tomorrow morning*."

"Yeah, right. Maybe we'll all take the day off."

"Well, you're the boss."

"Damn right I am. See you tomorrow. I'm glad you're okay, Amy." Detective Lancaster switched off his D-U.

Officer Jennigan let out a sigh then slid the D-U across to Riley. He quickly took it and put it in front of his plate while he looked left and right. He yawned wide. "I'm going to get some sleep. Got to be on the road by six."

"That's just three hours from now. You're going to kill someone."

Riley shook his head. "Nah, I'll be fine. I'm sitting eight feet up with fifty tons behind me."

Officer Jennigan thought back to what Ephraim had said 'you people travel around in your own little bubble not worrying about anyone around you.'

"Don't forget about the eggs." Riley smiled at her.

"Sure, Sure." Officer Jennigan said as she salted her newly-peeled egg. "If you can't trust law enforcement, who can you trust?"

The man's smile faltered. "Oh. Well…"

"I promise I'll pay you back, Riley." Amy said seriously. "Don't worry." To prove her honesty, she reached over and tapped her wrist D-U to his, picking up his information for when she was back in range of her D-U in her motorcycle's pouch or her spare in her apartment. "See? Got your information and everything."

"Okay." Riley said not sounding very convinced. "Okay then." He hopped off his stool- he was very short at only six feet tall. "See you Preston," He called as he left.

Officer Jennigan ate her two eggs and finished her coffee- the sugar had actually helped considerably. As she got up, Preston sidled up beside her. "I'll walk you out, Officer."

"Oh." Officer Jennigan smiled. "Okay." While she was considered 'cute', she was not someone who would ever be called 'beautiful.' "You people are starved for entertainment out here, huh?"

"Po-Dunk Theater puts on a nightly show." Preston said. "After you." He gestured at the door.

As they reached the door, Preston stepped in front of her and opened it. "Listen." He began.

Amy stepped outside then put on her respirator as she stepped away from the door. "Yes?" She said expecting a proposition.

"That Riley is a pretty good cat. I'd appreciate it if you didn't' stiff him."

"What?" Officer Jennigan put her hands on her hips. "I have every intention of paying him as soon as I get back home."

"Well good." He shrugged. "I mean, I heard you back there and…" He hesitated. "Riley is a good person but he's not a believer."

"What?"

"That's why he didn't respond to your 'sandstone highway' reference; it went right by him."

"I don't even know why I said that, to be honest with you. It kind of just popped into my head."

"Holy Spirit is working on you, it seems."

She shrugged. "No, I guess I said it because he seemed nice."

"There are plenty of real nice folks. Give you the shirt off their backs nice folks, that aren't believers."

"Oh, I didn't really consider that." Officer Jennigan said.

Preston smirked. "You're new to this, huh?"

"About an hour, truth be told."

"And were you a good person before?"

Officer Jennigan sighed. "No. Not really. I don't even know if I'm a good person now."

"Everyone falls short."

She nodded. "But we have to have faith."

"That's about the sum of it. Have faith, ask for salvation. That's what it boils down to."

"I just don't know. I mean… with this job," She patted her badge on her chest, "how do I even do this now?"

"Just like everyone else out there; treat people fairly. Help other believers."

"The guy I'm chasing that ended with me here, is a believer. An undesirable."

"Aren't we all?" Preston answered without missing a beat.

Officer Jennigan did a double take at the man- it was exactly the response from the dispatcher. "It's why they want him."

"Rabble rousers. Upsetting the status-quo."

"Exactly. How do I reconcile that?" Officer Jennigan held her hands up. "How?"

"That's between you and God. And that guy. I'm sure he understands you're stuck in the middle of the system. It's all how you approach it."

"You mean like how you don't give wayward travelers a free meal?"

"The boss would fire me on the spot. She's not even happy about the free coffee I give to you folks. But by keeping my job, I'm able to hook up… wayward travelers hoping to avoid dealing with you law enforcement types with like-minded drivers."

"I see."

"So I hear you're aiming to get back to Seattle?" he pointed west.

"I am."

"Well, I can do you the terrible favor of introducing you to a woman named Hannah Golden."

"Hannah Golden?"

"Driver. She's on a Seattle, Saint Louis run. Heading back now."

"And how is that terrible?"

"When she hears you're a new believer, she'll talk your ear off the whole way back to Seattle. Got the whole Bible memorized; chapter and verse."

"I'm not a believer."

The man cocked his head to the side. "Would you listen?"

"I suppose?"

"So that will be good for you, I think. She can give you a lot to think about." He smiled wide. "Let's go back inside and I'll introduce you."

"Thanks." Officer Jennigan said, surprised at how fast she was accepted. It struck her as odd that undercover officers had a difficult time infiltrating churches when she was being accepted freely.

"Thanks."

"You thank me now. After five hours of crazy Hannah, you might be cursing me." He gestured at the door.

The pair reentered the café and Preston introduced Officer Jennigan to Hannah. True to his word Hanna spoke the entire way back to Seattle, answering every question Officer Jennigan had with a biblical reference. Most of the conversation centered on the book of Romans.

By the time Officer Jennigan got home it was close to ten o'clock in the morning. As she lay in bed trying to process everything Hanna Golden had said, she remembered she needed to pay for her eggs.

Sending money to Riley was the last thing she did before falling asleep.

14

Ephraim hopped out of the ride-share. Unlike official public transportation, they did not have cameras in them.

He looked up at the large silver arch. Originally built in 1965, this was actually a replacement one. The first one was destroyed by religious radicals that crashed a cargo plane loaded with explosives into one of the legs twenty years ago to protest the United States of the Americas' involvement in a tribal conflict on the Saudi Arabian peninsula. A tribal conflict that included aircraft, heavy artillery, and tanks. They did this after the nuclear bomb they had put at the arch failed to reach fission and just exploded as a dirty bomb. The nuclear fallout had been removed but the damage to the city was done- a large portion of the population never returned leaving Saint Louis a veritable ghost town with roaming gangs and very little police force. Never the less, the government rebuilt the arch to its original specifications except for a more modern and faster magnetic repulsion elevator.

With a relegated sigh, Ephraim started toward a townhome that his sister and brother-in-law had bought forty years ago. When they died from radiation poisoning and he had inherited the home, he had kept the apartment and utilities in their name. Since the authorities never made the connection between him and his sister's married name, it had become a reliable safe house for him. Or as safe a house in a crime-ridden city could be.

As he walked along the mostly deserted streets, he passed a tourist shop. There were rows of snow-globes in the window which caught his eye. He ducked in under the exhaust fan that kept the acidic air out then removed his mask.

"Welcome to Saint Louis," the clerk said. "First time here?"

"It's worse than that; I live here." Ephraim smiled. "Got a place up on Lafayette Square." This was almost two miles from where the townhome actually was; Columbus Square.

"Oh," said the shopkeeper, not sure why a local was walking so much, but since it had been a slow day he was more interested in making a sale than anything else. "Well, let me know if you see something that catches your eye."

"I'm looking for a gift." Ephraim said as he approached a shelf of snow globes of the arch. Most were of a shining arch and cityscape around it. There were some that had dingy water and dilapidated buildings and a small plaque that said 'see the fallout from 630 feet'. Ephraim picked up one of those.

"I sell more of those than the nice ones." The clerk said. "They're twelve fifty."

Ephraim nodded. "That'll work." He turned to the clerk. "Do you by any chance carry memory cards?"

"Like a D-U or camera would use?"

"Sure." Ephraim replied. "One of those."

The man smiled at the prospect of a second sale- it had been a very slow week. "I've got some mini-micros. And they're even on sale right now," he lied. "How big?"

"Oh, just something small for photos and some videos. Ten terabytes is plenty."

"A little one, huh? Got that right here." He pulled a cardboard backer from under the glass counter. These were easily-pocketable items so he kept them under the counter. Sealed in the middle of it was a small rectangle memory card. It was a quarter of an inch long so that it could be handled easier. The actual memory chip was only a 1/16 inch dot in the center of it.

"Perfect," Ephraim said. "I'm giving some photos and books to my nephew." He added casually.

"Excellent. Well, I hope your friend and nephew enjoy them."

"What?"

"You said the snow globe was for a friend and the chip for your nephew." He smiled wide. "Unless they're the same person. I'd hope your nephew was a friend."

Ephraim mentally kicked himself for mentioning his nephew. "Yes, yes he is." He fished his electronic wallet from his pocket and placed it on the counter.

"No D-U?" The clerk asked as he retrieved his reader.

"Ran over it." Ephraim said. "Put it on the roof of my car then drove off."

The man laughed. “I’ve lost many a coffee cup that way. Happens to the best of us, huh?”

Feeling better about him, Ephraim replied with a smile. “Yeah, well a coffee cup is a lot less hassle to replace than a D-U.”

“Very true.” The clerk tapped his reader on the digital wallet. It beeped twice as the transaction was posted. If the shop keeper bothered to look, the name on the transaction was “Jonathan Swanson.”

“Have a great day,” Ephraim took both items wanting desperately to get away from the chatty owner.

“You too Mister Swanson.” The man called after him.

Ephraim put his digital wallet into his pocket. It was not connected to any network- once an amount was placed on it, it would keep track of the amount internally until it reached zero. Once that happened, it would have to be refilled at a bank or any number of kiosks around the city. At the moment, he had almost four thousand dollars on it. It was all the money he had left in the world.

Ephraim left the shop and purposefully went the wrong direction – toward Lafayette Square. When he got to the next block he continued in a loop northward toward his townhome.

When Ephraim finally reached his townhome, he was confident he had not been followed- there were so few people on the street he would have easily noticed, so he walked up the four steps to the covered porch. There were a great many leaves on it. Deciding to sweep them later, he just punched in the code to open the door.

It had been nearly six months since he had last been inside, so he turned on the air conditioning system as he made his way to the kitchen.

As Ephraim took a bottle of water from the refrigerator someone knocked on the door. Surprised, he dropped the water bottle.

The person knocked again when he picked up the bottle. “Relax Ephraim.” He said to himself as he padded to the door. “Cops don’t knock nowadays.”

The person knocked a third time as Ephraim steeled himself for the worst and opened the door.

15

"We're close to getting him, Chief. Close!"

"You've been saying that for a month now. It's getting old, Joe. I think you're losing your focus. You're losing sight of the big picture." Chief Stevens said as she put her feet up on her desk.

"I see it, Chief." Detective Lancaster said. "We've been keeping up on our other cases. We're sitting at an eighty-two percent closure rate."

"Yes, I know…"

"Which as you well know, Chief is in the top ten percent of the precinct."

"You could be in the top three percent with the team you have."

"We're close, Chief. *Close!* All I need is an open warrant to take to Nebraska and we've got this guy. I know you want him as bad as I do. So…"

"And open warrant? Is that all?"

Detective Lancaster smirked. "Well just a trifling more. A pittance really."

"*Joe*… I'm not…"

"*Miriam*, come on. We just need to get ahead of this guy."

"Wait; you aren't asking for more officers?"

"What? No, no." Detective Lancaster shook his head. "Wow, nothing like that. Of course not."

"Well, I'm glad because you've used up a lot of resources already and…"

Before she could finish her sentence, Detective Lancaster interrupted: "All I need is a jump jet."

"What?" Chief Stevens pulled her feet off her desk and sat upright. "This guys an undesirable, not an international terrorist."

"They're the same thing, Chief. He's just as dangerous… more even because he creates dissention everywhere he goes. And the longer he's allowed to do it, the worse it gets."

"A jump jet. Well, that means a pilot, copilot and at least a crew chief."

"Well, sure. Sure." Detective Lancaster looked away, not wanting to make eye contact. "Those are givens, I would think."

"And here I was thinking you weren't asking for more personnel."

"Well, since I'm asking, I need a PANEL as well."- a Portable Autonomous NEtworking Location; a mobile command center built into a thirty foot panel truck that allowed for remote operations while still networked with the home precinct. It also contained a small crime laboratory and a holding cell.

"Well sure." Chief Stevens pushed back from her desk and stood. "Because why would you even *need* a jump jet if you didn't have a panel truck for it to carry, right?"

"Well, when you say it like that…"

"It sounds crazy!" Chief Stevens said.

"I was going to say it sounded like you were going along with the plan. We'll drive the PANEL ourselves if that helps."

"Because that's what I have an issue with; who's driving the PANEL Truck."

Detective Lancaster took a step backward toward the door. "Well, if you don't have any issues…" He took another step. "Then all I have to say is…"

"Get out of here Lancaster! And take your team with you. You have until the end of the week."

"But it's Wednesday already."

"Four days. Then I'm calling that jump jet back and freezing your accounts. You can personally pay for the fuel to get that truck and your two officers back."

"I probably shouldn't even mention the PAT, of course."

"Get out." Chief Stevens pointed at the door. "Out."

"Thanks, Chief!" Detective Lancaster left the office quickly.

16

Ephraim opened the door slightly and peeked out. Relieved, he opened it fully. "Mister Psenisky!" he said. "Hello."

Gavin Psenisky was the first resident of the townhomes over sixty years ago. He and his wife were friends of Ephraim's sister and brother-in-law from the day they had moved in.

"I was ready to call the police; I thought someone had broken in." Gavin said gruffly.

"It's just me. Come on in!" Ephraim moved to the side to allow the man to enter.

At well over a hundred twenty, he shuffled in slowly. "Sorry about the porch; I can't seem to find anyone to sweep it." He smiled. "Seems everyone grew up and left. Or died."

"Well it's good to see you, old friend. Do you want to sit down?" Ephraim gestured at the nearby table.

"Nah, can't stay that long."

"Got to get back to Madelynn?"

The man's smile faded. "No. I don't, actually."

Ephraim moved close to the man. "Oh no. Gavin, what happened?" He asked even though he knew she was also almost a hundred thirty.

"Heart just quit. Went to sleep one night and never woke up."

"When?"

"Two months ago this Thursday she went to be with the Lord." Gavin answered.

"Well, I'm glad you let me know." Ephraim put his hand on his friend's shoulder. "She was a great lady."

"We celebrated our centennial in June."

"Wow." Ephraim said. "If you need anything, just let me know."

"Porch could use swept." Gavin's smile returned. "You staying, finally settling down?"

"You know I'd love to if I could."

"At some point you need to stop working; take a mid-life." Gavin suggested.

With lifespans so long, many people took what was called a 'mid-life retirement' for twenty or thirty years when they were around fifty years old. Then they would reenter the work force, sometimes in a completely different field.

"I'm working on that," Ephraim said with a smirk. "In fact, I'm planning a trip to the Moon right now."

"Good for you. Things have gotten pretty rough around here."

"Are you selling now that… that you're alone?"

Gavin shook his head. "All my memories are here. And at my age, I'm pretty set in my ways."

Ephraim smiled. "That's true. But you need to at least stop with that cross in your yard. I can't believe it's still there. Someone is bound to figure out what that 'T' really is."

"It's been there for ten years. If folks haven't figured it out by now, they're never going to."

Gavin and his wife had installed a traditional Roman crucifixion cross – essentially a large 'T' in their yard after Ephraim's sister and brother-in-law had died. When asked, he told the police inspector the 'T' stood for their first names; Theresa and Thomas. Accepting that, the case against the Pseniskys was closed and the cross stood as a beacon to believers all through the city.

"So what are your plans, Ephraim? I miss having neighbors." The man moved to the table and leaned on one of the chairs.

Ephraim shook his head. "No, I'm sorry I can't. I have this detective that's gunning for me. I'm just passing through to…"

Gavin held up a hand. "Stop right there. Don't tell me in case I'm questioned."

"I can't imagine they'd interrogate someone of your age."

Gavin shook his head. "They wouldn't have to. Those clankers they use can detect lies; breathing heartbeat, and pheromones tell them if you're

truthful or not. When I say I don't know where you've gone, I want it to be the truth."

"You are a wise man."

"How do you think I've lasted this long in this upside down world?"

Ephraim laughed. "By not poking the authorities in the eye by putting a twelve foot cross in your yard?"

"It's a 'T'."

"That's the word on the street, I suppose." Ephraim stopped and stared at Devin. He had known him almost thirty years. "I'm really going to miss you."

"Oh, I'll see you again. I'm sure of it." He smiled. "For if we have been united with Him in a death like His, we will certainly also be united with Him in a resurrection like His."

"Romans six, five." Ephraim said. "Amen."

"Amen."

A knock on the door made Ephraim jump. "I'm not expecting anyone." Ephraim looked to the back door. "Here we go."

Gavin pushed himself away from the table. "Relax; it's probably my grandson. He's visiting." He walked to the door and opened it. "See?"

True to his word, a man about as old as Ephraim was standing there. "Gramps, you need to not wander off like that. I was worried. It's pretty rough out there."

Gavin ushered his grandson in. "Pushaw. I've lived in this neighborhood for sixty years. I'm fine."

The man extended his hand. "Ayden."

Ephraim shook it. "Ephraim."

"Is there anything at all in this place?" Gavin asked. "To eat or drink?"

Ephraim held up a water bottle. "Water?"

"Some host you are. I'll get drinks. Sit." With that Gavin stepped out the door toward his home.

Ephraim smiled. "That guy is something else."

Ayden nodded. "You don't know the half of it." He sat at the table. "He has made it a hobby to annoy the authorities. Gets me a talking-to almost once a month as well."

"Oh? What line of work are you in? Government?"

"I'm a pilot. Civilian but I handle government contracts."

Ephraim considered that for a moment. "Continental or space?"

"Mostly the inner planets. I've done a couple of Io runs but they get boring. Millions of miles on a three-degree arc. So I stick closer to home where there's more stuff to dodge."

Ephraim glanced away. "Been thinking of going to the Moon here lately."

"I do mainly cargo and MilPax," he said referring to military passengers-both soldiers and scientists, "but civvies as well sometimes." He shrugged. "Those straight-civilian birds are much more comfortable than what I'm flying." He smiled. "Well, I've got a nice, heated seat; everyone behind me is in hard plastic." He leaned back in his chair. "Unless you don't like standing in a customs line, that is."

"That's…" Ephraim paused. "That's pretty much it."

"Well, with a blue jumpsuit, you could just walk right on. Avoid the small talk which isn't too hard." Ayden smirked. "If you're trying to get away from the hustle and bustle of Earth," he jerked a thumb behind him, "maybe you can talk Gramps into going with you. I've been trying to get him off the planet since Grammy died."

"You mean he can't be convinced?" Ephraim laughed.

Gavin came back through the door while both men were laughing. "I hope that's not at my expense."

"Never Gramps, never."

"We were discussing you taking a trip to the Moon."

"Never, Ephraim, never." Gavin replied as he put a try on the table. "Lemonade?"

"With real lemons?" Ephraim gestured at the glasses. Each had a slice of lemon floating in it.

"Gramps has turned the entire upstairs into a hydroponics lab." Ayden said. "Pumps, filters, grow lights; the whole works."

"Don't forget the catfish."

"You're growing catfish upstairs?" Ephraim said as he took a glass of lemonade.

"Raising. Raising catfish is the correct term. Although 'fish farm' is also accurate. I run the waste water from the pond through the plants. Catfish will eat just about anything so the system is pretty efficient."

"Ponds? You have ponds in your house?"

"It's ten hundred-gallon tanks. Fish start out small in one and as they get bigger, he moves them to the next tank up." Ayden explained.

"Once they get to the last tank they run from around ten to twelve inches long." Gavin added. "Plus I have a separate tank for spawning."

"How many fish are we talking here? A dozen or so?"

Gavin shrugged. "It only takes about forty days to grow one to a pound, you know. So I run about two hundred pounds of fish between the thousand gallons." He picked up his lemonade. "I eat a fish for lunch and dinner as it is. I could actually push that up to almost four hundred pounds but I'm pretty much even on the number of fish I harvest for what I trade them for."

"You trade them?"

"That's how I get the food for my fish as well as eggs for breakfast."

"That's amazing."

"The sad part is that the entire system is scalable. I could easily set up in one of the dozens of abandoned warehouses near here and have a thousand pounds of fish and tons of vegetables."

"Why don't you?" Ephraim took another sip. "You've got me on board with these lemons."

"Two reasons: First, I'm a hundred twenty-eight."

"Fair enough."

"And second, the city council said no."

"That's absurd."

"It's hard to control people who grow their own food. They called it a 'shadow economy'."

"Well, I suppose that is true." Ephraim leaned forward in his chair. "Well, you have a good thing going here and I'd hate to mess it up. So I'm heading out in the morning."

"That's a shame," Gavin said.

"So what's your plan?" Ayden asked.

"Your grandfather does not want to hear it."

"That is very true." Gavin stood and picked up his lemonade. "So I'll leave you young people to talk about it." He cocked his head to the side. "I'll splurge and pull three fish tonight. We'll do catfish, beans, and carrots."

"And lemonade?"

"Of course."

"Then I'm definitely in." Ephraim said.

"Great. We can eat at six." Gavin said as he walked to the door. "See you then." He took several deep breaths then held it, then stepped out.

"I'm going to miss that man. He is truly one of a kind."

Ayden nodded. "Definitely. So where are you trying to get to?"

"The Moon or even Mars I suppose. Anywhere off Earth, really."

"I've got a load going to the Fra Mauro highlands on the Moon next Tuesday. The Shephard Mitchell observatory. You could easily catch a ride to Mars from there. They fly about once a week to Olympus Mons. Once you're there, you can catch a jumper anywhere on the planet. Or even to the belt."

"Really?"

Ayden shrugged. "All you'd need is a jumpsuit. A blue one. And a clipboard. Everyone who is anyone carries a clipboard."

"Next Tuesday you say?"

"Charleston Pads." He said, referring to the launch facility in Charleston, South Carolina. Civilian companies had built two dozen launch pads, hangars, and a mission control center there. It was named after the first astronaut to land on Io- Lieutenant Commander Angela Padds. It was officially called the 'Angela Padds Launch Complex' but pilots shortened it to 'P-L-C' or Launch Padds as a play on her name.

"Tuesday," Ephraim said, thinking aloud. "Yeah, I can make it there by then. Definitely." He looked at the man. "Yeah, that works for me."

"Sounds good. My company flies from platforms three to six. It'll be a Pinto Runabout. Red. Orange flames on the nose; you can't miss it."

"Flashy." Ephraim said. "What time?"

"Load out starts at 1300 hours. So be there about fifteen minutes later to get lost in the shuffle."

"As long as you're not going to get in trouble."

Ayden raised his hands plaintively. "We're not related and I don't know you. There's no connection. Besides, you'll be able to just walk on with the other scientists. They aren't usually chatty."

"I really appreciate it."

Ayden stood, still holding onto his lemonade. "Then I'll see you at dinner."

Ephraim stood. "I'm looking forward to it." He moved to the door, opening it. The automatic fan above the door turned on to push air out as a barrier against the outside air. "See you," he said over it.

After Ayden left, Ephraim locked the door and went upstairs to get fresh clothes from a closet. With a couple of hours before dinner, he decided to take a well-deserved nap.

17

Ephraim crested the hill. It was an early autumn day and the air was finally brisk. The leaves had just since started changing colors on the remaining trees- even with the environment beaten down, the trees still pushed forward with their yearly routine. The launch complex filled a hundred acre area with roads connecting the dozens of launch pads and hangars. They were painted in the colors of whatever company owned them, creating a patchwork of corporate colors with each competing to be brighter than the one next to it. The steel-grey twenty-foot fence topped with razor wire surrounding the complex created a picture frame around it.

Ephraim approached the fence. There was one road that he was focused on; just inside the fence was an eight foot wide perimeter road. It was on this that four-legged robots patrolled back and forth in a seemingly random schedule. They were called SENTries. One of them trotted by, its algorithm deciding that the unarmed Ephraim wearing familiar corporate colors was not a threat, so it did not stop. Even so, the barrel of the weapon mounted on its back tracked him as it went by.

Ephraim ran his hands down his new bright blue jumpsuit, smoothing the creases down. Now he wished he had taken the time to wash it beforehand. He hoped the badge that had come with it would fool the gate guard. Unfortunately by the time the guard looked at it, it would be too late to do anything about it. "On faith." He said as he started toward the large guard shack. It was within fifty yards of him and the guard had already stepped out to watch him as he approached.

He raised his hand and casually waved as he approached. When he was within ten yards the guard disappeared back into her shack. He put a smile on his face as he swung into the opening of the door. "Morning," he said brightly.

The woman was behind a podium. "Morning." She responded. She had one hand on the top of the podium, the other hung at her side out of view. It was holding a pistol. "Walking to work?" She asked suspiciously.

"Got dropped off at Mikayla's," he said referring to a nearby diner. It was about a mile away through the woods but taking the road to get to the complex made it a ten mile journey. He had decided he did not want to be

dropped off right at the gate because if his badge didn't work, he would have implicated another believer.

"They couldn't drop you off here?" Her hand was still out of view.

"My ride is a waitress there. Didn't want to make her late after she did me a favor. I'm renting one of the rooms above the place." He turned and pointed. "It's just a mile and mostly downhill." He smiled as he turned back to her. "And the trees are pretty."

"No car?"

Ephraim shook his head. "Just got back from a gig on the HAVOCs." He said, referring to the High Altitude Venus Operational Collectors. While Venus' temperature on the surface was over 800 degrees with crushing pressures, the temperatures at 20,000 feet was a cool 70 degrees and the pressures were the same as Earth's so all the colonists needed to survive there was a light jacket and a respirator. Massive dirigibles moved around the planet's atmosphere collecting sulfuric acid and carbon dioxide that along with methane imported from Saturn's moon Titan were used as part of the Mars terraforming project. "Been there a year." He looked back out at the forest. "Great sunsets there but I still love the trees in the fall. I haven't bought anything to drive yet." He causally tapped his badge. "Of course if it works out with Hypes Aero, I'll be on the Moon for six months so I won't need a car till I get back from there." He smiled again. "Then I'll buy a house and a motorcycle- cash." He jerked a thumb upward. "Not much to spend your pay on up there, you know." Mentally he kicked himself so saying so much at once, hoping it wasn't suspicious.

"Yeah." The guard's tone softened. "Spent a year over on Saturn, bought a little place outright when I got back."

"Nice." Ephraim pulled the badge out on its retractable string. "Well, I hate to be late and screw up my Moon gig." He smiled again. "Maybe we can do dinner at Mikayla's later today if my interview goes well."

"I'm off in an hour." The woman's tone returned. "Then I'm going to be home to my kids and my husband."

Ephraim held up his hands, still holding the badge. "Sorry; no offence." He extended the badge to the limit of the string so she could look at it.

The guard looked from the badge to Ephraim then back to the badge again. "Know where you're going?"

"Err, no actually." Ephraim said honestly. "I was just told Hypes Aero pads were three, four, five, or six."

"You don't know which?"

"I'm meeting a guy at the ship then we're going inside the building. It's a Pinto Runabout with orange flames on the nose. It should be easy to spot when I get close."

The woman nodded at the reasonable sounding answer. "Single digits are on the south west corner. Far right once you leave here." She also pointed. "Check in at building Two-Alpha."

"Nice. Wish me luck."

The guard nodded. "If you make it out, I'm off the same time tomorrow."

"Oh." Ephraim was caught off guard but quickly recovered. "Hey well, now that sounds great." He said as he let go of his badge letting it snap back in. "Later." He said as he quickly left.

The woman keyed her radio. "He's in. A Pinto. Orange flames." She said. "Building Two-Alpha." She un-keyed her radio and began to wonder if the handsome man would actually meet her if he managed to escape. Either way, she was okay with the outcome.

18

Detective Lancaster leaned back in the chair. His eyes panned across the security monitors- they were laid out in two stacked rows of four. "Where are you?"

"Just give it some time, Officer." The security manager said.

"Detective." Detective Lancaster snapped.

"Detective," corrected the security manager. "The main guard shack is a good distance away and he's on foot."

After a few minutes, Ephraim appeared on a screen, approaching the building.

"This is great," Officer Morgan said. "He doesn't have a clue."

Officer Jennigan stood.

"Where you going?"

"Bathroom, Joe. Before the excitement. If any of us will be doing any running, it will be me." She added disparagingly. Out of the three of them, she was by far in the best shape. "I want to do it on an empty bladder in case it turns into a scuffle."

"Better safe than sorry, huh?" Officer Morgan guffawed.

With a headshake she left the room hoping to run into Ephraim. She wasn't sure how she could warn him but she desperately wanted to try. She walked slowly to the bathroom knowing the two men couldn't see her go. When she got there, she stood inside for almost ten minutes trying to listen for Ephraim. Deciding she had waited as long as she could without raising suspicions, she exited the bathroom and headed back slowly, hoping to bump into him on the way.

She was frustrated she did not seem him and reentered the security office. "Well?"

"Where've you been?" Morgan asked.

"The bathroom." Officer Jennigan snapped back. "Or did you forget already?"

"Okay, he's in the building but we're not sure where. Let's go get him." Detective Lancaster said as he pushed himself out of his chair.

"You don't know where?" Officer Jennigan asked.

The security manager shook his head at her. "No; cameras are on the entrance and exits and the launch pad. We don't monitor the hallways. I mean, why would we?"

"So let's go. If he leaves the building, let us know." Detective Lancaster pointed at Morgan. "You're with me. Jennigan you go right when we go left."

"I'll keep you posted." The security manager said. "He should be going to the Ops Room by the rear exit if he's trying to get on that flight. Everyone has to check in there before boarding."

"Right." Without waiting for the other two men, Officer Jennigan left the office and went right down the hallway. *God you don't know me but I'm Amy. Amy Jennigan. I want to ask a favor.* Amy prayed; it was her first time actually praying. She had spoken with a believer for a short time until she let it slip that she was a police officer. The man turned and ran off without another word. *Let me find Ephraim. Ephraim Simpson. Just so I can talk to him once more time. Thanks.* She finished. With a sigh she walked quickly down the hallway hoping that her first prayer ever would be answered.

As she turned the corner, Ephraim came around the far one at the end of the hallway. Officer Jennigan moved to a jog to get to him. "Ephraim!" She hissed.

Ephraim turned to look the way he had come.

"Wait, wait. Please!"

Something in her voice made Ephraim turn back to look at her as she skidded to a stop in front of him. He thought back to the gate guard 'if you make it out, I'm off the same time tomorrow'. He shook his head. "*If* you make it out. I missed that entirely."

"What? Missed what?" Officer Jennigan said.

"Nothing. It doesn't matter now." He smiled at her. "It's good to see you again, Amy."

"Ephraim. I don't really understand what's happening but I just can't take you in. These past two weeks…I can't let them take you in… but I can't just let you go either." She said with a frown. "I'm… having issues."

"There's a lot of that going on in the world." Ephraim said with a smile. "And a lot of it is internal. Just follow your heart."

"But…"

"Amy. If you can't let me go, don't."

"But, there's so much I don't understand. How am I supposed to figure this out on my own?"

"Prayers and trust. It's worked for me so far."

"Really? It looks like you're at a dead end." Officer Jennigan said.

"Faith will take me all the way to the end, Amy."

"How can you be sure?"

"Because I know that there is more to this." He put his hand on his chest, then her shoulder. "Than just this. There's a glorious future awaiting me. And you can have that too. You just need to ask."

"Just ask?"

Ephraim nodded. "Just ask. It's really that simple."

"But I've done so many bad things. Your aunt and uncle? You here? Oh, there's so much."

"My shoulders can bear your burden, says the Lord. And remember He sent His son to die for you… for everyone even though we were all sinners."

"Everyone? Even you?" Officer Jennigan smirked. "That's hard to believe."

"I haven't always been the happy-go-lucky free spirit you see before you."

"But when you're gone, who can I talk to?" Officer Jennigan looked left and right. "Here." She opened a door to an office. "Get in there and lock the door."

"No, I can't."

"You have to! Please. They're going to figure out where you are; this isn't that big of a building."

"It does my heart good to hear you say that. But I think God has other things in store for you than being Alexis Mathura."

"Who?"

"The female version of Alex Mathura."

Officer Jennigan smiled. "The fugitive?"

"Yeah; I think I'm through running too. Just take me in."

"I… I just can't."

"Well, I'm not going to let you throw away your life. Or run to give Detective Lancaster a chance to shoot me in the back."

"So…" Officer Jennigan said. "What then? We wait?"

"So we'll just wait." Ephraim said with a nod. "We'll wait. But if you have more questions, you can always put a note on the door of the Aslou Apartments off Golf Drive, near Rizal Park. If you get a burner D-U, someone should be able to answer your questions."

"That would be helpful." Officer Jennigan said.

"And I really feel you need to do it sooner rather than later."

"That catastrophe you mentioned?"

"Yeah." Ephraim said. He steeled himself. "God has shown me that things are going to get worse here on Earth. Worse than they already are."

"I don't see how it could get worse that is already is; the environment is pretty much done." Officer Jennigan shrugged. "But once they find us a new planet, everything will be okay again."

"I don't believe we have that much time left. You need to go to the apartments and find someone to talk to."

"Sooner rather than later, huh?" Officer Jennigan smirked.

"Or you could take a trip to the mines of Mars."

"That would just put a big red flag on my name. Your face showed up on a couple of cameras heading here. That's how we…they caught you; Lancaster figured out you were going to try to get to the asteroid belt and disappear."

"That was the plan; get a job running a loader. It's even pretty good pay." Ephraim said. "But I guess that's not going to happen."

"If you hide, you still might." Officer Jennigan pointed at the door. "Please, just hide."

"Except they'll figure out I never left the building and do a complete search. And they might figure out you helped me." He shook his head. "I just can't do that to you. It wouldn't be right."

"*None* of this is right!"

"I'm glad you see it that way now. I really…" Ephraim's voice trailed off as Officer Jennigan's D-U chirped.

Officer Jennigan pulled the D-U from her pocket and slid her hand across the face. "Where are you?" Officer Morgan snapped. "Lancaster went upstairs to search there."

"Tell him Amy. You have to." Ephraim whispered. He put his hand on her shoulder and smiled warmly at her. "Please."

"West corridor." She looked around. "By room one-twelve. I've… got him."

"Dead?" Officer Morgan's voice came over the D-U.

"No. He's alive." Officer Jennigan said. "So far."

"Moving your way. Did you let Lancaster know?"

"No."

"No?" Officer Morgan said. His voice sounded like he was running.

"Well, I mean… I just got him. I was ready to call when you called me."

Ephraim nodded and whispered. "Nice." Then he spoke louder: "Come join the party Officer Morgan. I think we have snacks coming."

Officer Jennigan keyed off her D-U. "Oh!"

"What?"

She pulled her gun.

"Yeah, good thinking." Ephraim said as he sat on the floor. "So there are no misunderstandings."

Amy sighed. She wasn't pointing the gun at him. "I suppose so."

Officer Morgan turned the corner. "Well there we go. The illusive Ephraim Simpson."

"Oh, thanks!" Ephraim said with a smile.

"What?"

"That's the first time you've called me by my name. Kind of makes me feel like a human instead of a hunted animal."

"Shut up!"

Detective Lancaster jogged around the corner, almost running into Officer Morgan. "What are you standing in the middle of the hallway for?" He exclaimed.

"Right? Have a seat by me." Ephraim patted the floor. "We're on the verge of a party." He looked left and right. "Where's a snack-bot when you need one?"

Officer Morgan kicked Ephraim in the side. "I told you to shut up!"

"Stop it." Officer Jennigan said. She swiveled the pistol toward Officer Morgan as she spoke. Realizing what she had done, she put it in her holster hoping he hadn't noticed.

Officer Morgan put his hand on his pistol. "What'd you do that for?"

"Oh… I…" Officer Jennigan said, unsure of how to respond.

Ephraim realized what had happened so he spoke up. "I'm sitting down Officer Morgan." He said as his hand went to his ribs. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Oh you're going somewhere all right." Detective Lancaster laughed. "It's convenient we're already at a space port."

"A well-needed vacation on Mars?"

"Not exactly." Detective Lancaster said. "There's a Department of Law Enforcement bird on pad sixteen. Heading to Vesta this evening."

"Best news all day, huh?" Officer Morgan drew his pistol. "Now stand up!"

"I know, I know; nice and slow." Ephraim said. "Here I come." He moved slowly and deliberately to his feet. He was almost a head taller than Officer Morgan. "Huh. I thought you'd be taller, Officer Morgan."

"Shut up!" Officer Morgan hit Ephraim on the side of the head with his pistol knocking him back to his knees. "Or I'll just shoot you right here and now!"

"Then he'd miss his flight; I'd hate for that to happen." Detective Lancaster gestured down the hallway. "Let's go." He took Ephraim by the

arm. "That way." He looked at Morgan. "If he runs for it, put a dozen rounds in him." He tried to pull Ephraim to his feet but couldn't.

"With pleasure." Officer Morgan looked down at Ephraim. "Get up!"

"Right." Ephraim said as he stood again.

"Lead the way, Officer Jennigan." Detective Lancaster said. "We need to get the illustrious Ephraim Simpson to his shuttle."

"Hey, thanks!" Ephraim said. "You know that's…"

"Shut up!" Officer Morgan said. "I've heard everything out of you I want to hear!"

"This way, gentlemen." Officer Jennigan said as she glanced at Ephraim.

"She means me, I think." Ephraim said.

Officer Morgan hit Ephraim with his pistol again. "I'm going to shoot you if you say another word!"

"And I won't stop him." Detective Lancaster said. "Move it, Officer Jennigan. Take up the rear, Officer Morgan." He pulled Ephraim closer. "Nice and easy. Let's go."

Without another word, Officer Jennigan led them to the small building at the base of launch pad sixteen.

19

Detective Lancaster shoved Ephraim toward the guards standing at the airlock. "Give this guy a front row seat." He snapped.

Ephraim stumbled because of the leg shackles Officer Morgan had put on him while they waited two hours for the shuttle to begin loading. He caught himself by the shoulder of the left guard.

"Get off me!" The guard roared as he shoved Ephraim off, toward the other guard.

Ephraim staggered backward, trying to gain his balance as the other guard grabbed him by the collar. "Easy now. Get your feet under you." He said.

Ephraim looked at the man. "Thanks."

The man gave a very small nod in return then snapped: "Keep your feet under you." He hesitated for the slightest moment then added: "Soon you'll be standing on the rock."

Ephraim's eyes got large.

Officer Jennigan looked at the guard. It was definitely one of the code phrases she had heard Hannah Golden use while riding back to Seattle with her; 'standing on the rock'. That trip seemed to have been a lifetime ago, even though it was only a few weeks.

"Yeah," guffawed the other guard. "That rock being Vesta. Right, Ernie?"

Ernie didn't reply.

Your angels are everywhere, huh Lord? Anyway I'm done for; no one escapes Vesta. Alive anyway. He thought. *I'm just your willing servant; Lord All I ask for is strength.* A feeling of calm washed over him. He looked over his shoulder at Detective Lancaster and his two officers. The feeling of calm got an edge to it, quickly becoming a combination of boldness and anger. Detective Lancaster and Officer Morgan were staring at him. Officer Jennigan was looking at the deck. *She will listen.* The boldness got stronger so he turned to face the three.

Officer Jennigan continued to stare at the cold steel deck. She couldn't bring herself to look at Ephraim. After spending the night in the empty semi with Ephraim, she was no longer convinced she was working for the right side. Her talk with Hannah also brought that point home. Even so, she didn't know how she could ever be forgiven. *You've done too many bad things. How can you ever be forgiven for all that? It's just too much; the world is a weight pressing down on me, pushing me to do more bad things.* She sighed. *I'm crushed under it all.*

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." Ephraim said. "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and *My burden is light*."

Amy looked at Ephraim.

Ephraim nodded at her then looked at Detective Lancaster. "What if God, choosing to show His wrath and make His power known, bore with great passion the objects of His wrath- prepared for destruction? What if He did this to make the riches of His glory known to the objects of His mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory- even us, whom He also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles?"

"Yeah, what if." Detective Lancaster said. "Hey, make sure you let me know when he's dead." He said to the first guard.

"You got it, Detective." The man answered. "Give it three or four months. Five tops." He grabbed Ephraim by the shoulder. "Let's go, prisoner."

Detective Lancaster looked at Officer Jennigan. "You going native on me or something?"

She snapped out of her retrospection. "What, me? No way." She shrugged. "No way." She said again, trying to convince more herself than her superior.

"Good bye, Joe," Ephraim said. "Take care, Amy and Cayman; tough times are coming." He shook out from under the officer's grasp and marched into the airlock. "Here I go; gladly and joyfully." He said as both guards followed him close behind.

The three officers watched as the door slid shut.

Ephraim's words rang in Officer Jennigan's mind: 'I'd march into the shuttle heading to Vesta Penal Colony gladly and joyfully if it made you believe. A few months of discomfort for me on Vesta for your *immortal soul*?

Hah! There's nothing to even consider about that trade. I'd give my life for your soul.' "Wow." Was all she could manage to say.

After a moment, Cayman spoke up: "Right? Happy to be going to die. What a loon."

"You got that right." Detective Lancaster said. He clapped his hands together and rubbed them. "That was exhausting. I say we all take the next couple of days off."

"Sounds good to me," Cayman let out a long breath. "I'm going to catch a hop to the coast and sit on a beach in Florence for two whole days."

"Who's Florence?" Detective Lancaster asked with a smirk.

"In Florence. Florence, *South Carolina*. There's a beach resort there with a dome that goes down into the water too. All day with no respirators. You should try it; a little color would do you good."

"Nah." Detective Lancaster said. "I'm just going to go home and get drunk."

Cayman turned and smiled. "For two whole days?"

"Well not entirely. I mean we need to be back at the precinct on Wednesday so I'll have to stop drinking some time on Tuesday evening, right?" Detective Lancaster laughed. "What about you, Amy?"

Amy thought back to the time she had spent in the tractor trailer with Ephraim. And the place where he just told her she could find answers. "I'm going to run down one last lead. Get some answers, I think."

"You really are pushing for detective." Cayman said. "Don't burn out on the way."

"Heed those words of wisdom, Officer Amy Jennigan." Detective Lancaster said. "Let's get back to Seattle." He gestured at the door. "I'm beat."

With that, the trio left.

20

Ephraim marched into the shuttle as dread filled him. *God, give me the courage I need to endure this.* The door to the shuttle slid open revealing a dozen seats on either side along the bulkhead. There were six other prisoners spread about the seats.

With a relegated sigh, he started toward an empty seat.

The second guard grabbed him by the collar. "Not yet." He turned him toward a side door. "Use the head first." He gestured. "You're going to be sitting for a while, pal."

Ephraim nodded at the man. "Thank you." He gave a weak smile and pulled open the door.

"Just don't take too long; we're lifting off in ten." The man smiled back. "Okay?"

"Right." Ephraim stepped in and closed the door.

"Are you going to do that the whole way?" The first guard asked after the door closed. "You're brutal, Ernie, you know that."

Ernie smiled wide. "Hey, you want them under control? Pretend you're on their side." He gestured around the cabin. "A couple of stupid catch-phrases and you're in. When was the last time any of these pieces of trash caused a ruckus since I started doing it?" Ernie was one of the more senior guards on Vesta- he had already signed two extensions to his contract. Many guards ended up breaking their contract, thereby giving up their large end-of-tour bonus because the work schedule of Vesta was too much for them. Ernie thrived on it and the power he had over the prisoners.

"No, I can't say I have."

"And that's how I want it." Ernie said. "I've got this one last tour to do then I'm retiring."

"If the radiation doesn't kill you first."

"I'm good, Stan." Ernie said. "I've got it all planned out to my last day." He pointed at a locker. "Get the juice. Once this last one is strapped in, we'll do it."

"Do what?" One of the prisoners said. "You don't have any right to be doing anything to us!"

"Shut up!" Ernie roared at the man. "Or I'll stick you in the airlock. If I show up with six instead of seven prisoners, no one… *no one*… is going to care one way or another! And I'll jettison you at thirty thousand feet so you fall all the way back to Earth over two and a half minutes instead of dying in seconds in space!" Out of curiosity, he had done the math after doing this exact thing to a prisoner a month ago.

The door to the bathroom clacked open and Ephraim stepped out.

Ernie's entire demeanor changed. "How about you sit over here?" He pointed at a seat with two empty ones on either side. "So you can stretch out some; we've got a three day ride you know."

"Thanks." Ephraim said. The prisoner behind him caught his eye- he was shaking his head at him. "Oh." He added without realizing it.

Ernie looked over his shoulder at the prisoner. "You passing secret messages?" He said. "Not very neighborly." He turned back to Ephraim. "Have a seat. Preflight is about to start." As if on cue, the engine whined to life. "See? We're on the path."

Ephraim sat in the seat and buckled the belts across his chest and waist. "I'm in." He said.

"Great." Ernie said as he stepped to a console and flipped a switch. The lights on the seat belts cycled from red to green to orange. "Now that everyone's nice and cozy… juice them, Stan."

"With what?" Ephraim said. "I don't get space sick, if that's what you're worried about."

Stan removed a large pneumatic injector from its slot. "It's just plain old midazolamdetomidine hydrochloride to keep you idiots quiet until we get there. We just call it The Juice to make it easier." He stepped to the closest prisoner.

"Wait; midazolam has benzodiazepine in it." The man said.

"What are you, some kind of doctor?" Stan asked as he pulled the plunger back on the injector, arming it.

"Yes and I'm allergic! Don't…" He continued as Stan injected him right through his pants into his thigh. The man's eyes rolled up into his head.

"You'll be fine." Stan shrugged. "Or maybe you won't. Either way, you'll be quiet." He closed the man's eyes with his fingers. As he pulled back on the plunger to reload the injector he sidestepped twice to the next prisoner "Close your eyes. Touching eyeballs creeps me out."

The man took a nervous breath then obliged.

Stan injected him the same way.

Ephraim watched as the guard injected the four prisoners on that side of the shuttle then tossed the injector to Ernie. The injected prisoners had all become groggy almost immediately. All except the first one; he had convulsed for a few moments then did not move at all. He leaned his head toward the guard when he stood in front of him. "What's in that thing, brother?" Ephraim whispered.

"A little of this, a little of that." Ernie replied with a smile. "You'll be fine; don't worry."

Ephraim gestured at the first prisoner who not did not seem to be breathing. "What about him?"

"You're getting on my nerves." Ernie slapped Ephraim across the face as hard as he could. "SHUT UP!"

Ephraim's head snapped to the side and his ear rang where the man had hit him. He was completely unprepared for the strike. He looked up at the man as he brought his head back upright. "But."

"Welcome to Vesta, idiot." Ernie said as he injected Ephraim's thigh. He looked at Stan. "He didn't see that coming, huh?" He laughed. "Anyone else want to make a comment?" He waved the injector around, pointing it at the prisoners like it was a weapon. "Second doses are free."

When no one said anything -because they were unable to speak- he crab walked down the side of the ship injecting the remaining prisoner.

"You're crazy, Ernie." Stan said as he took back the injector. "Cray--zee."

"Yeah, well I'm the crazy one that'll be retiring like a king at the end of this tour. A nice bungalow on a beach in Australia. No one to mess with me."

"And no one to mess with. You'll be bored in a week." Stan pointed out.

"I can always hire some indigenous kids to abuse." Ernie said. He looked around the cabin. All the prisoners were unconscious- their heartbeats and

breathing had slowed to almost nothing and would remain there for the entire journey. It would take a shot of epinephrine to bring them out of their hibernation. All except the first prisoner- he was already dead.

21

Ephraim startled awake, his heart racing. He clenched his fists at the thumping- he felt as if his heart was going to leap out of his chest. He opened his eyes but could not see anything. He realized he had a black cloth bag over his head. "What's going on?" He said as he tried to raise his hands- they were restrained to his thighs. "What's going on?" He said louder.

"Shut up, Prisoner Seven-Two-Oh-Nine." A voice said. "Answer when spoken to."

"And no one has." Said another voice.

After a moment, someone slapped the side of his head.

Ephraim leaned back in his seat and tried to listen to what was happening around him. He could hear voices of the two guards as well as what might have been a pilot, but could not make out what they were saying- except 'Vesta approaching'.

Vesta was situated along the inner portion of the asteroid belt, fairly close to Mars. At a little over fifty miles across, it was one of the larger asteroids in the area. Because of its stable rotation, large tanks had been positioned on its surface so it could be used as a refueling station for ships traveling farther out into the Solar System for close to fifty years. As underground storage tunnels were dug in concentric rings to use the asteroid's rotation to create a centrifugal 'gravity', a small section was set up as an interim prison for criminals that were being transported from the outer planets until enough of them were there to justify a trip to larger -more permanent- facilities on Earth or the Moon. More fuel tanks and structures were added to the asteroid until it was more angular metal than natural stone, increasing the number of prisoners that could be kept there. This penal 'weigh station' was only used for short stays for only capital crimes because of the high radiation levels; no one would be housed on the asteroid longer than a month. Since refueling of both the storage tanks and ships took a matter of hours, this was never an issue for the people who used Vesta for business.

About this same time, emboldened by decades of advances into Central and Southern Africa, India and China as well as North and South America, the Muslim community declared themselves a global caliphate in 2094. This

global caliphate, that also happened to be a nuclear power, immediately declared war on the non-Muslim world. With several tactical nuclear first-strikes, a dozen vehicular fission bombs, and all-out urban warfare that spread from major metropolitan areas to the remotest parts of the planet.

In the early part of the 22nd century, the ultimate defeat of the Caliphate led world leaders to ban Islam and execute any followers of that faith. Emboldened with the success of this endeavor, the world leaders then banned all other religions as well. The Vatican was the last holdout, when in 2145 it was dissolved and incorporated into the peninsula-spanning, mega-metropolis that was Rome. The leveling of Saint Peter's square was seen as the beginning of a new enlightened age with no religions to cause wars. However while the move did reduce the number of openly religious people, it did not wipe them out- churches and other places of worship moved into hiding, often masquerading as social clubs or businesses. When one was found out, the facilities were destroyed and the members were imprisoned or executed as an example to others.

The move was touted as the end of conflict on Earth. And it was- for almost two years until landlocked Paraguay attacked Brazil over its damming of the Paraná River. This began what was called the Six-Day Plata Basin Water War. Before either the regional capital in Bogotá or the national capital in the District of Colombia could step in to ensure the peace between the two neighbor-states, Paraguay was dealt a blow as devastating as their previous war with Brazil in the mid-19th Century. Who, by this time had its own arsenal of tactical nuclear weapons in its National Guard inventory. And used a dozen of them on the small country.

Since 'water rights' did not provide the narrative it wanted, the government of the United States of the Americas blamed the entire incident on 'religious fanatics'. The head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, an Admiral Derek Sanderson, then decided to turn Vesta into a full-fledged prison, moving the refueling station to a nearby asteroid to avoid unnecessary traffic to it. The tunnels were expanded to include multiple concentric levels with cells and a centrally located medical facility that had been built with lead lined walls. A smaller asteroid -Vesta Two- was towed near the prison and fitted with radiation shielding to be used as safe long-term housing for the prison's staff. Staff would remain on Vesta for no more than five days at a time and were given a daily regimen of oxyiodine sulfide against the radiation. After which, they would spend two days in a T-Cell tank repairing any cell damage. They were then given two days off to spend as they saw fit, with most going to Mars, Jupiter or any of its moons that happened to be close by at the time. Even so, the conditions on Vesta made it difficult to keep employees for more than six months. Because of this large bonuses were given to anyone

who stayed for an entire six-month contract. Prisoners on the other hand, tended to only survive four to five months because they were given neither anti-radiation treatments nor T-Cell baths.

Lord, give me the strength to deal with this place in a way that honors you. And to give me the words to reach people willing to listen. Ephraim prayed. The sound of a door opening and air pressure equalizing let him know they had arrived.

Ephraim was jerked to his feet. He fought to remain standing in the extremely low gravity. Having his hands bound to his thighs and not being able to see made it difficult. He took a step to keep his balance.

"Don't move, Seven Two Oh Nine."

Ephraim nodded. "Sorry."

"Don't be sorry; be stationary." The voice snapped.

Ephraim waited what seemed to be several minutes before he was led out of the shuttle. When he was stopped again, one of the guards yanked the sack off his head and stuffed it into Ephraim's jumpsuit. He realized that sometime while he was unconscious, they had redressed him in prison clothes. "That's your one worldly possession." The guard said before moving to the next prisoner. "Don't lose it."

Ephraim squinted against the bright lights that assailed him. After his eyes adjusted, he looked around. He was standing with five of the other prisoners from the ship. The two guards were also there. He looked at the one that had been nice to him before but he was talking to the other guard. In the far corner a bright blue EM-SQUAT stood. Since it had no exterior lighting, it was impossible to tell if it was operational or not.

"Listen up!" Another guard said.

Ephraim and the other prisoners turned to look at the man.

"Welcome to Vesta." The man said. He looked from prisoner to prisoner as he spoke. "You're here to die. If you cause problems, it will happen sooner rather than later. But believe me when I tell you it will happen. The sooner you accept that, the better. *You are here to die.*" He put his hands behind his back as he began to walk. "And don't even think of trying to escape. There's one shuttle bay on this rock and this is it. This one small bay. And only one shuttle runs from here to the residences on Vesta Two every day. There's a manifest for it. The EM-SQUAT that maintains the

manifest is not open to any sort of discussion as to why any of you should be on that shuttle."

The man stopped speaking when he reached the far wall of the room. Instead of turning back, he started down beside the prisoners' right side.

"And when you get Big Blue's attention, it's not going to be a good day for you. In fact, it will be your last day alive. So to make sure you understand; you can't escape, if you cause trouble you will die early, and even if you are a model prisoner, you will die." The man reached the rear corner of the room and started walking behind the prisoners.

"You will be given a cell. There are currently eighteen levels operational in the prison and seven hundred fifty-six prisoners. You are to remain on the level that your cell is on. You will be expected to keep your cell in a livable state. Hygiene will be conducted. There is a laundry facility centrally located. You will do laundry there. Just laundry; it is not a recreation area. Meals will be in the also centrally located mess hall. Twice a day at ten hundred hours and twenty hundred hours. If you miss the meal time, you miss the meal. There is a centrally located medical facility. It is also not a recreation area. You will go to the prison only when a human guard tells you to. If you feel ill, keep it to yourself. We are not here to make you healthy."

The man reached the other rear corner and started walking along the left side of the prisoners, toward Big Blue.

"There are several work details that involve cleaning and maintaining this prison. You will work alongside technicians for any detailed work on electronics or plumbing. These are not optional." The man stopped when he reached the massive robot. "You will notice your cell does not have a locking door. Or even any door for that matter. Just a ladder leading out. If you are out of your cell during non-authorized hours and one of the roving PATS or SENTries sees you, you will be killed." He patted Big Blue's side. "Oh, in case you're wondering, Big Blue has already registered all your faces and added you to the prison records. Every remote here knows who you are. And in case you are unaware, we are not a government facility; this is a business operation. We are paid to house you here. There is only one actual human guard per level because humans cost a lot more than remotes." He said unemotionally. He shrugged as he leaned on Big Blue's side. "But so that you don't get the impression that we will bend over backwards to keep you here as long as we can…Blue Seven, terminate prisoner Seven Two Oh Eight."

"Order meets mission parameters," the EM-SQUAT said as it fired three shots into the man standing next to Ephraim.

It was so unexpected, none of the prisoners were able to process which number the man had said.

The prisoner fell in a heap, three holes in his chest right where his heart was.

"We've got this prison running at peak profitability." The man continued to speak as calmly as if nothing had happened. "Losing one or two, or ten of the seven hundred some odd prisoners that are here at any given time is not a big deal." The man put his hands on his hips as he finally displayed an emotion; anger. "I'd vent an entire *level* to put down a riot!" He shouted. "And don't ever forget it!" He took several breaths as he composed himself. "So as you have all probably guessed, you are assigned to level seven, section two." He looked at the two guards. "Officer Buckets," he said. "Escort these prisoners to your section. You've had a week's vacation running to Earth and back; it's time to earn your pay."

"Yes, Chief." Ernie said. He looked at the prisoners. "You heard the man; get moving!" He pointed to a doorway. "First pole you come to, slide down it!"

Ephraim followed along with the other prisoners are they moved along the rough-hewn, upward curved corridor. It was slightly disconcerting to be constantly walking uphill so several prisoners zig zagged as they walked. The corridors were spacious at almost twenty feet wide and fifteen feet tall; large enough for an EM-SQUAT and several PATs to move through at the same time. Or a dozen SENTries.

After they had gone down six levels, Ernie spoke up: "Go past this upcoming hole to the next one; they are putting in some more cells so there's diggers working below us."

Ladders connected the various levels as well as steel poles that one could slide down. Placed at every other access hole was a larger hole to one side, ostensibly for EM-SQUAT to move from level to level. As the group walked along, Ephraim had seen only one other Human guard. He had however seen several PATs as well as twice as many SENTries moving along the corridors. As the group reached the appropriate intersection, they began to slide down the pole one after another, Ernie bringing up the rear.

As they had walked, Ephraim had let other prisoners get past him so he could get closer to Ernie. He hoped to be able to speak to him privately in

case the other prisoners weren't believers. When he slid down the pole, he stepped to the side waiting for him to come down as well. In the low gravity, it took a few moments to slide the thirty feet between levels. When the guard reached the bottom, Ephraim leaned in and whispered. "How many of us are on this level, brother?"

"What?" Ernie snapped.

Ephraim looked at the other prisoners; they had already continued down the corridor. "How many of us are here?"

"Oh." Ernie smiled wide. "I sometimes forget that one of the side effects of The Juice is temporary amnesia."

"What?"

Ernie brought up his rifle and struck Ephraim across the face, knocking him to the ground. "I'm not part of your insane cult!" He said loudly. The other prisoners stopped to look. "You actually think I'm stupid enough to believe in some god that runs everything?" He brought the rifle around and put the stock into the crook of his shoulder. He aimed down it at the sprawled Ephraim. After a moment, he lowered it. "I'd just shoot you now but you'd cost me two percent of my bonus." He slung his rifle. "And I have plans for that money. Big plans."

Ephraim worked himself to his feet. He didn't know what to say to the man so he just looked at the rough carved stone floor. As he did, several drops of blood hit at his feet. He brought his hand up- there was a large gash in his cheek. "Oh." He said, surprised.

"Get to the infirmary and get that fixed, then get to your cell!" Ernie snapped. He brought his wrist up to his mouth and spoke into the mini D-U he wore there. "Prisoner Seven Two Oh Nine traveling to infirmary then to his cell. No deviations authorized." He pointed down a third corridor that led toward the center of the asteroid. "Infirmary is that way. And your cell is the way we're all going right now. Don't get lost or a SENTrie will put you on the right track."

"To my cell?" Ephraim asked.

"To that God you people keep talking about. Now get moving."

With a nod, Ephraim started down the corridor Ernie had told him to use.

"Everyone else get moving! I'm not paid to baby sit you people all day!" Ernie shouted.

22

Ephraim had passed four SENTries as he made his way to the infirmary. He wasn't sure if they were different ones or the same ones multiple times; they were all identical. And none of them reacted to him as he walked by.

When he reached the door of the infirmary, he turned sideways and pushed through it; he had been keeping pressure on his check with his forearm. His sleeve was blood soaked because bleeding in low gravity took longer to clot.

"Can I help you?" A woman asked tiredly.

"I'm…" Ephraim hesitated. He wasn't sure how much he should say to the woman. "I've got a cut on my cheek." He turned sideways so she could see. "It's still bleeding pretty good."

"Sit here." The woman pointed at an examination table.

Ephraim looked around the room as he walked to it. The infirmary was spacious at almost forty feet wide and had high ceilings to deal with the large medical equipment. "Do you handle a lot of injuries here?" He asked as he lifted himself onto the table.

"No." The woman answered. "I handle a lot of deaths." She walked to a cabinet and took out a small package of gauze as well as an injector. "That's not going to clot in this low gravity."

"Oh, thanks." Ephraim said, taking the woman's tone for concern.

"You'll end up making a mess and they'll call me to deal with it." She added as she pulled his arm away. The gash began to flow blood freely. "Sit still." She said as she raised the injector. "This will sting but it will clot it."

Ephraim gripped the side of the examination table. "Ready." He said.

The woman stepped closer to him and injected him three times quickly in the gash. Almost immediately the wound stopped bleeding.

Ephraim winced from the pain- it felt like she had just put acid into the cut. "Wow, that hurts, Doc. You weren't kidding."

"Staples or tape?"

"What's the difference?"

The doctor shrugged. "Tape won't hurt as much but you'll end up with a scar."

"I don't think a scar is my biggest worry here," Ephraim said. "Tape, please."

The doctor reached into her lab coat and pulled out a roll of clear adhesive tape. "This will stay on for about a week even if you get it wet. After that, it should be healed enough to stay closed on its own." She pulled a length of tape off and ripped it with her teeth. "If not, come back and I'll stitch it shut." She let the tape hang from her mouth as she folded a piece of gauze into a rectangle. In one smooth motion, she pressed the gauze in place and laid the tape over it.

"You've done that before, I think." Ephraim smiled at her.

"You're done." The woman hesitated.

"Ephraim."

"What's your number?"

"Oh. It's Seven Two Zero Nine."

The doctor nodded as she spoke into her mini-D-U on her wrist. "Prisoner Seven Two Zero Nine treated and returning to his cell. Ambulatory. Return authorized if required for follow up."

"Thanks, Doc." Ephraim said as he hopped off the table. He floated to the ground slowly. "I'll try not to annoy Officer Buckets again."

"He's not an officer." The doctor said. "None of them are. They're all hired guards. Thugs, really. Even the one they call a chief isn't military."

Ephraim smiled again. "So are you a real doctor?"

"That I am." The woman said as she returned the smile. In all honesty, the man was quite fit and attractive. At the moment. She knew even though she was relatively new to the prison that he wouldn't remain fit for long. Radiation poisoning would take care of his physique. Either that or Ernie Buckets would; he seemed to take pleasure in sending her work. "You need to get back to your cell. The remotes know about how long it should take; getting lost is no excuse."

"Sure thing, Doc." Ephraim said as he started toward the door- he moved slowly thanks to the lower gravity in the infirmary since it was in the

center of the asteroid. “I hope I don’t see you again.” He said as he pulled the door open and stepped through it. “Nothing personal.”

“Oh, I’ll see you again,” She said softly to the closing door. “I see everyone here at least once.”

Not wanting to draw the lethal ire of any of the robotic guards, Ephraim moved as quickly as he could down the corridor toward his cell. He was relieved that by the time he got there, his cheek had stopped stinging.

23

Office Jennigan walked along the sidewalk looking at her D-U to keep track of her location. She knew the apartment Ephraim had mentioned was ahead a block or so even though it was not annotated on her map. She did not want to put its exact location into her D-U since it could be confiscated at any time by the Internal Investigations Department. For any reason whatsoever. She had not done anything to draw the attention of the IID but she knew if she ever did, everything electronic she owned - official and personal- would be at their disposal.

It had been two weeks since she, Detective Lancaster, and Officer Morgan had left the launch pads in South Carolina and she had been wrestling with the thought of coming to the apartment. She had actually run into a believer in her own condominium complex while peppering her language with the several catch phrases she knew believers used to identify each other. It had been while riding the elevator down with several other tenants; she had said she was looking forward to a vacation where she could walk the streets of Rome. What she actually said was: 'I can't wait to walk along a peaceful ancient sandstone Roman road instead of with these undesirables here in Seattle'. When the elevator stopped and everyone got out, a woman had grabbed her and pulled her back in.

The woman then proceeded to scold Officer Jennigan for using such phrases in public. When Officer Jennigan had tried to ask her questions about the Bible however, all the woman would say was that she needed to do nothing more than just say the 'words of salvation' as she called them. That was enough to guarantee her eternal life. However after being with Hannah Golden for five hours in her semi, Officer Jennigan felt there was more to it than that.

She was fairly certain she did not meet anyone else to talk to in her complex not because there were no believers there; it was common knowledge she was a police officer. She decided that complete strangers were her best option because she had things she needed to ask and other things to have explained. Officer Jennigan hoped that the person Ephraim had sent her to could do that. If she didn't find this person or they were unwilling to help, she was unsure where to look next; this was a move of desperation.

So she had finally worked up the courage to go to the apartment building Ephraim had told her about. She had spent the better part of three evenings trying to come up with a card that a believer would understand but not blatant enough to rouse the suspicions of non-believers who could also potentially be police informants. She had finally come up with 'For Sale, piece of sandstone from recent trip to the Republic of Italy. Verified ancient Roman road. Not an undesirable fake.'

Officer Jennigan finally arrived at the large stone apartment building. She self-consciously looked left and right before walking up the five steps to the main doors. She had learned the code to the front door and that the apartment building bulletin board was inside the large foyer thanks to her police credentials. She pressed in the five-digit code and pulled the door open when it unlocked. With another look over her shoulder, she entered and quickly pulled the door closed behind her, tugging against the piston that had it close smoothly all while the fan blew her hair in all directions. She was unable to get the door to close faster than the strong pistol would allow no matter how hard she tugged. When it finally closed, she tried to push her wind-blown hair back into place. With a loud sigh, she turned and looked into the foyer.

There was a man standing at the bulletin board. He was watching her. "Hello." He said with a chuckle. "Door one, you zero."

Officer Jennigan looked from him to the door and back again. She was torn between just leaving or placing the note in full view of the man.

"Are you okay?" The man asked. "Door giving you troubles? I can tell the Super."

"Uhm, yes." Officer Jennigan hesitated. "No. No I mean. I'm fine. Thanks."

The man smiled back at her. "Well that's good to hear. Confusing but good."

With a relegated sigh, she decided she had no other choice besides posting the note. Anything else would seem suspicious. "I just wanted to put this up." She held up the note then regretted bringing attention to it. "Up there on the board."

"That's what it's here for." The man said with another smile. He stepped away from the board and gave a short bow. "Post away."

Officer Jennigan gave a curt not then marched to the bulletin board. Without looking at the man, she retrieved a pin and posted the note on the

bottom right, farthest from the man. "There." She said as she turned again without looking at the man and headed for the door. As she reached it, the man laughed out loud.

Officer Jennigan put her hand on the bar to push it open, hoping he was laughing at something else he had seen on the board.

"You're kidding, right?" He said.

Officer Jennigan let go of the handle and turned around. "What?"

"Come on now." The man pointed at the note. "Really?"

"What?" She decided she would play along with her ruse. "There's nothing wrong with that." She stepped up to the board and re-read her note. Suddenly it seemed absurdly obvious. "It's fine." She said, pressing on with her lie. "Just fine."

"Well sure." The man said. His voice dropped to a conspiratorial tone. "So which are you?"

The question caught Officer Jennigan off guard. "Which what?"

The man gestured at the note. "Are you a Christian or are you an international smuggler selling stolen antiquities?" He cocked his head to the side. "Technically, they're both criminals."

"What? I…" She considered her note. Those were actually the only two possibilities. She pursed her lips instead of answering.

"Listen…" The man began. "Miss…"

Officer Jennigan was taken aback; she had not considered that she might have to speak to anyone in the building and now that she had, she really didn't want to give her real name. Especially if the IID were to get involved later on. "I'm uhh..." She stammered.

"Well, Miss Uhh." The man smirked at her. "What an unusual name; Nordic?"

"First off, it's not 'Miss Uhh'," she snapped. "Secondly I don't see how it is any of your business what I post."

"Well, I could possibly help." The man said. He gestured at her. "Miss…"

Officer Jennigan's mind went blank. "Lancaster." She said. "Josephine Lancaster, if you must know." After she had said it, she was sorry she had.

"Well, Miss Lancaster, if you're selling stolen antiquities, I'm not sure I can help you. If it's the other, then I may."

"Well." Officer Jennigan said. "I…" She narrowed her eyes. "And who are you, Sir? And what do you do?" Her voice took an authoritative tone.

The man smiled. "I'm Ephraim Simpson. Just a meek guy trying to get along in a world full of pushing and shoving." He pointed at the ceiling. "I live up on the top floor." Now he narrowed his eyes. "And I haven't seen you around here, Miss Lancaster. Are you new to the building? I'm sure I'd remember you moving in." His eyebrows went up. "It's 'miss' not 'missus', right?"

"Yes; it's *Miss*." She crossed her arms. "Ephraim Simpson, you say. What a coincidence."

"Oh?" Theron said, sounding worried.

"I just so happen to know another Ephraim Simpson. Two of you in one month. That's an *amazing* coincidence."

"Oh." Theron said. His shoulders sagged. "Lancaster you say?"

The two stared at each other for a long moment. Finally Officer Jennigan spoke. "Actually it's Jennigan."

"Josephine Jennigan? Man, your parents were mean." The man returned to smiling. "Joe Jenn, then? Or just J-J?"

"You're pretty annoying, *Ephraim*. And I have to say, pretty nosy."

He put his hands behind his back. "Fine, fine. Full disclosure then. My name is not Ephraim."

"Please keep your hands where I can see them." Officer Jennigan said curtly. She moved her hands to her hips. Her service pistol was under her jacket.

"Oh." Theron brought his hands out. "Officer Jennigan, then."

"What makes you say that?"

Theron shrugged. "I've been on the wrong end of this discussion a few times."

"Wrong end?"

"Yeah." Theron got serious. "Now, about Ephraim. I can't say he's a friend but I do know him. Is he… okay?"

Officer Jennigan frowned. “No. No he’s not.” Tears welled up in her eyes. “And it’s my fault.”

“Oh, well now that can’t be true, I’m sure.”

Officer Jennigan nodded. “It is. Me and my superior Detective Lancaster caught him in South Carolina.”

“Is he… dead?” Theron said, worried.

“It’s worse that than. He’s been sent to Vesta.” Officer Jennigan wiped her eyes. “And I helped put him there.”

“Now I’m a little confused, Officer.” Theron said. “If you say you helped put him there, I believe you, but from the looks of you.” He jerked a thumb at the bulletin board. “And that note, I’m not too sure you were a willing participant.”

“Oh, I tried to tell him to hide! But he wouldn’t.” She scoffed. “He said that would implicate me and he just couldn’t have that.”

“That sounds like Ephraim. So now you’re fishing for more believers? To send them to Vesta as well? I’m confused Officer Jennigan.”

“It’s Amy.” Officer Jennigan said. “And I’m… I’m confused too. Ephraim and I spent a few hours talking while I was trapped in a semi-trailer with him.”

“A semi-tractor trailer you say?” Theron said uncomfortably. “Oh.”

“Yes. Well, he did most of the talking. Then there was Hannah Golden. And that other guy at the truck stop. And… that lady in the elevator didn’t make any sense. Especially considering what Hannah said, so I’m…”

“Confused.” Theron said softly.

“Yes.” Officer Jennigan whispered back.

“Well, how about we talk about it?” Theron suggested.

“What, here? Now?”

“Well no, not here in the lobby. We could go to my place.” Theron said.

“Upstairs?” She took a step back. “No, I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“No, no; not upstairs. I have another place.” Theron said. “There are other people there so you wouldn’t be alone.”

“Other people? You live in a commune or something?”

Theron smirked. "Something." He tilted his head to the side. "It's more of a compound, now that I think about it. I could send a car to pick you up at your place. Say in an hour? Two would be better. You could even let a neighbor know where you're going." He smiled. "And you could even bring that gun with you."

Officer Jennigan's hand jerked off her weapon. "Oh, well. I carry it everywhere."

"Dangerous times we live in." Theron said. "We can do dinner and we can talk."

"Why would you be willing to do that?" Now Officer Jennigan tilted her head to the side. "With a police officer no less?"

"Truth be told, you're awful pretty, Officer Jennigan. And if you're interested in knowing more about Christianity, then you're someone I'd like to get to know."

"And what if it's a trap? What if I' m just setting you up?"

Theron laughed. "With a note like that? I have more faith in law enforcement than that."

"I'm not sure insulting me is a good way to begin a relationship."

"Whoa! Now there's a relationship? We haven't even had our first date yet, Amy; slow down."

"Are you always this exasperating?"

Theron sighed. "Yes, I have to admit that I am. So an hour and a half? I can send a car to get you."

"I have my own transportation, thank you very much."

"I don't think a police cruiser showing up be a good thing. The neighbors would talk."

"I have my own *personal* transportation."

"Great. My place in an hour and a half. We'll eat in two." Theron pulled out his D-U and typed in his address. "This way you have a record of it, so you can feel a little more comfortable coming over."

Officer Jennigan pulled out her D-U as well. "That sounds good."

"Fine." Theron held out his D-U and Officer Jennigan tapped hers to his, triggering a transfer of the directions. "Oh. We'll dress for dinner." He added casually.

"Who doesn't?" Officer Jennigan said as she looked down at the directions. "Wait. Denny-Blaine-Seacrest? Who are you really?"

"I might be the owner of Eastern Freight." Theron said as he looked away.

"Eastern Freight? As in semi-tractor trailers hauling freight?" Officer Jennigan's hands went back to her hips.

"I can see that dinner is going to be very exciting." Theron said as he took a several quick steps toward the door. "See you at seven thirty, Amy." He said as he reached the door, pushed it open and stepped out before she could answer.

Officer Jennigan stood there in the lobby staring at the door. She looked back at her note. "Well, I suppose that worked." She pulled it off the pin and put it in her pocket. She would dispose of the incriminating note in the incinerator at her house. "That man." She said a she also left.

24

Ephraim sat up as the lights came on- they made him squint. A moment afterwards, a loud claxon sounded in case anyone was actually able to sleep through the blinding lights.

"Work call starts in thirty minutes." A voice said over a loudspeaker.

Even after being there a while a week, the wake up procedure was still jarring. With a headshake, he picked up his towel and toiletry bag and headed toward the bathroom designated for him and the five other cells in his section.

Within thirty minutes, Ephraim was standing in front of his cell, waiting for the day's assignment. He had learned on his first morning that being late even a minute resulted in being placed in confinement. This was a series of spaces (they were too small to be called rooms) next to the bathroom. The space was barely nine feet tall and not wide enough to sit down in. The best Ephraim had managed was to jam his knees against the far wall so that he could rest some. By the time they let him out eight hours later, his legs were numb and he fell to the ground. Officer Buckets had kicked him until he was able to get to his feet. On the second day, he was standing in front of his cell with two minutes to spare.

"Seven Two Oh Nine," a guard said as he approached.

"Yes?"

"How does mess hall duty sound to you?"

Ephraim thought for a moment. He had never seen this guard before; all his interactions so far had been with Officer Buckets- and they usually ended up being physical interactions. "Uhm, if that's where you want me?" He offered.

The man smirked. "You a diplomat?"

"No?"

"You need to settle down, Oh Nine," The guard said. "You're wound pretty tight."

"Yes, Sir."

The guard gave Ephraim a double take. He pointed at his chest. "I'm O'Neil. Not Buckets."

Ephraim relaxed a little. "Yes, I suppose Mess Hall duty sounds fine. What am I doing? Cooking?"

"We need a replacement trained up."

"Okay." Ephraim said. "I'll do my best but I'm really not much of a cook."

The guard pointed down the hallway. "It's just heating and serving. Get going or everyone here will hate you if breakfast is late."

With a quick nod, Ephraim moved down the hallway as he heard the guard shout "Seven Two Twelve, laundry duty!" This was the assignment he had been on for his first week- it was hot and dirty. He hoped the Mess Hall would be neither. *Thank you Lord for putting another guard here besides Buckets.* Ephraim prayed as he walked. He stopped at an intersection and looked left and right. Suddenly he wasn't sure which way the Mess Hall was. For the past week, he had just been following along with the crowd instead of paying attention. As he stood there, bright green EM-SQUAT marched up.

"Loitering?" The machine rumbled.

"I am lost." Ephraim said. He knew from his experience in the Army that while EM-SQUATs were fairly autonomous, the best way to deal with one was simple sentences. "I am assigned to Mess Hall duty but I do not remember where it is."

The EM-SQUAT replied almost immediately. "Proceed North to the first intersection. Proceed East. The Mess Hall is located at the end of that corridor." It started to walk away.

"Wait. Hold." Ephraim said.

Without turning the EM-SQUAT stopped. "Further query?"

"Yes. Cardinal directions are not useful. I have no reference point."

Again without turning, the machine raised metal claw and pointed down the side corridor. "North is that direction."

"Okay, thank…"

The EM-SQUAT swiveled around and pointed toward the wall. "South is that direction."

"Right, I…"

The EM-SQUAT swiveled at the waist ninety degrees and pointed where Ephraim had come from. "West is that direction."

Ephraim smiled. He knew there was no way for him to stop it.

It swiveled a hundred eighty degrees and pointed again. "East is that direction." Without another word, it marched off.

"Thank you, Green." Ephraim shook his head. "Friendliest guy out here turns out to be a robot." He shrugged. "And maybe that O'Neil guy."

True to the EM-SQUAT's directions, Ephraim found the Mess Hall at the end of an eastern corridor. There was a gaunt prisoner waiting for him there.

"Morning." Ephraim said.

"Yeah; it is." the skeleton of a man replied. "And breakfast is soon. Real soon. We've got half an hour to get fifty meals prepped and in the heaters."

"Sorry." Ephraim said. "I got turned around; new here. I'm Ephraim."

"No worries," the man said. "Timothy. Let's get going so I can show you the ropes." He started toward the back of the mess hall, using tables along the way to steady himself.

"How long have you been here?" Ephraim asked worriedly.

"Oh, I'm a real old timer. Four months yesterday." The man looked over his shoulder. "That's why they've sent you down here; I've probably got a couple of days left."

"Come on now." Ephraim said. "You look great, Timothy, fearless man of God."

Timothy looked over his shoulder again. "What?"

Ephraim hesitated then replied: "Timothy was called a fearless man of God. Paul's sidekick?" He tried.

Timothy used the table for support. "I'm not one of those fairy tale freaks, Ephraim-new-here."

"Oh, I…" Ephraim began.

"Unlike you misguided fools, I have an actual real life plan."

Ephraim nodded. He had actually met several inmates that weren't believers; up until then he had thought that was the only type sent to Vesta. "One Gen, huh?"

"One *Generation*." Timothy stood a little straighter. "Trying to help Earth recover from the infestation that is humanity."

"So what are you in here for, Timothy? Picketing?" Ephraim said with a smirk.

"I was the mastermind behind the largest operation we have had to date!" The man glowered at Ephraim. "The hangar bombing last year."

Ephraim shook his head. "I'm sorry to hear that." He said as he started walking toward the kitchen.

"That I ran that bombing?"

"That you don't seem to have any remorse about killing all those people. Men, women, and children." Ephraim moved past the man. "Show me what we're doing back there. We need to get these people fed."

The man opened his mouth to answer then just pursed his thin lips and followed Ephraim into the kitchen.

When the man entered, Ephraim was moving boxes from the floor to a table. "We need to get going."

Timothy stared at Ephraim for a long moment then said, "Pull out the individual trays, peel off the paper and put them on the conveyor belt." He pointed.

"And how do I turn on the oven?" Ephraim pried one of the box lids off.

"Red button starts it all." Timothy moved to a chair and sat. "It takes them three minutes to move through the oven. When they are all heated up, put them on the shelves so the inmates can take one." He pointed again. "That's it."

Ephraim slid a box toward the oven. "So that's why."

"That's why what?" Timothy asked.

"That's why breakfast is cold; you heat them all up ahead of time so they sit for twenty minutes before we come get them."

"They're thawed out. That's all I'm supposed to do." Timothy crossed his legs. "So that's all I do."

Ephraim looked at the oven; it was on wheels. "So where do they make this food?" He asked as he pulled the table away from the edge of the 'oven entrance' conveyor belt.

"It's made on Vesta Two. Then they expose it to space to freeze them. They're brought here with the evening shuttle used for shift change. They're in a room that's vented to the outside." He shrugged. "All I got to do is unfreeze them."

"You know there's a difference between doing all you're supposed to do and doing your all, right?"

"Whatever." The man said. "In a couple of days none of this will matter to me anyway."

Ephraim pushed the oven toward the serving shelves. The shelves had a slight tilt to them so that the trays of food would slide down as the first one was taken.

"You're wasting your time, newbie." Timothy said. "Just do it the way I said."

Ephraim finished pushing the oven so the conveyor belt would push heated trays onto the serving shelves. "I've got it, Timothy."

"You should listen to me; I'm the fearless man of God." Timothy said sarcastically. He put his head down on the table. "Idiot."

"You do seem pretty fearless about where you're going to spend eternity, now that you mention it." Ephraim went over and pushed the table back against the oven. He pried open the box. "We should talk about your future plans, Timothy. Seriously; you're not on a good path." Ephraim looked into the box; it held five trays of food. Each tray was twelve inches wide and eighteen inches long. There was a layer of parchment glued over the tray. A thought occurred to him. "What do you do with the paper?"

"Pitch it into the incinerator." Timothy didn't even raise his head.

"You don't keep it?"

Timothy chuckled. "There's no mail here, stupid."

Ephraim tried to peel off the parchment but the glue around the edges of the tray caused it to rip.

"You're wasting time. Wake me when it's time to eat."

Ephraim ignored him and instead went to a row of drawers. There were various utensils in them but nothing useful. In the third drawer he found what he was looking for; a paring knife. "Now we're in business."

"Sure, maybe you can charge them for a hot meal. Not that there's money here either."

Ephraim went back to the stack of trays. The first parchment that he had ruined, he tore off and threw away. On the next tray, he ran the knife around the edges of the tray, cutting the parchment. It wasn't a clean cut or straight, but he now had a piece of parchment that was almost a foot by a foot and a half. *Lord, please let me use these to tell others about you.* He prayed as he laid the piece of parchment on the table.

He cut out the parchment out of the other three trays. He stacked them crisscross on top of each other at the entrance of the now hot oven. Thanks to the width of the oven, he could put three trays in it side by side. "Three minutes huh?" He said. He looked at the clock on the wall. He had about ten minutes before inmates would begin to arrive. He knew from his experience the past few days that it could take several minutes for a prisoner at the end of the line to walk from wherever their work was to the Mess Hall.

Ephraim quickly cut out the parchment from the remaining fifty trays, stacking them like cord wood at the end of the oven. When he was done, he had five minutes to spare. "So five minutes until breakfast starts then everyone trickles in, huh?" He said.

Timothy didn't answer him.

"So it's all down to the timing." Ephraim stood by the front row of trays and watched the clock. "You want to eat first or last?" When he still didn't get a response he just went back to watching the clock.

At exactly nine o'clock, a voice came over the loudspeakers: "Breakfast time. Work resumes at ten hundred hours."

Ephraim pushed the first set of three trays into the oven then looked toward the entrance. No one was there yet but he still pushed the next set of trays into the oven right behind the first. The trays crawled along slowly, making him worry he had started putting them in too late.

While the trays were only three quarters of the way through, several inmates entered the Mess Hall. They walked slowly – it was the default speed on Vesta as the radiation poisoning robbed them of strength. By the time they got to the serving area, the first three slid out and into place.

"Hot breakfast, huh?" Said the lead inmate. "That's a change."

Ephraim peeked over the top of the oven- he was putting trays on the conveyor belt as soon as there was space. "There's been a change of management, folks." He said with a smile. "Good morning!"

"Newbie." The inmate said with a headshake.

"Ephraim." Ephraim corrected.

The inmate started to pick up the tray and then pulled his hands back. "Hey! This is hot!" He pulled his arms into his sleeves and used the extra material to pick up the tray. "Thanks new… Ephraim." He said as he moved quickly to a table so he could put down the hot tray. When he got there he shouted back "Hey, Ephraim, next time take out the spoon so it's not a thousand degrees as well."

Ephraim looked down at the trays he was putting in the oven. Sure enough, there was cardboard spoon impressed in one side of the tray was there. "Oh man! Sorry!"

"Forget it," the inmate said back. "It cools off real quick once you pop it out. Keep up the good work."

Ephraim nodded even though the man couldn't see him. As he fed in the trays, he kept an eye on the other end. Only once did he have to move exiting trays to make room for the ones behind them- for the most part it was a steady stream of inmates that almost matched the pace of the oven. *Thanks Lord.* Ephraim prayed. *Thanks for putting me where I can reach the most amount of people.* He looked at the stack of parchment. *And giving me a way to let them know about you. Now all I need is a pen.*

Ephraim went back to feeding trays into the oven. Within a few minutes, they were all in so he moved to the front of the oven and looked over the dining area.

The first inmate applauded. "Thanks for the hot meal, Ephraim!"

Several other inmates joined in. After only a moment, everyone was clapping.

"Thanks very much." Ephraim said loudly. "I'll be here all week. Make sure you tip your servers." He added with a smile. Then he added a prayer: *Lord, thank you for putting me here.* He looked over his shoulder. "Timothy, you should eat while it's hot." He pulled his sleeves over his hands and picked up two trays then walked back to where Timothy was.

"Timothy." Ephraim slid the tray in front of the man. "Here you go." When the man didn't respond, he tapped him on the shoulder. "Timothy, you're worrying me." He shook him harder.

Timothy collapsed out of the chair onto the floor.

"Oh man." Ephraim walked quickly to the front of the serving area. There was a guard by the main doors. "Hey!" He called. "Guard!" He beckoned the guard over when the man looked.

"You're not expecting me to eat this, are you?" The guard said. "No way that's happening."

"No, no; that's not it." He gestured over his shoulder. "Timothy is gone."

"Who's Timothy?"

Ephraim shrugged. "The guy who was running the kitchen before me. I don't know his number, sorry." He pointed again. "He's back here on the floor."

The guard brought his wrist up and spoke into his mini-DU. "Inmate removal from level five mess." He hesitated. "You two fighting"

"No, no. I was heating up breakfast and he put his head down. That was it."

The guard nodded. "Natural causes. No paperwork required."

"Natural causes?" Ephraim said. "That's what you call it?"

"Radiation is natural." The guard said before walking back to his post.

Ephraim let out a long sigh. "I guess it is." He looked back. "Timothy. I wish I'd have had more time to talk to you." With another sigh he took one of the remaining trays and put it on the counter. He sat on the counter and swung his legs over, not wanting to eat where the dead man was.

Once Ephraim was done eating, he went back into the kitchen and threw away the remaining five trays of food. Then he carefully folded up the parchments and tucked them into the back of his pants; the prison uniforms did not have any pockets. It would take him the better part of two days to locate a pen, but once he did he spent any free time he had writing down passages from the Bible. He would hand them to inmates he passed as well as leave them out at breakfast and dinner for anyone that wanted to take one. He was pleased that many did.

25

Officer Jennigan pulled up to the massive black steel gate. Three foot tall bronze letters were attached to the center of the gate- a D, B, and an S. They were placed so that when the gate opened, the straight part of the 'B' moved with one gate and the two curves moved with the other. Not only did most of the individual mansions have their own walls, there was a twenty-five foot wall around the entire two hundred-fifty acres of the Denny-Blaine-Seacrest housing area.

A security guard stepped briskly out of the guard shack to the side of the massive gate. As he approached Officer Jennigan's motorcycle, he put his hand on his weapon.

Officer Jennigan removed her helmet. "Good evening." She said to the man. "He… They're expecting me. For dinner?"

"Who is?" The man eyed her motorcycle. "You know there are a lot of families that live in here, lady."

"Theron Skees. I'm meeting Mister Theron Skees."

The man held up a large D-U as he compared Officer Jennigan's face with the one Theron Skees had provided. It was from the police website so she was in uniform on the one the guard had. "Oh, Officer Jennigan." He said. "Welcome to Denny-Blaine-Seacrest Estates. Do you know where you're going from here?"

Officer Jennigan tapped her D-U which was affixed to her bike's handlebars. "Yup. Got it right here." A thought occurred to her. "Say, does Mister Skees get many visitors… like me?" She asked, unsure how to classify herself.

"Nope." The man answered truthfully. "You're the first I've seen in five years."

"I'm the first woman that's been to his house in five years?"

"What? No; of course not. You're the first cop." The man waved a hand dismissively. "There's been plenty of women that have… lots even. I mean… There's been…" He frowned. "I…" He said, still unsure of how to finish his

sentence. He brightened. "You're the best looking one I've seen in a long while."

"Uh huh." Officer Jennigan said as she pulled her helmet back on. She flipped up the mirrored visor and squinted at him. "Lots, huh?"

"Oh! Well, what I meant was that yeah, lots of women have come out here but you know… there's politicians, the mayor. His Vice President is a woman, so there's that. But…" He eyed her over again- she was wearing her leather riding pants and a tight fitting jacket. "None that fill out a leather outfit like that."

"Open the gate." Officer Jennigan said as she flipped down her visor. "And the annoyance starts early."

When the man opened the gate, Officer Jennigan peeled out, leaving a twenty foot black streak through the gates. After a full fifty feet, she finally throttled back. As she leaned hard to round the corner of a massive estate her foot peg left a trail of sparks. A man who was out near the road shouted 'slow down!' at her as she passed.

Pleased with herself, she slowed down and paid attention to her navigation as it brought her to the front of a sprawling three story Tudor style house. This particular estate had only a low four foot natural stone wall around it marking the boundaries of the property- which included almost two acres. She turned into the long gravel driveway and rode straight up to the rotunda at the end.

When Officer Jennigan got there, a man started down the stairs.

By the time Officer Jennigan had lowered her kickstand and taken off her helmet, he was beside her bike. "Miss Amy Jennigan?" The man said.

Amy looked at the man. He was wearing a grey tuxedo. "Oh. I… Yes, sir that's me."

"Very good, Miss." The man gestured at the massive oak double doors. "There are drinks in the library before dinner."

"Oh. Thanks, Sir." Amy swung her leg over and dismounted her motorcycle. His appearance finally caught her attention. "Oh! Dress for dinner!"

The man looked down at Officer Jennigan's black leather pants. He smiled. "No one will be able to say you are not dressed, Miss."

"Oh no." Officer Jennigan frowned. "When he said 'we dress for dinner' I thought he was making some kind of crack." She slapped her hands

on her thighs. "I can't go in there like *this*. With you like *that*." She gestured at the man. "Oh, I just can't, Sir."

"Mister Georges." The man offered. "Please."

She looked from the house to her motorcycle and back again. "I just can't." She started to remount her motorcycle. "I'm sorry Mister Georges, I look… I just can't."

"Miss, Jennigan. If you will allow me; you look stunning and I have to admit, your appearance will definitely put Mister Skees on his heels. It is a position he is not subjected to very often." He smiled. "I would be honored to escort you in." He offered her his elbow.

"But what if someone says something? What if I…"

"Miss Jennigan, today we dine with close family and friends. No one will say a thing, I assure you. But if on a regular evening, if *anyone* were so crass, so tactless as to cast aspersions upon you, a guest of the house while I was around, they would find their evening abruptly ended. I would not stand for it." He gave her a genuine smile. "And the fact that you are upset makes you better than most of Mister Skees' normal dinner guests. Very full of themselves. Entitled even. And not at all fun to be around. You should come back for one of those meals." He gestured at the motorcycle. "But on a more serious note; that, my good lady looks like a lot of fun."

"Do you ride?" Officer Jennigan asked, feeling more at ease.

"In fact I have a KLR Seven Fifty. Strictly off road though."

"Oh, those are a dream on the trails. Perfectly balanced, great torque. My brother used to have one."

"He doesn't ride anymore?" Mister Georges asked. "Oh, is he…"

"Nothing like that." Amy shook her head. "He's out on Venus running a collection station." She smiled. "Hard to ride when you're twenty thousand feet above the ground."

"Indeed." Mister Georges extended his elbow a little farther. "Ready? We bikers must stick together."

Amy looked at her motorcycle then the mansion. "I suppose so Mister Georges. Lead the way." She laced her arm through Mister George's elbow. "Well, here goes nothing."

"Oh, quite the opposite Miss Jennigan; I do believe this evening will be something." He smiled at her. "And I truly can't wait."

The pair walked up the marble steps and through the double doors. True to Mister Georges' word, drinks were being served in the library. By Theron Skees. And only for him, Mister Georges, and Officer Jennigan.

26

Ephraim moved slowly down the corridor. He was returning from the evening meal and it was taking all his strength to get back to his cell. Every ten yards or so, he would stop and lean against the wall to rest. A SENTrie that walked by had paused while he rested. When he started moving again, its algorithms were satisfied so it continued on its way. *Lord, I want to thank you for all that you've been doing for me.* He prayed as he went.

He had been in the prison for six months and two days- he was by far the oldest prisoner on Vesta by five weeks. In that time he had spoken to dozens of prisoners on his level, getting many of the ones who were unbelievers to accept Jesus as their savior. They had done the same to prisoners they interacted with. Then as the days went by, one by one, they had stopped coming to the mess hall. Replaced by new faces that weren't gaunt yet.

A guard he had spoken to several times approached him. "Hey, hey lookie here! The famous seven two oh nine. It must be my lucky day." He hit Ephraim on the shoulder. It was by no means out of anger or hate- it was more a friendly tap than anything else. Even so, it knocked Ephraim back against the wall. "Whoa there, oh nine. I don't want to be the one that puts you out of the game!" The guard reached out and grabbed him by the collar before he fell over. "I'm sorry about that." He pulled up and held him against the wall. "Get your feet under you."

"Thanks." Ephraim smiled at the man. He had spoken at great length to this guard and Ephraim felt that he took to heart a lot what he had heard. "You doing okay today?"

"Me? Sure."

A thought occurred to Ephraim. "Knock me out of the game? There's a game?"

"More like a pool, really. I've got my money on next week." The man smiled. "No offense, right?" The man's smile faltered. "I mean…"

"I get it." Ephraim said. "I'll try to not let you down." He reached up and took the man's wrist to pull himself upright. "But I think you've got too

much faith in me." He smirked. "Say, is it day by day or are they betting on hours?"

"Hours is pretty precise; it's only AM or PM." The guard said with a smile of his own. "Tuesday in the PM is me. Four more days? I picked the latest one because I like having you around." He patted Ephraim's shoulders gently then let go. "Right?"

Ephraim shook his head. "I don't know O'Neil." He looked down the corridor toward his cell. "Listen…This might be my last walk. I've tried to do the Lord's will but I've got to tell you, I'm out of fuel here."

The guard nodded. He and Ephraim had spoken several times about God but he had remained reticent. The best he was able to say was that they would have to agree to disagree. In truth, he liked Ephraim and appreciated that he was not belligerent because their beliefs differed; several other prisoners had become almost hostile when confronting him about his inability to believe. "Yeah." Was all he could say.

Ephraim smiled at the man. Considering how other guards had reacted to Ephraim's witnessing, this one was at least a partial victory. "Well, I just wish you'd come around. Things aren't getting any better for any of us you know. Time is getting short. Real short. And when you're dead…"

"It's too late to make a decision then." Finished O'Neil. "I know, oh nine. I know."

"At least you admit that much." Ephraim looked left and right. "Here, take this." He reached into his pants pulled out a wad of papers. "I wrote this down for you last night. I was praying I'd run into you one more time." He held them out.

"You trying to get me a visit with the Doc?" Now O'Neil looked left and right. "You gotta stop passing out that contraband. I'm finding it all over the place. No one knows it's you." He startled. "And where have you getting all this paper anyway? You're like a traveling supply store."

"God always provides." Ephraim said.

"Seriously."

Ephraim sighed. "Fine; these are the covers for our breakfast and dinner. I get almost a hundred sheets a day working the Mess Hall."

"Well that's absurd. But where'd you get a…" O'Neil's voice trailed off as he remembered several months ago Ephraim asking him for a pen. "Oh

and you made *me* complicit in your contraband activities." He shook his head. "Dastardly deed, Sir."

"Sorry about that." Ephraim said as he fought to keep a smile from his face. "Well, not really."

"You're something else, Oh Nine." O'Neil said. "It's a shame we didn't meet somewhere… anywhere besides here, you know?"

Ephraim held the wad of papers closer to the man. "This is the book of John."

"That's an entire book?" O'Neil chuckled. "Is it a short story?"

"It packs a lot of punch in a few words."

"Like that Romans one."

"Yes." Ephraim nodded. He had given him over half of the book of Romans a month ago. "It's too late in the game to be going through Numbers and the begots."

"What?"

Ephraim smiled. "It's an inside joke. I hope you get it later on." He pushed the papers out until they touched the man's chest. "Please, O'Neil."

O'Neil exhaled loudly. "Fine, fine. You're pretty pushy you know that?"

Both men turned as a SENTrie trotted up behind them. It slowed to a walk as it passed, weapon trained on Ephraim. Who still had his hand on O'Neil's chest.

"Gathering information from an informant." O'Neil said to it. "Move along. Prisoner is detained on official business."

The SENTrie dutifully moved to a trot and moved off.

"Please." Ephraim said again.

"Okay. I'll take it, I'll take it." He took the wad of papers and pushed them into his pocket. "Now get back to your cell and get some rest. Remember, I've got you for Tuesday after noon."

A thought occurred to Ephraim. "What's the pot up to?"

"Three thousand four hundred." O'Neil said. "You're the biggest thing happening on Vesta. Everyone's in on you. Even the Warden."

Ephraim smiled. "Well I'll do my best." His smile faded. "But don't take it personally if I don't come through for you." He gestured at the man's pocket. "That's more important than three grand anyway."

"That's what you keep telling me." O'Neil said. "You better get going. I think Buckets has you down for this afternoon. You know he wins even if a SENTrie does it."

"Oh. Thanks for the warning." Ephraim said. "I'll make sure to avoid him."

O'Neil shook his head. "He's sitting in a tank today. That's the house rules. Whatever day someone picked, their schedule gets shifted to put them in a tank on it. He'll be back around the prison tomorrow. Got to keep it fair, you know."

"Yeah." Ephraim stared at the man. "*There's no cheating death.*"

"Damn; that's harsh Oh Nine!" He patted his pocket. "Okay; I'll read it." His eyebrows went up. "See you tomorrow?"

"I really hope I see you again."

"Tomorrow?" O'Neil repeated.

"No, in eternity." Ephraim replied.

"Well just try to get through the next few days." O'Neil smiled. "Okay?"

"I'll do the best I can." Ephraim said.

"I'm sure you will." O'Neil said as he turned and walked off. "I mean, if I can't trust a man of God, who can I trust?" He said over his shoulder.

Ephraim shook his head at the man. *Lord, please soften his heart. He is so close to believing. Or maybe he already does and he just keeps this up to get a rise out of me.* He pushed himself off the wall and walked toward his cell, content that at least Officer Buckets wouldn't be around for the rest of the day.

27

Officer Jennigan walked toward the dining room. She was accompanied by Mister Georges. They had spent most of the time talking about motorcycles- much to Theron's chagrin.

Theron scooted up and muscled his way between them. "*Mister Georges*, are you quite through commandeering *my* dinner guest?"

"Mayhap I am, *Mister Skees*." Mister Georges replied. "I was actually doing you a favor, you know."

"How's that?"

Officer Jennigan stopped walking since the two men seemed to be ignoring her.

"We were talking technical details about motorcycles. Something that is not in your wheel house, as they say."

"That's what they say?"

"Theron," Mister Georges said. "You wouldn't know which end of a motorcycle to mount."

"Hah! That's where you're wrong John!" Theron punched his friend in the shoulder. "You mount them in the middle! Like a horse."

"Touché." Mister Georges came to a stop. "Oh dear."

After just a couple of steps, Theron stopped as well. "Oh dear what?"

"We seem to be missing *your* dinner guest." Mister Georges looked back. Officer Jennigan was standing with her hands on her hips. "Eeesh. You go get her." With that, he turned and headed toward the dining room.

"Oh dear." Theron said.

"Yes, I heard that already." Officer Jennigan said. "It must be pretty bad when even the help runs for it."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Theron closed the distance between them. "Don't say that!"

"What? Say what?"

"He's not the help." Theron shook his head. "He's my C-O-O."

"Your coo? Well isn't that sweet."

"No. He's my Chief Operations Officer." Theron looked back. "Actually, you calling him 'the help' would be fun. Do that once we're in there. Ask him to fill your glass or something."

"So if he's not the help, why does he call you Mister Skees, and why do you call him Mister Georges?"

"It's something silly we do. We could start calling you Mistress Jennigan." He smiled. "Yeah?"

"No, I don't think so." Officer Jennigan said, even though it did sound fun. "Not yet anyway."

"Well, I'm going to do it and I'll bet it catches on." Theron extended his elbow. "Dinner is waiting, shall we, Mistress Jennigan?"

"You're absurd." Officer Jennigan said. Even though she took his elbow. "But lead the way; I'm famished."

The pair walked into the dining room. It had a high ceiling with ornate woodwork and gold sconces on the wall. It had a massive oak table centered in the room. It could seat up to twenty. Each of the chairs had a high back and were also ornately carved. There was only one person already at it- a woman at one end.

As they entered the large archway, Mister Georges stepped out from behind a suit of armor. "Mister Skees and Mistress Jennigan," he said in an official tone.

"Come on now." Officer Jennigan said.

"See? And I didn't even tell him to do that." Theron laughed. "You need to learn to laugh a little more." He turned and gave a bow. "Thank you Mister Georges, as always you are haut couture."

"That only applies to clothing." Mister Georges pointed out. "I think you mean Avant Garde."

"Thank you Mister Georges, as always you are Avant Garde," Theron said without missing a beat.

"If you two are through," a woman at the table said. "We'd all like to eat sometime this evening." She looked at Officer Jennigan. "Sit by me, it's safer."

Officer Jennigan smiled. "Thank you." As she approached she extended her hand. "Amy Jennigan."

"Rebecca." The woman shook Officer Jennigan's hand. "Pleased to meet you, Amy."

Officer Jennigan sat beside the woman. "So these two are always like this?"

"Well, I can't speak for Theron but John is, yes." She smirked. "Their antics just get amplified when they are together."

"Oh, so you and Mister Georges… John?"

Rebecca nodded. "Oh yes we're married, but it's worse than that." She picked up her wine. "Theron told you he was his C-O-O?"

"Yes. Chief Operating Officer."

"Operations Officer, and I'm the Chief Executive Officer."

"Oh." Officer Jennigan said. "I don't think I'm quite up to snuff on these terms. Who works for who?"

"Theron is the owner of the company; I'm the C-E-O. John is my right hand man; the C-O-O. The C-E-O is responsible for crafting the company's vision. The C-O-O can make company decisions that are within his purview but the C-E-O can veto them if they go against the company's vision." She smiled. "Not that they ever do. We're a pretty good team, John and I."

"I see."

A man walked in pushing a large cart. "Dinner is served." He said.

"Mister Allen, excellent." Theron said.

"Indeed." Mister Allen said. "Shall I serve?"

"No, no; I've got it." Theron said as he hopped up from his chair at the head of the table. "I'm sure you've got more important things to do. Like homework."

"That I do." Mister Allen gave a short bow. "Good night all."

Officer Jennigan leaned toward Rebecca. "So what's he? The company lawyer?"

Rebecca laughed. "No, Mister Allen is the butler. He handles the house operations. An equally important job."

"And he has homework?"

"No; his wife and kids live here. All of the staff's family does. It makes it easier."

"For being on Theron's beck and call?"

Rebecca shook his head. "Not at all. It just makes it easier with the authorities."

"Dinner is served," Theron said as he placed a large platter on the table. With a flourish he removed the silver cover. There was a roasted turkey on it.

"Is that a turkey?" Officer Jennigan asked.

"Charlie, if memory serves me. Charlie the turkey." Thereon said. "White or dark meat, Amy?"

"I have no idea. I've never had a real turkey before."

"Dark for me." Rebecca said. "A drumstick and I'm happy."

"Right you are." Theron unsheathed a large knife. "One drumstick coming up while Amy decides on what she wants." He pointed with the knife. "Leg and thigh are dark meat. Breast is light meat. Both go well with stuffing, I must point out."

"I guess a little of both?" Officer Jennigan said. "So I can decide, I suppose."

"A fine choice." Theron said. "And Mister Georges, breast meat, coming up."

"And I'll serve the vegetables." Mister Georges said. "It seems Mistress Jennigan wants to try these vile things." He reached for a large covered bowl.

Rebecca sighed loudly. "We will not be having a discussion about how potatoes are vegetables. You will both eat some green beans."

"We each get one?" Mister Georges said.

"See what I mean?" Rebecca said to Officer Jennigan.

Officer Jennigan just stared. She had heard about actual turkeys but had never had the money to buy even a portion of it. She had had some green beans and she knew she liked them. She had never actually had a potato either. "I'll have a little of everything please."

"Excellent." Theron started carving up the turkey as Mister Georges moved around the table serving mashed potatoes, green beans, and stuffing.

Once everyone was served, Theron sat then extended his arms. Mister Georges took one, Rebecca the other. Rebecca reached over and took Officer Jennigan's hand.

Officer Jennigan was at a loss at what was happening. She looked around the table for some sort of clue.

"Lord, we thank You for your abundant harvest and everything you are doing for us. We thank You for family and friends, both old and new. Bless this food to give us the strength to do Your will."

Both Mister Georges and Rebecca said 'Amen.'

Rebecca let go of Officer Jennigan's hand, then realized she hadn't said anything. "Oh, I'm sorry. Did we… I just thought that…"

"It's okay, Rebecca." Theron skewered two of the four green beans on his plate. "Officer Jennigan isn't a believer as of yet."

"Officer?" Rebecca's eyes got large.

Officer Jennigan sighed. "Yes, I am a Seattle Police Officer. And… I'm not sure what I believe really. It's really kind of confusing. I have a lot of questions for things I don't understand."

"You've come to the right place." Mister Georges said. "But first we eat."

"I've never even seen a meal like this," Officer Jennigan admitted. "It all looks wonderful. Do you eat like this every night?"

"What?" Theron said.

"I mean…" Officer Jennigan said, embarrassed. "No, never mind." She picked up her fork and knife. "Sorry."

"Oh!" Mister Georges said. "No, we don't. It's Thanksgiving, of course. It's an old holiday that's fallen out of favor. Nobody seems to celebrate it anymore. Hardly anyone, that is."

"Thanksgiving?" Officer Jennigan had never heard of it.

"It was a holiday that commemorated the cooperation between the Europeans and the Native Americans back in 1691." Mister Georges said.

"October of 1691, to be exact." Theron said. "But continue, Sir." He put the two green beans in his mouth and made a face as he chewed them up.

"And later, in 1771 it was made a national holiday. It was celebrated for centuries, then the actions of certain anti-religious heathens…"

"*John.*" Rebecca warned.

"… people," Mister Georges continued, "it was cancelled as a national holiday. Christmas as well. Too religious, it seems."

"What's Christmas?"

"Gads." Mister Georges said. "First let's get Thanksgiving under our belt." He gave a wink.

"Nicely done, Sir." Theron interjected.

"Then we can discuss the birth of Jesus Christ."

"Scandalous talk." Rebecca said. "And Theron invited a police officer." She tsk tsk'ed him.

"Wait, she started it." Theron pointed his now empty fork at Officer Jennigan. "Her and her absurd note about wanting to sell a piece of Roman road that she picked up while traveling in places that didn't have undesirables."

"What?" Officer Jennigan was half way to her mouth with a piece of turkey. "That's now how it was written at all."

"Well, I'm paraphrasing of course. But it was delightfully absurd."

"I suppose a little, yes." Officer Jennigan said. "But I was hoping to get some answers." She put the turkey in her mouth. It was warm and delicious. Her eyes got large.

"Hah, so she's a fan of white meat. It's really the only part of the bird worth eating." Mister Georges said. "Watch out for those dark meat eaters." He winked at his wife. "They're trouble makers is what I hear."

"You heard right." Rebecca picked up her drumstick. "He doesn't know what he's missing." She took a bite. "You'll see."

Officer Jennigan swallowed her morsel then cut a piece of dark meat from the small portion of thigh on her plate. "That first was quite delicious." She said before popping the meat in her mouth. "Hmmm. That's a rich flavor. Oh, I like that better I think." She said around the piece of meat.

"Uh oh." Mister Georges said. "Well, I won't hold it against you, Mistress Jennigan."

The quartet ate and discussed the different foods they grew at the warehouse farm while Officer Jennigan tried a small piece of everything.

Finally Officer Jennigan leaned back. "Oh, that was the best meal I have ever had. Ever." She smiled. "Thank you for inviting me."

"It was my pleasure, really." Theron said. "I mean, the meal was great and all, but for the chance to talk to someone about their salvation? That is something special." He gestured. "We can talk over drinks in the library."

"If I drink much more, I'm not sure I can drive home." Officer Jennigan said. "This meal already had me tired."

"It's the turkey," Mister Georges said. "The meat has tryptophan in it. It naturally makes you drowsy."

"Oh. That explains it." Officer Jennigan said. After finishing her plate, she had eaten the other drumstick. "I shouldn't have eaten that other leg."

"Not to worry. We have several guest rooms for you to choose from on this side of the house. Then in the morning you can see what you think of an omelet."

"Oh, I don't like omelets." Officer Jennigan said quickly, thinking back to several she had tried from different food processors.

"Have you had one with real eggs and cheese?"

"Oh. I keep forgetting." Officer Jennigan said. "No, I haven't."

Theron stood. "Then let's go to the library and we can talk, then Mister Georges and I will clean up later." He nodded at Rebecca. "It's our turn, if I remember correctly."

"You do indeed." Rebecca said as she stood and started for the library.

Theron gestured. "Mistress Jennigan?"

"Oh, I don't know." She looked toward the exit. "I mean, I don't have anything with me to spend the night. And…"

"I'd be glad to loan you some pajamas and there are always extra toiletries in the guest rooms."

"Oh, you live here too?" Officer Jennigan said, surprised.

"We all do. It's really the safest thing to do. Plus, it allows us to all work together on the business and the farm." Mister Georges said as he stood as well. "Most of the staff does as well. There's three families; the butler, a cook and a gardener. The two maids don't want to live here so they don't. Which honestly makes it hard for us to give them fresh food to bring home. We do of course, but it's risky."

"Oh, okay." Officer Jennigan said even though it sounded strange to her.

"Right. Enough domestic talk." Theron clapped his hands together then rubbed them. "Let's crack open some Bibles and answer Officer Jennigan's questions."

"Bibles-sss?" Officer Jennigan drew out the 's'.

"Well, we each have our own of course. We can't all just crowd around one book." Theron said.

"We'd spill our drinks." Mister Georges pointed out.

"We are going to be serious about this, gentlemen." Rebecca said. "This is a serious subject."

"Indeed it is." Theron said. "I have a spare bible you can use as well."

"What do I need that for?" Officer Jennigan said. Not only had she been party to an actual prayer, she was now going to handle a real Bible- both serious felonies. It was very unfamiliar territory for her. And frightening."

"So you can look up the verses we talk about without leaning over someone's shoulder." Theron said. "Think of it as being in a book club and you're talking about a book."

"A book club. Right." Officer Jennigan said. "Okay then, let's go."

"Excellent." Theron smiled.

With that, the group went to the library and discussed the entire book of Romans as well the Christmas story from the book of Luke. It was well past two in the morning when Rebecca led Officer Jennigan to one of the guest rooms while the two men cleaned up from dinner.

At breakfast, Officer Jennigan reevaluated her opinion of omelets- they were now at the top of her list of favorite foods just below dark meat.

Over the course of the month, Officer Jennigan came to dinner at the house twice a week, always before a day off so she could continue to have discussions about the Bible and her salvation.

Then on Christmas day, she accepted her salvation through Jesus Christ.

28

Ephraim tried to move to a seated position on his slab but didn't have the strength. *Lord, I have been a faithful servant of yours but I am out of strength.* He took several deep breaths- even that was difficult to do. *I am spent, Lord. Truly spent. Six months here have finally taken their toll.* He thought back to the hundreds of prisoners he had befriended and spoken to. Many had taken what he had said to them to heart, accepting Salvation. They were all gone. Most everyone was dead after a mere four months on the asteroid. No one made it past six. Except Ephraim. Even the guards noticed that he was still walking and talking to prisoners long after others had succumbed. He laid his head back and stared at the ceiling. As he looked he realized the edges of his field of vision were fuzzy. *I will do what you ask of me, Lord. Just give me the strength.*

"Get up Seven Two Oh Nine." Ernie said as he shoved Ephraim's shoulder with his foot. "You lazy bum. You've been here for two days now. Cost me a lot of money too."

Ephraim let his head flop to the side to face the guard. "I can't. I… just can't."

Ernie shoved him again. "Don't be a sissy, old timer. You'll probably outlive me."

"You know if I could…" Even speaking so much was all of a sudden a tremendous challenge. "I…" His voice trailed off.

"Bah!" The guard tapped his communication link on his collar. "This is Echo Fifty Five, I need a lift assist at cell Seventeen fifteen twenty three." He looked down at Ephraim. "So where's your God to help you, Seven Two Oh Nine?" He shoved him again. Out of all the guards, Ernie was one of the few that didn't give Ephraim any slack, even when he lived past what was expected. In fact, once Ephraim had lasted into his sixth month, Ernie had started treating him even worse.

Ernie stepped back and sat on a ledge in the cell and just stared at Ephraim. "You almost made it you know." When Ephraim didn't answer, he continued. "I'm done next week. I thought you were going to outlast me. But it looks like you'll be checking out before I do." He stretched. "I can't say I'll be missing you while I sit on the porch of my bungalow on the beach. But I

know it would have bugged me if I didn't see you die before I left." He smiled. "So thanks for that."

Within only a couple of minutes, a squat drone entered the cell. "Prisoner extraction unit November Two." It said in a monotone voice.

"November Two, take Prisoner Seven Two Oh Nine to the infirmary. If he tries to escape in any way at all, lethal force is authorized."

"Commands meet current mission parameters." The drone said. It extended two long fork appendages and picked up Ephraim's now gaunt frame. It didn't even try to reposition him so that his head didn't hang down. "Complying." With that, it turned and marched off.

Ernie hopped off the small ledge and started to whistle as he followed the drone out. November Two marched to the prisoner infirmary just a short distance away. Like the infirmaries on the other levels, it was centrally located between the thirty cells of any given compound.

A thought occurred to Ephraim. "What day is this?" He asked the robot.

Since it was an innocuous question, the robot answered: "Tuesday."

"And the time?"

"It is twelve hundred hours six minutes." The robot answered.

Ephraim chuckled. "Thanks Lord." He said out loud. "That just might push him over the edge."

Since it wasn't a question, the robot ignored the statements.

When they arrived, Ernie scooted in front of the drone. "Got another one for you, Becky." He said to the doctor as he pushed through the swinging doors. Without looking back, he let the doors go. If the drone's double tines hadn't been sticking out past where Ephraim was, they both would have hit him.

"Who is this one?" The doctor asked in a tired voice. Her job was mainly to watch prisoners die- one or two a day- instead of actually providing first aid as they had told her when she signed her eight-month contract. Although, on a rare occasion she would set a broken arm or stitch up a wound.

"The famous Seven Two Oh Nine." Ernie gave a wide smile. "Our oldest resident is finally leaving us, it seems. Just in time, too."

Becky looked at Ephraim. She remembered when he had first arrived; he had a gash on his cheek that needed stitches on that very first day. She thought back to the incident; it was Ernie that had hit him with his weapon when he first arrived. She had not seen him since then. Now the eight foot four inch strapping man was a hundred twenty pounds lighter and practically skin and bones. The transformation was shocking. "Oh." Was all she could say. When she composed herself, she pointed to a gurney. "Put him down there."

"Complying." The drone said as it moved to the gurney. When it got there, it put Ephraim on the middle of it, the retracted its tines as it leaned against him so he stayed in place. "Further instructions?"

"Return to your post." The doctor said. "You can leave too." She snapped at Ernie.

"I'll wait in case he tries to escape." Ernie said as he hopped onto another gurney. He swung his legs back and forth playfully. "Just to be on the safe side."

"Thank you, November Two," Ephraim said weakly.

Since it had no programmed response for 'thank you', the drone turned and walked out of the infirmary.

"Trying to save that drone's soul?" Ernie said. "Hah! So, where's your God and why doesn't he save you?"

Give me the words to break through their hard hearts, Holy Spirit. Ephraim prayed. "God's will is God's will." He said simply.

"Ernie, I'm sure there's someplace else you could be." Becky said.

"You…fixed my cheek." Ephraim said.

The nurse nodded. "Yes. That was me. Five, six months ago, I think it was."

"Back when Seven Two Oh Nine was still a big strapping zealot." Ernie crossed his arms. "Ahhh; the good old days." He scoffed. "Now look at you. Pathetic."

Lord, I am sorry that I wasn't able to get through to Ernie. "I'm sorry." He said out loud.

"For what?" The doctor asked.

"Not talking to you sooner." Ephraim said.

"Oh, here we go again." Ernie scowled. "If you keep at it, I'll come over there and shut you up personally."

My mind is a fog, Lord. Help me focus.

"That won't be necessary," the doctor snapped at Ernie. Her voice softened: "It is fine, Seven Two Oh Nine."

Ephraim turned his head toward her. "God loves you, you know."

SHE KNOWS.

"She knows?" Ephraim said, confused as to who said it.

"She knows what?" Ernie said. "Who's he talking to?"

"Me, I think." The nurse said. "What do I know?"

"What?" Ephraim said, realizing the presence of an unfamiliar voice that he actually could hear. His eyes darted around the room looking for the interloper. "I'm…" His voice trailed off in his confusion.

YOU HAVE BEEN A FAITHFUL SERVANT, EPHRAIM OF SEATTLE.

"I've tried." Ephraim said.

SHE KNOWS. The angel's booming voice sounded like cracking thunder.

"What?" The nurse asked. "Tried what?"

"He's delirious," Ernie said. "He's on his way out. Then it's to the reactor pile for him."

"How do you know she knows?" Realization hit Ephraim. He looked to side of the nurse. Behind her to her right was a very tall man. So tall that his head practically brushed the ceiling- which was fifteen feet high in the infirmary thanks to the bulky medical equipment there. His face and arms were as black as space itself. He was dressed in a white tunic with a gold breastplate and a gold woven belt. His sandals were leather and laced to above his muscular calves. A very large sword was hanging from his belt in an ornate scabbard. Everything but his skin gave off a white radiance. "Who?"

VERY FAITHFUL INDEED.

"Are you the Ethiopian?" Ephraim asked.

"He's done for." Ernie said. "Hallucinating even."

The angel smiled a broad smile with white, perfect teeth. **I AM an ETHIPOIAN**. He put his hand on his sword. **BUT NOT THE ETHIPOIAN YOU ARE THINKING OF.** He chuckled. **HE WOULD CALL YOU THE FATHER'S LABORER IN THE FIELD.**

"I see." Ephraim said. He smiled back. "You're an angel."

"Aww," Ernie said as he pointed at the doctor. "He thinks you're his guardian angel. Isn't that sweet?"

"Shut up." The doctor snapped. While she did care for the prisoners and felt terrible for their predicament, she would never consider herself anyone's guardian. All she ever did was sit with them and certify their death, day in and day out so they could be taken and added to the reactor fuel that helped keep the prison running. She had been at her job for almost seven months and she wasn't sure if she could make it the last three of it. "Just shut up and let him die in peace."

"Die in peace?" Ephraim asked.

"Yes. Just lay still," The doctor said. "It will be over very soon."

SHE SPEAKS THE TRUTH, EPHRAIM. THEN YOU WILL REST IN A GLORIOUS MANSION. The angel put his hands on his hips then laughed. **I AM QUITE SURE YOU HAVE HEARD THAT IN OUR FATHER'S HOUSE ARE MANY MANSIONS.**

"John. John fourteen." Ephraim said. "Fourteen two."

JOHN SENDS HIS REGARDS FOR A JOB WELL DONE.

"You are making fun."

OF YOU? NEVER! The angel smiled again. **ALTHOUGH I MUST ADMIT I AM KNOWN FOR MY SENSE OF HUMOR.**

"Who's John?" Ernie said. "He's pretty far gone. Pathetic."

If only I could reach her. Tell me the words to say, Lord. Help me, please.

The doctor didn't answer because she had read that particular verse. One of the prisoners two months ago had several dozen handwritten pages in her pocket. Unknown to her, Ephraim was the one that had written them down for her. When Becky had removed the prisoner's clothes because they were in good enough condition to be issued to another prisoner, she had

found the pages. She read them as the woman's body was taken away. The pages had the entire life story of Jesus in just a dozen pages. 'Do not let your heart be troubled. Believe in God.' She remembered reading.

THEN I SHALL ASSIST YOU, EPHRAIM. DO NOT LET YOUR HEART BE TROUBLED. The angel said. **REPEAT THAT!**

"Do not let your heart be troubled." Ephraim repeated dutifully. "Why do I need to say that?"

"He's having a conversation with himself." Ernie laughed. "Idiot."

The doctor staggered back and put her hand on a table for support. There was no way the prisoner could have known what she had read.

TELL HER.

"What?" Ephraim asked

TELL HER WHAT SHE MUST DO.

"I'm so weak." Ephraim said. "Can you help?"

YOU DO PRETTY WELL ON YOUR OWN, EVEN NOW. The angel laughed again. **MOST IMPRESSIVE EPHRAIM OF SEATTLE.**

Ernie hopped off the table. "I'm just going to whack him on the head to put him out of his misery. My shift's over in a few minutes and I've got things to do. I'm short you know. Heading back to Earth." He took a thick metal shaft from his belt and with a flick of his wrist, extended his steel baton. "So I've got *much* better things to do that sit here and watch this lunatic die."

"Please." Ephraim said.

TELL HER THEN WE ARE OFF TO A FEAST!

Ephraim swiveled his head to look at the doctor. "Ask God for forgiveness; ask Him into your heart. That's all you have to do." He looked at the angel. "Will you help me save one more?"

"I've had enough of this guy's rantings to last a lifetime." Ernie took two steps toward Ephraim past where the angel was standing as he raised his baton.

FINE, I SHALL HELP. The angel unfurled his wings. They reached across the entire forty feet of the infirmary. **THEN WE FEAST!**

Ernie swung the baton down with all his might at Ephraim's head.

The angel appeared behind Ernie, who was focused completely on Ephraim.

The nurse's knees gave out at the sight of the massive angel. With his wings spread, he filled the entire space behind Ernie. He flashed her a broad smile, gave her a wink, then was gone.

And then so was Ephraim.

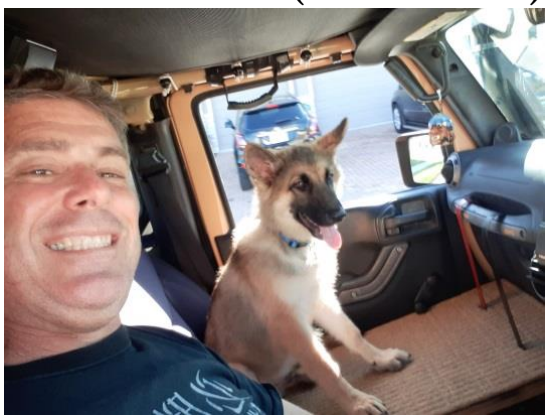
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At nearly the end of her ten-month contract -with only two days to go in fact- when a rogue planet careened through the Solar System and Vesta smashed into Mars, Ephraim welcomed Becky with tears of joy.

He had already greeted Amy Jennigan two months earlier. After she had inadvertently stumbled upon a bank robbery.

The End
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About the Author (and Illustrator)



Robert does what his Sister-In-Law tells him. Which is why this story happened. Content with how the entire trilogy of The Prodigals went, Robert had moved onto several other projects – two Alternatives stories: one titled *Poppins Von Trapp* (which explores the possibility that these two people are in fact the same person), the other titled *It Was a Wonderful Life* (which proposes that while George Bailey had a guardian angel, Henry Potter had a guardian devil who helped him achieve all that he had). He also has another science fiction story in the works- it is a "James Bond meets Men in Black meets Rogue Squadron" story titled *Ghost Team Ten*. It is about the Top Secret missions of Area 46's fighter squadron, Ghost Team Ten (which is far better at keeping a secret than those idiots over at Area 51). And of course, book 7 in his Tales From a Second Hand Wand Shop series *Killing Grimbledung* is also in the works.

Cover Art and Layout By N. T. Narbutovskih

Mister. Narbutovskih is a bestselling author and professional aviator and has been flying military and civilian aircraft since 2009. His undergrad in engineering somehow led to a masters in operations management and another masters in military operational art and science. He is an avid consumer of science fiction and is fascinated by the genre's ability to reveal deep truths through story and metaphor and predict what is probable and possible.

Outside of writing and flying, he is a voracious reader and goes through an average of three books a week. He is an involuntarily experienced home-improvement aficionado and randomly bounces between the hobbies of 3-d printing, woodworking, hiking, ultramarathon, triathlon, painting, and skiing (location dependent!).